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Some Insights from Church Planting in the Tower Hamlets Deanery of the Diocese of London

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Is church planting feasible for the Scottish Episcopal Church? According to the former bishop of London, the Right Reverend Richard Chartres, “Church planting is not the possession of one tradition, but a gift to the whole Body of Christ.” An example is [Holy Trinity](#), Brompton (HTB), in the Diocese of London. HTB, refers to itself as “one church four sites” and includes four worshipping congregations in and around South Kensington located in Brompton Road, Onslow Square, Queen’s Gate and Courtfield Gardens.

HTB has planted around 40 churches since 1985 and is still planting churches. Many of the planted (or receiving) churches have subsequently planted other churches, one of which is [St Paul’s](#), Shadwell. Planted in 2005, its steady growth enabled it, in 2010, to plant [St Peter’s](#), Bethnal Green, and [All Hallows](#), Bow, followed by [St Luke’s](#), Millwall, in 2013, and [Christ Church](#), Spitalfields, in 2014. I spent time at these churches (and the office premises of HTB’s Alpha course in South Kensington) during a five-day visit in April 2017, hoping to discover through observation and conversation some key elements of their success that may be transferable to the Scottish Episcopal Church.²

The Vision

The clergy I spoke with cited vision as the key factor for successful church planting, local mission and congregational growth. They placed it ahead of financial resources or provision of clergy. This vision – inspired by the Holy Spirit and sustained by hope, courage and imagination – is shared throughout the planted churches but is interpreted in and by the receiving communities in diverse ways appropriate to that congregation.

Their vision refuses to be hampered by pessimistic forecasts of failure and is resilient enough to find ways of working round resistance to change and to incorporate into itself the aspects of the existing situation that it seems important to retain. St Peter’s, Bethnal Green, for instance, has faithfully and lovingly maintained

¹ As quoted in Tim Thorlby, *Love, Sweat and Tears: Church Planting in East London* (Research for the Local Church 5; London: Centre for Theology and Community, 2016), foreword.

² Details of these visits can be found in Appendix 1.

traditional Eucharistic worship for its tiny, original congregation while energetically promoting new and contemporary worship patterns for its growing (younger) congregation.

Realisation of the vision flourishes with a collaborative approach. Clergy and planted congregations frequently live in the heart of the parish they are planting and listen carefully to its beat. This presents its own challenges in terms of personal cultural and social opportunity but it is truly the means of touching people's lives in a real sense and of being Christ in the community. At All Hallows, Bow, some young members of a local community project live rent-free in the vicarage, and in the case of some plants, the sent congregation members move to live on the local estate close to the receiving church.

Vision includes an assumption of success and a realistic appreciation of the hard work and sacrifice involved. Not for nothing is the report of the St Paul's, Shadwell, plants entitled "Love, Sweat and Tears."³ Occasional failure is accepted; the church learns from it and is not defeated by it. For example, Christ Church, Spitalfields, became enmeshed in a long and costly legal action when they built an additional worship space in their graveyard which was opposed by local action groups. They persevered, learning from the outcome the importance of meticulous record keeping and then seeking to repair the resultant rifts. The church continues to be a living, growing Christian landmark in the area.

The overarching vision of HTB is of an entire country won back to vibrant Christian faith; and with churches planted throughout London and beyond, church planting on the HTB model defies the statistical trend that suggests that the Christian faith is in serious decline. Vision does not, however, have to involve the assimilation of a stereotypical model. It is born of prayer, communication, consultation and sensitivity to place; it is a living out of Christ's command to carry the gospel to all.

The Resource Model for Church Planting

For the Reverend Phil Williams (St Paul's, Shadwell) a "resource church" or "minister model" is a vital component of church planting. A resource church provides "collegial support to a team of church leaders based in that church or in attached churches over a geographical area".⁴ Clergy operate as a team, drawing on the resources, oversight, fellowship and encouragement provided by the resource church. The advantage of a minister model is that it centralises available funding

³ See Appendix 3.

⁴ D. Dadwell and C. Ross, *Church Growth Research Project: Church Planting* (Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology Ripon College Cuddesdon, 2013), 30.

and manages it as a resource for all the congregations it serves. It can also attract funding and manpower from other organisations (such as the Church Army or local Christian entrepreneurs), supplying small (possibly rural) charges with clergy and often with additional congregation members as a sort of plant. Collegial support, regular meetings and continuing ministerial training are a lifeline for geographically scattered congregations and clergy. The core values of the resource church include “generosity ... (church planting, resources, teams, etc); partnership... (diocesan bishop, churches, other denominations, businesses, charities, etc); audacity ... a vision big enough to capture the imagination ... and humility ... play our part, listen and serve....”⁵

In the Scottish Episcopal Church’s environment, a resource church could be a planted congregation which is specifically developed for this purpose, attracting financial and pastoral support from the diocese and/or province to service several smaller churches which would have a worship style determined by the preferences of their congregations. Although training opportunities/collegial networking can be (and are) provided at both diocesan and provincial level, the direct support of a local resource church would be immediate and specifically relevant to the churches in its group.

The Bishop Model for Church Planting

The clergy I met and talked with in the Tower Hamlets Deanery were unanimous in their support for and appreciation of the overview of church planting by a bishop and his or her ability to cut across boundaries to facilitating and streamlining the process.

The Right Reverend Ric Thorpe, formerly vicar of St Paul’s, Shadwell, and now Bishop of Islington (licensed by the Bishop of London to oversee church planting throughout London), enables church planting in the Diocese of London “by working with area bishops and their teams (top down) and with deaneries to map and identify opportunities for planting (bottom up). We then develop those ideas through enabling consultancy, coaching, training and funding to progress each idea.”⁶ Support for the ensuing plants continues after the plant is complete.

Bishop Thorpe collaborates with the church commissioners’ strategy unit to put on information days for bishops and diocesan secretaries to look at possibilities for church planting in their dioceses. He emphasised that planting only ever takes

⁵ Church Growth: Resourcing Mission Bulletin at http://www.churchgrowthrd.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Resourcing_Mission_Bulletin/June_2015/02_City_Centre_Resource_Churches.pdf

⁶ From an email sent to the writer 27 March 2017. See Appendix 1.

place by invitation of the local diocesan bishop; no planting is imposed. His jurisdiction is not bounded by the duties of a diocesan bishop.

The structure of the Scottish Episcopal Church differs from that of the Church of England and this has implications for the creation of such a post but the principle of appointing one person to oversee church planting / mission throughout the province deserves consideration.

Congregational Attitude, Labels and Boundaries

Almost all the churches in the receiving churches I visited in East London had been in danger of closure. The principal trigger for their subsequent growth was their recognition of the current situation, a shared analysis of the problems, a vision of how the future could be and a desire to change things. Communication was crucial and the congregation was integral to the issuing of an invitation to plant.

Compromise is inevitable and this can be facilitated by careful, lengthy and sympathetic but realistic preparation of receiving congregations. As Phil Williams put it, we need to gently ask dwindling congregations questions like, "Can you remember when you last saw families in church?"

A compassionate plant particularly recognises the pain expressed in a reluctance to change and because in all cases this was handled with understanding, flexibility and generosity little damage was done, that is few congregation members left because they felt let down or disappointed by what was happening. Indeed in St Peter's, Bethnal Green, they were more determined than ever to stay and support the new lease of life their beloved church had been offered and in St Luke's, Millwall, one elderly member of the congregation (the widow of an earlier incumbent of Christ Church, Spitalfields) spoke warmly of the changes (for the better) she had seen in both parishes. They felt included and valued and were active participants in worship and in the life of the church.

The *Church Growth Research Project* notes: "It appears that most church planting emerges out of an evangelical tradition. We recommend deliberate and focussed support for other traditions to engage in church planting"⁷. Bishop Thorpe is keen to encourage plants by mainstream Anglican churches.

The pattern/style of worship often determine whether or not people remain members of or are attracted to a particular church. The London plants are all in areas where other Church of England churches close by provide an alternative place of worship for original congregation members who struggled with the changes brought about by the church plant. The two churches with minimal loss of congregation were St Peter's, Bethnal Green, and St Luke's, Millwall, both of which

⁷ Dadwell and Ross, *Church Growth Research Project*, 7.

had incorporated into their worship pattern traditional, Eucharist-based worship options. A member of the congregation in Bethnal Green told me he considered the contemporary style of worship on Sundays “abhorrent” but he continues as a committed disciple of his church, and is encouraged to contribute to worship by cantoring at the Eucharist.

St Luke’s, Millwall, has persevered with a hybrid middle-of-the-road Church of England/contemporary worship style. Combined with active fellowship and community involvement it has kept the congregation together and focused on their missional purpose.

When I asked Phil Williams (St Paul’s, Shadwell) what he thought of the word “evangelical”, he told me that his church “doesn’t do labels”. It is difficult to be open-minded about a church with a label; there are bound to be any number of preconceived ideas, many of them negative. In this small sample of East End churches the worship was as varied as the congregations and all the incumbents went to great lengths to consult with their congregations and honour their worship needs. The fear of the existing congregations seemed to be that they might become less Anglican but there is a conscious effort at identity; all the websites of these churches carry the Church of England logo.

The common success factor in terms of congregational growth and/or community presence was engagement with the local community or with a particular age group or social group. Holy Trinity Brompton deliberately targets students and young people; St Peter’s, Bethnal Green provides entrepreneurial space in its buildings; Christ Church, Spitalfields, supports and makes spiritual provision for the local Bengali-speaking community and All Hallows, Bow, has a lively and growing congregation of young people.

Entrepreneurial Links and Finance

Being a generous and lively presence in the community is vital to growing churches. All the churches I visited regularly host social events in their community; barbecues and Easter fun days, youth events and old persons’ outings. The days of the coffee morning and sale of work have gone. Pop-up cafés and community fun days have replaced them. Churches that are determined to grow must be willing to share the same social space as the community of which they are a part.

Encouraging church growth and the presence of Christian entrepreneurship in communities is a two-way process that benefits both. This is not to say that the church itself needs to engage in entrepreneurial activities but it helps if the incumbent or significant lay member has some business knowledge. Even affirming local Christian-based enterprises (such as housing associations, health centres or homeless schemes, for example) and contributions made to community work by

members of congregations, praying regularly and specifically for them and offering money where needed from a mission fund are all ways in which the church body draws closer to the community it serves and of which it is a part. Large, profit-making enterprises can be encouraged to support the missional work of the church.

It could be argued that such systematic and well-resourced campaigns of church planting have too much of the “business model” to be a valid expression of ecclesia in our secular society. HTB deliberately targets students and young professionals with its Alpha course and in its church plants, hoping to attract them to become active members of congregations. This has a huge financial advantage for the organisation but there are few congregations in Scotland where this pattern could easily be replicated. The personal and ecclesial wealth in some larger congregations is on a scale that astounds, and may even disturb. And yet this material wealth is being used to promote the gospel message.⁸ Churches on the HTB model expect their congregations to develop a culture of generous giving to provide resources for training clergy, supporting mission and hosting community events.

Conclusion

“It is so important that we listen and learn from one another, so that together we can support each other in forming communities that are authentic expressions of the life of Christ in our contemporary society.”⁹ The churches I visited in East London are in areas of great ethnic and economic diversity; the financially worst-off living next to those with access to the seemingly limitless financial resources that go with professional life in the capital.

The Scottish Episcopal Church operates in a very different context, serving a large geographical area fifty times greater than London, yet with a population only five-eighths its size. The two contexts present different practical challenges, yet there are many aspects of church life in the Tower Hamlets Deanery that transcend their socio-economic and geographical context and have relevance for the diverse setting of charges within the Scottish Episcopal Church.

In the Tower Hamlets Deanery, most people live within walking distance of at least one (Church of England) church, whereas in Scotland, where the Scottish

⁸ The Reverend Canon David Richards of St Paul’s & St George’s (Edinburgh) often tells the story of a clergy conference whose delegates were asked which of their churches was short of money. All, of course, were. The next question was how many times had clergy preached about giving? Very seldom, was the response. The correlation was obvious.

⁹ Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, as quoted in Stuart Murray, *Planting Churches* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), xii.

Episcopal Church is ministering to a mixture of urban and scattered rural congregations, there is no easily-available provision for traditionalist members of congregations choosing to leave a planted church with a changing worship style, and so the question remains of how to continue to honour the preferences of a dwindling and ageing congregation while working to encourage mission and church growth. The planting concept does not have to be large-scale; however, it is possible to “...transform a village if two or three families become involved in the church of their local community rather than simply going to the nearest large equivalent to what they are used to in their nearest town.”¹⁰

The vision for mission, growth and transforming lives I saw in London is relevant to our situation too. Key to its implementation are communication and organic initiation, that is change is instigated by the congregation and sufficient time is taken to prepare them for its acceptance. Worship patterns are planned and unfamiliar forms of worship introduced with sensitivity, respect and skill. Support networks (sending /resourcing church, diocese, area, relational)¹¹ are set up to and sustain plants and provide collegial support to clergy. Also, key to widespread implementation of growth is a coordinator with an overview of an entire growth/planting strategy and the authority and resources to facilitate its implementation. Transformation of lives takes place not only in churches but in the communities they touch and influence. Fellowship and shared experience bring people closer to God and Alpha courses encourage them to address questions of faith. At the heart of every church plant are clergy leaders with the expertise and energy to envision, encourage and enable their congregations to move forward into growth.

¹⁰ Dadwell and Ross, *Church Growth Research Project*, 38.

¹¹ See Appendix 2.

Appendix 1: Locations, Congregations and Conversations

As HTB attracted a steadily increasing congregation and encouraged movement and mission, the core of the church itself expanded widthways into missional outreach and support, developing the now world-renowned Alpha course.

In order to establish and maintain a high level of commercial appeal, HTB recruited media professionals who quickly developed their own departments to design and produce teaching and advertising material of a standard which matched that of commercial media material. The present administration sector, based in offices in South Kensington, has over a hundred employees, who have been recruited from HTB and its planted churches and most of whom are under the age of 30. HTB directs its mission focus deliberately towards young professionals and its principal services provide a high standard of contemporary worship and music in a setting calculated to appeal to this social group.

Meeting with Marl Eldson-Dew at the Alpha headquarters in South Kensington

“The Alpha course is for people who don’t go to church,” explains Mark Eldson-Dew, a former Express news editor who runs the PR operation. “But it’s not a church. It’s a publishing company. It’s a resource for churches to use, to introduce people to Christianity”.¹²

Certainly, my visit to the Alpha headquarters in South Kensington revealed a highly-efficient and focused commercial enterprise staffed entirely by young people who have been recruited mainly from HTB or its associated churches, and which is dedicated to designing, marketing and promoting the worldwide Alpha course, publishing its associated promotional literature and organising its conferences. Bear Grylls features on the cover of the newest issue of the *Alpha* magazine, stylishly produced to look good on the coffee tables of young, dynamic professionals. Just a few weeks after I visited, the annual international leaders’ conference was to take place in the Royal Albert Hall and the finishing touches were being made to the graphics, lighting effects and ancillary materials in readiness for this. A keynote speaker was to be the Most Reverend Justin Welby, archbishop of Canterbury, former fellow-student and now personal friend of Nicky Gumbel, the vicar of HTB. Over coffee, Mark outlined the HTB planting policy of deliberately targeting a city centre where there are students, with the expectation of developing a young and vibrant church congregation. An Alpha course is started straight away and is promoted on social media. A cafe environment is established in a “visible” location

¹² Matthew Bell, [“Alpha: The Slickest, Richest, Fastest-growing Division of the Church of England”](#), *The Spectator* (20 November 2013).

– this can be a large church building in a city centre or (as in Portsmouth) two rented floors in a city centre department store – and the new meeting place provides facilities like free internet access and food and drink. Mark described this as a “student magnet” that goes a long way to proving that church does not have to be “stuffy”. The advantages once the church is established is that students will often become leaders of children’s groups, members of a praise band etc. and so contribute to the life of the church. Young professionals are also encouraged to join the congregation and they then provide financial resources. It seems that Mark’s description of Alpha (and HTB) as a resource for church planting fits the way it operates as both a template and a financial springboard for church planting throughout London and beyond.

HTB also supports its own network of clergy and leaders whose mission activity reaches beyond merely cloning the HTB model, however. Leaders who have planted churches in the East End of London have had to work hard to establish their credentials and have interacted sensitively with existing congregations to honour their traditions while introducing contemporary patterns of worship and community involvement.

St Paul’s, Shadwell

The vision of St Paul’s, Shadwell, “is for the transformation of Shadwell and East London through the love and power of Jesus”. The church sits right beside the Thames and just above the Shadwell Basin, once a thriving wharf and now re-developed as waterside housing for convenient commuting into the City. A busy main road splits the church off from the more modest social housing on the other side and from the parish church of St Mary’s, Cable Street. Once a thriving church, the congregation of St Paul’s had diminished to 12 and was in danger of closure when the bishop of London invited HTB to provide a church plant. In 2005, Thorpe was appointed priest-in-charge and together with Jez Barnes and 100 members of the HTB congregation and a grant of £50,000 he moved to Shadwell. A series of other clergy with HTB associations joined the team at various times until when Thorpe was appointed Bishop of Islington in 2015, Williams took over as rector.

I met Phil in the large administrative building opposite the church which doubles as church hall and administrative centre, having spent an hour or so walking round the local area, where I was particularly aware of the limited green spaces, the constant traffic along the Highway and the apparent inaccessibility of St Paul’s from the road. Phil clearly has a full workload which involves building up and ministering to his own congregation as well as overseeing regular meetings with the incumbents of the churches planted by St Paul’s to pray together and share resources and sometimes personnel. He considers this to be very important and sees

St Paul's as a resource church for the planted churches. Following the HTB pattern of working as a team to meet the requirements of mission in the church and the community, St Paul's works with interns from HTB's Worship Central Academy¹³ as well as employing other full-time staff with responsibility for worship, administration, families and children and community outreach. There is a pastoral care team (generally not professional counsellors) and mid-week groups (Connect groups) meet regularly.

Although the church was originally supported financially by HTB it is now self-supporting. Mission was deliberately directed to young professionals who have moved into the largely re-furnished properties along the waterfront and they are encouraged to be both active and generous church members. "Giving follows vision", said Phil. People are encouraged to give a specified percentage of their income and giving is mentioned every Sunday. They are also encouraged to become involved in local community projects which include leisure activities such as a football club for local Bangladeshi fathers and sons, Tower Hamlets night shelter and the weekday organisations which meet in the church buildings. Some local people have become involved in worship but most of their involvement appears to be limited to the weekday activities organised by the church for the benefit of the community. There is an awareness of this and a desire to make the church more contextual to the community. In common with many London churches, St Paul's has experienced changes to its congregation as people move away or arrive. This can affect the dynamic of the congregation and present a challenge in terms of consistent community involvement.

Phil values the relational network represented by the close-knit Deanery of Tower Hamlets (area diocese of Stepney) where he meets other Church of England incumbents, not all of whom are in evangelical churches (Phil hotly rejects the word 'evangelical', saying that he has no use for labels when it comes to churches). Asked about the limitations posed by parish boundaries he said they were not important, although there had initially been opposition to the new plant when it first happened. This was probably due to inadequate communication and consultation prior to the plant happening. He is now in a relaxed partnership with other evangelical-style churches in the area. He sits lightly to traditional worship but says it is important to retain the centrality of the Eucharist and has a service of Holy Communion every Sunday as well as a morning and evening service focusing mainly on worship and prayer-ministry.

¹³ This is a ten-month (one academic year) worship leadership course funded by the candidate's church, and it includes practical experience in a congregation/community.

After leaving Phil, I went down to the wharf-side and spoke to an elderly local resident who, despite the many community and social activities going on at the church knew little or anything about them. The area along the river between there and the City of Westminster had little “community feel” about it, compared with some of the other areas of East London I subsequently visited.

I called into a large, red-brick church complex on the way along the Thames path which turned out to be the Anglo-Catholic church of St Peter, London Docks; the parish church of Wapping. I spoke briefly to the priest and mentioned I had spent an hour with Williams (a mile or so along the road). His response was a terse “Yes.” I imagine the Anglo-Catholic tradition (which is well-represented in East London) finds the concept of a more relaxed style of worship a difficult one. There is a general acknowledgement that relationships with existing non-planted Church of England churches have sometimes been somewhat strained as their incumbents see the planted church arriving with HTB and diocesan supports in place while they and their congregations struggle to find adequate resources. Clearly this would be less of an issue where the other churches in an area are of a different denomination.

St Peter’s, Bethnal Green

St Peter’s, Bethnal Green, aspires to “worship God, make friends and change the world.” The church was originally built in 1841 because of the vision of Bishop Blomfield to build 12 churches in the East End of London. By 2009 this faithful Anglo-Catholic congregation had dwindled to a handful of members who were determined to keep their church open. Their Sunday Eucharist was celebrated by a part-time priest who lived in community in Hackney. She maintained regular worship but it nonetheless appeared that the church was about to close.

Two members of the congregation approached the bishop for help and the possibility of a church plant was explored. A formal proposal was made to the Parochial Church Council and members of St Peter’s were invited to experience worship at St Paul’s. In 2010 the Reverend Adam Atkinson led a team to St Peter’s with the aim of “honouring the past, navigating change in the present and building the future”.¹⁴

To implement this, the church interior was prepared by making the traditional arrangement of pews more adaptable (they can be pushed back to the walls) before an evening congregation was brought in and a service of contemporary worship introduced. The original congregation has expressed the wish to see children present in church again and this cross-tradition approach to worship met all requirements. Adam Atkinson is happy to retain the treasure and richness of

¹⁴ See [“Exporting the Brompton Way”, Church Times \(21 April 2017\)](#).

Eucharistic worship and says, “We are not looking for the lowest-common-denominator form of worship but bringing together parts of church that have been atomised and separated out...”¹⁵ He describes St Peter’s as ‘scruffy Anglo-Catholic’, and points out that younger people also appreciate and respond to the liturgical and sacramental expression of worship – and the original congregation can see the infusion of youth they realised was necessary to the life of their church. He feels that together they have negotiated the hot topic of worship styles. A certain fusion is achieved by the social intermingling of two distinct congregations between the morning services on Sundays. Worshippers leaving the early, traditional Eucharist come together with the later more informal sung Eucharist to share (real!) coffee and toast.

On my first visit to St Peter’s I met Tim May, an ordinand and former Head of Alpha UK who had studied at the University of Edinburgh and had experienced worship in the Scottish Episcopal Church. We met in St Peter’s Mission Hall, Maker Wharf, which as well as housing the church’s administration functions is also home to local enterprises and community activities. Light, airy and equipped with modern kitchen and toilet facilities it provides a desirable venue for local entrepreneurs, artists and anyone wanting to rent office space.¹⁶ The church crypt is also rented out as a work-space.

Tim told me about the approach St Peter’s to become involved in the local community with social events, political involvement (the congregation and residents successfully agitated for a pedestrian crossing across the busy main road) and with an attitude to mission that “preaches with the bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.” A key element is the leader’s ability to get people on side by being involved locally with people’s needs and social justice issues; for instance, Atkinson had encouraged St Peter’s to become active members of TELCO (The East London Citizens Organisation).

Another team member, Brendan, spoke of the importance of respecting the traditions and culture of others and to find ways of making meaningful contact. There are a high number of Bangladeshi residents close to the church who had not responded to notices about St Peter’s community events. Brendan decided to make a large notice and post it on the local green space, facing and clearly visible from the flats where they live, advertising a free barbecue. This resulted in some initial social contact as food and social contact are a spur to social engagement.

The church practises a light touch in its approaches, generosity in its relationships and a willingness to “sit round the table and talk.” In common with all

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For more, see www.makerwharf.cc.

the churches in the study, St Peter's runs Alpha courses and these also place the emphasis on making friendships, of 'not underestimating people's intelligence while not overestimating their knowledge'. The post-Alpha courses are basically shared meals and discussion which establish firm friendships between members.

In the church we met a member of the original congregation who stated his preference for Anglo-Catholic worship, describing contemporary worship as "anathema", while conceding that the infusion of new worshippers had done nothing but good for the church and that without the plant it would have ceased to exist. I was to encounter him again on my second visit which was to the mid-week evening Eucharist. This took place in the church, in front of a simple nave altar, chairs grouped in a semi-circle lit by soft lighting and candles. The three other worshippers spoke positively about their church and were appreciative of the 'rescue' effected by the plant from St Paul's.

Immense care was taken by Atkinson in preparing and celebrating this Eucharist. Adam is equally at home at the much bigger worship event on Sunday evenings which features contemporary worship, young people and families. He said, "This is not just a feel-good factory, what's going on here is the serious business of prayer, scripture, spirit and sacraments. In the light of that we're reenergized and – pop – off we go." The remit of the church is not simply to provide worship opportunities; it is to present the face of Christ in a community which is no stranger to hardship, conflict and problems of ethnicity. My general impression was that this church provides a model that could be easily adapted to suit a setting where a mix of worship approaches is needed.

St Luke's, Millwall

St Luke's, Millwall, is "overflowing with the life of God." The Reverend Ed Dix, priest-in-charge, advised me that their morning worship on Sunday would be earlier than usual so that the congregation could go out after the service and cheer on the runners in the London Marathon. This lively and welcoming congregation meets in a community hall on an estate but considers a permanent church building to be of such importance that one is now being built close by.

In 2013 Ed and his wife led a group of about 30 people as a graft from St Paul's, Shadwell, onto the existing congregation of about the same number, which was meeting in a school as their church building had been demolished. It operates under a Bishop's Mission Order which supports and monitors plants across parish boundaries. The parish church is Christ Church, Spitalfields, and between them they serve the whole of the Isle of Dogs. Some of the original congregation chose to worship at Christ Church but most remained, including Renee who is the widow of a previous incumbent of Christ Church in the 1980s and she recalled how poor and

how run-down the neighbourhood of Spitalfields then was. Another, more recent, member of the congregation spoke of how his association with the church had allowed his life to be “turned around by Christ”; he had moved from sleeping rough and being dependent on drugs to now being in paid employment and with a roof over his head. His vocal and expressive worship style contrasted with the more restrained style of the older members but all were very clearly part of the same church family and all were welcomed and accepted. The Sunday morning Eucharist I shared was middle-of-the-road Anglican, with a mixture of hymns and modern worship songs. Evening worship at St Luke’s is designed to attract younger people, is very informal and the music is contemporary.

Dix acknowledges that combining traditional and contemporary elements of worship is sometimes “outside everyone’s comfort zone.” The present compromise meets current needs and is realistic in terms of resources. This is a socially diverse congregation of around 70 and it includes local families with children, long-term residents of the Isle of Dogs, people from overseas and some higher-income members who live close to Canary Wharf.

After church we did indeed go to the Marathon route to give out bottles of water and cheer on the runners. Community involvement is a key element of St Luke’s ecclesial life and includes once-monthly meetings in a local pub, community fun days, Alpha courses, parenting courses tailored to the family circumstances of some local families and also parent and toddler groups. In common with all the clergy I spoke to, Dix affirmed that the principal factor that drove success was shared vision; financial resources were also important, of course, but “a way can usually be found.”¹⁷

Christ Church, Spitalfields

Christ Church, Spitalfields, has a vision “to see Jesus loved, churches grown and society transformed.” It was not my original intention to visit there because I was at first unaware that this was another planted church from St Paul’s, Shadwell.

The planting pattern is rather different here, as the incumbent, the Reverend Andy Rider, was not “planted” with the new congregation. Instead, in 2014, after

¹⁷ It was clear from my meeting that inspirational leadership is also crucial. Dix and his wife lead by example: they have just become foster parents to a four-year-old Bangladeshi boy who has serious medical problems and speaks little English. Because they had just that week collected him from hospital, Dix was unable to keep his appointment for our meeting with me and our conversation was limited to a short time after church.

considerable discussion, prayer meetings, commitment of funding and planning a young evening congregation was integrated into Christ Church with HTB-style “professionally-delivered” contemporary worship, reflecting the creative and vibrant culture of this part of London. Two curates (one from HTB, one from St Paul’s, Shadwell) also joined the team.

Christ Church is a beautifully restored Grade I listed building designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor, which is used to host a number of cultural events, including organ recitals and classical concerts. Inside I met Rosa, a teacher of Indian ethnic origin, who gives English lessons to local Bengali-speakers. She spoke of the difficulties encountered by Bengali-speaking Christians who are often victimised and threatened by non-Christian Bengalis. She also spoke of her own appreciation of the Christ Church congregation and the support she had received and of her constant desire to speak of her faith.

The increase in congregational numbers has also facilitated other community involvement, such as the local food bank. The crypt of Christ Church has been completely renovated to provide an attractive cafe space run on commercial lines, with a small and beautifully furnished prayer room, equipped with bibles in a selection of languages adjacent to it. There is also a small chapel.

All Hallows, Bow

All Hallows, Bow, says, “Come as you are.” It is a self-confessed partying church! Its rector, the Reverend Cris Rogers, describes it as “representing Christianity as a colourful explosion of joy,” and certainly my first impression of the building was of an attractive and vibrant social space where young people were gathered to socialise and get to know each other. Rogers was available in the garden shed which serves as a vestry and office for anyone wanted to talk to him. Gradually everyone moved to the worship space at the other end of this large church to sit in a circle for prayer, listen to scripture, sing worship songs and hear a very relevant address given by Rogers. He did not lead worship in any other way; that was left to the young full-time lay worship leader and the lead singer of the praise band. The average age of the congregation was probably 25 and all were relaxed and engaged in the worship.

Copies of the church’s annual report were distributed after the service and presented by a young incumbent serving at the church while studying at St Mellitus¹⁸. The report was professionally produced and well-illustrated, with headers like “Explosions of joy” and “Thank yous and shout outs.” It also gave details of the very recent cross-diocese plant by a small group from All Hallows to St Matthias,

¹⁸ Many of the clergy associated with HTB and its plants have trained at St Mellitus College (London). For more, see <https://www.stmellitus.org>.

Canning Town (Diocese of Chelmsford). This represents a third-generation plant from HTB.

The sense of celebration encompasses much of the life of All Hallows: a blackboard in the meeting space lists the community activities carried out by various members of the congregation. These are not necessarily under the direction of the church. Young people and other congregation members involved in voluntary work are mentioned here and prayed for. The life of the community is drawn into the life of the church – and celebrated. Under the heading “vision” are listed the many celebrations and festivals hosted by All Hallows in the community. This is how All Hallows works to transform lives.

Right Reverend Ric Thorpe, Bishop of Islington

Although Bishop Thorpe was not in London at the time of my visit, he kindly emailed a response to my questions about his role in church planting. Here is what he said:

In simple terms, I enable church planting in the London Diocese by working with area bishops and their teams (top down) and with deaneries to map and identify opportunities for planting (bottom up). We then develop those ideas through enabling consultancy, coaching, training and funding to progress each idea. Then when they are planted we promote them internally and externally, help them to learn from others and for us to learn from them, and support them to grow to full health. I have authority in London Diocese because I have been given a license by the Bishop of London to do that.

Outside the diocese, I am “available for advice.” I have, with the church commissioners’ strategy unit, put on information days for bishops and diocesan secretaries to explore the idea of planting in their dioceses. We particularly focus on city centre resource churches which become church planting engines for their dioceses. We then follow this up with advice on church planting strategies in their dioceses. I only do this with a warm invitation so that it is always the local diocesan bishop’s initiative. There are therefore no cross-border issues. This planting is always in response to an invitation.

To create a dedicated bishop for church planting, you would need to revive an old see (without changing any legislation) or create a new one going through your synods and possibly national government, depending on the constitution of the episcopal church – of which I know nothing! Then once appointed, the role would need to be given

jurisdiction in a particular diocese so that authority can be exercised. For this you would need to talk to an archdeacon or bishop or registrar who would know the local legislation – which is likely to be different to England.¹⁹

Conclusion

I am grateful to all the churches I visited and to all the people who gave so generously of their time to answer my many questions. The information they provided is an invaluable resource not only for the concept of church planting itself but also for re-energising and resourcing small congregations to make a significant impact on their communities by offering vibrant and relevant worship and teaching and to make Jesus known in their community by their involvement in local projects. I do hope that the some of the insights of church planting in the Tower Hamlets Deanery of Diocese of London may be helpful to the Scottish Episcopal Church.

¹⁹ Contents of an email sent to the writer 27 March 2017.

Appendix 2: Networks and Resources

One of the strengths of the groups of planted churches in East London is the system of networks, both formal and informal, which supports them.

Relational networks

Many of the clergy of the churches I visited had known each other for quite some time; some had served together at HTB, some had trained together at St Mellitus College and some had known each other in previous church contexts. For instance, Thorpe initially served at HTB as curate, moved with Williams to plant a new congregation in Christ Church, Spitalfields, before planting St Paul's, Shadwell. He was joined at St Paul's by Atkinson, who later moved on to plant St Peter's, Bethnal Green, Dix who led the church plant to St Luke's, Millwall, and Rogers who went on to plant All Hallows, Bow. From there, Thorpe was appointed bishop of Islington with special responsibility for church planting throughout London. The vacancy at St Paul's was filled by Williams, former curate at Christ Church, who had also been associated with HTB.

This close meshed yet diverse network of clergy provides collegial support and unity of vision throughout the planted churches. Members of the planted churches meet with their sending church (in this case, St Paul's) three times a year to pray together and to share resources, ideas and if necessary personnel. Theirs is an example of a "permission-giving environment, deep friendships, and a generous disposition and posture that encourages experimentation for the sake of the gospel".²⁰ Clergy meet much more frequently, generally once a week, to offer each other fellowship and support.

The other significant relational network is that between HTB itself, the Alpha course initiated several decades ago by the Reverend Charles Marnham at HTB and the churches HTB has planted. Each of the churches I visited runs regular Alpha courses, whose content and presentation are determined by the audio-visual and printed resources available from the parent organisation in South Kensington. As previously mentioned, the clergy have long known each other, primarily because of their own links to HTB and close contact is maintained by the continuing interest by HTB in its plants. Their long-established working relationships in many of the HTB plants give coherence to their current ministries but do not detract from the individual nature of their churches.

²⁰ Dadwell and Ross, *Church Growth Research Project*, 36.

Diocesan Support

Communication is facilitated further and the network extended by the Diocesan Communications Team which provides “support to the network of clergy, churches, parishes and other worshipping communities that comprise the Diocese of London.”²¹ The team offers training resources, advice on use of media and marketing and practical reference material on specific ministerial issues.

The structure of the diocese is such that Tower Hamlets (where the churches I visited are all situated) is a Deanery supervised by the area bishop of Stepney as a sub-set of the Diocese of London. Williams of St Paul’s, Shadwell, was particularly appreciative of the support offered at diocesan level by his own deanery. This provides yet another network beyond that of HTB which includes contact with other clergy in neighbouring parishes who are not part of a church planting project. There is a natural affinity to other so-called evangelical churches in the area although there is also fraternal contact with the many other Anglican and non-Anglican churches of the neighbourhood.

Episcopal overview of and support for church planting was also practised and encouraged by Chartres and his help and vision were widely acknowledged by all the clergy I spoke to. They also found it particularly helpful that the Diocese of Islington had been revived and that Thorpe had been given special responsibility for church planting throughout London. The advantage of having one person as a point of reference who can authorise the necessary changes is that vision and the implementation of church planting are not restricted by diocesan boundaries and the deliberations of committees which might otherwise slow down the process. Thorpe’s remit now extends beyond the diocese of London or indeed the south-east of England. He has been instrumental in facilitating church plants from HTB as far afield as Newcastle upon Tyne and Portsmouth and is happy to offer advice on church planting anywhere he is invited.

The HTB pattern is that the sending church provides clergy (usually a curate), a group of around 30 people and a substantial sum of money (sometimes as much as £50,000) to the receiving parish. This forms the basis of the plant and the dent in the sending church’s congregation is soon filled by new members. Several of the churches I visited had been on the verge of closure and the plant has facilitated exponential growth (sometimes as much as tenfold), resulting in the church’s financial self-sufficiency and removing the need for any diocesan financial support. The interest, support and nurture of the sending church continue until the receiving

²¹ <https://www.london.anglican.org/articles/author/communications/>.

congregation is on its feet. In practical terms this generally seems to take just a few years.

Financial and Practical Support

Without the financial resources of this group of (now four) South Kensington churches which trained and supported many of the clergy now in post in the churches I visited, their congregations would have dwindled to nothing, church buildings would have been sold and developed for other purposes and Christian witness in areas so much in need of it would never have taken place. The Alpha course itself which now has attractive contemporary office accommodation in South Kensington and is staffed by a large team of young professionals has become a global Christian resource. All this costs money – vast quantities of money – which could never be raised by congregational donation alone. Some Christians might view with some reservations the entrepreneurship inherent in this model as running counter to the true purpose of the Church. However, it is clear from my observations of the group of churches I visited in London's East End that without substantial financial resources, stipends could not be paid, Alpha courses funded and community work subsidised; in short, their work could not be done. So entrepreneurial activity and the grateful acceptance of substantial financial gifts from donors are the means for HTB to be a resource church. This does not mean that HTB is acquiring wealth for its own sake; it is immediately put to missional use. Neither does it compromise 'being church' in communities without financial resources; on the contrary, it makes it possible and churches are supported by HTB rather than living in its shadow or under its ecclesial influence.

All the churches I visited acknowledged the need for realistic giving, which they actively encourage and all their websites include an online 'giving' facility.

Confronting Secularism since 1945

ALEC RYRIE

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Secularisation is of course the big religious story of this country and of the so-called West generally in this period. We need to keep it in perspective: globally, this Christian and matching Jewish decline is the exception, not the rule. But it has been marked. It is long-lasting, stretching back at least to the eighteenth century, but it has also clearly accelerated in our own times. In particular, as Callum Brown's provocative book argued a few years ago, Christian practice and identity in Britain fell off a cliff in the 1960s, and has not staged any kind of recovery since.¹ I think he makes that fact very plain. The argument now is about why. And this evening I want to offer you two things. One, a story about how we in the western democracies got to where we are now. It departs a bit from the standard narrative in that I am talking mostly about developments *internal* to the Christian world: arguing that traditional Euro-American Christianity has not been being crushed, it has been collapsing. You may not agree with this narrative but I hope you will at least find it interesting. And the second thing I want to do, more briefly, is to suggest where the processes I have talked about may take us next, and what prospects – if any – they offer for the eventual rebirth of Christianity in the old West. And I do think the prospects are there, but that the price may be high.

Anyway: back to 1945. That is a conventional watershed date in modern history, but I did not choose it haphazardly. My starting-point is the observation that the Second World War was, and still is, the defining moral event of our times. That is, it provided us with what is still our working definition of evil. And in a nutshell, I think that has been one of the driving forces of post-war Christianity's crisis: because defining good and evil is traditionally one of the things that religions do, and that fact that we have now subscribed to a moral framework which is defined in essentially secular terms has left religious moral frameworks bereft of their authority.

To begin with, it looked as if it might work the other way. In the 1920s and 1930s Christian identity had very much felt itself to be on the back foot, embattled by Communism, Fascism and breezy Jazz Age secularism, but the war marked a return to a self-conscious Christian identity, in what many people saw as a war for Christian civilisation against barbarism. My colleague Mike Snape, in his recent book on American military chaplaincy during World War II, has written very

¹ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).

movingly about the extent to which the United States, a secular republic, self-consciously fought a holy war during the 1940s, a war which bound America's three great religious families, Protestants, Catholics and Jews, into a newly-imagined entity called 'Judeo-Christian civilisation'.² Allied soldiers were told so often that Nazism was anti-Christian that, when they entered Germany, many expressed surprised that church buildings still stood there. Not that soldiers always swallowed their propaganda. Mike quotes the American GI Paul Fussell's famously acerbic memoir of wartime service, recalling how soldiers sneered or giggled at the word 'crusade'. But as it happened, the joke went sour. Allied troops in Germany discovered more than just churches. Even if they had believed everything they had heard about concentration camps, nothing could have prepared them for what they found at Buchenwald and Dachau. Fussell wrote:

They had seen and smelled the death camps, and now they were able to realize that all along they had been ... fighting for something positive, the sacredness of life itself. ... After the camps, a moral attitude was rampant. ... The boys' explosive little tour in France had been a crusade after all.³

Every Christian army tells its soldiers they are fighting the forces of evil. Just this once, it turned out to be true.

So 1945 was a moment of hope for what still thought of itself as the Christian West. Only Judeo-Christian civilisation had had the moral power to defeat Fascism, and only Judeo-Christian civilisation had the moral power to confront Communism. The political centre-right in most of post-war Europe was dominated by new Christian Democratic parties, uniting Catholics and Protestants. We did not have one of those in Britain, perhaps unfortunately, but one of the architects of our post-war settlement was Archbishop Temple, who was also, not coincidentally, a pioneer of Anglican-Jewish reconciliation. This surge of Christian politics was not exactly matched by religious revival, but there were modest hopeful signs. The churches' role in rebuilding a devastated Europe was hard to ignore. Britain saw a modest uptick in Anglican numbers, led, as churchmen eagerly noticed, by the young and especially by students. John Robinson, who was a chaplain at Cambridge through the 1950s, found its Christian environment so lively that he speculated that secularization's tide had finally turned. In America the change was unmistakable. In

² Michael Snape, *God and Uncle Sam: Religion and America's Armed Forces in World War II* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015).

³ Snape, *God and Uncle Sam*, 579.

1954 the United States added the phrase 'under God' to the Pledge of Allegiance, and adopted 'In God We Trust' as a national motto. The previous year, the proportion of the US population who were formal members of a church reached its highest ever level, 59.5%. Polling indicated that the American public respected religious leaders far more than any other group in their society, a dramatic turnaround from the pre-war years. Weekly church and synagogue attendance in the US rose from 38% in 1946 to 49% in 1955. Bible sales doubled over the same period.⁴ As importantly, the two long-alienated halves of American Protestantism seemed to be coming back together. The clerical and intellectual elite, and the evangelicals and fundamentalists, began to engage with each other again, an engagement symbolised by Billy Graham, the evangelical whose charm and moral authority the establishment proved unable to resist.

We can almost imagine that it could have lasted. But the western democracies in the 1950s were not waking from a ghastly secularist-totalitarian nightmare. They were doing their best to subside back into a pleasant dream from which they had been roughly awoken. We can hardly blame them. After the Second World War a certain numbness was only natural. But before too long its lessons would need to be absorbed in earnest.

That meant doing more than simply restating old religious truths. Since the previous century some Christians had been wondering if God was calling them, not to sing the old gospel in a different key, but to play a different tune altogether? They observed that churches, hierarchies, liturgies and all that were declining: perhaps this was God's will, and Christians should allow them to die, or even kill (!), rather than preserving them on life support? Jesus, after all, was no friend of hierarchies. In the 1880s, the campaigning British journalist W. T. Stead experienced a conversion in which God told him to 'be no longer a Christian, be a Christ'. In an 1894 pamphlet *If Christ Came to Chicago!*, a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic, he argued that what Jesus would do in that iconic modern city was found what he called a Civic Church, which would serve all humanity regardless of race, gender or religion, and would be open to anyone willing to work selflessly for the common good. The measure of true Christianity was not churchiness, but 'the extent to which we succeed in restoring in man the lost image of God'. Many of his contemporaries struggled to see how 'being a Christ' like this actually spread the Gospel. It would

⁴ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34-6.

surely be better, as one critic put it, 'if Chicago came to Christ'.⁵ But the idea did not go away.

It was the Second World War which brought it from the fringe to the mainstream. And it did so, above all, via the conscience of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. During 1944, in prison in Berlin as the bombs fell around him, with all trace of Christian civilisation apparently gone, Bonhoeffer began groping towards an understanding of what Christian faith might mean in this new world. Writing to a friend, he said: 'We are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all: men as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.' Rather than fighting a rearguard action against this, he wondered whether Christians might be called to work with it. Perhaps 'religion' was an infantile stage which 'a world come of age' had outgrown? What if 'religion' could be separated from Christianity, and is in fact no more than its 'garment'? What would then be needed would be, as he fatefully put it, 'a religionless Christianity'.

In a series of letters Bonhoeffer circled around the problem of what this religionless Christianity might actually be. This was not a materialism-lite rationalisation. It was about stripping away structures, hierarchies, jargon, and worldly wealth and power. The aim was a Christianity as weak and powerless as Christ, serving the world from the cross. Repeatedly in these letters, however, Bonhoeffer shied away from specifying how this could actually work. 'I shall be writing to you about it again soon ... I am thinking over the problem at present ... More about that next time, I hope.' If he made any further progress before the Nazis hanged him, his surviving letters do not record it.⁶

When those inconclusive reflections on 'religionless Christianity' were published in English in 1952, the work of the finest Christian martyr the war had produced, they spoke profoundly to many of his British and American readers. They shared his impatience with institutional, churchy 'religion', and wanted to cut through formalism and hypocrisy to rediscover the authentic heart of the Gospel. 'Authenticity' became their watchword: for they felt that the church-religion they had inherited, and indeed the whole of the patched-together post-war society which hosted it, was a sham.

This burgeoning discontent first took shape, not in the margins or the 'religionless' spaces, but at the heart of western Christian privilege, the universities.

⁵ Stewart J. Brown, 'W. T. Stead and the Civic Church, 1886–1895: The Vision Behind "If Christ Came to Chicago!"', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 66, no. 2 (2015): esp. 324, 331, 336.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: Collins, 1959), pp. 91, 93, 95, 125.

Student groups were groping towards ways of living an 'authentic', 'religionless' Christian life. Joseph Wesley Matthews was a former Fundamentalist preacher whose faith had been turned upside down by the butchery of the Pacific war, had discovered Bonhoeffer, and his gospel now became a search for a 'breakthrough' to authenticity. He once ripped out the pages of a church Bible during a sermon, to demonstrate what breaking free of 'religion' might be. He became leader of a student community in Austin, Texas, where he made it his business to help the community's members break through their self-deceptions to discover their authentic selves. One member of the community claimed it was like the early Church restored, because, as he said, 'the early Church didn't give a goddamn about life after death. Neither do we'.⁷ The claim about the early Church is entirely wrong, but the focus on this world rather than abstract pieties was true to Bonhoeffer's vision. That deliberate profanity, using blasphemy to cut through pious conventions, was America's own contribution.

In some ways this is a very traditional Christian phenomenon: a movement for reform and inner authenticity, like the Methodists, or Pietists, or Puritans, or any number of medieval reform movements before them. But unlike them, the Christian authenticity-seekers of the 1950s and 1960s explicitly refused to turn inward. Instead, they hoped to find Christianity's true nature in Christlike service to the world, given with defiant disregard to cost. They wanted not to be Christians, but to be Christs. Their awakened consciences were searching not just for sins of which they could repent, but for causes which they could serve.

And that meant one cause above all. The Second World War had been fought against an evil defined by its racism, by its doctrine of human inequality. And that struggle continued. Britain was deeply implicated in white-supremacist rule in South Africa and Rhodesia, and America's ingrained structures of racism were all too plain. Restless Christian consciences were, late in the day, awakening to the urgency of these causes.

The pivotal moment was 1955, when the leadership of a campaign against segregated seating on buses in the city of Montgomery, Alabama, was thrust unexpectedly onto a 26-year-old Baptist minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. King had been raised in which he called Fundamentalism, but had studied at the heart of the mainline white churches' establishment: his ability to connect those very different worlds, and to speak both of their languages, would be crucial to his achievement. That, and his remarkable moral and intellectual clarity. The key moment of the campaign, and perhaps of King's entire career, was the night of 30

⁷ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 55, 60, 70–71.

January 1956, less than two months into the boycott, when King's house was bombed. He was not at home, but his wife Coretta and their two-month-old daughter were: they escaped unhurt. By the time King had hurried home from his meeting, hundreds of supporters had gathered. They came, Coretta recalled, 'to do battle. ... It could have been a riot, a very bloody riot.' The city's mayor and police commissioner, trying to disperse the crowd, only stirred up their anger. Then King spoke from the bomb-damaged porch. It was not the high oratory he was capable of, but the impromptu, knife-edge words which the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported the following day were crystal clear:

“Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. ... We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them. ... If I am stopped our work will not stop. For what we are doing is right”. The crowd remained, singing hymns, for much of the rest of the night.⁸

In the Montgomery boycott, King successfully claimed post-war America's moral high ground. This was a struggle 'between the forces of light and the forces of darkness', not between white and black Americans. Preaching in February 1956, he insisted:

“We are concerned not merely to win justice in the busses but rather to behave in a new and different way – to be non-violent so that we may remove injustice itself, both from society and from ourselves. This is a struggle which we cannot lose, no matter what the apparent outcome, if we ourselves succeed in becoming better and more loving people”. If you want the contrast: at a segregationist rally in Montgomery earlier the same month, a handbill titled “A Declaration of Segregation” was distributed, stating: “We hold these truths to be self evident that all whites are created equal with certain rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of dead n*****s.”⁹

The contrast, at least for those Americans who were not themselves in a deep pit of hate and fear, could hardly be plainer.

⁸ Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 17, 134–35.

⁹ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 24, 154, 168.

It is worth emphasising how profoundly Christianised this movement was, from King's testimony to his spiritual struggles, to his newly-founded organisation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a body whose volunteers were required to pledge to 'MEDITATE daily on the teachings and life of Jesus' and 'PRAY daily to be used by God'.¹⁰ The civil-rights campaign had an old-fashioned revivalism to it. There were moments of prophetic certainty, claps of thunder during sermons, ministers raised from their sickbeds to preach with unaccustomed power. The greatest miracle was marching straight-backed towards brutal police and watching their power melt away. As Thomas Gilmore, who would himself become one of Alabama's first black sheriffs, put it: 'You really get the feeling that somebody bigger than you is walking beside you, and you feel that, well, man, nobody can hurt you if he wanted to.'¹¹ For white campaigners, the movement offered a different revivalist trope: repentance and redemption. Civil-rights preachers named evil for what it was, challenged their hearers to slough it off, and offered them forgiveness if they did.

The message's power across America's churches was plain. Even the white Southern churches were largely paralysed into inactivity, despite the overwhelmingly pro-segregation views of their memberships. The evangelical establishment, represented by Billy Graham, plainly backed the cause. Anti-segregation Americans lost their battle not in their schools or shops but in their hearts. They still wanted segregation, but they no longer knew how to defend it nor had the will to fight for it. And so, slowly, at times bloodily, but inexorably, it ended.

But if most American Christians accepted the power of King's message, one group in particular were entranced by it. The authenticity-seekers of the 1950s, hoping with Bonhoeffer to form a 'religionless Christianity', were drawn like moths to America's civil-rights movement, and to worldwide campaigns against racism, imperialism and above all against apartheid. This was – for a while – a fully-worked-out demonstration of what Bonhoeffer had struggled to imagine. Religionless Christianity in action: a movement whose Christian basis was unmistakable, but which was never about churchiness, jargon, institutions or cliques, a rainbow coalition led by Christians but not for Christians. America's main student-led civil-rights organisation, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was stuffed with Christian activists, but deliberately avoided claiming a Christian identity. This was a movement which would live the Gospel rather than boasting of it. It seemed much more like true Christianity, or at least more truly Christlike, than yet another

¹⁰ Mark Silk, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 114.

¹¹ David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 94.

self-satisfied Sunday service. It was prophetic. Unfortunately, not all self-appointed prophets succeed.

To come closer to home: in 1960, the year the contraceptive pill was approved for general use in the United States, the big story in this country was the *Lady Chatterley* trial, at which one of the star defence witnesses was John Robinson, now bishop of Woolwich. As a chaplain at Cambridge in the 1950s, Robinson had suspected that a Christian resurgence might be dawning. His arrival in Woolwich in 1959 was a rude awakening. His shock on meeting the English working class up close was not unlike Bonhoeffer's shock on meeting his jailers: men of apparently utter indifference to religion. Robinson was an avid reader of Bonhoeffer. His shocking courtroom defence of an obscene book was part of a wider effort to develop a prophetic Christian voice. He wanted to speak unexpected, riveting truths rather than always mouthing the self-serving platitudes which the public had long since learned to ignore. His bestselling 1963 book *Honest to God* appealed to the same ethic of authenticity. The title promised that, instead of party-line religious cant, for once a bishop was going to tell the plain truth. Of course the book's contents were in reality much more mainstream than its packaging. But he strongly echoed Bonhoeffer's call for a religionless Christianity.

Ominously, his call was taken up not in the secularised cities, but in his old university stamping-grounds. The story of what happened to student Christianity in the 1960s is a microcosm of the decade's wider religious convulsions. The leading British student Christian organisation was the SCM, whose ethic was broad, socially engaged and ecumenical. It had around 7000 members in 1963. That is a number which fell by a staggering 90% over the following decade. What makes this catastrophe remarkable is that it was almost deliberately self-inflicted. In 1962, the SCM appointed a new secretary, Ambrose Reeves, a former bishop in South Africa, who had been expelled from the country for his anti-apartheid activism. Reeves, another Bonhoeffer enthusiast, introduced what he called an 'openness policy', committing the SCM to ignoring any distinctions between Christians and non-Christians. Christianity, Reeves argued, needed to serve the secular world rather than withdraw from it or fight it. The SCM, therefore, should be 'primarily concerned with students who are not Christians ... It may well be that we can best serve the churches by ceasing to be a "religious" society.'

This reckless, self-sacrificial abandonment of institutional self-interest certainly felt prophetic. It did not by itself answer Bonhoeffer's awkward question: what does a religionless Christianity actually consist of? Reeves admitted that "many of us have been uncertain as to what exactly the new emphasis on 'openness' involves." His answer, inspired by the civil rights and anti-apartheid causes, was working alongside groups of all kinds that were "seeking to promote justice and

world peace.” In 1968, Reeves’ successor at SCM, David Head, formally committed it to “revolutionary change” and to supporting Marxist movements worldwide. A 1969 SCM communiqué stated, “The overall purpose of the movement would be to bring about a better and just society. . . . Call it “the revolution,” call it “the Kingdom,” call it what you will.’

Now whether or not you agree with this policy, it had certain practical consequences. Most student Christians did not share these political views, and simply left the organisation. The SCM’s leaders, who knew that prophets are not honoured in their own time, felt vindicated by this. But even for the true believers who stayed, it wasn’t clear what they were supposed to do. In 1967, one SCM branch complained that its members were in a state of “utter apathy,” which “will only be removed when the leaders make clear what they are trying to do.” The only consistent answer—to work alongside secular campaigners—did not answer the increasingly urgent question of why the SCM itself existed at all. It was deliberately suppressing any assertion of a distinctively Christian identity, instead subsuming that identity into radical politics. So Christians who disliked radical politics withdrew from the SCM, and Christians who embraced radical politics increasingly saw themselves simply as radicals and no longer as Christians. In a decade, Britain’s main student Christian organization willed itself almost out of existence.¹²

The SCM’s story is extreme, but it was widely paralleled. The 1972 assembly of the World Student Christian Federation committed itself to ‘the common class struggle against capitalism’, passed a series of political resolutions, and deplored the failure to invite official representatives from the People’s Republic of China, where at that date Christian practice of any kind was illegal. And grown-ups were caught up in the same mood. The World Council of Churches’ assembly at Uppsala in 1968 chose the slogan, ‘The world sets the agenda’: it is the same deliberate and conscientious refusal to assert a Christian identity. Its focus was anti-imperialism and anti-racism. The point is not whether these policies were right or not, but that those organisations were presuming to lead their member churches in a radical direction without heed to ordinary believers’ views. They were there to serve the world, not their own flocks. And it meant the churches were, as the contemporary phrase had it, part of the problem rather than part of the solution. In 1965 one radical London cleric, who had transformed his own church into a community centre, called on his fellow clergy to “leave their parishes and take secular jobs, especially in the welfare and social services run by the State”—advice that he later

¹² Sam Brewitt-Taylor, ‘From Religion to Revolution: Theologies of Secularization in the British Student Christian Movement, 1963–1973’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 66, no. 4 (2015).

took himself. In 1968, Bishop Robinson, yesterday's radical, wrote sympathetically of the modern Christian's dilemma: to stay in the church despite its many flaws, or to say "This is so irrelevant, that there is nothing to be done but come out." He admitted that "creative disaffiliation" from the church could be liberating and that sometimes "non-involvement in organized religion is indeed a Christian vocation."¹³

He may have had his American friend James Pike in mind, the Episcopalian bishop of California who had grown increasingly contemptuous of what he called the 'standard-brand churches' and their obsession with irrelevant doctrines. Pike resigned his bishopric in 1966 and in 1969 left the Church altogether to form what he called a 'Foundation for Religious Transition'. Its aim was to uncover the true Jesus, who was of course a political revolutionary. In the same year Pike travelled to Israel, confident that he would make 'the big breakthrough' to the new post-religious consciousness. Instead, he and his young, third wife became lost in the Judean desert. She found her way to safety. His body was found a few days later. It was perhaps a kind of prophetic end, although not of the sort he had intended.¹⁴

Western Christianity would in any case have faced powerful cultural headwinds in the 1960s. But its fateful seduction by a half-developed idea of religionless Christianity made matters much, much worse. A swathe of Christians became convinced that it was their Christian duty to stop talking about Christianity and to subsume themselves into radical politics. Some completed the journey and became simple revolutionaries. Many others discovered that being a religionless Christian was pretty much like being an ordinary secular citizen. They joined the large majority of the population who professed a Christian identity but showed little sign of it in their everyday lives. Others remained in the churches with a sense of voiceless disillusion. No doubt they deserved prophetic denunciation, but they did not enjoy it. As for secular society, Christian leaders were loudly declaring that churches were unimportant. Unsurprisingly, it was a message many people were ready to hear.

It is not fair to blame Bonhoeffer, who knew that he had not worked out what form 'religionless Christianity' might take, and who did not know that his half-formed musings in private letters would be turned into a manifesto. He also did not know that the future was not going to be as inhuman as it looked from a Berlin prison in 1944. In retrospect, one feature of that prison environment stands out: the guards and prisoners whose irreligion so shook Bonhoeffer were all men. Christianity in modern times has been predominantly a women's religion.

¹³ John A. T. Robinson, *Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 227–28, 239.

¹⁴ Silk, *Spiritual Politics*, 137–41.

Patriarchal Christians, of whom Bonhoeffer was one, have often worried that this makes Christianity seem weak. The prophets of religionless Christianity, like almost all of the prophets of 1960s radicalism, were men, and their quest for revolutionary relevance was a very masculine agenda. Religionless Christianity turned out, in practice, not only to be a denial of the mundane lived reality which makes a sustained Christian community possible, but also a repudiation of many of the unglamorous, faithful pew-fillers who were more often treated with disdain than recognised as that community's life-blood.

By 1970 it was already clear that establishment Protestant churches were in free fall, with the Catholics not far behind. And in those churches, the downward trajectory has been maintained ever since, with some variations and pockets of good news. Whether the tide can at some point turn for these institutions is another matter. It has often done so before, and there is no such thing as an unstoppable historical force, but at present there is not much sign of it. And for western European Christianity, dominated as it is by those establishment churches, this is the bulk of the story, although even here, some conservative and even fundamentalist churches have fared less badly. In the United States, of course, things have been different. I want to finish by commenting a little bit on why.

During the 1970s it became clear that evangelical and fundamentalist Christians in America were holding up quite a lot better than their liberal and radical brethren, and because America's disestablished and anti-hierarchical churches were structurally, culturally and financially more responsive to the views of their ordinary members than is the case in most European churches, the institutions generally turned more sharply in response to that new mood. In particular, this meant a reversal of the radical, left-wing political agenda which had been such a high-profile feature of 1960s Christianity, such that in the 1980 presidential election American evangelicals abandoned the first-ever self-avowed born-again President, Jimmy Carter, in favour of the divorcé and nominal Presbyterian Ronald Reagan. Since then there has been a lot of attention given to the American religious Right, but I want briefly to note what I think is the more telling phenomenon: the absence, or rather the invisibility, of the American religious Left. Despite the fact that many American Christians have political concerns associated with the Left, repeated attempts to mould an organised, vocal religious Left have run into the sand.

The immediate problem that the American religious Left foundered on was abortion, a paralysingly difficult issue for American Christians who both nourished a moral intuition that abortion was wrong and also cherished their attachment to a feminism in which reproductive rights were an increasingly important shibboleth. Such Christians – most famous amongst them President Carter – found themselves

unable to voice their convictions, or, if they spoke on the issue of abortion, they did so tentatively, with nuance and moderation. Which has never been the way to get yourself heard in American politics. But that presenting issue was only a symptom of a deeper, systemic problem: the inability of liberal white Christians in both America and Europe to assert their religious identity. Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that liberal white Christians have been muzzled by secularism, nor that they have suffered from some sort of despicable failure of nerve and self-belief, as is often implied. The problem is more honourable, deeper and more systemic than that. They have been silenced by their own profound commitment to inclusion and opposition to discrimination. Their aim is to serve society as a whole rather than their own narrow confessional self-interest, a commitment which blends a noble Bonhoefferian instinct for self-sacrificial service with a lingering sense that they are a normative establishment, the bedrock of Christian societies, and so cannot abandon their universal responsibilities by claiming a particular identity for themselves. They want to work alongside ecumenical, non-Christian and even anti-Christian groups: but if you want to partner with say Jewish or gay-rights groups, as evangelical campaigners against the Reagan administration's Nicaragua policies did in the 1980s, you cannot assert your Christian identity in the process. As one frustrated evangelical volunteer in Nicaragua put it, 'The last thing you want to be doing when people you love are getting killed is worrying about whether your prayer is going to offend someone.'¹⁵ Yet the fear that prayer might offend had become one of the facts with which the Christian Left had to live.

My favourite symbol of this comes from the 1960s' greatest adventure: the space programme. The idea of reaching to the heavens in order peacefully to defeat godless Communism should have been a gift to Christians. It was in this spirit that, on Christmas Eve 1968, the crew of Apollo 8, who were orbiting the moon and looking back at the Earth, read the first ten verses of the book of Genesis in a live television broadcast. This prompted a lawsuit from a secularist campaigner who alleged that NASA was violating the constitutional separation of church and state. The case was dismissed, but it had its effects. One of the first two men to land on the moon the following July, Buzz Aldrin, was a Presbyterian elder as well as an astronaut, and he had brought consecrated bread and wine from his home church. And so, before either he or Neil Armstrong went outside, the first food and drink ever consumed on the moon was a Presbyterian Eucharist. (Armstrong did not receive.) The real significance of this event, however, is the discretion that surrounded it. Aldrin wanted to broadcast it, like his predecessors on Apollo 8, but

¹⁵ David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 239.

NASA's flight operations manager discouraged him, wanting to avoid any further controversy. Aldrin therefore invited 'each person listening in, wherever and whomever he may be, to contemplate for a moment ... and to give thanks in his own individual way', and then closed down the radio to celebrate his communion. This is not, however, a story of secularist bullying. Aldrin wrote about how much the event had meant to him, but also, years later, wondered whether he had been right to do it at all:

"Perhaps if I had it to do over again, I would not choose to celebrate communion. Although it was a deeply meaningful experience for me, it was a Christian sacrament, and we had come to the moon in the name of all mankind—be they Christians, Jews, Muslims, animists, agnostics, or atheists." An earnest and committed Christian could now feel that he had a duty to speak in the name of all humanity, and therefore, as a matter of conscience, regret privately celebrating the central rite of his faith.¹⁶

So I am suggesting that the retreat of Christianity in the West since 1945 is not some deep and inevitable process of secularisation, but a local and historically specific response to the moral shock of the Second World War that we are still processing. It is striking that so many western Christians have tried to reassert themselves through political activism of one kind or another, whether on the Left as part of rainbow coalitions on essentially secular issues, as I have said, or with a self-conscious religious Right as we have seen in the United States and also, more recently and in an uglier form, in nationalist movements in parts of Europe. But in terms of the history of Christianity my hunch is that these are both dead ends. In the Sixties and Seventies, progressive Christians who embraced radical politics often ended up leaving their religion behind and keeping the politics. We have been seeing the same thing happen before our eyes on the Right in the last year, as many – not all – on the religious Right have, in lending their support to Mr Trump, strongly suggested that their politics now defines their religion, not vice versa.

¹⁶ Buzz Aldrin, "Guideposts Classics: Buzz Aldrin on Communion in Space," *Guideposts*, accessed 4 August 2017, <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/life-advice/finding-life-purpose/guideposts-classics-buzz-aldrin-on-communion-in-space>; Elizabeth Dias, 'The Secret Communion on the Moon: The 44-Year Anniversary', *Time*, 20 July 2013, accessed 4 August 2017, <http://swampland.time.com/2013/07/20/the-secret-communion-on-the-moon-the-44-year-anniversary/>.

Neither the Right nor the Left look like plausible vectors for a revival of Christianity in the West, and anyone from either side who is a little disappointed by that message is, I suggest, betraying that their political sympathies matter a little bit more to them than their faith.

As a historian, I think the best prospect for renewal in our societies at the moment comes from a different direction altogether. Let me tell you an unsettling story about modern South Africa. During the apartheid years, there was of course the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church which justified and defended apartheid, until, in a late but I think genuine show of repentance, it quite suddenly changed its position during the 1980s. There was also the coalition of the so-called English-speaking churches, the multiracial denomination of international origin that belonged to the South African Council of Churches, who moved from mouthing critiques of apartheid in the 1960s to leading the campaign against it during the 1980s, a campaign whose theological high point was the Kairos Document of 1985. But alongside these combatants were the so-called African Independent churches, none of whom, significantly, were included or even mentioned in the Kairos Document, despite the fact that by then fully a third of black South African Christians belonged to them. This is because those churches were uniformly disengaged from the anti-apartheid struggle. Some of them even actively carried favour with the apartheid regime. During the hearings of the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, some of these Independent churches confessed their failure to take part in the struggle. Others, though, were unrepentant. Some emphasised that simply existing and respecting one another and the law was their response to apartheid. Others struck a different note. The Nazaretha Church, one of the largest, testified to the TRC that when they were faced with oppression, “all they had to do was to ask the congregation to kneel down and have Isiguqa, which is a special prayer to God.” This sort of talk led establishment churches to despair that the independent churches would only ever offer supernatural placebos rather than providing what one black theologian called “the kind of political direction which the black community needs.” But for the independent churches, providing “political direction” was not their purpose. What the “black community” truly needed, in their view, was not mobilization but spiritual assistance in the midst of this world’s troubles. As a more sympathetic theologian, Simon Maimela, pointed out, the establishment churches had much to say to the people about the distant hope of political liberation but little about “their daily misfortunes, illness, encounter with evil and witchcraft, bad luck, poverty, barrenness—in short, all their concrete social

problems.”¹⁷ The independent churches, by contrast, positively encouraged believers to bring these troubles to church with them. The establishment churches were learning to defy evil, but the independents offered instead to defeat it. It does not seem to me a coincidence that it is those churches, not the ones leading the struggle, that were growing fastest. South Africa’s independent churches prospered, not because they collaborated with the apartheid regime, but because through them many of its victims discovered a power and a dignity which defied anything that regime could throw at them. I defy anyone to say that they were wrong.

This is a story with parallels around the world. Most of the most dramatic growth stories in global Christianity in the past half-century or more have come from churches which have disengaged from the political realm. In South Korea, the churches which opposed the dictatorship in the 1970s grew anaemically; the ones that ignored or even collaborated with it grew spectacularly. The Protestant surge in Latin America has been apolitical, acquiescing to regimes ranging from Pinochet in Chile to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and has made astonishing strides while the demographic impact of liberation theology has remained muted. The equally astonishing surge in contemporary Chinese Christianity is, or at least has been until the last three or four years, sedulously and conscientiously apolitical, albeit in China the attempt to carve out an apolitical realm is itself a provocative political act.

Now I do not want to recommend this sort of deliberate withdrawal from the political realm, partly because I myself am enough of a white western liberal Protestant that I care about the political realm quite a bit, and partly because apolitical withdrawal is not politically neutral – it systematically favours whoever happens to be in power, and by its scepticism towards government and politics as an effective tool for solving human problems, it skews right-wing in modern parlance. Although you could also say that in its radical egalitarianism and anti-nationalism it skews left. Still, I am not recommending but observing. The Christian churches which have flourished globally in recent decades are not the ones which have called their members to engage in a prophetic struggle for goals which are defined in public, worldly terms, but are ones which have offered those members gifts on the micro-scale rather than the macro-scale; whether that be miracles, exorcisms, healing and the prosperity gospel, or moral and social transformation in the face of ills such as drugs, gangs or family breakdown, or the experience of

¹⁷ Robin M. Petersen, ‘The AICs and the TRC: Resistance Redefined’ in *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth & Reconciliation Commission*, ed. James Cochrane, John de Gruchy, and Stephen Martin (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), 115-121; Allan Anderson, *Bazalwane: African Pentecostals in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992), 19.

ecstatic worship. Churches which have a real and substantive offer to make to their members, which is not primarily to do with assuaging fear or guilt.

These sorts of churches have, of course, made relatively little impact in the old West, and where they have they have disproportionately been amongst immigrant communities. But, and this is my last and most tentative observation, I suspect there may be an opening for them emerging. The Western democracies are in the midst of a slow-burning crisis of political legitimacy, in which the old Pentecostal view that politics is a rotten business not worth bothering with is coming to seem less like a theological claim and more like a cultural truism. In other words, our societies are coming to doubt the gospel which we have collectively believed since the French Revolution: that most human problems are susceptible of political solutions. The malign political effects of this we can see all around us as we seem to lurch between inept or corrupt technocracy and ineffectual or vicious extremism. But those are very much the sort of malign political conditions under which Christian resurgence has taken place in other parts of the globe. If these conditions do prove fertile ground for a Christian resurgence in the western democracies, though, it will be a resurgence of a particular kind. It will be low-profile: being apolitical tends to mean you keep your head down. Latin American Protestantism, Chinese Christianity and until recently even a lot of African Christianity has been relatively invisible, despite its scale. It will be decentralised: congregational rather than bureaucratic, and institutional churches which are not able to embrace that, with all the attendant risks and problems, will not be part of it. It will be female-dominated, certainly in numbers and ethos and increasingly also in leadership. It will be highly heterogenous. And it will be, if you will forgive the term, consumerist: and I mean that in a relatively positive sense, in that these will be churches which actually meet their people's needs and desires, which provide a compelling reason to belong to them, and to embrace a Christianity which is not religionless.

All of which is to say that whether or not this will happen is unlikely to depend on anything which those of us here do. It will be the work of local communities, or it will not; and it will be the work of the Holy Spirit, or it will not. What those of us who work deep in institutions and establishments may be able to do, however, is to give some shape to it if it does happen. Will our institutions and traditions, with their particular gifts and burdens, be able to survive this transition, or not? Will the emerging churches manage to bridge the gap between being counter-cultural and part of the culture? And crucially, how much theological, moral and intellectual integrity will they retain? Which means: will they really, truly hang on to and integrate the moral lessons about the absolute value of inclusivity, pluralism and human equality, which the Second World War and its aftermath have

taught us so painfully? Because those are lessons I would rather we did not have to learn again.

Book Review

SCOTT ROBERTSON. *Sin: The St Aidan's Lectures 2017* (Glasgow: Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway, 2017). Pages 42. ISBN 978-1-872170-17-6. Available from St Aidan's Church, 8 Golf Road, Clarkston G76 7LZ (paperback).

St Aidan's Church (Clarkston) has hosted an annual series of public lectures on subjects relevant to the Christian faith, but also of interest to a public wider than the faithful, from 2012. Scott Robertson delivered the most recent series in the summer of 2017 on the topic of sin in four lectures – (1) The Nature of the Problem; (2) The Source of all our Troubles: Original Sin and its Consequences; (3) Sin and Suffering; and (4) Living in Sin: Religion and Human Frailty – which have, subsequently, become the chapters of his *Sin*. Robertson's *Sin*, then, is not an exposition on the reality or question of evil, nor is it a theodicy. It is, instead, much closer to home, that is a deep reflection on the very personal nature of sin for human beings. And so personal a reflection it is that Robertson begins with one of his own so-called sins.

The nature of the problem is, to be sure, to hone in on what we mean when we say *sin* because we mean so many varied and different things, and our conversation is unintelligible unless there is some common ground. Robertson's common ground for the conversation is theology, for when we speak of sin we are speaking theologically, in fact we are doing theology. Sin is not about individual acts, even if actions are important, but about the existential nature of human beings.

Our understanding of original sin is a significant foreground for any discussion about sin among Christians. Robertson explains what we, as a Christian community, have tried to articulate about the human condition vis-à-vis St Augustine of Hippo, whose writings on the subject – and his interpretation of St Paul – have formed so much of our posterity and perspective(s) regarding the sin. It is mixed legacy, yet our legacy nonetheless. It reminds us, at least, that we are broken and fallible; it also reminds us that a fundamental part of the problem of the human condition lies not outwith but inside our very selves.

Sin and suffering are inescapable realities in our past and present; no doubt they will remain with us until the Second Coming. Concomitant with them is the challenge of understanding Jesus, who does not sin but suffers because of sin. In the person of Jesus we see, although we may understand only partially, that sin and suffering are not some sort of earth-bound cause-and-effect syndrome. As humans we all sin. As humans we all suffer. We are partakers in the sufferings of the world and somehow part of God's yet-to-be-completed response to that suffering.

Thus it is that we are all living in sin, so to speak, all frail and faulty. That frailness and faultiness ought to lend themselves to God's forgiveness as a *sine qua*

non of our everyday lives. Can we not, recognising our weakness and proclivity to evil, be one with St Paul when he says that “*now* is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation?” (2 Corinthians 6.2).

Robertson’s *Sin* tells us about something more significant to God than sin, namely you and me for whom sin is an unexpected and bewildering vehicle of salvation.

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