# Journal of European Baptist Studies



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# Journal of European Baptist Studies

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## Contents

# Editorial

The current issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* focuses on the general topic of relations, discussing Christian perception and creative interpretation of the arts and dealing with a variety of relations in an ecclesiological context. The volume reflects IBTSC academic and conference activities in 2019. Ken Roxburgh's article about slavery and racism in a Southern Baptist context is based on a Hughey Lecture, which he delivered in Amsterdam in January 2019. The 'Arts and Mission' Conference in Bromma, Sweden, in June 2019, organised by the European Baptist Federation and IBTSC, was a fruitful and inspiring forum for several discussions, and some of the papers have found their way into this volume. I am also very pleased to mention that this issue represents a wide international spectrum of authors, as well as providing a forum for the work of younger scholars who are pursuing their research journey at IBTSC. Their topics of interest range from inclusion of persons with learning disabilities in local church life to theological analysis of 'ethnography and ecclesiology'.

Matt Edminster has undertaken a challenging task of discussing 'relational ontology', especially in a Free Church setting. He argues: '…it is incumbent upon the congregation not simply to reflect on what they *do* when they come together, but also on what they *are* when they are gathered in the name of Christ'. The author considers the church as a 'relational subject', and he uses both theological and sociological tools to explore this somewhat elusive reality. Whatever position the reader will take while reading the article, the author has managed to emphasise the central role of relations in baptistic understanding of *ecclesia*.

The following four contributions expand the conversation into the area of arts, both visual and verbal. In many Baptist communities there is a tendency to resist non-verbal forms of communication. However, Richard Kidd, in conversation with voices from the Bible and from wider culture, argues in his article that it is time to ask if this pattern still serves Baptists well, especially as 'visual cultures' have gained momentum. The art of seeing may clear the way for a 'more than' we might otherwise miss. Graham Sparkes poses the question of whether Protestantism might have an even more complicated relationship with the visual. Being afraid of falling into the trap of idolatry, some Protestant traditions, especially Calvinism, have been extremely cautious about using images for devotion or worship; 'the infinite surely cannot be imagined in the way we might represent in paint something we can see'. Sparkes asks: 'Could it be that this truth is exactly what abstract artists have also wanted to recognise in imaginative and

creative ways?' He argues, using Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko as examples, that this, indeed, might be the case. These artists offer us space to contemplate what is transcendent, refusing to give images that are too easily controlled or defined. Could it be that the Reformed reluctance towards images has played a part in the emergence of abstract art?

Denis Kondyuk, using films by Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev, turns to the relationships between theology and movie-aesthetics. Kondyuk's interpretation assumes the use of Christological reading of reality in film analysis, and he sees the dramatic and aesthetical environment of film as a framework for revelation. Experience of God in a film, sometimes a sudden and unexpected event, creates a space for mirroring our human identity and challenging our perception of God. It can be an experience of being 'seen' rather than coming to view 'the other'.

Lon Graham, in turn, moves from the visual to the verbal, and draws the reader's attention to the narrative of grief in the poems of John Ryland Jr. Opening a window onto the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the author allows us to see into the emotions and personal spirituality of this famous preacher and theologian. This chapter of Ryland's life has not been researched in depth before, as, after his first wife's death, he seemed to continue his public ministry undisturbed. In the poems, however, he appears 'less as a churchman, pastor, and denominational leader, and more as an ordinary, struggling man, whose theology served both to wound and soothe his soul'.

Ken Roxburgh, professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Samford University, and guest speaker at IBTSC Hughey Lectures 2019, has published an article titled 'Baptists and Race in the American South'. This piece of research turns the trajectory of this volume towards relational matters in Baptist communities. Roxburgh skilfully tells the story of Alabaman and other Southern Baptists who, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, struggled to discern the will of Christ in a cultural context where slavery or racism was an everyday reality. The author explores biblical hermeneutics as well as political and congregational decisions, and he concludes with a sobering notion that 'the current context of America and of White Evangelicalism would suggest that racism is alive and well'. There is a long road ahead, 'to begin to … seek forgiveness and reconciliation through genuine repentance'.

The next author, Israel Olofinjana, scrutinises another aspect: his analysis of African and European Christian relations helps us to understand better the phenomenon of 'reverse mission' in the United Kingdom, especially in the Baptist communities, often known as Baptists Together. Olofinjana illustrates his article with several examples of mission activities

carried out by African migrants. Their presence has opened new avenues in mission and church planting, enhanced theological discussion, as well as highlighting several social and racial justice issues. A helpful short 'excursus' also sheds light onto Asian and African migrants' presence in the historical or mainline churches in Britain.

The last three articles in this issue of *JEBS* have doctrinal and/or practical emphases and, needless to say, the doctrinal and the practical are often closely intertwined. Ross Hamilton engages with the case of Dumbarton Baptist Church's vision of making church more accessible for people with learning disability. Hamilton offers the background to the problem, which is envisaged not only as social, but also as theological, and includes discussion on the biblical position of human dignity, exploration of the message of the Sermon on the Mount as the basis of ethical practice, and conversation about otherness and diversity. On the last pages of the article the author presents some suggestions for future practice. The volume concludes with articles by Roger Jasper and by Kegan Chandler, which highlight theological issues and the inevitable but difficult task of interpretation. Jasper, in conversation with Paul Fiddes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, asks: How can we discern the nature of relations between theology and social science, ecclesiology and ethnography? Theology – ecclesiology – which is disconnected from social reality leaves our understanding of the church and its calling aloof 'in the sky'. And ecclesiology, which is content with the descriptive task only, runs the risk of passively adopting an essentially naturalistic view of the world. The author seeks a balance, integrating ecclesiology and ethnography, in the incarnational reality of Christ and in the doctrine of the Trinity. Chandler's text reminds the reader that theological discussions also have a historical dimension. And in history the answers have not always been the same as one might assume today, including in matters of Trinity and Christology. Chandler discusses the unorthodox Christological views of Matthew Caffyn, a seventeenth-century General Baptist. He argues that Caffyn's place in the Baptist tradition must be revisited, as this historical figure does not represent an unexpected aberration but rather expresses the wider General Baptist views and practices of the seventeenth century. These views were influenced by commitment to being spiritual and by an atmosphere of tolerance within the believers' community, which also meant freedom of biblical interpretation. The article argues that unorthodox Christological leanings, and even a tendency towards unitarianism among early Baptists, was not just a sign of 'enlightenment rationalism' – its roots were in 'primitivism and a fervent worry over the Scriptures'. Perhaps, in his own time, Caffyn was much less unorthodox than the present-day criteria might presuppose.

*Journal of European Baptist Studies* is aiming to advance discussion in areas which are challenging and inspiring for Baptist scholars today. As one of my colleagues said recently, "Theology is everywhere." It is a joy to introduce this issue of *JEBS*, where scholars from different countries have taken seriously the task of finding theology, sometimes in unexpected places.

**Revd Dr Toivo Pilli (Editor)**

# The Space Between: Considering the Church as Relational Subject

Matthew Edminster

Much of our reflection on the nature of the concrete church has rightly been focused upon the people, practices, and contexts that shape ecclesial realities. Largely missing from our considerations is a substantial engagement with the relationships that connect and animate the church as a social and theological system. How are we to proceed in filling this gap in ecclesiology? On what grounds can we claim to observe relationships and not the points that they connect? How are we to gain acccess to the testimony of a relationship? And if this is possible, how might this information contribute to our understanding of local ecclesiology? In an attempt to clear the way forward, this article will examine the vision for relational sociology presented by Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer in their book *The Relational Subject*, present a theological argument for applying their insights to congregational studies, and consider the implications of examining ecclesial relationships as an ontological subject in their own right.

## Keywords

Congregational studies; relational sociology; relationship

## Introduction

Worship begins on this average Sunday morning at 11:06 am. The congregation has been slowly filing in, shaking hands, and finding their familiar places. Most people seem to know one another and know their way around the space, though a few figures sit alone with small moleskin notepads in hand and look a bit startled when someone comes to greet them. A group of musicians takes the stage and the ambient noise begins to quieten when a young woman taps the microphone a few times and lifts it to her chin:

> Good morning and welcome to worship here at Average Community Church. We are gathered this morning in the name of Jesus Christ, who promises that where two or three are gathered in his name he is there among them. Jesus Christ is indeed the reason that we gather. In his life, death, and resurrection we have found freedom from sin, hope for the future, and restored relationship with the Creator of the universe: reasons for worship! But before we begin worship this morning, I want to introduce our friends from the Department of Theology. These specialists in the theology of the church have combined their considerable skill and wisdom to observe our congregation and provide us with a glance into the

> theological and social significance of this worship event. Feel free to join all of us after the service today for coffee and a brief presentation of their findings. And now, let's calm our hearts and lift our voices in worship.

In this caricatured scene I want to consider the extent to which the moleskinned visitors' combined powers of observation and analysis might reflect the ecclesial realities experienced by those who have gathered to worship. My question is motivated not by a critique of our efforts to date but by a sense that, even with the impressive array of scholarship we can provide, we are still missing something essential to the life of the congregation and the event of gathered worship. I submit that a significant part of what remains unaccounted for in concrete ecclesiology is the relational reality which exists between ecclesial events, practices, and persons.

The difficulty with this proposal is that relational space, however we might define it, is an abstraction until it bears upon its predicate persons, processes, and systems. Unlike relational space, persons and processes can be observed and investigated with the aid of our senses. Consequently, we may easily attribute causality for relational goods to the realities our eyes tell us are real, as opposed to less visible relational realities. And yet, a growing number of social scholars are unconvinced that observable social realities can provide an accurate account for complex phenomena like cultural or even personal transformation. There is *something* happening between us that must be accounted for. My hunch is that the content and behaviour of the relational web connecting the persons of the church and bearing upon both its sublime and mundane practices has secrets to reveal. In much the same way that so-called *dark matter* – invisible and undetectable – is said to compose the majority of the mass in the observable universe, so also the reality of the church may not be fully appreciated without accounting to some degree for what is taking place in the gaps we call *relationship*.

What is happening in the relational space between us, to what or whom can it be attributed, and to what extent can these 'happenings' be described as a reality? In this article I advance a claim that relationships between ecclesial persons constitute a level of reality bearing unique features and powers not reduceable to social agents or structures. After a brief introduction to the theory of 'being in relation' advocated by sociologists Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer,[1] I will sketch a preliminary theological framework derived from Jesus' high priestly prayer in which these claims might be appropriated for a relational ontology of ecclesial persons. I will then engage with some of the outworkings of Donati and Archer's theory to illustrate ways in which a relational ontology may assist our study of congregations.

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[1] Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer, *The Relational Subject* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

## Proposing a Relational Ontology

I want to first consider the claim put forward by relational sociologists Donati and Archer that human relationship should be considered an ontological category, with its own attributes and contributing to the morphogenesis of both systems and persons. Donati and Archer trace the development of this relational perspective, setting it over against the debate emerging in late modernity between agential and structural approaches to sociology. As both approaches developed, it became clear that the relationship between agency and structure had to be clarified without negating either or conflating the two into an undefined middle ground.[2] The inability to do so has been exposed in the era of globalisation as either an undervaluation of individual action within complex systems or an ignorance of the ethical impact of structural machinations on social reality. Both shortcomings have profound implications for human society in an increasingly connected world. Donati and Archer argue that missing in both structural and agential approaches is a thoroughgoing examination of the role played by human relationships, including not only the comfort, motivation, and utility they provide to persons participating in a relationship, but also the genesis of the relationship itself, as well as its emergent effects and their ability to impact upon social reality. Distinguishing themselves from 'relationist' scholars – particularly those in North America – Donati and Archer insist that social relations cannot be reduced to the interactions or ties (Durkheim's *religo*[3]) between participating individuals (Weber's *refero*) but compose a distinct ontological category. Donati and Archer argue,

> 'B*eing in relation*' is an ontological expression that has three analytical meanings: (i) it says that, between two (or more) entities there is a *certain distance* which, at the same time, distinguishes *and* connects them; (ii) it says that any such relation *exists*, that is, it is real in itself, irreducible to its progenitors, and possesses its own properties and causal powers; and (iii) it says that such a reality has its own *modus essendi* (the modality of *the* beings who are *inside* the relation which refers to the internal structure of the social relation and its dynamics) and is responsible for its emergent properties, that is, relational goods and evils.[4]

This proposal is worked out in a detailed explanation of both the nature of relational reality as well as its implications for understanding the social world and its morphogenesis.[5] The resulting taxonomy of relational subjects and goods is particularly tantalising for ethnographic ecclesiology because it suggests that the distance between ecclesial persons might be observed in

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[2] Ibid., pp. 8-12.
[3] Ibid., pp. 26-27.
[4] Ibid., p. 18 (italics original).
[5] It must be said that Donati and Archer's project is largely a demonstration of the descriptive and explanatory potential of a relational ontology and not so much a philosophical apologetic. Archer does, however, address the objection of *relationist* critics who would argue against attributing ontological status to ideas apart from reference to a *knowing subject* (pp. 155-179).

some way and its contribution to our understanding of the nature and function of the church reflected upon. I will return to some of the promising contributions I believe a relational approach might offer. But in order to avoid making a hasty appropriation, we must first consider theological grounds on which this claim might be considered.

## A Preliminary Theological Framework for Considering Relational Ontology

Here I would like to outline a cautious and preliminary theological argument for entertaining the possibility of a relational ontology in congregational settings. It is beyond the scope of this introductory article to develop these ideas in detail, but I hope at this point simply to indicate a potential path by which a relational ontology might be considered.

Some might argue that this effort is only an exercise in ontological speculation and indeed the danger does exist. But I maintain that it is both appropriate as well as deeply practical. This is particularly true in the theological context of Free Church ecclesiology which places great emphasis on the local gathering of believers as the setting in which the ecclesial call is expressed. Consequently, the convictions and conduct of the Free Church congregation invites a certain theological scrutiny that episcopal traditions might redirect in clerical or sacramental directions. In his comparative study of trinitarian implications for ecclesiology, Miroslav Volf demonstrates that Free Church ecclesiology differs significantly from Orthodox and Catholic traditions in that it locates the presence of Christ in the believers' gathering rather than in the person of the bishop or the substance of the sacraments.[6] This appropriation of Christ's promise to his disicples in Matthew 18:20 for ecclesiological purposes deeply informs the freedom of conscience and personal devotion to Christ that so marks the baptistic identity. But it also shifts the responsbility of locating Christ's action in the ecclesial setting firmly onto the congregation. And so we are required to ask with Volf not only 'what is the church?' (answer: the place where Christ is present among his people) but also 'when and where is the church?' (that is, in what circumstances can the gathering be said to be 'in his name'?). Volf advocates a 'policentric-participative' model of Free Church ecclesiology in which the presence and ministry of Christ becomes 'enjoined on all believers' in the congregation as they make his presence manifest in their worship and service.[7] All of this is to suggest that, particularly in a Free Church setting, it is encumbent upon the congregation not simply to reflect on what they *do* when they come together, but also on what they *are* when they are gathered

[6] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 137-145.
[7] Ibid., p. 227.

in the name of Christ. But on what basis then should relational realities be included (alongside individual, environmental, or practical realities) in that consideration?

The obvious answer to this question is to look to the ethical teaching of Jesus that his disciples should love one another. The love expressed between disciples will confirm to the watching world that they do, in fact, belong to him (John 13.35). However, the disciples' love for one another is not simply an exercise of will but rather a reflection of the loving relational reality they have themselves participated in by virtue of their identification with Jesus. John declares in his first epistle that we love because He first loved us (I John 4.19). Having witnessed the love which flows unceasingly from the Triune communion in the ministry of their Lord, the disciples are not only enjoined to continue the practice, but also enabled. So I submit that Jesus' ethical command to love is rooted in a deeper calling – an ecclesial vision in which the disciples (and, by extension, the congregation) are meant to participate communally with God in the ecclesial mystery and so to appropriate in their human relationships some measure of the divine communion of mutual indwelling. This is, admittedly, a radical claim and fraught with both promise and peril and as such must be well grounded and substantiated.

It seems to me that an appropriate place to begin is with Jesus' prayer in John 17.21 that his disciples would be unified amongst themselves, just as he is unified with the Father. This request for unity is concluded with a curious construction: 'I in You, You in me, and *them in us*.' I would argue that this final clause demonstrates Jesus' intention that something of the communal mystery defining his relationship with the Father (John 10.38 and 14.10,11) be extended into the ecclesial setting not only as an eschatological hope but, indeed, as a vocational pursuit.[8] The nature of this extension rests upon the association of ecclesial communion (them) with divine communion (us) in a relationship characterised in its trinitarian state by what theologians have called mutual interpenetration. The nature of that extension must be carefully delineated in order to avoid error and this is the task to which I will turn in a moment. But if this is true, then two things must be concluded: first, we cannot consider ecclesiology rightly, particularly in a Free Church context, without also treating the relational realities between believers; and second, the relational realities under consideration must include not only those on the human plane between gathered worshippers, but also the relationships between these persons and the triune persons of the Godhead.

[8] The subjunctive *kai osin en hemin* ('that they would be in us') points to an objective reality enjoyed between Father and Son requested for the disciples. In 14.20 we see the same construction directed as a promise to the disciples that 'on that day you will see that I am in the Father, the Father is in me and you are in us'. So, while finally realisable only in an eschatological sense, Jesus is indicating a calling meant to be intentionally pursued and indwelt in the present.

Relational space in an ecclesial setting is composed of the divine *us*, the human *them*, and an essential relational reality existing in the space between them.

Clearly at this point it is essential to clarify what is meant by each of these terms if we are to arrive at any cohesive understanding of ecclesial relationships and to have any hope of observing and reflecting on these realities for the edification of the church. Consideration must first be made for the perichoretic reality I am arguing is envisioned by Jesus for his disciples when he prays that 'they would be *in* us'. The use of the Greek word perichoresis was first employed by Gregory of Nazianzus in his treatment of the relationship between the divine and human nature of Christ. It was subsequently expanded upon in the same context by Maximus the Confessor and finally applied to the relationships within the Trinity by John of Damascus. Jürgen Moltmann explains that in early trinitarian developments relative agreement was reached on the notion that three *hypostases* (personal realities) could exist in one *ousia* (substance) and that this reality was intrinsically relational. However, it remained unresolved between the Eastern and Western Churches whether this reality constituted or was manifested by the divine hypostases. The concept of *perichoresis* served to resolve this debate by emphasising the circulation of love between the persons of the Trinity, which resulted in a personal and perfectly mutual affirmation of divine being.[9]

Contemporary trinitarian theologians have worked out the implications of this perichoretic unity and its contribution to trinitarian personhood for a variety of confessional and disciplinary ends.[10] But Paul Fiddes is unique in the field in his understanding of the perichoretic life as an invitation extended to the church to participate in the circulation of divine love demonstrated in a variety of ecclesial practices.

> The notion of 'subsistent relations', properly understood … proposes that relations in God are as real and 'beingful' as anything which is created or uncreated, and that their ground of existence is in themselves. If we use the term hypostasis as the early theologians did for a 'distinct reality' which has being, then the relations *are* hypostases. There are no persons 'at the end of a relation', but the 'persons' are simply the relations.[11]

There is in this assertion a danger that relation defined as beingful becomes conflated with divine essence washing out any helpful distinctions between

[9] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 172-175.
[10] Along with Moltmann, major contributions include Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*; John Zizioulas, *Being in Communion* (New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).
[11] Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2000), p. 34.

the two. Fiddes notes that Aquinas' otherwise helpful identification of the relationships between the trinitarian persons becomes limited at this very point when his commitment to divine simplicity leads him to identify divine nature with divine properties.[12] Fiddes seeks to mitigate this danger and still maintain the ontological status of relationship by emphasising the dynamic nature of relationship and describing God as 'three movements subsisting in one event'.[13] This approach allows not only for a combined association with the divine communion and simultaneous distinction from divine essence, but also creates a space in which the church can be said to participate in God's relational activity in the world.

We should recognise that, on this basis, the trinitarian vocabulary provides us with a theological lexicon for conceiving of relationship as a hypostatic and therefore ontological category. The question remains, in what way is this reality made accessible to or pursuable by humanity? We may agree with Fiddes that relationship is a hypostatic reality within the Godhead and with Donati and Archer that relationship may be an ontological category with explanatory power in the social realm. But is there a correspondence between the two? In the terms provided by Jesus' high priestly prayer, in what way does the *in-ness* of divine hypostatic union relate to the *in-ness* of human relational reality?[14]

The key to locating a correspondence between the divine *us* and the human *them* lies in the fact that Jesus the Christ is functioning here in anticipation of his role as high priest and mediator between God and man. His explicit request is that the two societies with which he is now intimately associated be related between themselves such that, in the fulness of time, the human reality will come to reflect the divine. This request for supernatural unity on the human plane is issued in the context of a prayer seeking protection for the disciples from a world limited to the jagged contours of imperfect human relations. The explicit purpose of the unity Jesus requests for his disciples is that the world would know that he was sent by God. The unity of the disciples transformed by participation in the perfect perichoresis of the Godhead is a relational beacon to a broken world aching for perfection. It is highly unlikely that Jesus, in his use of *them*, has in mind a simple assemblage of disciples, like loose coins jangling against each other in a common purse. His *them* points toward a society of persons connected in some intrinsic way and, as such, capable of being invited to share in an

[12] Ibid., p. 35.
[13] Ibid., p. 36.
[14] The *in-ness* referred to here and in the passages I have mentioned previously has been the topic of much debate in theological and philosophical circles. I am here proposing that *in* is referencing not a particular kind of mutual inhabitation but rather 'participation in'.

ecclesial mystery of which he alone can be the mediator. Miroslav Volf points to this conclusion when he writes,

> The future of the church in God's new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people … Present participation in the trinitarian *communio* through faith in Jesus Christ anticipates in history the eschatological communion of the church with the triune God.[15]

From this line of thought, I am optimistic that an examination of the concrete church through the lens of relational ontology is entirely possible on the provisional grounds I have supplied. Moreover, a relational ecclesiology combining both theological and sociological insights would be a unique and particularly fitting application since it would by necessity need to take into consideration both the *in-ness* of the ecclesial *them* as well as the eschatological invitation to participate in the divine perichoresis through faith in Christ.

## Relational Sociology for Ethnographic Ecclesiology

Having sketched the outlines of a theological framework for employing relational sociology, I will now highlight some of the outworkings of Donati and Archer's construction and briefly propose ways in which they might prove useful for consideration of the concrete church.

At the heart of Donati and Archer's programme is a unique development of the notion of relational reflexivity. We will recall that reflexivity literally refers to a *bending back* and reflection upon influences on an individual's point of view. Applying the practice of reflexivity to the task of research, John Swinton states, 'reflexivity is the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings'.[16] Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's development of reflexivity in the context of the researcher's *habitus*, Christian Scharen delineates three types of researcher reflexivity: the social location of the researcher, the social space represented by the academic field, and finally the tendency of the researcher to assume the ability to make objective observations and conclusions regarding the subject of study.[17] Elizabeth Jordan has perceptively applied this research reflexivity to her study of diverse lay and clergy perceptions of a congregation by noting that only by virtue of being embedded in the congregational network of relationships and accounting for

[15] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp. 128-129.
[16] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 59.
[17] Christian Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), p. 79.

the resulting 'relational epistemology' was she able to gain access to insider knowledge, aiding her interpretation of respondent data.[18] Reflexivity in these contexts is a concern in particular for the researcher as she reflects upon her location and bias in relation to her subject of study. The intended result is a combination of personal awareness on the part of the researcher, as well as a stated distinction between the researcher's conclusions and their subject.

But Donati and Archer see a further value to reflexivity when the reflection of persons in relation is focused back upon the relationships they share. Donati's concept of 'relational reflexivity'

> consists in orientating the subjects to the reality emergent from their interactions by their taking into consideration how this reality is able (by virtue of its own powers) to feed back onto the subjects … since it exceeds their individual as well as their aggregated personal powers.[19]

Employed in social settings, this relational reflexivity is shown to produce by emergent effect real (though immaterial) relational goods and ills. It also contributes to the morphogenesis of societal culture and the development of mature social beings able to consider not only their own identity, but also that which they share with others by virtue of their relationships.[20]

This conceptual combination of relational reflexivity, emergent relational effects, and relational morphogenesis offers a wealth of possibility to the study of concrete ecclesiology. As I bring this examination to a close, I want to highlight two areas of study in which these concepts might be applied to great effect: the assessment of relational goods and evils and their effect on congregational life and effectiveness and a relational understanding of the morphogenesis of ecclesial practice.

## 1. Collective Orientation to Relational Goods and Evils

First-time visitors to a church service will often report a good or bad 'vibe' which they can pick up, sometimes even within the span of their first few interactions. Perhaps the presence (or absence) of a greeter at the door and the manner in which they are welcomed will be the first tip-off. But more than this, there is often a sense – and I have experienced this myself – that the congregation is not only participating in worship but that there is a 'good spirit' among them. This may be what the Apostle Paul is refering to when he speaks of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace (Ephesians 4.3). In my experience, this is not just a question of people enjoying one another's company. There is a sense of 'something in the air' which is not only widely enjoyed but also engendered. Some will attribute

[18] Elizabeth Jordan, 'Knowing as We Are Known: Relational Epistemology in Practice', *Ecclesial Practices* 5 (2018): 214-230.
[19] Taken from the preface to his *Relational Sociology: a New Paradigm for the Social Science* (London: Routledge, 2011) quoted in *The Relational Subject*, p. 153.
[20] Donati and Archer, *The Relational Subject*, p. 30.

this sense to the presence of the Holy Spirit (and its lack to the Spirit's absence), though this conclusion is not only highly subjective but also theologically problematic. Part of the problem is that, in addition to whatever the Spirit might be up to, there is an undeniable human element to the vibe: some combination of sincerity, mutuality, goodwill, and vulnerability.

Donati and Archer describe this sort of situation in terms of relational goods and evils, which are products of relational reflexivity practised in a given social setting. The application of relational goods and ills to congregational life is particularly appropriate when we consider that what takes place in the congregational setting is seldom simply a practice in bare liturgy, sacrament, service, or proclamation. In all that the congregation sets out to do together in its *we-ness* (the relational reflexive form of Jesus' *them*), the worshippers are reflexively engaged to a greater or lesser degree in what Archer refers to as a 'collective orientation to a collective 'output',' which is to say that 'the group is oriented to the relational goods it produces, to maintaining or improving upon them – and to eradicating any relational evils detected in their collective performance'.[21]

Professional and academic assessment of congregations focuses attention on opinions, doctrines, practices, and outputs. What is largely neglected, to the detriment of both pursuits, is the 'collective relational orientation' that employs, sustains, and develops these practices, as is the 'doubly reflexive' effect these outcomes have on those engaged in them.[22] This is not to say, of course, that relationships are relegated to secondary status. On the contrary, we are fond of saying with a hint of resignation that "it all comes down to relationships". But without a precise understanding of what relationships are, and what effects they produce within a society, it is nearly impossible to be specific about just what is 'coming down' or how.

The concept of reflexively generated relational goods and evils shines a light on these otherwise ethereal concerns, making them observable in the ongoing life of the congregation. This is essentially what Fiddes is proposing in the form of his reflections on ecclesial practices such as prayer and reconciliation, and relational experiences such as suffering and grief. But I contend that the same light can be focused on actual congregations as they orient and reorient themselves in pursuit of communal sanctification. This reality is, in essence, the relational substrate or lattice on which Healy's practical-prophetic ecclesiology is actually being played and upon which the church's brokenness (or success) can be assessed with any accuracy.[23]

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[21] Ibid., p. 61.

[22] Archer employs the term 'double reflexivity' to denote the reciprocal effect that relational goods and effects have on their subjects.

[23] Nicholas Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 137.

## 2. Clarification of Ecclesial Practices on Relational Grounds

But the mention of practices raises another critique of Healy's that may be addressed by means of relational ontology. Healy argues that much of the treatment of ecclesial practices lacks definition and conceptual clarity. Using the example of the 'practice' of hospitality, Healy notes that what we refer to as a practice may be more accurately identified as a precept: an explicit teaching taking on a wide array of conceptual interpretations and social expressions. What do we mean when we identify a social phenomenon as a 'practice'? Healy demonstrates the point further by noting a number of competing definitions of 'practice', offering an overly wide semantic range.[24] What these definitions share in common is a rooting in social construction, though like relational goods and evils, the details of this construction are assumed and remain largely undefined. Take for example Alistair MacIntyre's widely applied definition of practice:

> Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[25]

For our purposes, the key clause is 'socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal … are realized'. This, I suggest, represents the soft underbelly of much consideration of practice. Until we can demonstrate in detail the way in which a practice is established socially, our definitions of practice will begin only at the point at which the practice manifests. What is missing is its morphogenesis, that is, the way in which the practice is developed and employed within the relational processes of a social reality and the effect the practice in turn has upon those who employ it.

This pursuit may inspire a fear that ecclesial practices will be disembowelled, in an effort to identify and observe their constituent anatomic parts. But my hunch is that instead the 'soft underbelly' will be strengthened by virtue of a clearer and more precise understanding of the way in which ecclesial practices function in and impinge upon congregational life. Additionally, the morphogenetic approach allows us to consider (and classify if need be) a wide range of practice-like exercises in the life of a congregation. This includes, of course, those explicitly ecclesial practices and precepts handed down from scripture and tradition. But it also involves more mundane practices which have perhaps been relegated to the

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[24] Nicholas M. Healy, 'Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 1, 2003): 287–308.

[25] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), p. 187.

realm of personal ethics. By this I mean all the rich content with which Paul sums up his letters in parenetic exhortation: family relationships, power dynamics, and interactions with a fallen world. Once we consider the congregation as a relational subject and are able to consider its actions and deliberations in the light of relational realities, our study of congregational dynamics and practices takes on entirely new promise.

## Conclusion

Relationships are an essential part of what it means to be the church. On any given Sunday in any given congregation, worshippers will gather not only to worship their God, but to do this explicitly in the context of fellowship. Outside of an ascetic existence, it is very difficult to imagine a circumstance in which the admonition to not give up meeting together could be obeyed without also drawing upon relational realities in the performance of liturgy. Even in monastic orders where interaction is intentionally limited by various vows and rules, there is a palpable sense that love exists between the monastics.

In this article I have endeavoured to present briefly sociological and theological grounds for considering the church as a relational subject, defined by the unique relational realities at play within it. Identifying exactly what we mean by *relationship* can be an elusive task but an essential first step is to square with its ontological nature. Relationships cannot be captured or preserved in the way that a practice or an opinion might. Our access to relational realities will be based in testimony and observation of their effects. As such we may only ever light upon the places where a relationship left its scent and moved on. Be this as it may, relationships are no less real that the subjects we can apprehend and observe in physical or linguistic space. Learning to observe relational realities and their resulting goods and evils promises to open new vistas for exploration of embedded congregational ecclesiologies. My hope is that the insights gained from this brief exploration of a relational perspective will be of use to the church, wherever believers gather in faith that the glorified Christ has called them into fellowship.

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# The Art of Seeing[1]

Richard L. Kidd

This paper examines an instinctive tendency in many Baptist communities to resist non-verbal forms of communication, both in their approach to public worship and in their practice of mission. It suggests that, without compromise to their roots, Baptists today could greatly benefit from embracing 'the arts' in general, and the 'non-verbal arts' in particular, as authentic tools for theological reflection and effective proclamation of the Christian gospel. Greater use of creative imagination and non-verbal communication, thereby engaging the entire range of human senses, could also enable Baptist communities better to fulfil their historic emphasis on discerning and responding to the mind of Christ. The paper develops its argument in conversation with a variety of voices from the wider church.

## Keywords

Art; the arts; icon; vision; communication; insight; imagination; discernment; mission

## Introduction

This is not the first time that I have brought the words 'art' and 'seeing' together in a working title.[2] In this paper, my aim is to show that what I call 'the art of seeing' offers a creative challenge to Baptist Christians, as they continue to re-evaluate their distinctive identity in changing times.

## The Changing Context of Baptist Communities

Baptist communities first took shape alongside a number of dissenting prophetic Christian movements in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; and the peculiar context of that time was undoubtedly a major factor in determining their emergent identity. Although that context is now

[1] This paper shares its title with a keynote presentation which I made at a conference entitled 'Arts and Mission', jointly sponsored by the European Baptist Federation and the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam. The conference was held at Bromma, Stockholm, Sweden, from 5-8 June 2019. Building on creative conversations stimulated by the Stockholm conference, I here rehearse some of the elements in that address, making further connections to develop my engagement with the conference theme.

[2] Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing: Visual Resources for a Journey of Faith*, Regent's Study Guides 11 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, and Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2003). A landmark publication drawing attention to the importance of 'seeing' was John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972).

long past, some original Baptist characteristics have remained important throughout the intervening centuries. In recent time, Baptists have been well-known for their keen desire to engage in Christian mission. The question that Baptists must now face, therefore, is how best, without compromise to their roots, to communicate the gospel in ways that are credible and compelling for the present generation. In particular, the question must be asked whether a long-standing commitment to predominantly verbal methods of communication still serves them well in what many social commentators would now describe as predominantly 'visual cultures', a trend that gained momentum almost everywhere with the rapid development of digital technologies in the late twentieth century.[3]

An uneasy tension between 'the arts' and church practice in many of today's Baptist communities was the central theme of the 2019 'Arts and Mission' conference in Stockholm. During the conference, a recurring theme was voiced by participants from Baptist communities from almost everywhere in Europe; namely, that it is now essential for Baptists to embrace 'the arts' with much greater conviction, if they are to be true to their missionary calling. The overarching message from the conference was that 'the arts', especially the non-verbal arts, need to be given a much higher profile if today's Baptists are effectively to communicate their understanding of the gospel in the contexts of the modern world.

To help Baptists rise to this challenge, it might be helpful to consider more fully why Baptists have put so much emphasis on verbal communication, and also to consider why there has been so much suspicion around the use of non-verbal forms in public worship and private devotion. These are some of the questions explored in this paper.

## 'The Art of Seeing'

How, then, am I using the phrase 'the art of seeing' in this paper, and how might it usefully inform my argument? I am using the word 'art' in at least two different ways. Most obviously, I am simply drawing attention to art as the work of art-practitioners: painters, musicians, sculptors, poets, film-makers, and so on. Many of these creative arts were represented amongst the artists who gathered for the Stockholm conference. My own special interest is in painters, and I shall be arguing that painting is a uniquely important medium for communicating gospel truth.

'Art', however, also suggests something that stands in contrast to 'science', and that will be significant in this paper too. I am keen to show that there is so much more to 'seeing' than will ever be uncovered by

[3] See: Malcolm Barnard, *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

approaching 'seeing' from a merely scientific perspective. In saying this, I in no way want to be dismissive of science as an equally honourable path into human knowledge. My own scientific training leaves me with a keen interest in many of the sciences that inform our understanding of human sight. I am fascinated by the physiology of the eye, the role of rods and cones in alerting us to tone and colour, the workings of neural pathways connecting the eye and the brain and, of course, the structure of the brain itself that so amazingly enables us to make meaning out of the complex electrical activity it registers and stores.[4]

I am in no doubt, however, that 'seeing' has a significance for human communication and self-understanding far in excess of anything that scientific scrutiny alone can detect or analyse. The idea that a merely empirical analysis of Claude Monet's 'Water Lilies' will ever yield everything we might want to say concerning the potential impact of a visit to the Orangerie in Paris is simply absurd.[5] I admit to being fascinated by much recent analysis of the painterly techniques that someone like Monet employed in laying his oils on the canvas; and that knowledge has undoubtedly enhanced my pleasure when I now look at his paintings. I am indebted, for example, to the art historian James Elkins, who has written a detailed account that evidences the sheer complexity of Monet's working practice:

> The study of gestures reveals a Monet that I would not have suspected: to make paintings the way he made them, it is necessary to work roughly, with unexpected violence and then with sudden gentleness, and to keep turning the body against itself, so it never does quite what it wants to do – so it never falls into the routine of oval marks, all pelting down in one direction. The gestures tell the story of a certain dissatisfaction, and itchy chafing of the body against itself, of a hand that is impatient and out of control.[6]

This is a description not only of the complexity but also the profound subtlety required to achieve successful artistic communication – and I shall return to the idea of 'itchy chafing' later. Elkins' careful 'scientific' analysis does not, however, even begin to explain the totality of the potentially life-changing influence that Monet's finished works can have on those who are privileged to see them. The 'science of seeing' is undoubtedly valuable; but so is the 'art of seeing', without which the full potential of human 'visionary' possibilities will always remain incomplete.

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[4] An influential contribution to a growing understanding of all these themes appeared in Trevor Lamb and Janine Bourriau, eds., *Colour: Art and Science*, The Darwin College Lectures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[5] The Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris houses a stunning display of Monet's *Nymphéas* ('Water Lilies') canvases, curated in collaboration with the artist in 1922.

[6] James Elkins, *What Painting is* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), p. 17.

It is the 'excess', the 'more than', surfacing through 'the art of seeing', that is so significant for art's potential contribution to human communication. This 'more than' is not unlike the 'excess' that theologians find necessary in accounting for their Christian understandings of God. It does not surprise me at all, then, that people in today's Western cultures, living in societies where scientific evidence and scientific reasoning are given such high priority, now find themselves almost incapable of activating the cognitive strategies necessary to engage with ideas of God. Given that so many Christian apologists, Baptists included, now prioritise models of analytical reasoning that are almost indistinguishable from the dominant scientific paradigm, it is also not at all surprising to find that they experience some serious barriers to effective mission.

## Baptists and the Visual Arts

I do not find it hard to understand, and in large measure to sympathise with, the way that many Baptists have found themselves struggling with the idea that visual and other non-verbal forms of communication might be significant for their quest to discern and interpret the mind of God. When prophetic communities were fragile, as Baptists were both in England and The Netherlands in the early seventeenth century, struggling to secure a secure identity in contexts where powerful factions jealously guarded the *status quo*, it is not surprising that sharp lines were drawn, distancing themselves from those they felt called to challenge. Sadly, however, as is so often the case, amongst the collateral damage 'the baby is thrown out with the bathwater'.

The reality is that many Baptists, not only in shaping an original identity but also throughout their history, have found themselves needing to work at self-definition over against religious authorities that have put a very strong emphasis on visual artefacts: paintings, sculptures, architectural wonders, and religious 'icons' of various kinds.[7] Although there were often other important issues of identity at stake, for example matters of religious freedom and social justice, Baptists and others have often found themselves shedding all manner of practices associated with the authorities they challenge. In matters of religion, the visual arts are commonly found amongst the earliest victims. Baptists have often, almost intuitively, identified themselves with a broadly iconoclastic[8] approach to art and

[7] I have in mind the struggle for survival experienced by many Baptist communities in the former USSR. Often they struggled not only under the powers of government, but also under the power of Orthodox Churches.

[8] I am using 'iconoclastic' as a catch-all to describe extremely negative attitudes towards images of many kinds; it literally means the breaking of images, of which there is a long Christian history.

religious truth. Whilst there have been notable exceptions, Baptists have typically shown only limited interest in religious paintings, sculptures, or innovative architecture.[9] My question is whether such iconoclasm is necessarily a permanent feature of Baptist identity.[10]

The Stockholm Conference on Arts and Mission raised these issues in a variety of contemporary guises. Participants spoke of their art-practitioner colleagues leaving Baptist churches in significant numbers, having found themselves unable to carve out sufficient opportunities to use their creative skills without compromise to their artistic integrity. Many spoke of an experience of being driven to the margins, typically putting this down to suspicions amongst church leaders that artistic imagination and creativity constitute an unacceptable challenge to their authority as guardians of a received tradition.

The success of the Stockholm Conference, however, indicates that there are creative artists who remain very much committed to participation in the life of Baptist communities. The conference gathered a wide range of Baptist artists who are still working to convince their sisters and brothers that they have important gifts and insights to offer into the communities to which they belong. This, I suggest, is nowhere more important than in the very Baptist communities that manifest this fear, that creative imagination is somehow at odds with an historic Baptist commitment to verbal proclamation and the written words of the Bible. In my own view, their response is based on entirely false presuppositions. There is, in fact, a strong case to suggest that the arts could actually revitalise Baptists' and others' engagement with the Bible, enabling us to hear (and see) more, not less, of God's 'word' speaking into our time. In particular, it is in the practice of mission that our artists have an important contribution to make. Using their skills in non-verbal communication, they are uniquely placed to bridge some of the deep divides that currently inhibit our effective proclamation of the Christian gospel.

Across much of the Western world an unnecessary rift has appeared between the sacred and the so-called secular. The dominant scientific mindset has taken ownership of materiality, as if the 'stuff' that we see, hear, and touch has no relevance when it comes to spiritual concerns; and tragically, many Christians have bought into a similar entrenched dualism. Much religious fundamentalism, with its own highly mechanistic use of language and logic, relies heavily on the same rationalistic strategies as the

[9] One notable exception was the development of icon painting in the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia.
[10] There have already been notable moments of change in Baptist identity that could act as precedents for the proposals in this paper. Music, for example, was originally excluded from Baptist life, until at the end of the seventeenth century Benjamin Keach recommended the singing of hymns. Similarly, for a very long time Baptists resisted the display of the cross (today an almost universal Christian image) on places of worship. One report suggests that the first use of the cross on a Baptist Church was at Mare Street, Hackney, as recently as just after the Second World War.

scientific fundamentalism that actually rules the day. This is, of course, quite extraordinary – given the pride of place that Christians have always attached to their convictions concerning a Christian doctrine of Incarnation, and their particular understanding of the way that materiality and spirituality come together in Jesus, God's Christ. I shall return to these convictions later; for now, I simply express my own considered view that today it is essential that 'the arts' speak into both scientific and religious communities alike. Baptist communities, I suggest, can only benefit as they come to trust their own artists more fully as bearers of insight and discernment, the kind of discernment essential to their core commitment to discern the mind of Christ.

## The Phenomenon of Iconoclasm

Iconoclasm, of course, has a long and well-documented history.[11] It was not long into the Christian era before significant resistance to the use of visual images began to take hold. It came to a head in the eighth century following an edict by Leo III in 730CE forbidding the veneration of religious images. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787CE supposedly brought an end to the dispute, defending the making and veneration of icons, but the issue was by no means resolved. Instead, iconoclasm has surfaced time and again throughout subsequent history, not least in association with the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

The issues have been many and varied, but they cluster around a number of recurrent themes. Many Christians have found themselves simply unable to reconcile what they see as definitive rulings in some Old Testament scriptures, concerned with the making of images, with any Christian accommodation to non-verbal forms. They find no annulment of such rulings in the New Testament or any later authoritative writings. There has also been lasting controversy over the use of the word 'veneration', which became normative for Orthodox worshippers and theologians in connection with painted icons. Iconoclasts have heard the term veneration as synonymous with worship, iconophiles[12] insisting that veneration is radically different, in no way subverting exclusive use of the word worship with reference to God. Both of these issues have and still do arise in various Baptist communities

[11] An important collection of articles addressing the ongoing issue of iconoclasm – embracing Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant perspectives – was gathered by the World Council of Churches in Gennadios Limouris, compiler, *Icons: Windows on Eternity, Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, Faith and Order Paper 147 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990). More recently, a succinct account of iconoclast debates from an Orthodox perspective forms part of the opening chapter in Aidan Hart, *Beauty Spirit Matter: Icons in the Modern World* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2014), pp. 7-32; and an account of the rise of iconoclasm through the eyes of an American Presbyterian can be found in William Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 25-51.

[12] 'Iconophile' is a less-used term, coined to contrast with iconoclast and to identify a 'lover of images'.

around the world.

The strongest focus for the iconophile case, which here I am taking to include openness to all non-verbal forms and not simply traditional Orthodox icons, rests on an interpretation of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation. A key text has been I John 1.1-4, which reads:

> We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.[13]

In this text, iconophiles find a strong case for speaking of Jesus Christ, in the flesh, as an 'icon' of God.[14] This text testifies that in the person of Jesus the truth of God became seeable, audible, touchable and, we might reasonably presume, accessible to the entire range of human senses. The iconophile argument then develops like this: if this was possible, even if only once, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, for God to make Godself known in material form, then there is no intrinsic reason to presume that God cannot choose to do something similar whenever and wherever God chooses. In other words, there is no *a priori* case for arguing that material images, based on things we see and touch, will necessarily deceive us in our search for God.

Iconoclasts, however, are uncomfortable with the leap that is necessary to generalise from the specificity of God's self-disclosure in the person of Jesus, to similar self-disclosures in other material forms. I John 1.1-4 certainly seems to support the view that divinity and materiality are not intrinsically alienated one from the other ('… he abhors not the Virgin's womb'[15], as the old Christmas hymn puts it). My own view, however, is that a belief in Incarnation also rightly inspires confidence that God can and does actually make Godself known in and through other material forms, as the Second Council of Nicaea appeared to decree. There still remains, of course, a second not insignificant leap to be made; namely, to believe that humans are adequately equipped to recognise and interpret such images when they encounter them.

These leaps, and the presuppositions associated with them, have received much attention across the centuries, and significantly so in Roman

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[13] I John 1.1-4 (NRSV).

[14] There are a number of other much quoted New Testament texts in which the word 'image' is actually explicit, most significantly Colossians 1.15-20.

[15] The popular Christmas hymn *O come, all ye faithful* includes the line, 'Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb'. By any measure, this is an odd way of speaking, but I hear it as saying something about the 'natural' compatibility of divinity and humanity in Jesus.

Catholic and Orthodox traditions from the mid-twentieth century onwards.[16] Protestant theologians have rarely been in the forefront, but I think it is fair to say that across a wide ecumenical spectrum, certainly in the UK, there has been an enormous relaxation with respect to the use of visual images in public worship and personal spiritual disciplines. In my own lifetime, many Baptists have found it possible to re-explore the bathwater and to discover numerous babies that were accidentally jettisoned.[17]

## The 'more than' of Seeing

This brings me back to my specific focus on 'the art of seeing'. There is, as I have claimed, so much more to 'seeing' than first meets the eye. I have commented elsewhere that, whilst most of us are naturally well-practised in 'looking at', it does not necessarily follow that we actually succeed in much significant 'seeing'.[18] Human eyes have always been bombarded by visual images; and many of these images have been around since the time of our earliest ancestors, most commonly images composed of natural forms. Today, however, the images that more typically impact our visual life are the direct product of artful human activity (ambiguity intended). I have in mind everything that humans have designed and manufactured: buildings, machines, fine art paintings and sculptures, electronic devices, and all the products we now associate with the virtual world. Many of these images demand seeing skills largely unpractised by earlier human generations, and demand new kinds of careful and critical attention. These critical skills might usefully be gathered under an umbrella term – visual hermeneutics. This would comprise artistic and scientific interpretive skills, both now essential to navigate safely through the visual minefield. It is all too easy to stray from a balanced approach. On the one hand, if we undervalue 'the art of seeing', we might miss the 'more than' visual delight in a late Van Gogh painting. On the other hand, if we denigrate 'the science of seeing', especially its

[16] In Roman Catholic communities, the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar has been especially noteworthy. His monumental work *The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics*, 7 volumes (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1982) became a launchpad for many other authors. His writings shed new light on 'beauty' as the long-neglected partner in the Platonic triad: truth, goodness, and beauty. Two respected interpreters of Orthodoxy to non-Orthodox readers are Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky. See Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: an Introduction*, trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989) and Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, trans. Anthony Gythiel, 2 volumes (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992).

[17] In the course of my forty-year ministry as a British Baptist Minister I have witnessed many areas where previously held suspicions have been relaxed. I have witnessed a much freer use of banners, pictures, candles, and other artefacts in public worship. I have also seen much greater openness to engage with previously unexplored spiritualities and theologies; many Baptists in the UK now make regular retreats and draw on traditions of contemplative prayer, once regarded as the domain of Roman Catholic communities. Others now find spiritual value in giving attention to Orthodox icons that would previously have attracted only negative responses.

[18] Kidd and Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing*, p. xi.

analytical skills, we might find ourselves dangerously exposed to the dangers now everywhere encoded in digital images.

It was, I am sure, no accident that our ancestors landed on the word 'seer' ('see-er') to describe someone with unusual skills for detecting the 'more than' in human experience of the world, a capacity for seeing that somehow reaches beneath the surface of what we normally associate with a merely empirical approach to visual life. Other relevant terms expressing similar or related human capacities include 'insight'[19] and 'discernment'.[20] There is a profoundly human – I would say, deeply spiritual – potential in 'the art of seeing' that enables humans to get in touch with levels of insight and discernment without parallel in their importance for fully developed human identity and community. The art of seeing, I suggest, invites us to take the elusive nature of human 'subjectivity' as seriously as it takes the 'objectivity' of our bodily existence. The seer's gifts of 'insight' and 'discernment' enable us to reach beneath and beyond the important, but ultimately only preliminary, level of empirical interpretation and understanding of human experience.

As I suggested in an earlier paragraph, the surface level is not without great importance, especially in a digital age. We now have a world in which the creation and analysis of digital visual images are fundamental to our social structures, our political decision-making and our personal security. There is no going back on the technologies that have come to shape almost every aspect of modern living and, correspondingly, new layers of Christian responsibility have emerged, demanding that we take part in their careful management and control. As committed believers, however, it is essential that Christians remain confident that there is so much more to 'seeing' than mere data analysis will ever be able to yield. There are also intuitive, but often overlooked, dimensions of insight, discernment, and imaginative understanding that are crucial not only for our protection but also for our creative fulfilment.

In traditions clearly visible in the writings of the great Hebrew prophets, the art of seeing has always been very much at the core of what it means to live abundantly in God's world. The enormous challenge in our time is to give a good account of such seeing and its prophetic implications,

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[19] Insight is a term much used in a variety of spiritual writings and contexts. I am especially struck, however, by the monumental work of Bernard Lonergan that takes the same word as its title (Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (London: Longmans Green, 1957)). What I find most striking is the way that Lonergan is able to explore the significance of the concept of insight, not merely in spiritual contexts, but across the whole gamut of human epistemological endeavour. Insight, according to Lonergan, is a *sine qua non* for almost all the important developments in human understanding of the universe within which we are situated.

[20] Discernment is a term widely used when describing spiritual disciplines. It lies at the heart of the practices that today gather under the heading 'Ignatian Spirituality', now widely affirmed by Baptists around the world.

especially to companions in the Western world, trapped by their deep suspicions about anything that cannot readily be measured and quantified within the everyday canons of empirical science. I am under no illusion that my argument runs counter to a strong tide in much that has become normative wisdom in the intellectual environment of the Western world and its learning institutions. The paradigms of positivism and empiricism that became so potent in the first half of the twentieth century still provide the dominant strategies for testing human knowledge, and this makes credible religious apologetics a seriously difficult task. It is now necessary to surmount enormous hurdles of prejudice concerning what is and what is not thought to be acceptable evidence, even before the real work of apologetics can begin. We simply have to accept that tackling this hurdle is a necessary preface to making our case as Christian believers. There is no way around what for many today is an enormous credibility gap, even before they begin to process the larger possibilities in Christian believing.

What disappoints me most is that many who have themselves successfully negotiated some kind of 'leap' into a community of faith, now appear to have pulled up the drawbridge behind them. They go on their way, content to handle the precious artefacts of faith as if they had never embraced the 'more than' that first enabled them to reach beyond the limitations of a predominantly empirical mindset. Too often spiritual wisdom and insight is treated as if it were just another datum of scientific experiment, and religious truth is reduced to propositions that can be handled by analytical logic alone. This, I suggest, fails to do justice to the disciplines of human knowledge that are essential for faith communities and scientific communities alike. In my experience, the best science knows that science is more like an art than overly mechanistic approaches imply;[21] the best art draws widely on insight into the human condition culled from the work of the sciences;[22] and the best theologies, Baptist theologies included, celebrate the extraordinary richness of the entire human intellectual endeavour, connecting this abundance with our own peculiar insight into the mystery of God.

[21] Examples include: Michael Polanyi, whose book *Personal Knowledge*, new edition (London: Routledge, 1989) convincingly demonstrated the irreducible subjectivity in all that is typically portrayed as the objectivity of modern science; John Polkinhorne, now well-known as the Professor of Theoretical Physics turned Anglican Priest, even in his early work *Particle Play: Account of the Ultimate Constituents of Matter* (London: W H Freeman & Co, 1979) made much of the role of beauty in arriving at scientific judgements.
[22] Some of the Baptist artists who gathered in Stockholm work with complex digital techniques to produce high quality video materials. I also have in mind, however, that pioneers of what we still today call modern art, including Georges-Pierre Seurat and Vincent van Gogh, were seasoned researchers into the emergent science of colour.

## An Epistemological Challenge

How then are we to break through the *impasse* that has been generated by a global stand-off between those who prioritise an 'either-or' between scientific and religious views of the world? It should already be clear that I myself do not see this as a sufficient cause for inevitable conflict, and I am in no doubt that missionary practitioners, concerned to gain a good hearing for the gospel, need to build cognitive bridges across this otherwise damaging divide. My argument here is that artists are frequently found in the vanguard of those who can help us break down these unhelpful and unnecessary barriers, using their skills of creative imagination to tap more deeply into a larger understanding of the human world. Drawing on their rich practice of attentive seeing, artists can bring analysis and imagination back together into a lost original unity, one which will benefit both believers and non-believers, as we seek to live together with the complexity of the world we have made. We must not, however, underestimate the scale of the contemporary epistemological challenge to Christian apologetics.

Let me try again to focus on what it is that specifically catches my eye in the non-verbal arts, and how they can help us to address these issues. At the heart of the matter is the way that the non-verbal arts typically offer an 'open' invitation to enlarge human knowledge and appreciation of the world, in ways that exclusively analytical and verbal strategies can entirely miss. Like many in my generation, too much of my own education was modelled on decidedly 'closed' didactic models. It was possible to achieve a significant level of apparent success by doing little more than writing down what I heard, learning it by heart, and writing it down again when it came to a formal examination. How remote that is from the real potential for intellectual formation, in which educators delight to see learners developing ideas of their own, ideas that take both teachers and learners together to new levels of understanding. My conviction as a theological educator has long been that growth in the knowledge of God necessarily demands 'openness' of this kind, and this is where non-verbal forms come into their own.

As an example of the potency of non-verbal learning, I recall sitting on the floor of the Academia Gallery in Florence (yes, it was possible to do that in the late 1960s without attracting the attention of security guards) and drinking in the wonder of Michelangelo's statue of David. No one told me what to see or to write; no one suggested where my mind should focus. In the event, it ran wild, ranging far and wide, etching marks on my growing mind that would repeatedly open new journeys and uncover fresh areas of discovery for the rest of my life. True, it was helpful that I knew a bit about Michelangelo, something about Florentine art, and a little about the use of marble in making sculptures of such refined texture and brilliance; but my mind did not stop with any of these things. Rather, I began to think more

widely about the importance of the way a work of art is curated (the David is on a pedestal in a brilliantly lit rotunda), about the importance of size in figurative sculpture (this David is certainly larger than life), about the jaw-dropping beauty of the human body if only it is given that kind of attention to detail, about the uncanny power of a work of art to change me and enable me to see the world in a new way, and so on. It was, I suggest, a significant moment on my own spiritual journeying, a moment when the 'more than' of seeing broke like a wave over my life. When I compare that encounter to the aridity of so many of the crudely crafted verbal propositions that are deemed to encapsulate the totality of reality, viewed both religiously and scientifically, I find myself dismayed by what we have done with the potential richness of the world.

I would like to think that I have already made it clear that I am as open to the visionary insights offered through the work of the greatest scientists as I am to the sculptural genius of Michelangelo. What depresses me is the reductionism, paraded as science, that too often consigns us to such intellectual poverty in the Western world. It seems to me that reductionism has shown its head almost everywhere in modern religious movements – especially since the European Enlightenment, and even more especially in the West. It is not just fundamentalists who seem to embrace some kind of reductionist-scientific approach to their religion, religion reducible to propositions, but actually large numbers of religious institutions now appear to rely on an overly mechanical grasp of the truth of God and the mystery of God's creative activity. I have long sided with those who are deeply suspicious about the value of 'credal statements' as a basis for energising the real vitality of religious thought and action. This was one of several factors that originally attracted me to Baptist movements, many of which, from their earliest days, were quite passionate about their resistance to the use of Creeds.[23] These same Baptist movements were also passionate about religious freedom. I want to bring these two passions together, and to suggest that the freedom of thought appropriate to living religion is more like my experience sitting in the presence of Michelangelo's David than it is to reciting a supposedly authoritative definition of God, probably crafted more in the process of challenging others, typically labelled heretic, than in trying to articulate the subtleties of theological truth.

[23] Baptists have, however, made much of 'Confessions of Faith', amongst which the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession is frequently noted in works on Baptist identity. In their Confessions of Faith, '… Baptists have sought in the past to explain their beliefs to those outside their own fellowship and to provide a tool for teaching those inside it'. (Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), p. 45.) This, I suggest, is very different from the way in which many of the early Christian Creeds have been used to define clear boundaries to Christian believing as such, over-against those outsiders thought to be beyond the Christian fold.

The universe and the human beings that inhabit it are too often described by sentences that include the phrase 'nothing more than …'. This is, I suggest, quite literally depressing, pressing down on the imaginative potential of the human spirit, leaving us seriously diminished and sold short on hope for ourselves and our world. Surely this is the point at which a prophetic word from those who have been moved by an encounter with God must rise to the challenge. My argument has been that attention to the art of seeing offers precisely the kind of resource that can prick the bubble of such arid approaches to truth – be they scientific, religious, or anything else that humans are tempted to vest with unjustified authority. Visual encounters can be catalytic in energising the very changes necessary to re-awaken the Western world to credible understandings of God, and Baptist communities cannot afford to dismiss them lightly.

## Where Next?

Fortunately, there is no shortage of trustworthy voices from the wider Christian church to encourage us as we now re-consider the importance of non-verbal arts in our own Baptist communities. In his book *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, Rowan Williams points to some of the key areas where the mystery of God and forms of human communication intersect. As his title suggests, Williams has no desire to replace verbal forms; rather he points us towards 'an edge' where the verbal and the non-verbal meet. Approaching the edge, poetry increases in importance and visual forms rapidly come into view. It is here that Williams would have us find what I have been calling the 'more than' of human knowledge. In his own words, around the edge we find:

> … the creative use of language beyond description as a dimension of the attempt to reflect the excess of significance in what we encounter – what has been described as the way in which the things of the world 'give more than they have'. The work of the artist, in speech and in gesture, is thus not an eccentricity in the human world, but an intensifying of what human beings as such characteristically do. 'The "fine arts" are only valid when they see themselves as intensifying this art which is proper to humanity as such', to quote John Milbank. As writers such as David Jones insist, sign-making is pervasive in human discourse: signals or gestures evoke connections that are not obvious and need time to tease out; we cannot leave our superficially clear and definitive perceptions alone, it seems, but elaborate and reconfigure, looking constantly for new relations that make new and enlarged sense of what we perceive.[24]

That last sentence strongly echoes James Elkins' description of Monet at work with oil on canvas. Using disciplined creativity artists can release a

[24] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), Kindle location 2517.

'more than' that complements the endeavours of wordsmiths nearing the edge of words. In church contexts, this is mirrored when artists complement the work of preachers and teachers as they wrestle to communicate the mystery of God.

Like Rowan Williams, Iain McGilchrist, a contemporary psychiatrist, also helps us to understand where the verbal and non-verbal meet. In McGilchrist's highly acclaimed work, *The Master and His Emissary*, 'master' refers to what is often described as 'right hemisphere' brain function, typically associated with creativity and intuitive reason; and 'emissary' refers to the 'left hemisphere', typically associated with logic and analytical reason. In summary, McGilchrist argues that most Western cultures now prioritise the left hemisphere, with its emphasis on words and logic, largely over-riding the authority of the right hemisphere with its ability to handle visual images and other non-verbal forms. The right hemisphere, the original 'master', has been usurped by the left hemisphere, in reality only its 'emissary'. We desperately need to re-discover both left and right hemispheres in their more original creative tension. If we persist, McGilchrist writes, in giving almost exclusive priority to the left brain, our demise will be like that of those philosophers of whom he writes:

> Philosophers spend a good deal of time inspecting and analysing processes that are usually – and perhaps must remain – implicit, unconscious, intuitive; in other words, examining the life of the right hemisphere from the standpoint of the left. It is perhaps then not surprising that the glue begins to disintegrate, and there is a nasty cracking noise as the otherwise normally robust sense of the self comes apart, possibly revealing more about the merits (or otherwise) of the process, than the self under scrutiny.[25]

McGilchrist's philosophers are like Christian apologists who try to do theology without proper acknowledgement of the right hemisphere and its primarily non-verbal methods of communication. In church contexts, this is mirrored by those who fail to acknowledge the rightful contribution of non-verbal arts.

Another contemporary writer who engages with these themes is Maggie Ross, an Anglican solitary with a strong emphasis on silence. She uses the word 'liminality' as a preferred term for describing something like what Rowan Williams called 'the edge'. Like Williams, Ross does not discourage proper attention to words as crucial for the journey of faith, but she expects words almost inevitably to lead us further, beyond themselves, often through poetry, ever nearer towards non-verbal forms. In the language of Iain McGilchrist, she too advocates right brain priority, arguing that left-brain methodologies can never match those of the right brain and their

[25] Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), Kindle location 2471.

capacity for deep insight. Given the reality we inherit, the best we can do today is to lean in as close as we can to the liminal boundary. She writes:

> If we can get beyond our manipulative thinking to focus on not focusing, we open ourselves to insight and change; we access a vast, spacious, generous, silent, thinking mind that seems to have knowledge we have never self-consciously learned; that makes unexpected connections; that has its own ethics; and that not only gives us insights but can tell us when an insight is correct.[26]

For Ross, as a contemplative, an even better goal is silence, being the inevitable destination when the verbal and the non-verbal reach out together for the liminal edge. It is there, she claims, that we maximise access to what she calls 'deep mind', the 'more than' of insight, discernment, and knowledge with their self-authenticating hallmarks of grace. Returning again to church contexts, this is mirrored when we push to the limit the art of seeing in our search to know and interpret the mind of Christ.

I find myself returning to the term that Orthodox theologians frequently use when speaking about painted icons, 'windows on eternity'. Windows are not simply an end in themselves; it is the images that pass through them that really count. Likewise, the art of seeing is best understood as one more means to an end, an attentive possibility that clears the way for a 'more than' we might otherwise miss. Neither the verbal contortions of preachers nor the non-verbal 'itchy chafing' of an artist like Monet can ever guarantee access to what Ross is calling 'deep mind'; they are just windows through which God's 'more than' can graciously make itself known.

Finally, let me highlight what I have come to see as the particular importance of humility in every effort to extend human knowledge and to effect good communication. As I understand it, the best scientists know that there is always something irremovably provisional about all their theories.[27] The best artists invite us to accompany them on a shared journey, and delight if we, their viewers, discover depths of meaning that they themselves had never intended or seen. My own view is that Christian preachers, teachers, and missioners can only benefit from immersion in a similar kind of humility. God's authentic 'word' into our communities will always take us by surprise. It is always a gift of grace, loaded with a 'more than' that we could never merely conjure or fabricate.

My appeal to Baptist communities, and especially to their leaders, is that we must learn to make space for both verbal and non-verbal

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[26] Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, Volume 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2017), Kindle location 114.

[27] I am struck by the emphasis on humility in the writings of Roger Penrose, widely recognised as one of the leading mathematical physicists of the twentieth century. In *The Road to Reality: a Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe* (London: Vintage, 2005), he returns time and again to the ultimate provisionality of all innovative scientific work.

communication in our common search to hear and interpret the mind of Christ. 'The art of seeing', I suggest, is one possible route into a creative conversation that has the potential greatly to enrich our life together.

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# Imaging the Infinite

Graham Sparkes

Protestantism, particularly as expressed through both the Reformed and radical dissenting traditions, has struggled to find a place for art in faith and worship. The fear of falling into idolatry has always haunted its approach. This paper seeks to show that the twentieth-century move to abstraction in art can be seen, at least in certain respects, as a response to such Protestant concerns. Artists such as Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko illustrate this, and offer us an important way of understanding and appreciating how abstract art can deepen the spiritual journey.

## Keywords

Protestantism; idolatry; abstract art; Mondrian; Rothko

## Introduction

The question is sometimes asked, 'What is Christian art?' Any answer is always likely to prove problematic, but no doubt there are many of us who would immediately point to images that portray some aspect of the life and person of Jesus, or perhaps depict a particular scene described within scripture, or illustrate the lived experiences of the people of God. In other words, we would define Christian art in terms of its content – the particular story a painting seeks to represent. It is an obvious way of trying to answer the question, but it is also one that excludes many alternative and exciting possibilities, including the idea that modern abstract art might in some sense be understood as 'Christian'.

In the past this is not an idea that has found much support amongst evangelical writers reflecting on culture and the arts. Indeed, the move towards abstraction has often been interpreted as a sign of decline and failure that should be regarded with considerable suspicion.[1] Yet there has been an increasing recognition that there are abstract artists and abstract art that display profound links with Christian spirituality. More specifically, there are connections with Protestant theologies growing out of the Reformation that ought to be recognised and that give added force to what these artists were seeking to do.

[1] See for example the writings of Hans Rookmaaker and Francis Schaeffer.

It is these connections that will be explored, with a discussion of two significant abstract artists of the last one hundred years – Piet Mondrian[2] and Mark Rothko[3] – and brief reference to others including James Turrell.[4] Some of their links with Protestant convictions are clear and obvious; others are more diverse in origin; but together they help us see why those of us who belong within the dissenting traditions might learn to pay attention to abstract art and recognise its potential to enrich our faith.

## The Journey towards Abstraction

It has to be said that the task of learning to value and appreciate abstract art has proved challenging for many, irrespective of their Christian allegiance. It is not unusual for such art to be greeted with incomprehension and bemusement, and more hostile and less polite reactions have also been known.[5] This is not art that has instantly attracted great popularity; it tends to leave us discomforted, perhaps because we cannot instantly name and identify (and so contain) what is portrayed on the canvas. Yet, since the early 1900s, abstraction has become an established stream within modern art. Its origins are hard to identify, though Wassily Kandinsky[6] is often credited with being the first to create floating forms that did not obviously represent anything, and his paintings were certainly a radical departure for people who thought they knew what their art was all about. This was clearly not history, portraiture, or landscape. It did not fit the known genres. So, what was going on and why? Does abstract art do no more than illustrate a cultural slide towards emptiness and lack of meaning, as is sometimes thought?

To abstract something is to separate it from its normal reference points. In the visual arts that leads to a process of simplification of forms, lines, and colours, as what is represented on the canvas is separated or pulled away from any literal depiction of an original object, person, or landscape. For some artists that may lead further to art based purely on geometrical lines and shapes that have no immediate referent in the world around us. So, the most obvious – and challenging – feature of this new form of art is the sense

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[2] Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) was a Dutch artist, a pioneer of abstract art, and founder of the *De Stijl* movement that sought to reduce art to essential forms and colours.

[3] Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was born in Latvia and arrived in the United States in 1913. He became known as an abstract expressionist, noted in later life for his colour field paintings that express a yearning for the infinite.

[4] James Turrell (1943- ) is an American artist concerned with light and space. His installations challenge our seeing in ways that enable sight to become revelatory.

[5] The controversies surrounding the 2007 documentary film, *My Kid Could Paint That*, is an example of the very mixed responses that abstract art can engender.

[6] Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a Russian painter. His abstract paintings included those that brought together his love of both music and art – he believed in the phenomenon of synaesthesia whereby colours could trigger particular sounds. In 1911 he wrote a text called *On the Spiritual in Art*.

that it is non-representational. That is actually a little misleading, as abstract art may well correspond to things in certain ways, but it is fair to say that such art does not give us a picture of the world as we see it, and as was expected of art in previous generations.

One of the most obvious catalysts for this new and radical movement in art was the development of photography. By the late nineteenth century, the camera provided a way of capturing the exact likeness of a human face or of a landscape scene that rendered redundant the skills of artists intent on doing the same thing, and so artists needed to explore new meanings for their work. But a more profound reason for the development of abstract art had to do with what was going on in science: it was the discovery that our apparent solid and material world is actually made up of atoms that are not nearly as solid as we imagine. How, then, to represent this strange reality so recently discovered? How could the artist paint the world as it was now seen and understood by science? A new way of picturing reality was needed that was prepared to follow science in letting go of established reference points. As Barasch points out, we may not be able to argue that the 'dissolution of the atom' directly led to the development of abstract art. However, 'The *indirect* impact of science on art and art theory was no less significant. By shaping the conceptual and emotional orientations of a period, science necessarily also affects the arts.'[7] Such a view is supported by the writings of Kandinsky himself who, though he may not have understood the new scientific developments, speaks of how they shaped his artistic development.[8]

One way of beginning to make sense of abstract art, then, is to see within it a process of taking away the surface inessentials in order to uncover the underlying essence. An artist might begin with a realistic portrayal of an object, but slowly set about the task of identifying that which lies at the very heart of what is seen; to pare down the image, untying it from its appearance in the world in order that its deepest form and meaning can be exposed. A good example of an artist working in this way is Georgia O'Keeffe,[9] who in 1930 painted a series of six images of the Jack-in-the-Pulpit flower. The first is an easily recognisable realistic representation of the flower, though magnified and enlarged in a way that was typical for O'Keeffe, but each subsequent canvas moves us further in the direction of abstraction, with the sixth and final one offering us a very simplified use of form and colour.[10]

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[7] Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art 2: from Impressionism to Kandinsky* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 295.

[8] Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art 2: from Impressionism to Kandinsky*, pp. 296-7.

[9] Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) was an American artist who is best known for her desert landscapes and for her close-up paintings of flowers. By magnifying a flower, she wanted people to learn to see detail, colour, and shape.

[10] For a full discussion of this series of paintings by O'Keeffe, see Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing: Visual Resources for a Journey of Faith* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, and Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), pp. 116-125.

Here were artists wanting to imitate the scientists by looking beneath the everyday appearance of things and seek the real essence of what was to be seen, and we will return to this approach shortly when considering the work of Piet Mondrian.

There was another significant impetus to the development of abstract art that must not be underestimated – the influence of a range of different spiritual beliefs. On the one hand, it is clear that a number of artists began following the teachings of theosophy with its esoteric mixture of spiritual beliefs and practices.[11] This offered them a belief that hidden forces were at work in the universe that are beyond science and reason, opening up a deeper reality that they wanted to explore. On the other hand, many artists drew on the established faith traditions that had sustained and nurtured them during their formative years. This not only rooted them in their own past, but also in the history of art that they were now taking in new directions. Both these dimensions have been noted as they emerge in the art and writings of Kandinsky, with his background in Russian Orthodoxy.[12] But what also needs to be understood is the particular ways in which Protestant theology shaped the development of abstract art, giving it meaning and direction alongside the other influences that have been noted.

On the surface, such connections might appear unlikely. Puritan, Reformed, and Baptist traditions, with their roots in Calvinism and the radical strands of the Reformation, feel like stony ground on which to grow any links with the visual arts. But a deeper exploration will show that some of their concerns can be seen as related to the emergence of abstract art.

## The Dangers of Idolatry

From the thirteenth century onwards, it is possible to identify ways in which images became the focus of increasing popular devotion, invested with spiritual power and significance. While the Reformation response in sixteenth-century Europe was certainly not uniform, leaders such as Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Calvin were unequivocal in their rejection of this use of images within worship, which they regarded as dangerous and harmful, and one of the strongest arguments used was the sin of idolatry. Calvin begins his 'Institutes of the Christian Religion' by declaring his intention to

[11] The Theosophical Society was founded at the end of the nineteenth century by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and its speculative search for mystical, psychic, and spiritual wisdom attracted many artists including Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, Klee, and Gauguin. For a brief discussion of its influence, see Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 66-70.

[12] See Moshe Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art 2: from Impressionism to Kandinsky*, pp. 299-307.

seek after knowledge of God,[13] and in recognising our inherent human limitations in gaining such knowledge, including our fall into arrogance and pride, he warns of the capacity of our imaginations to lead us towards superstition and the setting up of idols. Attention becomes focused on Exodus 20.4, with Calvin declaring that God 'curbs any licentious attempt we might make to represent him by a visible shape'.[14] The sovereign transcendence of God means that no human attempt to image God can ever be acceptable. Any move to offer a figurative image of the divine – a shape or a picture that represents God – amounts to blasphemy. While art allows us only to imagine what is illusory, true knowledge of God is gained through the use of the intellect that can then guide the will through sound reasoning.[15] Central to that development of sound reasoning is the teaching of Scripture.

Calvin's beliefs and convictions were written up for children in his 1542 Catechism. Having been asked to repeat the second commandment, the following exchange takes place between minister and child:

> M: Does God wholly forbid the painting or sculpturing of any images?
>
> C: He forbids only these two – The making of images, for the purpose of representing God, or for worshipping him.
>
> M: Why is it forbidden to represent God, by a visible image?
>
> C: Because there is nothing in him, who is an eternal and incomprehensible Spirit, that resembles a corporeal, corruptible, and inanimated figure.[16]

Calvin did allow a place for images. They might, for example, appear in the home, in the form of pictures of creation or of family and neighbours, both of which can be regarded as imaging the presence of the divine all around us in the world. Sculpture and paintings are no less than 'gifts of God',[17] he said, but it is important that they portray only what we can see. God cannot be seen, and an attempt to image God merely abuses the gift we have been given.

There are certainly those of us who would want to question Calvin's complete rejection of the use of images for devotion and worship. Although Baptists, along with many others within Protestantism, owe a debt to his reforming work with its emphasis on worship rooted in the preaching of scripture, there are those of us who would want to recover the importance of 'seeing' alongside 'hearing'. It is worth exploring the incarnational implications of our faith whereby Christ takes human form and likeness and

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[13] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, trans. H. Beveridge (London: James Clarke and Co., 1949), I.I.1-3.
[14] Calvin, I.XI.1.
[15] Calvin, I.XV.7.
[16] John Calvin, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, trans. E. Waterman (Sheldon and Goodwin, 1815), pp. 43-44.
[17] Calvin, I.XI.12.

so in some sense offers us an image of God, and to recognise the reality of mental images that are often deliberately provoked by the words of scripture that seek to describe the nature of God.

Yet the second commandment does have undeniable force. Calvin's iconoclastic approach may be extreme, but at the same time we do want to continue to affirm the unbridgeable gap between the Creator and the created: that the infinite surely cannot be imaged in the way we might represent in paint something we can see. Could it be that this truth is exactly what abstract artists have also wanted to recognise in imaginative and creative ways? Are the concerns of iconoclasts such as Calvin actually mirrored in the work of artists such as Mondrian and Rothko?

## Piet Mondrian

The abstract art for which Piet Mondrian is best known is both instantly recognisable and also very difficult for many to comprehend. From the 1920s he produced a series of paintings that used horizontal and vertical black lines of different widths to create a grid of different sized squares and rectangles, and then filled particular squares and rectangles usually with one of the primary colours.[18] We are therefore confronted with an asymmetrical geometric pattern that is very ordered and even instinctively beautiful, but clearly abstract in its failure to reference the way the world appears.

Mondrian grew up in a Dutch Calvinist home, and throughout his early training and development as an artist he retained an active involvement in the life of Reformed churches. At this early stage in his artistic development he produced conventional realist paintings, including completing Protestant commissions for churches and organisations, though even then his willingness to take risks and experiment can be seen in the way his landscapes challenge the convention of painting low horizons and dominant skies. It is also true that in the early years of the twentieth century he moved away from his Calvinist and Protestant roots, and began an involvement with theosophy. As already noted, its mixture of spiritual beliefs was attracting a number of artists at the time, but in the case of Mondrian there are well-developed arguments that suggest it would be a mistake to ignore the continuing influence of his Protestant roots on the development of his abstract art. In other words, we should regard theosophy as supplementing rather than replacing his 'mother tongue of Dutch Calvinism'.[19]

One way of making this argument is to concentrate on the language that Mondrian uses to discuss his paintings and the ways that this echoes

[18] Mondrian's paintings are widely available to view online.
[19] Joseph Masheck, 'A Christian Mondrian', *Bavinck Review*, 6 (2015), p. 39.

Calvinist theological concerns, and this is developed at length by Masheck.[20] We are familiar with 'justification' as one of the key words within the story of the Protestant Reformation, expressing the vindication of the human soul through the sacrifice of Christ, and Calvin expresses this as the debit of our sin being paid by the credit of righteousness gained through grace. In other words, a balanced equilibrium is restored – there is justification. Masheck writes, 'Concepts of justice and justification play a steady part in Mondrian's unfolding view of art. While justification concerns the vindication of the individual soul before the judgement seat... Mondrian's term "equilibrated relationship" plays this role in painting.'[21] Further, this idea of 'equilibrated relationships' leads Mondrian to a wider vision of a just society. 'He saw aesthetics and ethics as deeply linked', suggests Anderson and Dyrness, his artistic aims bound up with questions about 'the rightness and justness of social relationships'.[22] So there emerges an eschatological hope of a world that is finally complete and put right – the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. While Masheck proposes that Mondrian would have been particularly attracted to the Reformed theology of Herman Bavinck, Anderson and Dyrness identify analogies with the neo-Calvinist Abraham Kuyper. Either way, Mondrian's language suggests a considerable debt to his Protestant Calvinist upbringing.

But it is perhaps more helpful to try to understand the paintings themselves, and to put these alongside the language used in order to make sense of the task that Mondrian set himself. The Mondrian painting regarded as one of his most important is 'Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow' from 1930[23] and represents the height of the style he developed and named as Neo-Plasticism – a new approach to the plastic arts of sculpture and painting. It is a small canvas (just 46 x 46 cm) and deceptively simple. Through the use of those familiar black lines and blocks of primary colours, we are presented with a work that has two contrasting features set alongside each other. It is clearly a well-ordered painting that, as is typical of Mondrian, represents a search after balance and harmony. Whether it is the large area of red off-set by the much smaller square of blue, or the direction of the brush strokes that appear on the surface of the canvas, the apparent simplicity is actually the result of long periods of exploration in the search for a stillness that holds the painting together.

At the same time as offering us harmony and balance, this painting offers us something else: a desire to go beyond stillness in order to achieve

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[20] Joseph Masheck, 'A Christian Mondrian', pp. 37-72.
[21] Joseph Masheck, 'A Christian Mondrian', p. 46.
[22] Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016) p. 184.
[23] A reproduction of this painting can be found here: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/piet-mondrian/composition-with-red-blue-and-yellow-1930> [accessed 2 September 2019]

an element of creative movement and energy. It is introduced, for example, through the double thickness of the black line on the left side, and the fact that the black line on the left towards the bottom does not extend to the edge. The lines are key to the presence of this energy, together with the fact that the edges of the canvas are unframed. A tension is introduced that allows the painting to live, and this was a new and significant step for Mondrian.

In taking the path of abstraction and producing a painting such as 'Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow', Mondrian is wanting to uncover the essence of things – to explore the fundamental ways in which relationships give shape and meaning to the world. For him, a painting that merely reproduces a landscape scene only succeeds in hiding these deep-down structural relations that are at the very heart of creation. Such a painting makes us think too much about the particular subject matter that is portrayed; what is needed is art that identifies the very basic relationships of colour and shape within which are held all other possibilities. Thus, Mondrian uses the pure primary colours from which all other colours are derived, and works with vertical and horizontal lines between which all other lines are constructed. While the actual lines and colour combinations may appear random, they are the result of years of training and very careful work designed to attain the basic qualities we have already noted: the virtues of balance, harmony, and symmetry, and also the virtues of life, energy, and movement that are central to the creative processes. As Anderson and Dyrness put it, 'His paintings increasingly simplified into asymmetrical grids of primary colour: iconic figurations of the immutable ground of being from which all concrete, mutable existence is given.'[24]

What lies behind these abstract compositions is nothing less than Mondrian's belief in the sacred beauty of the created world, a conviction that stays faithful to his Protestant Calvinist roots. He believed in God as creator, as the one who holds all things together, as the one who justifies all things, and the one who deserves our humble worship. Idolatry must be avoided at all costs, and so Mondrian seeks to paint such as to capture within the structure of his abstract image a finite glimpse of the infinite beauty and unity of life. He wrote:

> Nature is that great manifestation through which our deepest being is revealed and assumes concrete appearance. (Nature's disclosure) is far stronger and much more beautiful than any *imitation* of it can ever be... precisely for the sake of nature, of reality, we avoid imitating its natural appearance.[25]

In other words, as Anderson and Dyrness argue, there is a sense in which Mondrian is taking Calvin's iconoclastic arguments one step further. Just as

[24] Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, p. 181.
[25] Quoted in Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, p. 182 (italics original).

it is dangerous to portray religious subjects in art and heretical to attempt any image of the divine, so Mondrian's sense of the goodness of the world means that for him even representations of this natural world destroy their essence. He rejects figurative art because it distorts the holiness and beauty of all God has made. Rather, out of love for all things, the artist must abstract the real depth of creation, seeking to capture the balance, relationship, and energy that reflect the Creator's vision and intention.

It is worth recalling Paul Tillich's 'Protestant Principle': the sovereignty of the Divine must be acknowledged over against any human claim – there can be no claim to absoluteness on the part of any human person or group whether political, religious, or artistic. It is not just the church that can try to take to itself an authority and ultimacy that is illegitimate and so fall into the trap of idolatry, for there are many cultural temptations to enclose and contain what is transcendent and infinite. In his abstract paintings Mondrian wants to affirm this principle, as he points towards the vast and limitless experiences that the Creator offers through creation, and he does so by offering a glimpse of what is most profoundly real.

Mondrian described his style of painting as 'abstract-real'. He wanted to capture an expression of pure reality beneath the forms and colours all around us. Whether or not we think he is successful, and whatever questions we might want to ask of his methods, there is no denying that Mondrian is an artist who turns to abstraction precisely because he wants to affirm the reality of the infinite God whose sovereignty must be upheld.

## Mark Rothko

If the roots of Mondrian's abstract art lie very clearly within the European Protestant tradition, what are we to make of developments across the Atlantic? Following the Second World War, New York increasingly became the centre of the art world, and with it came the rise of a different form of abstract painting – it became known as abstract expressionism. How much did this new direction also reflect Protestant convictions and values? Can it, too, deepen and inspire the spiritual journey?

The context within which abstract expressionism developed was the crisis created by war and the ways it exposed our human vulnerability and capacity for violence. It left people with fractured emotions that lacked any outlet, in a society struggling for a sense of identity and direction. Abstract expressionism provided a way for artists to respond and it reflected a number of different emphases, including: the expression of deep feelings charged with meaning; the attempt to uncover universal truths about the human condition; the value of individual actions and decisions over those of society;

and the significance of finding a place for mystery and the unknown. As Barnett Newman said, 'We felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles... it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing – flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello.'[26] While abstract expressionism is not a unified movement with one style, one of its groupings that included Barnett Newman became known for paintings that consisted of large areas of colour – colour field paintings.

Mark Rothko was also part of this group. He is one of its most prominent artists and perhaps also one of its most complex. The latter part of his life was given over to producing vast canvases where the fields of different colours extend right to the edge, and there is nothing else to be seen except these blocks of colour.

It really does not help us to try to analyse Rothko's abstract expressionist paintings.[27] They need to be seen and felt! Sometimes they offer us a kind of horizon between two blocks of colour that invite us to peer into the distance; sometimes there is a kind of door or window that seems to reveal little but further mystery; sometimes the paintings seem to envelop us and hold us, or even to illuminate us with a kind of inner light. Rothko actually declared that he was not really interested in colour as such, but rather with the light that he sought to generate by thinning the paint and then applying many layers in order to create a luminous effect. His last paintings used colours that were increasingly dark and brooding, none more so than the fourteen canvases hanging on the eight walls of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. They are a very deep purplish colour, almost black, and yet at the same time they have that strange translucent effect he deliberately sought through the techniques he adopted.

Somewhat surprisingly, Rothko claimed he was not painting abstract art at all. His art was about something! He wanted to paint the concrete reality of human drama, to portray the tragedy of our human condition, and to lead people towards an experience of the transcendent. Moreover, he wanted to do this in a way that was contemporary. He said, 'In a sense, the whole artistic process since the Renaissance can be described as a nostalgic yearning for a myth and a search for new symbols that will enable art to symbolise again the utmost fullness of reality.'[28] He was wanting to give expression to that which might bring everything together into a unity, and it is interesting that just as we have noted Mondrian's declaration that his paintings were 'abstract-real', so Rothko also expresses this quest for the

[26] Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John O'Neill (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 287.
[27] Rothko's paintings are widely available to view online.
[28] Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 96.

deepest levels of reality. Here are abstract artists wanting to deal with matters of ultimate spiritual significance.

Where do Rothko's roots lie, and why might we see in his abstract expressionism links with our Protestant spirituality? Though he lived most of his life in the USA, Rothko was born in the Russian Pale and his Jewish heritage was certainly one of the factors that shaped his life and art, despite renouncing any formal allegiance to the faith. Another was the Protestant Puritan culture that continues to be a dominant force in the USA, and the fusion of these two influences is worth exploring.

It would be difficult to make a case for Rothko having a formal religious commitment of any kind, though there are plenty of suggestions that religious and spiritual experience was part of his make-up. As we will explore in a moment, his willingness to design a chapel is one illustration of this, as is his famous comment that the 'people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when painting them'.[29] It is hard to know what Rothko might have meant by his 'religious experience', but that is his phrase. What we can note, firstly, is that the issue at the centre of Calvinist aversion to art was one that Rothko was very conscious of – the second commandment not to make graven images. No doubt it was part of his Jewish upbringing, and he discussed it at some length in 'The Artist's Reality'[30] where he expressed his dismay at how this text had been used against artistic endeavour. Yet the non-representational abstract canvases Rothko produced suggest that the commandment never lost its influence. Reflecting on his heritage, Christopher Knight concludes that 'for Rothko, art was a sacred calling and his temple would become very much a Jewish temple. The abstract, sacred spaces of his mature works are not violated by graven images; his Jewishness helped Rothko become an abstract expressionist.'[31]

If Rothko's Jewish roots were significant, then these would have been matched by the Protestant ethos that was – and still is – a feature of the American cultural life he experienced. This ethos is one that emphasises the individual, whether applied to work ethic or personal faith. Rothko was inspired by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose existentialism emphasised the individual – the importance of the personal choices and commitments one makes – as well as the infinite distinction that needs to be maintained between God and humanity. At the same time, this prevailing ethos also holds to the importance of community and togetherness. As well as understanding his art in terms of a search for unity, Rothko wanted to see

[29] Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 119-120.
[30] Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, pp. 6-8.
[31] Christopher Knight, *Omissions are not Accidents* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010,) p. 108.

himself as standing within tradition – whether it was the Patristic writers he read or the works of Fra Angelico that he studied.

In his discussion of Rothko's art, Simon Schama makes the interesting observation that one of the problems that Abstract Expressionists encountered was 'how to stay loose and free without becoming entirely random, tediously incoherent'. He says, 'The dialogue between freedom and limits was, of course definitely American.'[32] And, we might add, typically Protestant! The tension between allowing all to read and interpret scripture, while at the same time determining the boundaries of such interpretation, has always haunted the churches of the Reformation, and this very Protestant struggle found its way into Rothko's art.

But perhaps the most obvious way of identifying the influence of Protestant values on Rothko is in the construction of the Rothko Chapel,[33] already referred to, and this despite the fact that it was commissioned by observant Catholics. Rothko had an intimate involvement with the entire project, including the design and the furnishings for the chapel as well as his canvases that hang on the walls, and what immediately strikes one when entering into its small dimly-lit space is its sparseness. It is plain with grey walls and just simple wooden benches to sit on, offering the kind of simplicity one would expect of a nonconformist chapel. It is of an irregular octagonal shape with no focal point, of the sort that might suit Baptists, where the gathered community is of central significance. It takes us out of the harsh light of a Texan sky into another world, reaching deep into another place. It is, in fact, designed to be a non-denominational space for worship and reflection.

The paintings themselves took Rothko many months to complete. At first sight they may appear dark and uninteresting, but as one stays with them the complicated layering of the paint begins to allow different light tones to play on the surface. Their apparent monochrome nature gives way to a sense of the independence of each canvas, including those deliberately placed in triptychs, and yet they also interact in order to achieve a mutual coherence. There are in fact two groups of seven – one made up of black rectangular paintings against a dark purple background, and one made up of monochrome purples and mauves. To sit before them makes us feel our smallness, and this combined with their darkness almost inevitably confronts us with the tragedy of our human condition. They are paintings about the frailty and mortality of our existence. Yet they also offer an invitation to the viewer to enter a silence and emptiness in order to find a presence. Here is

[32] Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (London: Bodley Head, 2009), p. 415.
[33] The official website can be found at <http://www.rothkochapel.org/> and contains a video showing the inside of the Chapel [accessed 2 September 2019]

expressed something of Rothko's search for transcendence, for a glimpse of the infinite. Dore Ashton writes,

> He was like a mystic in that he had an over-weaning private hunger for illumination, for personal enlightenment, for some direct experience – or at least the quality of that experience – with the transcendent. He was a mystic in the way Nietzsche described "a mystic soul … almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself."[34]

Rothko's abstract canvases do evoke both presence and absence, revelation and hiddenness, the seen and the unseen, and in doing so they open us to mystery – to the contemplative silence that is the only appropriate response to the God who is beyond understanding. Indeed, there is always an ambiguity inherent within Rothko's work. On the one hand, there is the sense of a God who has fled, leaving behind only darkness; on the other hand, his ability to allow a light to emerge from within the darkness speaks of a God always waiting to be discovered. What is certain, of course, is that such a God can never be captured by words or images, and so Rothko's paintings provide us with a truly Protestant space within which to worship.

## Faith in Abstract Art

In 1971, when the opening of the Rothko Chapel took place, an address was given by Dominique de Menil, who had been one of its commissioners. She paid tribute to Rothko's art, though he himself had sadly died a year earlier, and she then spoke of how in our age of visual clutter, 'only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine'.[35]

Such a statement seems a long way from those uttered by Calvin. But we have attempted to show that the gap is not nearly as unbridgeable as we might think – that actually abstract art can be understood as an outworking of deeply held Protestant principles. There are those of us who, despite the legacy of Reformers such as Calvin, want to recover the significance of art and the visual for the Christian journey. At the same time, we continue to recognise the threat of idolatry in all its forms, and see in abstract art an affirmation of the transcendence of God who cannot be imaged but whose mystery we continue to seek. Indeed, there is the opportunity to discover in abstract art the apophatic dimension of spirituality that has sometimes been neglected by the inheritors of radical Protestantism.

James Turrell is a contemporary abstract artist whose parents were Quakers. Whether or not he has been influenced by the well-known Quaker conviction that there is something of the light of God in everyone, Turrell's

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[34] Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), p. 194.
[35] Quoted in Susie Babka, *Through the Dark Field* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), pp. 270-1.

art has been notable for its exploration of light as a source for contemplation. Whereas our tendency is to use light in order to look around us and see spaces and objects clearly, Turrell wants us to see light itself. 'Light,' he claims, 'is not so much something that reveals as it is itself the revelation.'[36] Thus he creates rooms and spaces where the possibilities and the limits of human perception can be explored, where sometimes this causes severe disorientation, and where we learn to see ourselves seeing. Some pieces create the illusion of walls and barriers; others challenge us with apparently solid objects floating in the air. We see something, and yet there is nothing there. We are left feeling insecure and confused.

In his helpful reflection, Kosky shows how issues of power and control become central to Turrell's work.[37] We have learned to use light – most notably through the modern so-called 'enlightenment' period – in order to bring the world into the light, so enabling us to gain knowledge, understanding, and truth. It has been a project driven by us and under our control. But as a result, we have lost the quiet path of contemplation wherein we learn to see light in itself, and allow ourselves to be seen. We have treated mystery as a problem that we can solve by our own efforts, and forgotten that the divine mystery reveals itself only to those who wait in quietness and stillness, however uncomfortable and challenging that may prove.

If we allow it, abstract art can deepen the spiritual journey. Whether it is the colour patterns of Mondrian, the dark canvases of Rothko, or the light installations of Turrell, abstract art throws at us questions and refuses us easy answers. These artists stand alongside the iconoclasts in refusing to offer us images of God, or indeed any images that might be too easily controlled and defined. Instead, they give us space to contemplate what is transcendent, forever hidden, and infinite.

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[36] Jeffrey Kosky, 'Contemplative Recovery: The Artwork of James Turrell', *Cross Currents*, Vol. 63, No. 1, p. 48.
[37] Jeffrey Kosky, 'Contemplative Recovery: The Artwork of James Turrell', pp. 44-61.

# Revelation of God through Film: Theological Aesthetics and Beauty as Transcendental Applied to Films of Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev

Denys Kondyuk

God cannot be viewed and cannot be comprehended, but is there a possibility of God being revealed through a film? There are several ways used by the Church to represent God in worship: worship through singing or music, visual worship through icons, and participation in dramatic performance. In this study, the methodology of finding God in films is suggested and applied to some films. It is based on works on theological aesthetics by John Panteleimon Manoussakis and David Bentley Hart. The films of Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev are used as examples. One of the main ideas of this study is related to viewing God through Jesus as God who can be comprehended (in some way) and incorporating Christological reading of reality into film analysis. There is also a strong emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of film experience as theological aesthetic experience.

## Keywords

Aesthetic theology; beauty; God in film; interpersonal

## Introduction

The topic of addressing ways through which we might comprehend God is not new, yet new media forms raise new questions of how God can be comprehended. There are many ways that have been used by the Church to represent God in worship. We perform worship through singing or using musical accompaniment; visual worship by contemplating through icons, paintings, and statues; and worship through participation in dramatic performance. On the other hand, the relatively young field of film making is still in the process of finding its way into the Christian worship experience. Can it be integrated into our worship – if not in public, then at least personally? Can film be a place for the revelation of God?

## Films, Beauty, and Transcendence

The correlation of film studies and theology is not something completely new, as the dialogue has begun from the works (to mention a few) of André

Bazin with his sacramental dimension,[1] John May and his narrative approach,[2] and the transcendental approach of Paul Schrader.[3] Recently some scholars have used the works of Paul Tillich to approach film from a theological perspective.[4] John Lyden,[5] Robert K. Johnston,[6] Clive Marsh,[7] and Craig Detweiler[8] have also published books on the role of theology for the film, and of the film for theology (or religious experience), popularising and facilitating broader discussion about the role of film in the Church. Some authors like Elijah Lynn Davidson[9] and Josh Larsen[10] suggest that films may be incorporated in our prayer life and be considered as a spiritual exercise. This may seem to be the answer to the question raised by this study, but these books rather call for a critical dialogue with film and a topical connection of certain films to certain modes of prayer. This seems to be useful and enriching, yet it does not create a space for further theological engagement.

There is an old theological perspective that takes the transcendentals seriously and develops the theological discourse on them. Hans Urs von Balthasar revived the interest in transcendentals in the twentieth century and reinstated the importance of theological aesthetics and the study of beauty.[11] Recently two Orthodox theologians, John Panteleimon Manoussakis and David Bentley Hart, addressed the topic of theological aesthetics in their works and brought some Eastern perspective to the developing tradition of theological aesthetics in the West. Their input may be seen as a unique interpretation of theological aesthetics and may be enriched by applying some ideas to film studies. Manoussakis describes

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[1] Andrè Bazin and Bert Cardullo, *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[2] John R. May, ed., *New Image of Religious Film*, *Communication, Culture & Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

[3] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

[4] Jonathan Brant, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film: A Theoretical Account Grounded by Empirical Research into the Experiences of Filmgoers*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[5] John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

[6] Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd edn, Rev. and expanded, Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2006).

[7] Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998).

[8] Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008).

[9] Elijah Lynn Davidson and Kutter Callaway, *How to Talk to a Movie: Movie-Watching as a Spiritual Exercise*, Reel Spirituality Monograph Series (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017).

[10] Josh Larsen, *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

[11] Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Fessio, and John Kenneth Riches, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco; New York: Ignatius Press; Crossroad Publications, 1983).

theological aesthetics in terms of interpersonal relations.[12] Hart sees theological aesthetics in the context of beauty (as transcendental) and understands it as an event.[13]

As I have already mentioned, there is quite a history of so-called transcendental cinema and transcendental style in film introduced by Paul Schrader.[14] Though his perspective is not the only one, it is interesting that one of the features of his approach is hiddenness of the transcendental in film and representation of reality with the intense givenness of an arbitrary experience. I have chosen to focus on Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev because they are addressing the challenge of representing God through the intensity of the real in their movies and they produce their films with some kind of theological perspective.[15] It may even be suggested that many of the directors who can be defined by this approach try to portray the presence of God by his absence. Among those who have recently directed films that can be related to the transcendence approach, Andrey Zvyagintsev stands out. Zvyagintsev mentions in one of his lectures that he is eager to create mythic reality through his art, and for him myth is a true meaning of the world we live in.[16] He also thinks that we can communicate the transcendental only through a paradox and correlates myth and paradox.[17] Andrey does not address the question of transcendental beauty directly; in his opinion it is something he would describe as poetic. It is peculiar that in a similar way David Bentley Hart describes beauty: 'the truth of being is 'poetic' before it is 'rational'... Beauty is the beginning and end of all true knowledge.'[18]

Terrence Malick also addresses the presence of God through the distance in his films. Malick does not explain much concerning his latest films, but we can easily see that they relate directly to the comprehension of God through reality. In *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *To the Wonder*

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[12] John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 45-46, 67-70.
[13] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 283.
[14] Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, pp. 40-44.
[15] Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*, Routledge Studies in Religion and Film 8 (New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016); Robert Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, Philosophical Filmmakers (London, UK ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); James Batcho, *Terrence Malick's Unseeing Cinema: Memory, Time and Audibility* (New York, NY: Springer Science+Business Media, 2018); Denys Kondyuk, 'Sensing And Longing For God In Andrey Zvyagintsev's The Return And Leviathan', *Religions*, 7 (7) (2016), p. 82 < https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/7/7/82/htm> [accessed 20 October 2019]
[16] *Dyckhaniye kamnia. Mir filmov Andreya Zviagintseva. [A stone breath. The world of Andrey Zvyagintsev's films.]* (Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2014), pp. 148-151.
[17]Ibid., pp. 275-276.
[18] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 132.

(2012), he reveals God through prayerful communication of his characters, a kind of a worshipping testimony mixed with a narrative.[19] He does it in quite a different way than Lars von Trier in his *Breaking the Waves* (1996), not using self-talk, which stands for God, nor using theological inserts commented by a narrator (thus Trier rejects the tension and unity of the transcendent and the immanent and chooses totality of form and being over difference in unity).[20] Malick uses the beauty of creation and presents it also as the beauty of relations. His films concentrate on interpersonal relations, love, joy, drama, and the meaning of life. For him there is a possibility of depicting transcendence as interpersonal reality and as reality of movement and change in film form.

These two directors are worth noting, not only because they try to show God through film form (this has been done by many other filmmakers), but also because their film-art interestingly correlates with a theological aesthetics approach and works of Manoussakis and Hart. Malick depicts many paradoxes, inviting to participate in a direct life experience, and almost imposing this experience on the viewer. His film language is close to Manoussakis' idea of us being seen by others and the experience of being as an inter-subjective experience.[21] Moreover, the whole puzzling Malick creates in his films corresponds to the idea of limited knowledge:

> …the *recognition* of this very limit constitutes, at the same time, the highest point of our knowledge of God. In other words, in our falling short in knowing God, at the moment of reason's failure, knowledge is given. We get to know what we are looking for once we are forced to the painful and humbling realization of our inadequacy to know.[22]

This awareness does not seem to be alien in current film studies as Kathleen E. Urda emphasises some aspects of contemplation in the works of Terrence Malick, and believes that his films can invite the viewer to see reality as beauty and be an invitation to see God.[23] She also describes the possibility of knowledge as intuition and wonder, that are provoked by what one sees, connecting Malick's films to the suggested theological aesthetic approach.

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[19] Damon Linker, *Terrence Malick's moving Christian message — and film critics' failure to engage with it*, 26 April 2013 <http://theweek.com/article/index/243353/terrence-malicks-moving-christian-message-mdash-and-film-critics-failure-to-engage-with-it> [accessed 21 October 2019]

[20] Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema*, *Film Culture in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 109, 118-121, 195.

[21] Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 21-22.

[22] Ibid., p. 95.

[23] Kathleen E. Urda, 'Eros and Contemplation: The Catholic Vision of Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder*', *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2016): 130–147, doi:10.1353/log.2016.0001.

Zvyagintsev, on the other hand, describes the encounter with God not in a direct way. Quite often, the character does not see God literally, being blind to something we as viewers can recognise – a representation of the transcendental. This could be seen in the actions and attitude of Ivan towards his father in *The Return* (2003) or Alex's relations with Vera in *The Banishment* (2007). Zvyagintsev also shows the inability to grasp and hold the divine: as we may observe in *The Return* (2003), sons could not keep the father's body, and there are no pictures of him in the end credits scene, except from their past before the trip (as if he were not there during the trip). They also needed a photo to recognise him at the beginning of the film. In a similar way Ivan calls his father 'daddy' only after his father's death. So, in losing the possibility to communicate with his father, Ivan discovers his father as 'father'. Zvyagintsev emphasises human inability to see God, yet he still shows his presence in all his stories through different signs or dialogues (and most often in retrospective). His films emphasise our inability to comprehend God: we can only have glimpses and moments of illumination that allow us to experience God in daily things. Zvyagintsev also teaches the importance of 'trustful' attitude and the role of compassion in his films. All of these characteristics of Zvyagintsev's films correspond to the definition of beauty and the transcendent experience by the aforementioned theologians.

Films combine some qualities of visual, some auditory, and are related to theatrical play and storytelling. Most theologians, however, address the aesthetics of painting or music but not film; for example, Manoussakis in his work *God after Metaphysics*.[24] Hart likes to use the example of polyphonic music to illustrate beauty.[25] But what approach could we use in relation to art that combines the static features of painting and dynamics of music, and goes beyond concentrating on a literature kind of storytelling? What could be said of an art form that builds heavily on visual narrative and uses different and multiple forms of communication? It seems that their theological suggestions have more in common with films than they may think.

## Narrative, Visual, and Transcendental

As I have already stated, all films have a narrative structure, even those that have non-conventional plots or unusual visual language. Yet theological aesthetics suggest that it is not topical narrative aspects that should be taken into account, but the nature of presented narrative and its form. There are

[24] He describes three ways of experiencing transcendent: through sight, hearing, and touch (based on a metaphor of three paintings by Rubens and Brueghel).
[25] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, pp. 282-285.

several qualities of beauty, according to David Bentley Hart, that help us to identify it when presented by the narrative:

1. the transcendent and beautiful precede our reaction, and we do not find them – they are revealed;
2. by manifestation of beauty, a distance to the transcendent is created (beauty shows that there is not enough means to present God, yet we comprehend that God was communicated);
3. it awakens desire for transcendental God (most prominent examples are in *The Tree of Life* and *The Return*);
4. it crosses boundaries of the transcendent and immanent (a common life story becomes God's story and vice versa);
5. it transcends rational comprehension (it evokes marvel, not description, which is mostly presented in Malick's films);
6. it presents generous and winning life through death and sacrifice (not dramatising its vulnerability, so beauty is not Christian sentimentality);
7. Theologically beautiful narratives lead to some kind of peaceful resolution; they always keep faith and hope (and justice). [26]

In Manoussakis the very important concept of his theological aesthetics (based on *God after Metaphysics*) is the concept of *prosopon* ('being-in-front-of-another' or, as he redefines it, 'being-in-relation'). This may also be seen as a key theological theme in his works (and corresponds to the personalised reality of Malick's films, where the experience of being is the experience of the Other and by the Other).[27] Manoussakis places all of our experiences in phenomenological *relatedness* and 'existence as relational infinity' of our being (as Zvyagintsev pushes us into relational collapse in his films, he also confesses the relational nature of being through his characters).[28] All these ideas may be grouped into several common vectors that may be used as lenses of a theological aesthetic approach to films (Malick's and Zvyagintsev's films in particular), and these are:

1. *hymnal* form (interpersonal and beyond cognitive communication of God);
2. reversed knowledge (which is also interpersonal knowledge of God);
3. difference in the Trinity and mediation of Christ (interpersonal mode of the trinitarian life communicated through Christ-likeness and experienced as the beauty of the infinite);
4. unexpected givenness of the transcendental experience of God;
5. awakening of the desire for God, by the experience of beauty (formative nature of the *theo-aesthetic* experience).

[26] Ibid., pp. 17-28, 399-402, 436-438.
[27] Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 34, 37.
[28] Ibid., p. 46.

These rather general descriptions of Manoussakis' and Hart's projects may help us develop an approach that will lead to incorporation of the film experience into our worship. Let us see what can be seen through these theological lenses.

## 1. *Hymnal* Form

For Manoussakis music and hymn are things that cannot be conceptualised and differ from rhetoric and rational concepts, so they fit well the intention of turning to God and 'knowing' him by their means.[29] Hymn is an icon in a word form, a form that allows meeting the Other, so it is not just a song and not an informing performance.[30] Hymn is something in which we participate and, in the process of this participation, we discover both the other and ourselves. Hymn presents the *relatedness* that is so important for Manoussakis' theological aesthetics. The 'hymnal form' is what Malick used in his latest films, and, especially in *The Tree of Life* (2011), as much of its narrative is a conversation with God, we could even say it is a prayer. But it is not just a recording of a prayer, the meeting experience is expressed not only through a character's or narrator's voice, it is presented visually as much as audibly. It is also not descriptive, but representative. Similar communication and a search for the other/Other may be noted in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017). This form of a confession, prayer, search in a dialogue with the other/Other may define Malick's recent film-works almost as his personal directorial style. Thus, Malick's film language could be described as 'hymnal' (in the sense that Manoussakis uses it) or interpersonal and perceived as appropriate for depicting God. Mark S. M. Scott sees in the films of Terrence Malick application of the concept of beauty and theological aesthetics.[31] Scott also sees the importance of relationships and sacrificial love depicted in his films as ways of uncovering the beauty. But also, he sees the beauty in visual and cinematographic presentation of the story, through the light itself and created order that participates in the cinematic representation of the film-story.

But this interpersonal (beyond cognitive) effect is made not only by what is said in the film, but also by the way the narrative (both visual and audial) is presented (as a hymn is something open for participation). Hart's idea of beauty as that which invites us to experience itself and transcends rational comprehension corresponds to the hymn concept. The narrative invites us not only to observe what is happening; it asks with Jack's voice

[29] Ibid., p. 103.
[30] Ibid., pp. 101-102.
[31] Mark S. M. Scott, 'Light in the Darkness: The Problem of Evil in The Thin Red Line', in Barnett and Elliston, *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*., pp. 173-186 (pp. 180-181).

in *The Tree of Life* (2011), "How do you come to me? In what shape? In what disguise?" It invites to the search of God's form in the film. Maybe it is because the whole universe, any situation, a flock of birds or a blow of wind could be seen as theophany, but of course interpersonal encounters are the most important. The citation from Job 38.4,7 at the beginning of *The Tree of Life* (2011) is a description of worship at the creation moment itself. It would be hard to dismiss it as a hermeneutical key to viewing this film. Therefore, if a narrative does not impose a single meaning on a viewer and does not pretend to speak from an objective perspective, it could be called a beautiful narrative, such that could represent God through created forms that invite a viewer to see and participate.

## 2. Reversed Personalised Knowledge

Manoussakis also states that we can know because we are known, and our experience is an answer to God's call.[32] It corresponds well with *To the Wonder*, which ends with a confession by Marina: "Love that loves us... Thank you." The whole movie leads to the understanding of the importance of God's love as a source of any love and happiness.[33] Hart describes longing for beauty as an 'existential wonder', which ironically corresponds to the title of Malick's last film.[34] This introduces another area of theological-aesthetic interpretation, namely openness of characters and the viewer to some kind of a sign of the transcendent as being loved and seen. Viewing of a film becomes a state of being viewed by the One who is supposed to be presented (in a similar way to perceiving an icon).[35]

Hart, following Gregory of Nyssa, sees this principle also in light of our understanding of the Trinity, as 'We can become images of God because God is always already, in himself, Image.'[36] Our growth in self-discovery is ultimately connected to trinitarian love and interrelatedness, so by discovering God's love to ourselves we discover both God and ourselves (as we are images of the Image). Thus, both Hart and Manoussakis see the knowledge of ourselves through the lenses of being known by God, and experiencing it in particularity of being and in wonder at the experience of being.

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[32] Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 112-116.

[33] *Souls in Need: The Journey 'To the Wonder'*, April 2014, <http://www.bywayofbeauty.com/2013/04/souls-in-need-journey-to-wonder.html> [accessed 18 July 2019] and W. Bradford Littlejohn, *'Show Us How to Seek You': Discovering the Love of God in Terrence Malick's 'To The Wonder'*, October 2014, <http://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/show-us-how-to-seek-you-discovering-the-love-of-god-in-terrence-malicks-to-the-w-1.php> [accessed 18 July 2019]

[34] Hart, *The Experience of God*, p. 283.

[35] Gerard Loughlin, 'Within the Image: Film as Icon', in Robert K. Johnston, ed., *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 287-303 (pp. 294-297, 300).

[36] David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), pp. 161-162.

In Zvyagintsev's *The Banishment* (2007) the inability of Alex to see signs is related to another inability to receive and experience love from Vera. This lovelessness as inability for interpersonal relations and a lack in deep connectedness is also important for understanding the most recent films *Leviathan* (2014) and *Loveless* (2017). The walls of inability to be loved and to love seem to play quite an important role in Zvyagintsev's films. Just as hymnal form defines Malick's style, Zvyagintsev's style is defined by the question of seeing the other/Other and being able to receive love and share love with others. The distrust of the other shown by Ivan in *The Return* (2003) is continually presented in Zvyagintsev's films as a cause of inability to meet God, or as a late understanding of the experience of the transcendental. In some way Zvyagintsev's films are films about the hermeneutics of loved/loveless. These films also present characters who are experiencing the crisis of their identity in different ways but deeply understanding the ethical and transcendental dimension of their struggle. So, experience of God in a film creates the space of mirroring our identity, but not only mirroring our own identity, but also challenging our perception of God and ourselves facing him. Zvyagintsev's films are also a good example of films that still present the possibility of experience being interpersonal (even though from a negative side of the presented experience).

## 3. Difference in the Trinity and Mediation of Christ

Following the idea of the trinitarian nature of true knowledge, Hart states that the true image of God reveals the difference and mediation that are present in the Trinity.[37] The beauty which represents God by analogically uniting the transcendent and the immanent resides in these trinitarian relations that are open for creation to join.

In his interview Zvyagintsev mentions that in *The Return* (2003) he was willing to build a model of relationships between God and man.[38] Therefore, for him God could be presented by visualising something common, yet corresponding to the transcendental truths (even the transcendental Being). It is thought-provoking that most parables Jesus uses to illustrate the Kingdom of God are based on common experience available to everybody, but presenting a transcendental dimension to these usual things and situations. This deification of the common comes from the particularity and uniqueness of Christ and his life event in history. This brings us to the idea that, in one way or another, these stories relate to Christ and his mediation role and to understanding that 'Christ is the

[37] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 208.
[38] *Dyckhaniye kamnia. Mir filmov Andreya Zviagintseva. [A stone breath. The world of Andrey Zvyagintsev's films.]*, p. 137.

measure of all beauty.'[39] Therefore, all kinds of film presentations that show Christ-like figures could be described as a form of beauty in theological terms.[40] Beauty, in Hart's perspective, is an event and it is woven into relationships, in facing the Other.[41] Manoussakis states that the unseen God can be 'seen' through his effects, so we can see God not only in figures that could be associated with Christ but also in Christ-like relations.[42] Relations reveal beauty and only through them Christ-like figures can be identified.

Yet it has to be clarified that a Christ-like figure could have nothing in common with the historical Jesus, moreover it could be a completely fictional character. What makes a figure Christ-like is the trinitarian interrelatedness in the gift of love and the presence of the transcendent in our common created being. This openness of God in love to creation may be experienced in the Christ-like acts that may be presented and used in films. The father in *The Return* (2003) seems to be a Christ-like figure, and his association with a picture of the dead Christ from Andrea Mantegna's painting stresses that from the beginning. Ivan and Andrey show a different attitude of faith/disbelief, and by following their stories we learn that Andrey grows in maturity and Ivan discovers 'faith'.[43] The father dies for Ivan, so Ivan could meet the father truly in his act of sacrifice and discover his love. It is not an accident that the film starts with an empty drowned boat and ends with this boat drowning with the father's body. In *To the Wonder* (2012) father Quintana overcomes his depression and inability to love others by submitting himself to Christ who loves him and rediscovers God's love in himself. The same kind of transformation may be seen in Neil in his attitude towards Marina (also in *To the Wonder*).

The narrative that presents beauty is the one that allows interpersonal relations, which could reveal relations that are beautiful (seen in light of transcendental beauty) and point to God. In this respect, Malick's depiction of Jack's mother and brother and their relationships in *The Tree of Life* (2011) could be a good example of these beautiful and thus Christ-like relations. The same could be said of Marina and Neil and father Quintana in *To the Wonder*. In Zvyagintsev's films these Christ-like roles are played by Andrey in *The Return* (2003) and by Robert in *The Banishment* (2007) (there are less definitive features of Christ-like characters in his later films).

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[39] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 320.
[40] Ibid., pp. 338-340.
[41] Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 29-30.
[42] Ibid., p. 97.
[43] *Dyckhaniye kamnia. Mir filmov Andreya Zviagintseva. [A stone breath. The world of Andrey Zvyagintsev's films.]*, pp. 137-138.

## 4. The Sudden Unexpected Experience of the Transcendental

The difference of being, gratuity of existence, and also experience of the gift of being are important for Hart's understanding of beauty (as transcendental) and wonder (as the experience of the transcendental).[44] Hart points to the fact that experience of beauty calls out our responsibility, and in wonder we cannot escape the ethical and epistemological decision concerning the difference of the other:

> It is beauty and wonder that bring intention up short and prevent it from traversing the distance of being in indifference; beauty – the sudden splendor of otherness – forbids both absorption in oneself and the "infinitist" orientation of an ethical titan. What startles and provokes is glory, in which one finds a coincidence of strangeness and recognition.[45]

This point is vital in Manoussakis' concept of *exaiphnes* (a kind of sudden awakening) too, describing the moment at which one suddenly finds oneself in relationships and being defined by them.[46] *Exaiphnes* also describes a temporal experience of reality, when suddenly one sees through it as if it was transparent for eternity to be present in temporality, God as the wholly Other to appear and for transcendental to be experienced in the immanent.[47]

These experiences of unexpected enlightenment to the personal nature of reality and to the transcendent that may be experienced here and now are particularly important for Malick's filmic narration. As discussed earlier, Malick creates space for contemplation of reality itself in his films. Some critics say that the light is a character in his films, too, and it enlightens characters in different scenes (for instance, Marina in *To the Wonder* (2012) is literally enlightened in the final shot).[48] The same is seen in the experience of 'a spark' that Private Witt and First Sergeant Welsh discuss in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), as they share their perspective on God and love. We may recollect Witt's experience of joy before his death as we can see light and local kids playing (that sends us to the beginning of the film and his peaceful experience in the local village). So, characters in Malick's films like Jack in *The Tree of Life* (2011) suddenly realise their standing in front of the other, which often co-represents God.

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[44] Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest*, pp. 36-37.
[45] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 84.
[46] John Panteleimon Manoussakis, 'Toward a Fourth Reduction?', in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy.* ed. by John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham Press, 2006), pp. 21–33 (pp. 27-28).
[47] Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 49, 64-70.
[48] Benjamin Kerstein, *The Beautiful Light: A contemplation of Terrence Malick*, December 19, 2013, <https://thefederalist.com/2013/12/19/beautiful-light-contemplation-terrence-malick/> [accessed 27 July 2019]

Most often this happens in retrospective realisation that he was already there all the time, but only now are we struck by the ethical challenge of this meeting. This may be seen in Ivan's confession of his father after the fact of the father's death in Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2003). Suddenly Ivan sees his father as 'daddy', experiencing the wonder of his love and discovering the interpersonal nature of the experience he had, but was not able to process. The understanding that characters have encountered something transcendental comes after the encounter itself. That is why Elena from *Elena* (2011) is scared of God's punishment, seeing a dying horse rider and the lights turned off at her children's home. In a paradoxical way, she 'sees' God after turning away from him.[49] Alex in *The Banishment* (2007) understands what has been happening and a possible 'miracle' of a child that was expected only after reading Vera's letter that Robert gives him at the end of the film. By the time of his enlightenment and some kind of repentance Vera, his unborn child, and Mark are dead.

*Exaiphnes* helps to identify the moments of otherness, when one can see God and his beauty in common things, and some films are leading the viewer to this very experience of being enlightened by God's filmic presence.

## 5. Desire Awakened

As one experiences the enlightenment to the transparency of the created to the transcendent, the desire is awakened. This awakening of a desire is one of the major qualities of the experience of beauty outlined by Hart.[50] After realisation of the interpersonal particularity of our experience of reality and having an *exaiphnes* moment, one is awakened to the experience of the transcendent. It may be said that this experience requires reaction and, even if one tries to ignore its effects, one will still be attracted to the experience of the infinite. This desire becomes the openness for another experience of beauty and another *exaiphnes*, and thus it becomes a hermeneutical key for film experience and experience of the transcendent (mostly of God) in film.

From Malick's films it is most prominently presented in *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017). In *Knight of Cups* (2015) citation from Plato (*Phaedrus*) reminds us that the beauty of people and things we see awakens a desire for heavenly beauty, so our desire is longing beyond what we think we desire. And that seems to be the way the main character Rick is moving as the film progresses. In one scene, a fortune teller shows some Tarot cards with the Knight of Cups and the Sun cards clearly seen

[49] Andrey Zvyagintsev et al., *Elena: The Making of Andrey Zvyagintsev's Film* (London: Cygnnet, 2014), pp. 56, 92, 101, 121.
[50] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, pp. 17, 19-20.

and tells Rick he is moving along the edge of a cliff (the Sun does not have its own chapter but it does appear in the film, introducing the fashion model Helen, who refuses to have a romantic relationship with Rick, making her special). Helen is introduced in the storyline as an embodiment of beauty and she tells him that he has to wake up to "someone else we get to get to". There is the original search in Rick, but it is rekindled with his meeting with Helen. In a similar manner, in *Song to Song* (2017) mutual attraction of BV and Faye awakens a desire for true life in both of them. Their search for popularity and success is transformed by the experience of the other, and overturns their original direction of desires and goals in life.

In Zvyagintsev's films we mostly see the rejection of this experience and thus 'circular' movement of his characters who are most often directed in a loop of their untransformed desires. Redirection and openness may be seen in *The Return* (2003), *The Banishment* (2007) and partially in *Elena* (2011) (where the only character that is transformed is Katerina), as their characters discover the different mode of being after experiencing the beauty and the transcendent. But most recent films show the existential loop and blindness to the experience of beauty, which we can see in *Elena* (2011), *Leviathan* (2014), and *Loveless* (2017), where characters try to change their environment or social status but seem to go nowhere or get even worse by losing the opportunity to experience the infinite.

Thus, the films mentioned above create a model and represent an event which may provoke a search for God's beauty. Even 'negative' presentations of experience of beauty and the transcendent may be seen as a ground for the viewer's experience of God.

## Conclusion: Towards the Iconic Cinematography

Before coming to a conclusion about the potential of theological aesthetics to bring us close to film experience as worship, we need to take note of another dimension of the film experience. This dimension is a problem of interpretation of our experience of film watching. It is obvious that the interpreter of film experience is a part of the interpretation process and thus his/her attitude defines the result of the interpretive outcome. Vivian Sobchack shows that film experience gets beyond filmmaker intentions, as it is personalised by an individual viewer and incorporated in that personal dimension of experience, but it is also a shared sphere in which we all can participate, thus a social experience and a mutual act.[51] She also places the viewer into an active position of film viewing: 'The viewer, therefore,

[51] Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 9.

shares cinematic space with the film but must also negotiate it, contribute to and perform the constitution of its experiential significance.'[52] Sobchack's idea thus seems to propose that a viewer is a co-creator of meaning and film experience, and there is some intentional part to the experience of film and experience of the transcendent in it. In order to see beauty, one must love, and to be able to love, one must be open to be loved. And, according to theologies analysed above, this happens in our experience of God (or at least in openness to this experience). Therefore, the interpreter should admit his passive position and the possibility of unexpected relations in approaching the vision of God. Hart, corresponding to the thought of Jean-Luc Marion, states, 'Love is necessary first, before beauty can be seen, for love is that essential 'mood' that intends the world as beauty and can so receive it.'[53]

We can also see that films model the attitude of a viewer and invite a viewer into the interpretive dialogue with openness to the experience of being. Hart states that things of the senses could not distract our attention from God, rather the viewer is shortsighted, and that 'to come to see the world as beauty is the moral education of desire, the redemption of vision'.[54] That means that a viewer should come to the act of viewing not as to an object to be analysed, but to a conversation or to a some kind of a revelation. Thus, the first thing in interpreting is the proper attitude towards 'the object' and intentional confession of the inter-subjective nature of this interpretation. Following the theological vectors of: *hymnal* form; reversed knowledge; difference in the Trinity and mediation of Christ; unexpected givenness of the transcendental experience of God; awakening of the desire for God, by the experience of beauty, we may conclude that film watching may be seen as formative theological experience. It seems also that love and hunger for God create the basis for film experience that transforms a viewer. Seeing the world and films in love means assuming that they could be a part of God's initiative of self-revelation. Of course, it would be best if a director intended to present the transcendent, but it does not have to be so. As we have already noted, the beauty of the transcendent is revealed in relations. Christ is the embodiment of the Father's love, so in order for films to present a transcendental God, they have to present trinitarian love in one way or another. There should be some Christ-likeness. Paradoxically it could be seen in the need for or in the depiction of absence of love (but it should lead to God in the end to be beautiful and Zvyagintsev succeeds in presenting this aspect of beauty in his films).

[52] Ibid., p. 10.
[53] Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 240.
[54] Ibid., p. 255.

Sometimes God is revealed in a combination of different art forms that create some kind of a movement and dynamics of relations within a film; for instance, the use of paintings, music, or other films in order to enrich and broaden the meaning of the narrative and make it multilayered. This also relates to the beauty as crossing borders and creating events of God's transcendental glory.

Finally, there is a parallel between the experience of a film and an icon experience, because in both cases we may be in a passive role of being in front of the other, being 'seen' rather than coming to view 'the other' with our own premises and expectations. It is rather the experience of invitation for meeting and of contemplation.

Therefore, can we answer the main question: is there a possibility of God being revealed through films? The answer that theological aesthetics offers is 'yes', but we have to remember that the nature of this communication is dynamic. We should also remember that this communication is possible through beauty, which is related to Christ and trinitarian relations and also cannot be totally rationalised and categorised. We could, rather, describe the premises that allow this communication and even an act of worship. Therefore, these premises could be the following:

1. recognising the limits of any attempt to present God, but confessing positive apprehension of reality (admitting that it is still possible through films);
2. accepting the givenness and iconicity of the filmic experience of God (to be seen in order to see);
3. prioritising participative communal nature of film experience over an individual cognitive analysis of this experience;
4. taking the experience of God as a discovery (that there will be always an existential challenge for openness of a viewer to 'see' and 'receive' this through a film);
5. relational/trinitarian nature of Christ-likeness, both in film and life (valuing difference that allows a communal experience of the gift of love);
6. admitting that a true depiction of God fills a viewer with yearning, willingness to prolong that experience (forms a hunger for God and is a never-ending process).

The final note is that beauty and experience of God are not violent; they leave space for our reaction, or no reaction at all, which means that they may be neglected. There is always a possibility that God may be not seen by the viewer, even though the viewer is seen by God.

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# ‘The Dearest of Women is Gone’: A Historical Study of Grief in the Life of John Ryland Jr

Lon Graham

In January 1787, John Ryland Jr, pastor of College Lane Baptist Church in Northampton and future pastor of the Broadmead church in Bristol and President of Bristol Baptist Academy, lost his beloved wife, Betsy. While his public ministry continued largely uninterrupted, evidence of his struggle with grief is found in his unpublished poetry, which is kept in the Bristol Baptist College archives. These poems provide insight into how an influential Particular Baptist leader dealt with the loss of a woman whom he called ‘the dearest of women’. In them, Ryland displays a vulnerability that is largely absent from his published writings and gives insight into how his theology interacted with his personal grief during the years after Betsy’s death.

## Keywords

Particular Baptist; grief; Ryland; poetry

## Introduction

In the archive of Bristol Baptist College, there are two volumes of 165 hand-written poems by John Ryland Jr (1753–1825) between 1779 and 1821. While Ryland was a published poet, his poetry never reached the audience or critical acclaim of his fellow Bristolian, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Whatever he lacked in renown, Ryland made up for in consistency: from an early age, Ryland was busy at his poems. He published his first book of poetry at age thirteen,[1] and his last published piece of poetry was written during his last illness in 1825.[2]

Ryland’s early poetry is of a distinctly theological bent.[3] This is evidenced by Ryland’s early book of poetry entitled *Serious Essays on the Truths of the Glorious Gospel*, which is complete with Scripture proofs after

[1] John Ryland, *The Plagues of Egypt, by a School-boy Thirteen Years of Age* (London: No Publisher, 1766).
[2] John Ryland, ‘Lines Written by the Late Dr. Ryland during His Last Illness’, *Baptist Magazine* 17 (July 1825), p. 308.
[3] He says of his early poetry, ‘Since that time [his conversion in 1767], my poems have been chiefly on religious subjects, some of which having been seen by several Christian friends, who have signified their approbation of them, and their desire to have a few of them published, which they hoped might be neither disagreeable nor useless to many of the Lord's people, I was persuaded to consent’ (John Ryland, *Serious Essays on the Truths of the Glorious Gospel, and the Various Branches of Vital Experience. For the Use of True Christians* (London: J.W. Pasham, 1771), p. viii.

many of the stanzas.[4] While he ceased publishing books of poetry in 1773,[5] he continued to compose poems along the same theologically motivated lines as before. However, in 1787, the tenor of Ryland's poetry changes, and it becomes more personal. The reason for this is not difficult to discern: Ryland lost his wife, Elizabeth (Betsy), just forty-five days after she gave birth to their first child, a son named John Tyler Ryland. Ryland's reaction to her death has not been examined in depth in any of the recent research into his life and thought. This is likely because of how little it seemed to disturb his public ministry: Betsy died on 23 January 1787, and he was back in the pulpit for the funeral of a child on 2 February.[6] Thereafter, he resumed his ordinary duties as pastor at College Lane, Northampton.

In the light of this, it would be easy, and perhaps reasonable, to assume that Ryland continued his life largely undisturbed after Betsy's death. However, his private writings reveal a deep and lasting pain. In a letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr, Ryland shows the grief he was enduring. After giving an account of their relationship[7] as well as Betsy's last weeks, Ryland says, 'Do pray for me! I can pray but seldom with a degree of proper feeling.'[8] Ryland also divulged his heart to his frequent counsellors, John Newton and Robert Hall Sr.[9]

It is in the two volumes of poetry, however, that one finds a lengthy, unguarded look into the broken spirit of a man grieving the loss of his wife. It is worth examining because it provides a deeper, fuller picture of who Ryland was as a husband and man. He appears in the poems less as a churchman, pastor, and denominational leader, and more as an ordinary, struggling man, whose theology served both to wound and soothe his soul.

## John Ryland and Elizabeth Tyler

Ryland had longed to marry. He says in his 'Autograph Reminiscences' that he first began to think of marrying in 1775.[10] As he did not marry Betsy until

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[4] John Ryland, *Serious* Essays, passim.

[5] John Ryland, *The Faithfulness of God in His Word Evinced* (London: J.W. Pasham, 1773).

[6] John Ryland, 'Text Book', 2 February 1787, Northamptonshire Record Office. Ryland marked the occasion of Betsy's death with a black bar drawn on the date.

[7] Speaking of their married life together, he says, 'I lived w$^{th}$ her 7 years. They were 7 years of sore trials in some respects, from another quarter, but she was a blessed comfort to me under them. Few young women ever equall'd her in prudence & evry amiable disposition. She had a great degree of domestic œconomy, join'd with much benevolence to the poor' (Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University). Ryland's description of their relationship to Edwards Jr is very much in keeping with what is found in the poems.

[8] Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787.

[9] The letters to Newton and Hall have been lost, but letters from them yet remain and demonstrate that Ryland was open with them about his grief. A letter from Hall is held at the Bristol Baptist College Archives, and the letters from Newton were published in Grant Gordon, ed., *Wise Counsel: John Newton's Letters to John Ryland Jr.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009).

[10] Ryland, 'Autograph Reminiscences', Bristol Baptist College Archives, 53.

1780, that meant five years of waiting. Ryland mentions two young ladies with whom he attempted courtships, both of which came to naught. These disappointments were apparently quite sore for Ryland at the time. He wrote to Newton about his struggles, and Newton responded with compassionate yet firm counsel. As Ryland was seemingly growing impatient with the process of finding a wife, Newton advises him, saying, 'Worldly people expect their schemes to run upon all-fours.'[11] He encourages Ryland to trust God to provide for him at the right time:

> if he sees the marriage state best for you, he has the proper person already in his eye; and though she were in Peru or Nova-Zembla, he knows how to bring you together. In the mean time, go thou and preach the Gospel.[12]

Ryland obeyed the counsel of his mentor and continued his ministry, but his desire to marry did not abate.

So it was, in December 1776, that Ryland began to court Elizabeth Tyler.[13] She was born on 1 December 1758 to Robert and Elizabeth Tyler of Banbury.[14] Her parents probably died before she came of age, as Newton mentions her being under guardians while at school.[15] While at school, she became a member of College Lane Baptist Church, where Ryland was the co-pastor along with his father.[16] It was in this context that they likely would have first met, though their courting began after she had moved away to

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[11] John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 6 July 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 92.

[12] Newton, 'Letter to Ryland', 6 July 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 92. 'Nova-Zembla' is most likely Novaya Zemlya, a large and sparsely inhabited island north of Russia that divides the Barents and Kara seas. In the same letter, Newton tells Ryland, 'You were sent into the world for a nobler end than to be pinned to a girl's apron-string' (Newton, 'Letter to Ryland', 6 July 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 92). In a later letter, he tries to help Ryland see the positive side of a recent relationship disappointment: 'Indeed the one circumstance you mention makes me more ready to call it an escape than a disappointment' (John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 20 December 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 99). These are all indicative of Newton's letters to Ryland during this time.

[13] The timing of the beginning of the courtship is revealed by Ryland in a note on a hymn he composed on 31 December 1776. Ryland writes, 'This was made at Bradwin, when I first went over to see Miſs Betsy Tyler, whom I married 3 y$^{rs}$. afterward, & who was Mother to John Tyler Ryland' (John Ryland, 'A Selection of Hymns Composed by J Ryland Jnr. Between 1773 and 1778', Bristol Baptist College Archives, 83). A letter from Newton to Ryland on 7 February 1777 about a new prospective wife aligns with this date.

[14] Anon., England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives of the United Kingdom, 80. Her birth record is lost, but her birthdate can be extrapolated from data within the two books of poems. She died on 23 January 1787, and Ryland says that she was aged twenty-eight at the time of her death (John Ryland, 'Poems by John Ryland Junr', Vol. 2 (1783-1795), Bristol Baptist College Archives, 67). Elsewhere, Ryland writes two poems on Betsy's birthday, which he notes was 1 December. If she was twenty-eight at her death on 23 January 1787, and her birthday was 1 December, then her birth date must be 1 December 1758.

[15] John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 7 February 1777, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 103.

[16] Betsy joined the church at College Lane on 8 April 1774 (Anon., 'College Lane Baptist Church: Church Book, 1737-1781', Northamptonshire Record Office, 185). She was, at the time, a student at Mrs. Trinder's school for girls (Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University). For more information on Martha Trinder and her school, see Karen E. Smith, '"Female Education" among Baptists in the Eighteenth Century: Martha (Smith) Trinder (1736–1790) and Henrietta Neale (1752–1802)', *Baptist Quarterly* 48.4 (2017), 172-76.

Bradwin.[17] The courtship process took three years, and John Ryland Jr and Elizabeth Tyler were finally married on 12 January 1780.[18]

On 9 December 1786, Betsy gave birth to John Tyler Ryland. Ryland's joy at the birth of his first son compelled him to take up his pen and write a poem to his son:

> My dear little boy
> Shall I sit down & try
> To make you some verses to learn
> That I may please you
> And as it is due
> Teach you to please me in return.[19]

## A Pastor's Struggle at the Death of an Affectionate Wife

The boy was healthy, but Betsy's health was precarious. Ryland describes her last weeks to Edwards Jr. After a 'painful lingering labor', Betsy was 'seized with most violent convulsions'.[20] Those around her observed 'many tokens of a consumptive nature' in Betsy, and she seems to have slowly declined until she finally passed. Ryland describes her death: 'She died very sweetly! I never saw anybody die beside. I had hold of her hand all the while. God took away all her fears. Tho ſhe was of a very nervous, timid constitution.'[21]

Ryland's first poem after Betsy's death begins with an introduction, stating that it is meant as the 'prayr of a poor solitary Father for his poor little orphan Boy, design'd at the same time as a memorial of the dearest of all the human race, my precious affectionate Wife, who joined the spirits of the just made perfect Jan. 23. 1787'.[22] The language of the poem is that of loss and sorrow mixed with hope and reassurance. Ryland writes of his infant son:

> This poor little motherleſs boy
> That lies in my bosom asleep,
> From all that w$^{d}$. hurt or destroy
> I pray the Redeemer to keep.[23]

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[17] See footnote 13. Bradwin is now known as Bradden.
[18] Anon., Northamptonshire, England, Church of England Marriages, 1754-1912, Northamptonshire Record Office, 8; cf. Ryland, 'Text Book', 12 January 1780, Northamptonshire Record Office.
[19] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 49. His happiness may also be seen in the birth register entry for John Tyler. It is written in Ryland's handwriting, and it takes up noticeably more space than the others on the same page. He includes more information about the family and signs it with a flourish not seen in his other signatures on the page. In a sad coincidence, the facing page, the death registry, contains the entry for Betsy (Anon., England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives of the United Kingdom, 80).
[20] Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787.
[21] Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787.
[22] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 51.
[23] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 51.

Of Betsy, Ryland is both despondent and hopeful:

> The dearest of Women is gone
> Who bore him with sorrow & pain;
> I'm left to feel trouble alone;
> She never shall sorrow again.
>
> She's gone, but her infant remains;
> Sweet pledge of connection so sweet!
> Her God her poor husband sustains,
> Nor will he her infant forget.[24]

He writes about Betsy's prayers for her new son while she yet lived and how she 'gave up her babe to her God'.[25] He pictures her in her dying as resigned to the will of God: lying in the arms of her Lord, filled with peace and serenity, silently sinking into rest. Around her deathbed, her loved ones, Ryland in particular, hid their emotions and kept her from seeing their struggles:

> Our paſsions we ſtrove to withhold;
> But often by ſtealth drop'd a tear.[26]

In death she is largely idealised, portrayed as free from all the troubles that this world affords: she feels no anxiety and her soul 'is all rapture on high'.[27] It is interesting to note that the hope found in this early poem is hope for Betsy, not necessarily for Ryland himself. He speaks of 'her joy'[28] and 'her bliſs'.[29] For himself, Ryland seems to see darkness with only a little light ahead. He writes:

> O how cou'd I poſsibly part
> So long & so tenderly ty'd?
> Ten years to the choice of my ♥,
> Full sev'n to my loveliest bride![30]

Herein is seen the theological struggle in the poems. Ryland's theology was thoroughly Calvinistic in terms of how he understood the sovereignty of God. At his ordination, he produced a confession of his faith in which he states that he believes that God not only has 'Foreknowledge from Eternity of all Events', but that nothing can 'alter the most perfect and determinate plan laid down in his decrees who worketh all Things according to the Counsel of his own Will'.[31] There is nothing that is exempt from these

[24] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 51.
[25] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 52.
[26] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 53.
[27] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 52.
[28] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 53.
[29] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 54.
[30] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 54.
[31] Ryland, 'Confession of Faith', 7.

decrees, and, according to Ryland, 'nothing was left out of his original Purpose'.[32]

Ryland did not drop his understanding of sovereignty when Betsy passed away. He could speak of death being 'at her Savior's command', and that he could not withstand the pleasure of the Lord to call her.[33] However, he dared not say that he felt no pain at the blow. It was a lasting wound, and it was inflicted by the Lord whom he loved. This struggle between owning his pain and knowing it came from the Lord would continue for years, and it is seen most acutely in Ryland's lack of personal engagement with the doctrines he held and preached. That is, for some time after Betsy's death, in his poetry if not his preaching, when Ryland speaks of theological truth it is generally depersonalised. In this poem, Ryland's only 'engagement' with God is a prayer in the last stanza:

> Now Lord be my God & my Guide,
> My friend & companion alone!
> And for my dear Infant provide,
> And seal his young ♥ for thy own.[34]

A couple of weeks after that poem was penned, John Tyler fell ill. He was not given much hope of recovery, and Ryland once again took up his pen. Again, his theological struggle comes to the fore, as he begins the poem with a question for God:

> Dear dying pledge of my own Betsy's Love,
> Part of myself, as part of her more dear;
> Will Heav'ns great Lord all earthly Joy remove?
> And muſt his Wisdom leave me nothing here?
>
> He takes away & who can then withhold?
> Who ſhall presume to aſk him 'What doſt thou?'
> Almighty pow'r can never be control'd;
> To perfect rectitude all ought to bow.[35]

He believes that God can heal his son if He will, writing that 'one kind volition wou'd O Lord suffice'.[36] However, he will not deny the sting of hearing his son's cries, hide his parental anguish, or pretend that he is at ease with the prospect of losing his son so soon after the death of his wife. He openly prays for his son's recovery, but he also soothes his own worries with the hope his son would have of heaven. Ryland's understanding of the

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[32] Ryland, 'Confession of Faith', 7. This was his settled theological position. Many years later, he would write something similar, saying that God, '"who worketh all things after the counſel of his own will",cannot be defeated in the execution of his gracious purpoſes, or diſappointed of his deſired end' (Ryland, 'Certain Increase of the Kingdom and Glory of Jesus', 22).
[33] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 54.
[34] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 54.
[35] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 55.
[36] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 55.

afterlife of infants dying in infancy is somewhat difficult to discern,[37] but he holds out hope that his infant son, were he to die, would be with God in heaven. He even offers a prayer that somehow Betsy might instruct John Tyler before his death:

> Perhaps that dear maternal spirit may
> Receive commission to instruct her son;
> Unknown ideas to his mind convey
> By modes to mortals here entomb'd unknown.[38]

## A Hopeful Heavenward Gaze

The prospect of his son's death gave Ryland cause to look to his own death, when, he says, he will be reunited with Betsy:

> Which ever first ſhall his dear Mother meet
> Or he, or I, Oh bring us there at last
> Where each our crowns before the Saviors feet
> In holy extacy ſhall gladly cast.
>
> Mother & Father & their only Son
> In the sweet heavnly contest shall agree
> Disputing then this single point alone

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[37] The correspondence with Newton includes discussion regarding the subject, with Newton taking the position that infants dying in infancy are received into heaven by the blood of Christ (John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 14 May 1799, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 353). At times, Ryland would seem to disagree with Newton, or at least not possess Newton's surety, as he writes in one poem, dated December 1795:

> If ere he taste of earthly Woe
> Or actually can sin,
> Thou ſhou'dst eternal Life bestow,
> And bid his heavn begin (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 122).

An earlier poem, written in March 1787, when he thought that John Tyler might die, is more positive about the destiny of infants:

> Speak but the word & my dear babe ſhall live;
> Pain & disease ſhall both thy will obey;
> Or to thyself his spirit Lord receive,
> To dwell with thee in everlasting day (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 55).

Later, Ryland seems to fully adopt Newton's position, as, in August 1813, he writes to John Tyler to console him on the loss of his daughter, Sophia Elizabeth Ryland, who lived but one day:

> Better for your Babe to go,
> Where all his Glory see,
> Than, in realms of sin & woe,
> A pilgrim long to be.
>
> One short day her journey ends,
> One day she has to moan,
> Then her blood-bought soul ascends,
> To stand before the throne (John Ryland, 'Poems by John Ryland Junr', Vol. 1 (1778-1821), Bristol Baptist College Archives, 10-11).

[38] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 56. This is definitely an unusual request by Ryland, as it would require God giving Betsy renewed access to earthly life to communicate with the infant John Tyler Ryland. This is perhaps some evidence of the depth of Ryland's pain at this point.

Which was the deepest Lord in debt to Thee.[39]

In Ryland's earlier poetry, he focuses on the service he can offer Christ in this life. For example, in a hymn he wrote to Betsy during their courtship, Ryland writes:

Lord & is this blessing ours?
Thee we'd praise with all our powrs.
We are thine, thou are our choice,
All our souls in thee rejoice.[40]

His spirituality in the earlier hymn is a present, earthly spirituality. The spirituality of the poem is much more future- and heaven- oriented. Ryland's gaze is turned away from this world and its vale of sorrows and tears and to heaven.

The next poem Ryland records in this volume is a musing on Psalm 88.18, which reads, 'You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.' In light of this psalm, Ryland owns that it is the Lord who has taken Betsy from him:

Lover & friend, O Lord, has thou
Put far away from me;
My best acquaintance here below
I never more shall see.[41]

Ryland speaks of God's ability to meet every need of His people: 'ev'ry loſs thou canst supply'.[42] Ryland believes this to be true, at least, theoretically. His own experience, however, is that his losses have not been supplied. They are, rather, laid heavy upon him:

Bereav'd & desolate I am,
And heavily opprest.[43]

He goes on to say that he still trusts in 'thy Name', and he looks to the Lord for refuge and rest, but it is worthwhile to note that these are hopeful attainments for Ryland rather than present possessions. His theology tells him that God can assuage every grief and meet every need, but his experience is telling him that that has not happened for him. All he is left with is this poetic prayer, asking God to conduct him to the 'fountain head', in which 'all are fill'd above'. He identifies this fountain head as the place where those around us 'never for a moment dread the ebbing of thy Love'.[44] This would

[39] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 58.
[40] John Ryland, 'A Selection of Hymns Composed by J Ryland Jnr. Between 1773 and 1778', Bristol Baptist College Archives, 87.
[41] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.
[42] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.
[43] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.
[44] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.

indicate that Ryland was not at that time free of such dread. The loss of Betsy, understood in light of God's sovereign rule over all events, was not necessarily a loss of faith for Ryland; it was, however, a crisis of confidence in his own experience of God's love.

The next poem is to John Tyler on 27 November 1787, twelve days before his birthday. Apparently, Betsy began her labour on this day twelve months previously.[45] The poem itself is chiefly a remembrance of Betsy for John. He describes her face as a place 'where lilies mix'd with roses grew', and he points out that Betsy had a strawberry birthmark beneath her eye.[46] Again, Betsy is idealised as a perfect specimen of a saint. Her mind was so beautiful that he lacks the poetic ability to describe it. Every grace was combined in her, 'the lovely Saint'.[47] Ryland's purpose in the poems seems to be to assure John Tyler of his mother's character and love. While she and John Tyler were both alive, 'her spirit staid and hover'd o'er her Son', praying for both him and his father.[48] He points John Tyler to the hope of resurrection, in which 'Mamma shall rise again…when death itself is slain', for it is in that place that they will all be together again.[49]

Ryland next addresses Betsy's death in a poem on what would have been her twenty-ninth birthday. Ryland favours the juxtaposition between himself and Betsy, which is seen in other poems but is especially clear in this one. He speaks of his loneliness and portrays himself as a 'weary pilgrim' creeping through a thorny maze, while Betsy enjoys heavenly bliss:

> She needs not creatures to augment her bliſs,
> From God himself her living comforts flow:
> And evil cannot enter where she is,
> Nor terror nor temptation reach her now.[50]

He looks again to the return of Christ and the resurrection of the just. However, his hope in this case is focused on Betsy's rise:

> Her ſlumbering clay that joyful trump shall hear,
> And in immortal youth & beauty rise;
> The likeneſs of her blessed Savior wear,
> And dwell forever with him in the ſkies.[51]

Heaven is portrayed in this poem less as the place of God's dwelling and more as the house of departed loved ones. Ryland speaks more of friends and

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[45] Ryland makes reference to this:

> How soon are XII months fled,
> Since your dear Mother's pangs came on? (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 60)

[46] Whether it was shaped or coloured like a strawberry is unknown.
[47] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 60.
[48] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 60.
[49] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 61.
[50] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 62.
[51] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 63.

people whom he admired being in heaven with Betsy than he does anything else. These include friends such as David Evans of Thorn, Hannah Payen Law, and Mary Vaughan, as well as theologians and ministers whom Ryland admired, such as James Hervey, Joseph Bellamy, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, John Owen, Stephen Charnock, Joseph Alleine, and John Maclaurin.[52] Ryland's attention in this poem is focused almost exclusively on the people with whom he expects to have communion in heaven, whether he knew them personally or through their writings. Evans is 'clad in light divine', Law and Vaughan shine with Betsy, Bellamy (who 'plac'd 'true Religion' in a clearer Light') is also portrayed as shining bright, and Alleine glows with 'celestial Fire'.[53]

Ryland's expectation for himself is largely limited to meeting Betsy and being introduced by her to people whom he has admired.[54] Indeed, it is the 'sweet hope' of being with them that sustains what he calls his 'burden'd mind'.[55] As he closes the poem, Ryland's mind wanders back to his beloved Betsy:

> My soul's best half is now already there,
> And there, her God, my All, for ever reigns.[56]

Anticipating heaven as a place of reunion with departed loved ones is, in many ways, an extension of Ryland's understanding of the church catholic. Ryland's catholicity was well-known in his day,[57] and it extended beyond the bounds of earthly life. Ryland believed in the church militant and the church triumphant, and the death of a saint meant the dismissal from the former into the latter.[58] He writes of the state of believers after death,

> The S$^{ts}$. are X$^{ts}$. Friends as well as ours, & we muſt allow him to have his blessed Will (Joh. xvii. 24.) to have his friends about him, as well as we have had them so long; and it may be, before X$^{t}$. has had them so long with him, as some of us have had them here below, we ſhall be with them again, and Christ, and they, and we

[52] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 64-66.
[53] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 64-65.
[54] He does mention anticipating having his 'last Abode' with Christ, but this is limited to one line amidst the many stanzas related to seeing the others (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 66).
[55] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 66.
[56] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 62-66.
[57] In the funeral sermon for Ryland, Robert Hall Jr comments on his departed friend's broad friendships, saying, 'Though a Calvinist, in the strictest sense of the word, and attached to its peculiarities in a higher degree than most of the advocates of that system, he extended his affection to all who bore the image of Christ, and was ingenious in discovering reasons for thinking well of many who widely dissented from his religious views. No man was more remarkable for combining a zealous attachment to his own principles with the utmost liberality of mind towards those who differed from him; an abhorrence of error, with the kindest feelings towards the erroneous. He detested the spirit of monopoly in religion, and opposed every tendency to circumscribe it by the limits of party' (Hall, 'A Sermon', 398).
[58] Preaching the funeral for a Mrs. A. Tozer in 1820, he begins, 'You are generally aware that God has lately removed from the Ch. militant to the Ch. triumph$^{t}$. a very excell$^{t}$. Person, who has had Communion w$^{th}$. this X$^{n}$ Society ab$^{t}$. 25 yrs' (Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: 2 Samuel 23:5', Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. I, Bristol Baptist College Archives).

> ſhall be all together! O what a happy Meeting! They & we freed of all natural & sinful Infirmities. There θe Communion of S$^{ts}$. is in perfection, & this bleſsed Society ſhall never break up or separate. No parting Salutation there. The word Farewell is no part of the heavenly Language."[59]

The idea of reunion with Betsy, coupled with his understanding of heaven as a reunion of believing friends, returns in the next poem in which he references Betsy and which was written on their wedding anniversary.[60] Ryland begins in a solemn tone:

> Once happy day! but ah how gloomy now,
> When recollection fills my breaſt w$^{th}$. Woe![61]

The poem fits well with the previous poems directed to or about Betsy. He speaks repeatedly of her present joy and her advantage in death.[62] He also recognises the role that God played in her death:

> Scarse was it past, when soon a voice divine
> Said "come up hither" & my Love obey'd:[63]

What makes this particular poem unique is Ryland's emphasis on his present relationship to Betsy and its future prospect.[64] While the hope of their reunion is found elsewhere, in poems both before and after this, the way in which Ryland expresses himself is unusual. He speaks of the 'string w$^{th}$. w$^{ch}$. our ♥s were closely ty'd' being presently broken by her death,[65] but he goes on to write of another that 'Death cou'd not divide', which is now 'stretch'd

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[59] Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: 2 Samuel 23:5', Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. I, Bristol Baptist College Archives.

[60] Between this poem and the last Ryland inserts a draft of the epitaph he had written for Betsy, whom he calls 'the dearest of all Women' (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 67). It begins: 'ELIZABETH RYLAND, the eldeſt Daughter of Rob. & Eliz. Tyler, & for seven years the affectionate & beloved Wife of John Ryland jun$^{r}$. enter into the Joy of her Lord Jan. 23. 1787. Aged 28. Years' (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 67). Ryland includes several drafts and additions to the epitaph, with the following the seemingly final version:

> The Tomb a while detains her Clay
> But Vict'ry crown'd her dying Day
> Death's pointless Dart her Savior broke
> She smil'd to feel its harmless stroke
> Which had no power to destroy
> Her blood-bought soul, her heavn-born joy (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 67).

[61] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 69.

[62] She is 'breath divine' and 'immortal – no, she cou'd not die' (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70).

[63] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 69.

[64] This poem is also noteworthy for containing one of the few references to words that Betsy herself spoke. It is not known when she spoke these words, but it seems from the context that it was during her last illness:

> We 'are the Babies' – true, my Betsy, true –
> Those words mysterious now I understand;
> We shall not reach full age till we, with you,
> Are safe translated to Immanuel's Land (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 72).

On the facing page, Ryland inserts a poetic note meant to elaborate on the second line:

> Was it thy spirit from the realms of joy
> That to explain thy dying language came?
> Or did thy God more common means employ
> To form so pleasant & so true a dream?

[65] He says that is it 'broke, & bleeds – I feel it throb with pain' (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70).

to heav'n', and which 'must & will remain'.[66] This unbroken string that binds them together is 'sacred Love far stronger than before' that 'bind her to Jesus, & to all his friends'. At first glance, it would seem as though Ryland is merely resting here on the connection that all saints have in Christ,[67] but he goes on to speak of the peculiar reunion and joy that he and Betsy would share. He understands their bond to be unique and unbroken by death. She is his 'Soul's best friend', with whom no other earthly friendship could compare, of whom he could say that not even his own body was even half as dear.[68] He writes:

> But we if met in heav'n, must sure enjoy
> A special pleasure in other's bliss;
> That World will sinful Selfishness destroy,
> But not obliterate th' Events of this.[69]

While in that place 'from sensual paſsions are the saints refin'd', and while he would have stipulated in his wedding vows that his bond to Betsy was to be broken at death,[70] Ryland believes, nevertheless, that his bond with Betsy continued after her death and would be resumed, though in a different form, at his. His thinking seems to run thus: if death does not break the bonds of friendship, then surely it does not destroy the much deeper bond that he and Betsy shared.

## The Darkness Begins to Lift

The first poem that Ryland wrote after Betsy's death that did not have to do with either Betsy or John was not written until over a year after her death. On 26 February 1788, Ryland composed a poem that begins a series of aspirational poems written during the next few months that show him coming to grips with his grief. While it is not the purpose of this article to provide a psychological diagnosis of Ryland, it is not too much to say that these poems show Ryland to be in the midst of a spiritual desert from which he is seeking

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[66] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70.

[67] To be fair, he does reference this common element of Christian union in Christ. He speaks in the poem of Noah hearing about Betsy's life with admiration and the new converts of Greenland rejoicing to converse with the Britons who are there (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70). That is not Ryland's focus in the poem, however.

[68] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 71.

[69] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70.

[70] When writing to his oldest son, John Tyler, before his own wedding day, Ryland emphasizes that aspect of the vows, writing in a poetic prayer:

> Protect his journey, Lord, to night,
> And let tomorrow's welcome light
> Pleasure before unknown impart;
> Fill both their ♥s with ſober bliss,
> Remembering, while they meet & kiss,
> That ſolemn Clause, "Till death ſhall part" (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 1, 120).

rescue.[71] The 26 February poem is relatively short and simple, a prayer for conformity to the likeness of Christ.[72] The next poem was written several days later and is based on John 15.5, on which he preached the next day at College Lane in the morning.[73] In it, Ryland focuses on his sinfulness and need of Christ to override his passions and wickedness. He writes:

> My ♥ is bad, deprav'd my Will,
> My paſsions oft my reason blind;
> I am perversly prone to Ill,
> To Good I'm strangely disinclin'd.
>
> I am all Badness, but thy Grace
> My only Remedy I own;
> Lord from my mind the darkness chase
> And from my will remove the stone.[74]

Ryland's next entry in the poem book is dated 2 March 1788. Like the previous poems in this series, it is based on a text of Scripture from which he was to preach. In this case, it is Philippians 4.13, on which he preached that same day in the afternoon at College Lane. It is a curious poem. He dwells on Paul's claim that he can do all things through Christ. Much of the poem is depersonalised. Paul could claim that he could do all things through Christ, and even 'The Christian Soldier'[75] could claim this. Of himself, however, Ryland only says:

> If I my weakness better knew
> And liv'd on Christ alone
> I in his strength cou'd all things do
> Paul cou'd not in his own.[76]

Ryland seems to see himself as a poor follower of Christ, subsisting on his own strength and not that of Christ. While some of his expression here may

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[71] Indeed, in the previous months he had described himself as in a 'dreary, desart Land' and praying for God to 'refresh & cheer' his soul (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59). The poems from this period demonstrate that he had not yet received a positive answer to that prayer.

[72] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 73:

> Sure it is my chief desire
> In thy likeneſs Lord to grow;
> I wou'd constantly aspire
> More of Jesus Christ to know;
> So to know thee, as to be
> Thoro'ly conform'd to thee.

[73] See Ryland, 'Text Book', 2 March 1788, Northamptonshire Record Office.

[74] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 74. There is another dated 1 March 1788. It is based on 1 John 2.6, on which he preached the next day in the evening. It is less focused on sinfulness, but it is still aspirational. He is still striving for something he does not seem to possess. Ryland was clearly struggling spiritually at this time, with his state of mind described by Newton as a 'thraldom' (John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 30 April 1788, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 205).

[75] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 76.

[76] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 76.

be accounted for by his theological commitments,[77] when placed in the context of the other poems written around the same time it shows that Ryland, while still holding on to Christ in faith, could not claim to be walking in any sort of joy or peace of soul. His faith was a hopeful faith, in the sense that he hoped one day to experience in his own life what he held to in faith.

The good news for the sympathetic reader of Ryland's poetry is that the next poem shows that the light was beginning once again to dawn for him. The poem is dated 5 April 1788, and it is based on 2 Chronicles 20.11-12, on which he preached on 27 April in the morning. It is the first where he speaks positively of himself and his spirituality. He says:

> Legions of Sins & Care & Fears
> My feeble Soul invade
> But when my blessed Lord appears
> His presence brings me aid.[78]

It is a small stanza, but it speaks volumes in light of the struggles that have been evident in the poems since Betsy's death. He is still 'feeble', but the Lord has begun to bring Him aid by His presence, something he seems not to have enjoyed much in his recent past. The next poem continues this theme of recovery. It is dated 3 June 1788, and it is based on Galatians 3.4 and was later published in the *Evangelical Magazine*.[79] He seems to be gaining perspective on his grief. He speaks of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus and the purpose of suffering:

> Of trials I meet by the way
> I wou'd not presume to complain
> But grant blessed Savior I may
> Not suffer so often in vain.[80]

The poem demonstrates an understanding of his suffering that is missing in prior poems. He is still not where he would like to be,[81] but the darkness seems to be lifting from his life. Indeed, the next poem reintroduces levity into Ryland's poetry. It is written to John Tyler and is, by Ryland's own admission, a bit silly:

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[77] Ryland believed that human beings are wholly sinful. In the last piece he wrote for publication before he died, he writes of our 'sinful and miserable condition', the presence of war as proof of 'human depravity', and God's abiding treatment of the human race as guilty (Ryland, 'On the Alleged Impiety of Calvinism', 278).

[78] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 77.

[79] This poem was published under the pen name "R." as 'On Galatians, iii. 4', *Evangelical Magazine* (1795), 554. This poem is also unique in this time period in that it was not based on a passage on which he was soon to preach. He preached from Galatians 3.4 on 31 August 1788, which was almost two months later.

[80] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 78.

[81] He writes:

> I long to be wholly thy own
> Let Sin & let Self be subdued
> Then Lord it shall clearly be shown
> My Trials are working for good (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 78).

If the verse is but lame
It may still wear the name
As I only address it to you
Papa sure may chat
About this or that
And good sense or nonsense will do

I soon shall have done
As it's only for fun
That I write in this jingling way
But if you cou'd talk
As well as you walk
I'd tell my dear boy what to say.[82]

Ryland then experiences what many who have mourned and then learned to laugh again after mourning experience: guilt. On 1 December 1788, 'the second return of my ever dear Betsy's Birth day after her Glorification',[83] he writes:

Have I forgot her? – Judge me O her God!
I court the search of thine impartial Eye;
Thine eye which pierces hell's profound abode,
And all the earth surveys, & all the sky.[84]

For the rest of the poem, Ryland returns to a previous theme: God's sovereignty in Betsy's death. In this particular one, however, he leans most heavily on God's activity in taking Betsy but is also able to see how God had sustained him through 'two years of worse than solitary Grief'.[85]

Were I not conscious Thy unerring will
Had from my bosom torn that saint away,
Rivers of tears by night my bed wou'd fill,
And groans incessant wear out every day.

Thou Lord has done it – therefore I forbear,
Yes, therefore only, I my grief repress;
Else ſhou'd I be abandon'd to despair,
For sure my loss thou only canst redress.[86]

While he still could describe Betsy as an 'earthly boon' he prized like no other,[87] this poem also features the first mention of his second wife, Frances Barrett. This first reference to the woman who would be his wife for thirty

[82] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 79.
[83] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.
[84] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.
[85] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 82.
[86] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.
[87] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.

six years is somewhat less impassioned than his references to Betsy.[88] He writes of Frances:

> Yes, she has left a female friend behind
> Who lov'd her much, was much by her belov'd,[89]
> Of gentle Manners, & a kindred Mind,
> A tender ♥, & piety approv'd.
>
> Grant me that friend to soothe Life's later Woes
> And teach our infant Babe a Savior's Love
> Till with my Betsy's Clay shall mine repose
> And I shall join her in the Realms above.[90]

The poems of deep-rooted grief end with this one. Ryland and Frances Barrett were married on 18 June 1789, and it would seem that his prayer for comfort from Frances was answered positively. Ryland composed several poems with no references to Betsy, and the poems he did write were more joyful than those before. For example, on 31 July 1790, Ryland wrote a poem based on Psalm 45, on which he had preached several times around that time.[91] He writes:

> Let us sing the King Meſsiah,
> King of Righteousneſs & Peace;
> Hail him all his happy Subjects,
> Never let his praises cease:
> Ever hail him,
> Never let his praises cease.
>
> How transcendent are thy Glories!
> Fairer than the Sons of Men!
> While thy blessed Mediation
> Brings us back to God again

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[88] Newton gives Ryland some intriguing advice around this time, saying, 'As matters seem to have gone too far for receding with honour and propriety, and as you mean to marry in the Lord, I think you may trust him to give you such feelings as may suffice to make your relation comfortable' (John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 20 January 1789, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 214). It would seem as though Ryland was having second thoughts about his marriage to Frances.

[89] Betsy and Frances were indeed friends before Betsy's death. Ryland makes reference to this in several poems. In one written from the perspective of John Tyler, he writes:

> My own dear Mother's friend
> Who lov'd her here below
> And gladly will attend
> To nurse & teach me now (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 90).

In her diary, Frances records her own thoughts on Betsy: 'The thought of presiding in the place of one I so dearly loved, and whose temper and conduct was so truly amiable, fills my heart with a thousand anxieties. No, I shall never forget the sweetness of her love and esteem! My hope is in God, otherwise the charge and care of her dear Infant, would occasion still greater concern. May the recollection of her kindneſs, affection, and sympathy, not only soften every care, but animate me to the discharge of duties however difficult with all fidelity' (Frances Barrett Ryland, Spiritual Journal of MRS Ryland (1789-1806), Bristol Baptist College Archives, 14 June 1789).

[90] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81-83.

[91] Ryland, 'Text Book', 22 July and 1 August 1790, Northamptonshire Record Office.

Blest Redeemer
How we triumph in thy reign![92]

Theological poems such as this begin to be found once again in Ryland's book, mixed with more personal poems to his wife, children, and grandchildren.[93] The references to Betsy slowly fade away. Ryland moves on, but he never forgot Betsy, the wife and love of his youth, for even decades after his death, in poems written to his second wife, Betsy makes the occasional appearance. Writing to Frances, his 'dear Wife',[94] in April 1808, Ryland mentions Betsy:

Her once you lov'd as well as I,
And now she waits, above the sky,
Our entrance there to greet;
In a few years before the throne,
In realms where ſorrow is unknown
We ſhall her spirit meet.[95]

## Conclusion

It is not uncommon to find Calvinistic writers such as Ryland referring to the necessity of 'kissing the rod' which struck them.[96] By this they mean that they ought to understand the hand of God in their afflictions and accept it as for their good. Ryland uses a form of it in the funeral sermon for his friend William Guy, telling the congregation, 'Be humbled then under the rod of your heavenly Father, and enquire, Was there not a cauſe for this ſtroke?'[97] He would later exhort another congregation at a funeral service with these words:

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[92] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 92. This poem was published under the pen name "R." as 'Success to the Arms of Messiah', *Evangelical Magazine* 1 (1793), 44. It has since been put to use as a hymn, appearing in numerous hymnals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as *Missionary Hymns, Composed and Selected for the Public Services at the Annual Meetings of the Missionary Society, in London* (London: W. Arding, 1814), number 23; *The Hymnary: For Use in Baptist Churches* (Whitby, Ontario: Ryerson Press, 1936), number 10; *Hymns of Hope: Founded on the Psalms and the New Covenant* (London: Elliot Stock, 1879, number 328; *Baptist Praise and Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), number 631.
[93] Ryland had three daughters, Elizabeth Barrett Ryland, Frances Barrett Ryland, and Mary Ryland. He also had another son, Jonathan Edwards Ryland. Curiously, no poems survive that were written to Jonathan Edwards Ryland.
[94] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 1, 36.
[95] Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 1, 36-37.
[96] See Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old Testament* (4 vols; Edinburgh: C. Wright, 1758), p. 510; John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel: Or, Advice to Sufferers* (London: Benjamin Alsop, 1684), p. 62; John Newton, *The Christian Correspondent; or a Series of Religious Letters* (Hull: George Prince, 1790), p. 158; and James Hervey, *Letters from the Late Reverend James Hervey, A.M., Rector of Weston Flavel to the Right Honourable Lady Frances Shirley* (London: John Rivington, 1782), p. 273. The phrase was not limited to Calvinist or even religious literature. Shakespeare used it in Richard II, 5.1.32.
[97] John Ryland, *Seasonable Hints to a Bereaved Church; and the Blessedness of the Dead, Who Die in the Lord* (Northampton: T. Dicey, 1783), p. 21.

> To consider the Hand of God in our Afflictions is the Way to calm our Minds, which are too ready to fret at Inſtruments & 2[d] Causes, & overlook the first. By this we often miſs the Benefit of Afflict[s]. even when we do not directly fret ag[t]. God himself.[98]

What Ryland's poems show is that giving these kinds of exhortations is somewhat easier than obeying them. The calming of the mind and realising the benefits of affliction, of which Ryland wrote, do not happen overnight and may, in fact, come only after a long struggle. The poems show that the men whose well-edited books and sermons historians study sometimes walked with a spiritual and psychological limp.

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[98] John Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: Job 1:21', Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. 1, Bristol Baptist College Archives.

# Baptists and Race in the American South[1]

Kenneth B. E. Roxburgh

The essay explores the attitude of Baptists in the American South towards race, indicating that the issue is long lasting. It includes a survey of racism in the early nineteenth century, culminating in the civil war, but extending to the Jim Crow era and the more recent expressions of white supremacy. Special attention is paid to the formation and development of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the 'repentance' of the Convention at the 1995 Southern Baptist Convention with respect to its origins in 1845 over the issue of slavery. The article also examines the way in which integration at Samford University, a Baptist school in Alabama, illustrates the struggle for equality between the races.

## Keywords

Race; slavery; Jim Crow era; white supremacy; racial reconciliation

## Introduction

Baptist life in the American South has a long and troubled history, marked by remarkable growth and yet facing various issues of discerning the will of God, especially in regard to race.

Up until the Revolutionary War in 1776, significant westward expansion had been halted at the Appalachian Mountains. Following the Revolution there was a sense of national identity, optimism, and hope. The economy was strong and the population was growing. The Louisiana purchase of 1803 would double the size of the country, as over 900,000 square miles were purchased for fifteen million dollars. The territory was carved into thirteen states, or parts of states, and put the United States in a position to become a world power. New railroads enabled the nation to expand westward. From 1795 to 1810 a broad rekindling of Christianity took place throughout the emerging country.

During this period of time, Alabama became a significant centre of Baptist life. By the middle of the nineteenth century Marion, Alabama was the headquarters of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, along with Howard College, preparing men for ministry and Judson College, educating women.

The first Baptist congregation in Alabama was constituted in October 1808, the first of many small congregations which emerged in the frontier.

[1] This material was first presented as the biennial Hughey Lecture at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam in January 2018.

Wayne Flynt speaks of the 'blossoming of evangelical religion on the Alabama frontier', which he describes as being as prolific as corn and cotton.[2] By 1812 there were nearly 200,000 Baptists in America, half of them in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky. By 1850 the number was about 1.6 million. While the population of America increased from 7.2 million in 1810 to 23.2 million in 1850, the number of church members increased even faster. By the middle of the century an estimated one-third of the population affiliated to some form of organised religion, twice the percentage of 1776.

The Baptist congregations which emerged in Alabama defined themselves, both individually and also within Baptist Associations,[3] in various statements of principles or abstracts of faith, to clarify their understanding of their faith. By 1823, the one hundred and twenty congregations which had been established belonged to seven geographic associations. By 1839 there were 'thirty associations with 500 churches, 300 ministers, and 25,000 members'. The majority of these congregations were Calvinistic in their theology. The Flint River Association, formed in 1814, declared their faith in 'the doctrine of election; and that God chose his people in Christ before the foundation of the world'.[4] In 1818, the Salem-Troy Association amplified its statement on election to include 'detrimental (i.e. reprobation) and particular election'.[5] A minority view was expressed by the United Baptist Churches of Jesus Christ in 1843, when they expressed their belief in 'the doctrine of free salvation and a general atonement'.[6] These early Baptists took their theology seriously.

Despite the fact that most of the ministers were bi-vocational farmers and preachers, they maintained a high view of ordained ministry, arguing that 'no ministers have a right to the administration of the ordinances, only such as are regularly baptized, called and come under the imposition of hands by the presbytery'.[7] Ordination was 'by the imposition of hands by a presbytery of ministers gathered to evaluate the applicant's character, mental

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[2] Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (University of Alabama Press, 1998), p. 4. The state of Alabama was constituted in 1819.
[3] Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, pp. 7, 11.
[4] Larry Hale, *Flint River Baptist Association Minutes and Historical Articles 1814-2004* (No Publisher, 2005), p. 8. The Cahawba Association, formed in 1818, adopted an identical *Abstract of Principles*. [5] Harold D. Wicks, *Salem-Troy Baptist Association: Past and Present* (Troy, 1990), p. 22. See also Glenda Brack, *County Line Baptist Church* (No Publisher, 2005), p. 1.
[5] Harold D. Wicks, *Salem-Troy Baptist Association: Past and Present* (Troy, 1990), p. 22. See also Glenda Brack, *County Line Baptist Church* (No Publisher, 2005), p. 1.
[6] They adopted the name of North River United Baptist Association. In their fifth article they stated: 'We believe that Jesus Christ, the son of God, did make atonement for all men in general, but the benefits of the atonement specially are only received by the true believer.'
[7] Hale, *Flint River*, p. 8.

qualifications, and doctrinal soundness'.[8] So, in 1849, *The Alabama Baptist,* the State Baptist Newspaper, asked 'whether in our whole connection, a church can be named, in which a member would not be promptly *excluded*, who would venture to administer *baptism* or the *Lord's Supper*, in the absence of regular ordination as a Minister'.[9] This led to communion services being celebrated on a quarterly or semi-annual basis, as many congregations only met on a monthly basis for public worship, their pastors being shared with surrounding congregations.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Baptists united around missions. In May 1814, thirty-three delegates met at the First Baptist Church in Philadelphia to form the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions. This is often referred to as the Triennial Convention, because it would meet every three years. Although the majority of delegates came from the North, they chose a President, Richard Furnam, from Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1817, at its second meeting, the Convention extended its work to Home Missions. In 1824 the Baptist General Tract Society was formed and in 1832 the Triennial Convention split their responsibilities into two, with the American Baptist Home Mission Society being formed to promote the preaching of the gospel in North America. By 1844 Baptists had seventy-nine overseas missionaries and thirty-two in America.

As the century progressed, one issue began to undermine the unity which Baptists had known on mission – chattel slavery. There had been anti-slavery societies in Kentucky by 1808, in Tennessee by 1815, and in North Carolina by 1816. Indeed, by 1826, there were forty-five societies in the South. However, from the 1820s to the 1840s, anti-slavery sentiment among Baptists and other evangelicals in the South disappeared and an elaborate economic, political, and biblical defence of slavery emerged. While Baptists in the North agitated for abolition, believing that slavery was an awful sin before God, Baptists in the South followed the arguments of Richard Furman concerning the biblical basis of slavery.

Richard Furman published his *Treatise on Slavery* in 1822, arguing for the 'lawfulness of holding slaves – the subject being considered in a moral and religious point of view'.[10] Furman argued that in the Old Testament 'the Israelites were directed to purchase their bond-men and bond-maids of the Heathen nations' and in the New Testament, when those who had slaves were converted, the relationship between 'masters and slaves

[8] Hosea Holcombe, *History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Alabama* (Philadelphia, 1840), pp. 311-322.
[9] See 'Communications', *The Alabama Baptist*, 16 May 1849, p. 3 (italics original).
[10] Richard Furman, *Treatise on Slavery* (1822), pp. 82-86.

were not dissolved'. For Furman, the 'Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions'. While arguing against cruelty, 'servitude may be consistent with such degrees of happiness as men usually attain in this imperfect state of things'. Indeed, he maintained that the 'manner of obtaining slaves from Africa is just…..[it had been] the means of saving life…..even piety has been originally brought into operation in the purchase of slaves' and transporting them from Africa 'has been the means of their mental and religious improvement, and so of obtaining salvation'. Slaves, in the providential purposes of God would then be able to take the message back to their home continent. Rather than seeking their release, 'slavery, when tempered with humanity and justice, is a state of tolerable happiness' and 'a master has a scriptural right to govern his slaves so as to keep them in subjection, to demand and receive from them a reasonable service and to correct them for neglect of duty'.[11] Paul Harvey speaks of how 'Sermons in defense of slavery became a religious ritual in the antebellum South.'[12]

Both Baptist agencies, the Home Mission Society and the Triennial Convention, attempted to be neutral on the issue. Two events in 1844 thwarted this and led to schism between the North and the South. First of all, Georgia Baptists nominated a slave-holder for appointment by the Home Mission Society to test the waters. The Board simply restated its neutrality and refused to act on the appointment. Then the Baptist State Convention of Alabama wrote to enquire from the Board of the Triennial Convention as to whether churches or the Board should appoint missionaries and whether, hypothetically, a slave-holder could be appointed to mission work. The Baptist Board, based in Boston, responded by saying that it was the body responsible for appointments and added, 'one thing is certain; we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery'.[13]

Some Southern Baptist newspapers advocated immediate withdrawal from the Triennial Convention, while others wanted to wait. In 1845 Virginia Baptists called a meeting in Augusta, Georgia and they voted to form the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). William Johnston of South Carolina had arrived with a constitution already written. Both home and foreign mission boards, along with other agencies, would come under the auspices of one organisation, the convention model. With the formation of the SBC, Baptists in the South became Southern Baptists.

One of the most profound influences with the SBC in its early days was their first president – William Bullein Johnson. Johnson's experience of

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Paul Harvey, *Christianity and Race in the American South, A History* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 77.
[13] See <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/johnsons-address.pdf> p. 3 [accessed 12 January 2019]

Baptist life at association, state, and national level led those Southern leaders who met at Augusta in 1845 to follow his lead in preparing a constitution for the newly fledged body.[14] Johnson's leadership at the Convention was recognised, not only when he was appointed President of the Convention, but as he preached the first sermon on 7 May and led the morning devotions the following morning.[15] Johnson was also given the responsibility of issuing an *Address* to the churches on behalf of the Convention.

In the *Address to the Public*, issued at the first meeting of the SBC in 1845, Southern Baptists said, 'We have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible.' Johnson was thoroughly anti-confessional and anti-creedal. He was ardently Christ-centred, in his hermeneutical approach to scripture and experience. Unity in Baptist life, he contended, came not from confessions of faith or imposed doctrinal statements, but from allegiance to Christ. Johnson's aversion to all creeds and confessions of faith did not adequately reflect variations within the Baptist constituency, although Lumpkin reminds us that 'no confession has ever permanently bound individuals, churches, associations, conventions or unions among Baptists'.[16] For Johnson 'it was a new feature In Baptist Theology to talk of Confessions of Faith as tests of orthodoxy'. [17]

Johnson expressed a concern that the adoption of confessions of faith tended to undermine the authority of Christ as Lord of the conscience, and that because 'the churches are independent bodies, subject only to Christ, their Head – that His word is the only standard of faith and practice'.[18] He also maintained that confessions of faith were unnecessary encumbrances because the church already possessed the scriptures, a 'perfect and full standard' of God's will. Why then, turn to the human interpretation which was 'imperfect and limited'?[19]

Writing in the *Southern Baptist* in January 1856, Johnson stated that 'it is difficult to see how among us Baptists, who hold to the sufficiency of the Scriptures, and their paramount authority, it should be considered necessary' to adopt a 'written declaration of the principles of the doctrine of Christ which she believes' as the '*standard of her faith and practices*'. This he contended is 'inadmissible' because 'the Bible alone is that standard, and

[14] Johnson actually came to Augusta with a previously prepared constitution to present to the committee formed for this purpose. James M. Morton Jr, 'Leadership of W. B. Johnson in the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 5:1 (January 1970), p. 10.
[15] Robert G. Gardner, *A Decade of Debate and Division: Georgia Baptists and the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), p. 36.
[16] W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 17.
[17] William B. Johnson, 'To the Baptists of South Carolina', *Southern Baptist*, 18 October 1848.
[18] William Johnson, 'Baptist Usage', *Southern Baptist*, 7 November 1855.
[19] William B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (Richmond, 1846), pp. 194, 201.

no human compilations or abstracts of principles from the Bible can supplant *that perfect standard*'.[20] To Johnson, it was strange that an Association of Baptist Churches 'that have so strenuously contended for the supremacy and authority of the scriptures' should adopt 'any other religious standard than these holy writings'.[21] The responsibility of churches is, in 'humble and fervent prayer' to seek 'the Spirit's aid in all our searching of the oracles of God for knowledge of His will'.[22] Sadly, Johnson's commitment to scripture led him to argue that opponents of slavery have acted upon a sentiment they have failed to provide – that slavery is, in all circumstances, sinful.'[23] It was clearly a difference in hermeneutics which led to Baptists in the South supporting slavery and leading to racist attitudes which would be perpetuated through more than one hundred years of their history.

By 1861, the Southern Baptist Convention supported the formation of the Confederacy and the Civil War. In May 1861, the second of ten resolutions approved by the convention declared: 'That we most cordially approve of the formation of the Government of the Confederate States of America, and admire and applaud the noble course of that Government up to this present time.'[24]

The support of the Christians in the South, including Baptists, for the Confederate Cause continued long after the Civil War came to an end in 1865, and during the following era of Reconstruction. In May 1926, L. L. Gwaltney, editor of *The Alabama Baptist*, wrote an editorial on the 'Confederate Veterans Reunion' in Birmingham. He noted that the reunion drew 3300 veterans and 10,000 visitors for its thirty-sixth annual meeting, and described them as 'gallant soldiers…who still feel that their cause was just…no one among them will admit defeat in battle…'[25] There are many people in the South who still feel the same about the 'war of Northern Aggression', as it was explained to me by a few students in 2002, the first year I taught Baptist History at Samford.

You do not have to look far in Alabama for trucks which fly the Confederate flag with pride. Indeed, Confederate battle flag sales rocketed in the US since the violence at the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, held to oppose the removal of confederate statutes to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. At Alabama Flag and Banner, one of the few remaining US makers of the Confederate flag, sales reached 150 in a single day near the end of August 2017, a quarter of the number of average annual sales.

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[20] *Southern Baptist*, 30 January 1856 (italics original).
[21] *Southern Baptist*, 10 June 1856.
[22] *Southern Baptist*, 10 June 1856.
[23] Cited in B. Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope* (Eerdmans, 1990), p. 19.
[24] W. W. Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1953* (Nashville: Broadman, 1954), p. 44, citing *Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1861*, pp. 63-64.
[25] *The Alabama Baptist*, 27 May 1926, p. 1.

## African-American Baptists after the Civil War

In the South, in the years after the Civil War, some four million ex-slaves were free to organise and worship as they saw fit. In a massive effort, northern black churches established missions to their southern counterparts, resulting in the dynamic growth of independent black churches in the southern states between 1865 and 1900. Predominantly white denominations, such as the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Episcopal churches, also sponsored missions, opened schools for freed slaves, and aided the general welfare of southern blacks, but the majority of African Americans chose to join the independent black churches founded in the northern states nearly a century earlier.

In 1865 the Alabama State Convention examined the issue of the presence of blacks in white churches. Many whites feared that, where they were in the majority, the blacks would take over. In 1868, fifty independent Black Baptist Churches had been established in Alabama. They formed the Colored Baptist Missionary Convention in 1868, twenty-six delegates, most from the Black Belt, with two Associations predating the state convention (Eufaula – 1867 and Bethlehem – a few months earlier in 1868) and more associations being formed as time went on. In 1868, one correspondent to *The Alabama Baptist* stated that, though Negroes had rational and moral faculties, they were in fact subhuman. Although Wayne Flynt thinks that this was a minority viewpoint, and some Baptists worked tirelessly for the advancement of African Americans, not all Alabama Baptists shared their enthusiasm. One example of the paternalism which existed was in a North Alabama Baptist Association where blacks were allowed to choose their own pastor, as long as he was white. By 1874, however, the process of separation was complete, the year of the end of reconstruction in Alabama, when a desire for independence and self-determination led to blacks establishing more and more of their own churches.

## Alabama Constitution and the Beginning of the Jim Crow Era

The last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a hardening of racial discrimination in Alabama. The 1901 Alabama Constitution achieved the goal of the disenfranchisement of black males. Linked to the political process was the racial violence of the period, which saw racial lynchings, usually defined as unprosecuted murders that occurred at the hands of mobs or unidentified people. They began in 1877 in Alabama and ended in 1943. Three hundred and forty victims are known at this time in Alabama's history.

Baptists argued that the fifteenth amendment to the United States Constitution, which gave African Americans the right to vote, 'flew in the

face of nature'. This was the viewpoint of the editor of *The Alabama Baptist* newspaper on 11 June 1891. The Constitution also ensured the establishment of an entirely segregated school system and prevented the legislature from ever allowing interracial marriages. The document introduced the Jim Crow era, restricting African-American political rights, social movement, and economic development.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded in 1865 by a group of Confederate veterans and grew from a secret social fraternity opposing the federal government's reconstruction policies in the South, especially as they elevated the rights of the African-American population. It was a White supremacist group which had been banned in 1871, although the US Supreme Court reversed this policy in 1882, when the KKK had faded away. The twentieth century saw two revivals of the KKK: one was a response to the immigration of Catholics in the 1910s and the 1920s, and another in response to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. L. L. Gwaltney, who was opposed to the immigration of Roman Catholics from Eastern Europe, rejected the view that the KKK had been formed to 'intimate and keep down the negro'.[26] He argued that the Klan's main purpose was to oppose Catholicism. In the previous year he naively argued that 'should the Ku Klux or any other order inhibit the rights of the Negro citizen, it would be opposed by the best people of the South'.[27] As the years progressed, and the influence of the Klan developed, Gwaltney took up the issue of intermarriage between the races and stated his viewpoint that 'no hybrid race has ever served a noble purpose, amalgamation would defeat the highest and noble humanity as well as Christianity'.[28] In 1943, Gwaltney returned to the question of race and the issue of integration, predicting that whites would not yield on this point. While agreeing that 'God was no respecter of persons', this did not obliterate 'national characteristics, biological facts, and the deeply rooted consciousness of kind'.[29]

In the 1950s great disquiet was expressed among many Alabama Baptist churches at the way in which the agencies of both the Alabama State Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention were publishing articles promoting the integration of the race or the promotion of integration ideas in any form. On 9 February 1958, Greensboro Baptist Church in Alabama protested against these articles, arguing that the Convention had been formed 'on the principle that slaveholding was not unchristian' and that its growth

[26] *The Alabama Baptist*, 11 January 1922, p. 1.
[27] *The Alabama Baptist*, 5 May 1921, p. 1.
[28] *The Alabama Baptist*, 22 January 1931, p. 1.
[29] Hal D. Bennett, *An Inquiry into the Life and Works of Editor Leslie L Gwaltney of Alabama*, Doctor of Theology Thesis (New Orleans Seminary, March 1954), p. 118.

indicated God's approval of such attitudes, and thus is 'today one of the greatest and strongest Denominations in the United States'.[30]

Bryan Stevenson – Harvard Law School graduate, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama – commenting on 'Charleston and our Real Problem with Race', said: 'I don't believe slavery ended in 1865, I believe it just evolved.'[31] He gave an interview at the time of the mass shooting in which Dylan Roof, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist, murdered nine African Americans (including the senior pastor) during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, on the evening of 17 June 2015. He stated:

> the South is a region where …. the narrative of racial difference still haunts us, and infects our economic, social and political structures, because we have in the South done something worse than silence, we've actually created a counter-narrative and invited people to take pride in their southern heritage. We've basically minimized the hardships of slavery and extolled its virtues…We've ignored the lynchings and the struggles and the violence and terror that kept people of color from having any opportunities for fairness and equality, and we haven't really addressed all of the pain and injury that was created by decades of segregation.[32]

## SBC and Race

In the twentieth century the Southern Baptist Convention, like the majority of southern institutions, reflected the racism of the region as a whole. Several agencies in the Southern Baptist Convention, including the Christian Life Commission and the Foreign and Home Mission Board, supported the US Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v Board of Education (1954)* that encouraged the integration of public schools 'with all due speed'. Although certain segments of Convention leadership supported integration, the majority of churches, pastors, and congregations worked against its implementation. Extreme statements, later regretted by the speakers, were often made. W. E. Criswell, in 1956, called Americans who favoured desegregation 'infidels, dying from the neck up'.[33] In 1970 he repudiated the statement but, when it was made, it was a real sentiment.

Supporters of integration included two prominent ethicists: T. B. Maston, who taught at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, and published

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[30] Copy of Church minutes in Gwaltney papers lodged in Samford University archives.

[31] <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/06/24/bryan-stevenson-on-charleston-and-our-real-problem-with-race> [accessed 29 November 2018]

[32] Ibid.

[33] Cited by Curtis W. Freeman, '"Never Had I Been So Blind": W. A. Criswell's "Change" on Racial Segregation', *Journal of Southern Religion*, Vol. X (2007), p. 1.

*The Bible and Race* in 1959, and Henlee Barnette, father of one of my colleagues at Samford. Barnette invited Martin Luther King Jr to speak in his class at Southern Seminary, an event that caused many financial supporters to threaten to withdraw their money, and he also marched with King to protest against housing in Louisville, Kentucky.

During the civil rights era of the 1960s, most of the leaders who opposed desegregation were Southern Baptists. Their views reflected the work of southern legislators, many of whom were Southern Baptists, as the region resisted the Civil Rights movement and even at times defied the decisions of the Supreme Court.

In Alabama the president of the national black Baptist convention meeting in Birmingham told his audience not to expect 'segregationists to meekly surrender'. Alabama Baptists developed strong views on the subject, especially since the modern civil rights movement was born in Alabama, as were protagonists on both sides of the divide such as Martin Luther King Jr and George C. Wallace. Many of the movement's leaders were Baptist ministers. Alabama became the focus of the attention of the world. Both sides, as in the nineteenth century, claimed scripture as the foundation of their thinking.

In 1965 Billy Graham scheduled his racially integrated campaign in Montgomery to coincide with the civil rights unrest, and it was groundbreaking in that Graham refused to have segregated seating. Many Alabama Baptists resented his timing and growing support of integration, and Flynt suggests that this 'did little to enhance his reputation among Alabama Baptists'.[34] The editor of the state newspaper believed that God wanted the races to be separated and advised his twenty-year-old son not to attend the rallies.[35]

Two congregations in Birmingham that took a positive step towards integration were Mountain Brook and Vestavia Hills. Mountain Brook's pastor, Dotson M. Nelson Jr, advocated that every person must be treated as a person, not an object, and that every person should be treated as a brother or sister; every person was entitled to life, freedom, and constitutional rights. The church's Women's Missionary Union began a joint vacation Bible School with several Black Baptist churches. In the 1970s, Vestavia Hills Baptist church admitted its first black members when a Samford University couple brought a Pharmacy student and his wife who came from Nigeria to church. He had become a Christian through the witness of Southern Baptist missionaries, and, although they had attended several African-American congregations in the vicinity, they did not feel comfortable with their style

[34] Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, p. 462.
[35] *The Alabama Baptist*, 24 June 1965.

of worship. Pastor Otis Brooks led the deacons and the church to open its membership to anyone who confessed faith in Jesus Christ and wanted to join the church. Two deacons disagreed with the decision, but anxiety of some members that the church would be overwhelmed with black members did not materialise.

One church which split over the issue was First Baptist, and as a result of deep disagreement and 'anger', the pastor, J. Herbert Gilmore Jr, left with a sizeable number of members to form the Church of the Covenant, with the express purpose of opening its membership to anyone who confessed Jesus Christ. In the midst of the controversy, Otis Brooks, pastor of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, wrote to a local newspaper to support the actions of Gilmore and the congregation.

It took until 1989 before my own church, Southside Baptist, eventually welcomed its first non-white member. Earlier, during the 1950s, the church refused to seat blacks, many of whom were students at the nearby University. Eric Quarshie was a student at the University of Alabama in Birmingham from Ghana and he joined the church on profession of faith. One year later, the first African American, Yvette Greene, was baptised in the church. However, my colleague told me that, when the baptism was due to take place, the church discovered that the water heater had malfunctioned, and the water was piping hot and could not be used for the baptism, which took place the following Sunday. One of our current deacons, Marilyn Shepard, joined the church in March 1991. She and her husband James were the first bi-racial couple to join the congregation and they were followed by their three sons in the years that followed. Currently we have two African-American deacons, and about ten percent of the church consists of African-American members, along with people from Korea and India.

In 1990, Birmingham's largest and wealthiest black Church, Sixth Avenue, became a member of the Birmingham Baptist Association. It was dually aligned with the National Baptist Convention, USA. The pastor, John Porter, had been an assistant to Martin Luther King Jr at Dexter Avenue in 1954-1955 during the first stages of the Montgomery bus boycott and arrested with King during the 1963 Birmingham demonstrations. He later served as a Samford trustee.

## Integration at Samford

Integration at Samford was stimulated by students who had been raised in mission contexts, where they had become accustomed to integration, and were appalled at the lack of the integration in churches in Birmingham and also on campus. One of those students, David Graves, spoke to the then

president, Leslie Wright, who 'was sympathetic', but the College's biggest benefactor (and also the chair of the deacons at Southside Baptist Church), Frank Samford, was insistent that the College remain all-white. Frank Samford chaired the Board of Trustees, and his pastor at Southside Baptist Church served as vice chairman, and thus the centre of power was quite beyond the reach of those arguing for integration. The College did integrate in 1968, but only because the Cumberland School of Law, which Samford had purchased from Tennessee, was at risk of losing its accreditation and admitted its first black student. Money speaks. The first year of integration was worth $750,000 in federal funds. Technically, Samford University integrated its student body, and yet over the fifty-year period since integration, it has graduated only 2,000 African-American students.

Since 1948, Samford has celebrated a unique partnership with Baptist associations within the Alabama Baptist Convention. Nearly every Sunday during the fall and spring semesters, a different association invites ministerial students to preach in some of their churches. About ten years ago, one of our African-American students, a ministerial candidate within the Black Primitive Baptist Tradition, was dropped off at one church, and as he approached the door he was asked by a deacon what he was doing there. When he replied that he had come from Samford to preach, he was told that was not happening. He had no transport, was in the middle of rural Alabama, and so he decided to stay for the morning service, sit in a pew, and endure the humiliation of segregation.

In May 2016, the Alpha Delta Pi sorority at Samford University printed a T-shirt, which included imagery of an African-American man eating a watermelon and a slave picking cotton. Student university officials had rejected the design, but it was still printed. In an email to students and staff, Samford President Andrew Westmoreland said he was "repulsed" when he saw the shirt. This all happened on the weekend of graduation, and I vividly remember the distress which the president genuinely felt and was shared by faculty.[36] However, I have to say students still tell me that it is not unusual to hear racist comments by fellow students on campus. We do live, after all, in the South.

## The Southern Baptist Convention 1995 Resolution on Racial Reconciliation

1995 was the occasion of the denomination's 150th anniversary and many SBC leaders, such as Richard Land, believed that it 'would be unseemly and

[36] See <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/samford-university-apologizes-over-sorority-s-t-shirt-racist-imagery-n574131> [accessed on 29 November 2018]

terribly wrong to celebrate our sesquicentennial without addressing forthrightly the more unsavory aspects of our past'. The SBC resolution was part of a wider trend among many groups to apologise for the past – such as German Christians expressing sorrow for their complicity in the holocaust; New Zealanders for their sins against the Maoris; and American Christians because of the slaughter of Native American Indians.

In an article on the 1995 resolution, William M. Tillman Jr says that 'in reality, most of the SBC's numeric growth in the previous decade and in the years immediately following came from additions of African-American and other ethnic communities'.[37] Of the 15.6 million members in 1995, there were about half a million African Americans in 1,200 churches. By 2005, the SBC had 3,000 African-American churches among the 16.2 million members of the Convention. Baptists and the SBC resolution in part states: 'We apologize to all African Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime, and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously.'[38]

## Reactions

'On behalf of my black brothers and sisters, we accept your apology,' Gary Frost, SBC second vice president and a black pastor, said at the Georgia Dome convention. 'We pray that the genuineness of your repentance will be reflected in your attitudes and in your actions.'[39] In 1989, the SBC had approved a resolution against racism. But the 1995 resolution was the first ever to address blacks specifically in a way linked with the slavery issue. SBC president, James B. Henry, said passage of the measure was 'one of our finest moments in Southern Baptist life'. Henry said he views the apology as 'a huge statement to the African-American community of who we are and what we're about'.[40]

The president of the nation's second-largest African-American Baptist denomination has rejected the SBC's apology for racism, saying more action is needed. E. Edward Jones told some 4,000 delegates attending the annual convention of the National Baptist Convention of America, which concluded recently in Dallas, that the apology offered by the primarily white SBC was belated and needed to be more than words. 'The civil rights struggle is still

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[37] William M. Tillman Jr, 'Baptists and the Turn toward Racial Inclusion: 1955', in *Turning Points in Baptist History*, ed. by Michael E. Williams and Walter B. Shurden (Mercer, 2008), p. 269.
[38] Cited in <http://www.sbts.edu/southern-project/> [accessed13 January 2019]
[39] See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/06/21/an-apology-for-racism/25ce442e-8733-47de-85b1-0dd7c7fd62ec/?utm_term=.90ab1fac9888> [accessed 13 January 2019]
[40] See < https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/august1/5t9053.html> [accessed 13 January 2019]

going on and we need more than an apology,' Jones declared. Southern Baptist voices were silent during the racist atrocities of the past, Jones said. He questioned whether the apology would have come if Southern Baptists didn't see a need to increase their numbers by targeting the fast-growing black middle class. 'You may say an apology is better late than never,' said the convention president. 'True. But is the apology valid?' [41]

Caesar A. W. Clark, president of the Baptist Missionary and Education Convention of Texas, observed, 'Southern Baptists have been working overtime to win black National Baptists.'[42] Clark is pastor of Good Street Baptist Church in Dallas, affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA, and a predominantly African-American denomination. He said there is a widespread perception among some black Christians that the SBC is wooing existing black congregations into the SBC fold.

Richard Land, president of the SBC's Christian Life Commission and a leader in the apology effort, said his denomination is sincere in wanting to be more racially inclusive. 'We are not trying to steal sheep from the National Baptists,' Land said.

> It's never too late to do the right thing. If Reverend Jones had been in the meetings where this resolution was hammered out and been in the convention hall and seen the spirit of reconciliation and healing that swept through the messengers, he would have a different conclusion about this.'

Jones, noting that African-American churches are the fastest-growing segment in the SBC, said he 'sensed a scheme' that the apology would not have been offered if the black middle class had not been seen as an attractive marketing area for church growth. 'I have no hatred,' Jones said. 'I just have a terrible habit of thinking.'

Yet many others, including evangelist Billy Graham, who spoke at the convention, hailed the historic effort. Graham told Southern Baptists, 'Only when we individually and as a corporate group renounce racism in all of its forms and repent of all transgression will God choose to use us in the future to reach all people throughout the world.' [43]

Willie T. McPherson, director of the Black Church Extension Division, said racism in America remains alive and well. 'Today racism is subtle,' McPherson said. 'It's corporate, and it's very difficult to see it unless you are African-American. I see it now in our convention in a lot of ways.' McPherson, while optimistic overall on race relations, admitted that the

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[41] Clyde McQueen, *Black Churches in Texas: A Guide to Historic Congregations* (Texas: A&M University Press), p.22.
[42] See <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/august1/5t9053.html> [accessed 17 October 2019]
[43] Ibid.

resolution was 'just the beginning'. He said, 'We already know that God will not operate where there is sin. And racism is sin.'[44]

In the fall of 2018, the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville released a stark report seeking to address its ties to institutionalised racism. The year-long study found that all four founding faculty members owned slaves and 'were deeply complicit in the defense of slavery'. The report noted that the seminary's most important donor and chairman of its Board of Trustees in the late 1800s, Joseph E. Brown, 'earned much of his fortune by the exploitation of mostly black convict lease laborers', employing in his coal mines and iron furnaces 'the same brutal punishments and tortures formerly employed by slave drivers'. Al Mohler, the current president, commented that many of the founding faculty members 'throughout the period of Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, advocated segregation, the inferiority of African Americans, and openly embraced the ideology of the Lost Cause of southern slavery', that recast the South as an idyllic place for both slaves and masters and the Civil War as a battle fought over southern honour, not slavery.

Not all Southern Faculty were unconscious of the importance of race religions. Henlee Barnette served as professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Seminary from 1951-77. He is perhaps best known for his work on behalf of social and civil rights causes. In 1961, Barnette hosted civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr on the campus of Southern Seminary and later marched with King in Frankfort, Ky. At the time the seminary came under attack from segregationists who threatened to withhold donations.

Reactions to the report have been mixed. Few educational institutions founded in the pre-civil war era can have escaped the charge of benefitting from slavery. Evangelicals in the eighteenth-century revival such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield supported the institution. Bill Leonard, who taught at Southern from 1975-1992, suggests that 2019, the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first slave-ship in Virginia, is a 'terrible, teachable' moment and concludes that, 'I can't repent of the racism of my Baptist ancestors if I won't repent of racism in myself and my own segment of American culture right now.'[45]

One African American refers to the report as one which 'deliberately omits mention of the most recent instances of racism, white supremacy and white religious nationalism practiced and perpetrated at and by SBTS'.[46]

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Bill Leonard, 'American Racism, 1619-2019: Exorcism of this Demon is Needed – Now', *Christian Ethics Today*, Vol. 28, Number 1 (Winter 2019), pp. 20-22 (p. 22).

[46] Wendel Griffin: <https://baptistnews.com/article/white-baptists-and-racial-reconciliation-theres-a-difference-between-lament-and-repentance/#.XDd7nM17k2y> [accessed 13 January 2019]

The current context of America and of White Evangelicalism would suggest that racism is alive and well. Even today, few Baptist churches are truly integrated. As I wrote these words, a run-off senate election was taking place in Mississippi, where two nooses had been found hanging from trees,[47] and the issue of immigration, which brought about the resurgence in the KKK in the 1920s, was on the top of the agenda of our current President. Baptists in the South have a long hard road ahead, to begin to make reparations for past sinfulness and to seek forgiveness and reconciliation through genuine repentance.

I conclude this article with the words of T. B. Maston, who in 1959 ended his book on *The Bible and Race* with these words:

> Surely the God who created humanity in his own image, who made of one, all people, who is no respecter of persons, who loved all people enough to give his Son for their salvation, and who taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves, did not and does not intend that any person or any segment of humankind should be kept in permanent subserviency or should be treated as innately inferior, as second-class citizens in a first-class society.[48]

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[47] See <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/nooses-found-hanging-mississippi-capitol-n940176> [accessed 13 January 2019]

[48] T. B. Maston, *The Bible and Race* (Broadman Press, 1959), p. 117.

# Reverse Mission: African Presence and Mission within Baptists Together[1] in the United Kingdom

Israel Oluwole Olofinjana

This research paper explores the missiological implications of the migration of African Christians to Britain. It particularly focuses on the mission of African Christians within the historic church context in the UK by considering the history and presence of African Christians within Baptists Together as a case study. Why do we have many African Christians within historic churches, what are their struggles, and most importantly, what are their mission contributions? In this article I review key literature in the study of reverse mission, situating it within the discourse of African theology. I then narrow my investigation by looking at various examples of mission carried out by African migrants within Baptists Together. I am writing as an African missionary and a Baptist minister in Britain, employing an insider's perspective using an historical-theological approach.

## Keywords

Reverse mission; migration; African Christianity; diaspora missiology; historic churches; Baptist theology

## Introduction

This article is an investigation into the missiological implications of African Christianity in Britain. It explores the phenomenon of reverse mission, that is, the idea that people from former mission fields are now contributing to mission in Europe and North America.

It appears that the majority of studies on reverse mission tend to focus on independent Pentecostal and Charismatic churches from Africa. These churches with humble beginnings have emerged over time to be some of the largest and fastest-growing churches in Britain. For example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God started in the UK in 1988 and now boasts of having about 864 church plants within the British Isles.[2] While African Pentecostal churches are growing and scholarly and public attention is drawn to them, what is obscured is the fact that there is now a concentration and growing

[1] The term 'Baptists Together' (used since 2013) emerged during conversations about restructuring the national resource offices at Didcot and future processes of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The term describes the movement of local churches supported by regional associations, colleges, and specialist teams also known as the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

[2] Peter Brierley, *UK Church Statistics No. 3: 2018 Edition* (Tonbridge, UK: ADBC, 2017).

presence of Africans within historic churches.[3] For example, the number of black Anglicans in Britain more than doubled between 1992 and 1998, from 27,000 to 58,200 attendees.[4] In addition, the largest black church concentration in the year 2000 was found in the Roman Catholic church with 61,000, set against a total Pentecostal population of 70,000.[5]

This article is an attempt to document the mission contributions and struggles of African Christians within Baptists Together. It highlights with biographical case studies the different approaches to mission used by African migrants, such as church planting, evangelism, social action, and racial justice concerns.

## Literature Review: African Christianity and Black Majority Churches

As this article is investigating African Christian migrants in Britain, it is important to locate it within the study of African Christianity, namely African theology. Studies on African Christianity exist primarily through the contextualisation work of African theologians, but also through a host of historical and anthropological treatments. As African countries began gaining independence, with Ghana in 1957, African theologians started to look at the relationship between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR). African theology's main pre-occupation, as articulated in West and East Africa or Anglophone African countries, was the inculturation of Christianity into African worldviews. The particular concern of this discourse considered the nature of ATRs and their relationship of continuity rather than discontinuity with the Christian faith. Part of the argument was that just as the Jewish religion was a *Praeparatio Evangelica* (Preparation of the gospel) – that is, Judaism prepared the way for the gospel to be received – so did ATRs prepare Africans for the reception of the gospel in the African context.[6]

This makes Christianity a continuation rather than a discontinuation of ATR. While various African theologians articulated this point of view, nevertheless their voices were far from identical. The exponents of this new

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[3] Historic churches in this context refers to Catholic, Church of England, Baptist, Methodist, and United Reformed Churches.

[4] Joe Aldred, 'The Black Church in Britain and Their Relations with the Ecumenical Movement, with Particular Reference to Black Pentecostalism', in Christoph Dahling-Sander, Kai M. Funkschmidt and Vera Mielke (eds.), *Beiheft zur Okumenischen Rundschau: Pfingstkirchen und Okumene in Bewegung* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2001), p. 184.

[5] Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out: What the English Church Attendance Survey Reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2000).

[6] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 1992), pp. 315-316.

contextual theology, who were pioneers of their time, are: Bolaji Idowu (1913-1993), whose works explored the relationship between Christianity and Yoruba religion and spirituality arguing for an indigenous church;[7] Christian Baeta (1908-1994), whose work looked at some spiritual churches in the context of Ghana;[8] Harry Sawyerr (1909-1987) from Sierra Leone, who was in the process of developing a strong mission theology for the African context[9] before his death; the late John S. Mbiti (1931-2019), possibly the best known of all modern African theologians, developed a systematic study of ATRs.[10] Lastly, Kwesi Dickson (1929-2005) discussed the theoretical basis for the working out of Christian theology by African Christians in respect of the rise of third world theologies.[11]

While the task of relating Christianity to ATRs and culture pre-occupied the beginnings of African theology, by the early 1970s it began to consider mission as the liberation of Africans in terms of socio-economic development and political emancipation.[12] This was very true in the apartheid situation in South Africa where a South African black theology of liberation was developed by, for example, Basil Moore, a South African Methodist theologian,[13] Steve Biko, a lawyer and an activist who died campaigning for the freedom of black people in South Africa, and later Desmond Tutu. In other parts of Africa there developed an African theology of liberation, which began to articulate for the political and economic freedom of Africans. The main task here was to free Africans not just from neo-colonialism and effects of globalisation, but also from the many African dictators who plagued the continent. One of the African scholars and churchmen who was articulating an African political theology was the Liberian theologian Burgess Carr (1936-2012), former General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC).

Since the mid-1980s we have also seen the explosion of African womanist theology through independent scholars such as the Ghanaian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, and Isabel Phiri. Other avenues for the expression of African womanist theology are women's theological events, women's organisations, and publications. The main concern of this theology is the liberation of African women from African patriarchal

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[7] E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Lagos, Nigeria: Longman Nigeria, 1962); Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).
[8] Christian Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some Spiritual Churches* (London: SCM, 1962).
[9] Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: Lutterworth Publishers, 1968).
[10] J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).
[11] Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984).
[12] John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African theology Today* (Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 137.
[13] Basil Moore (ed.), *Black Theology: The South African Voice* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1973).

heritage that most of the time oppresses women.[14] An example of one of the issues that still confronts African women is female genital mutilation as practised by some cultures within the African context. Other matters include domestic violence, abuse, and rape.

The current state of African theology is that, while in the past there was a distinction between African theologies of inculturation and African political theologies, this is no longer the case, as a result of various socio-economic and political changes taking place across the continent.[15] In addition to this is the fact that African Charismatics and Pentecostals have dominated the Christian scene on the continent in the last forty years. This has given rise to a distinctive African Pentecostal theology.[16] In my view one of the pioneers of modern African theology was Byang Kato (1936-1975), who advocated against all his peers a distinct African evangelical theology. His theology is one that would sit well with many African Charismatics and Pentecostals. Byang was one of the few voices who argued for a discontinuity between ATRs and Christianity.[17] While discussions are still ongoing about the nature and scope of theological contributions of African Pentecostals and Charismatics in regards to mission, church history, and theology within the discourse of African theology, they are now accepted as a significant contributor to global Pentecostalism[18] and world Christianity.[19]

The explosive growth of African Charismatics and Pentecostals amongst other expressions of African Christianity have taken the lead in what is known as reverse mission. They are among the numerous Christians from the majority world who are planting churches and doing mission in Europe and North America. A notable African theologian, whose research work examines the explosive growth of African Charismatics, as a background to understanding African Christianity in the diaspora, is Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu.[20] I have also provided an introductory background in understanding reverse mission of Nigerian Christianity in

[14] Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*.
[15] Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, 'Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century', in Ogbu Kalu (ed.) *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2007), p. 418.
[16] Clifton Clarke (ed.), *Pentecostal Theology in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), p. 1.
[17] Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975).
[18] A. H. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[19] A. F. Walls, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity* (New York: Orbis, 2017).
[20] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) and *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

Britain by looking at Nigerian Pentecostal history through twenty of its pioneers.[21]

In the British context, African churches are regarded as part of what is known as Black Majority Churches (BMC). Studies on BMC started in the 1970s with the British Council of Churches commissioning a research work to better understand these churches. This was Clifford Hill's short piece, *Black Churches: West Indian and African Sects in Britain*.[22] This was an early survey of black churches in Britain from around the 1950s to the 1970s. This work is now limited because the history of BMC has developed since the 1970s. In addition, this was around the time when black churches were considered as sects by the British Council of Churches.

A more mature seminal text on BMC was found in the research and scholarship of the German Roswith Gerloff. Her robust scholarship and research spanned 1972-2013, when she passed away. Her core text on black theology was *A Plea for British Black Theologies* (2010).[23] This book could be credited as the foundational and pioneering text on Black British Theology. However, it must be mentioned that this text focused more on Caribbean Pentecostal churches by exploring in-depth Apostolic Pentecostal churches and the Sabbatarian church movements. Nevertheless, her extensive writing and research on black Pentecostalism in Britain has produced some influential work on the social, cultural, and missiological significance of the African Caribbean diaspora contribution to the Christian faith. Roy Kerridge's book *The Storm is Passing Over: A Look at Black Churches in Britain* examines the beliefs and practices of BMC such as funeral practices, wedding ceremonies, and the use of traditional music.[24] This book did not, however, consider the idea of reverse mission. In the late 1990s, Robert Beckford, building on the scholarship of Roswith Gerloff, pushed the boundaries by developing a political theology for African and Caribbean Pentecostal churches using the Rastafari ideology of liberation. His articulation of what can be termed a black political Pentecostal theology

[21] Israel Olofinjana, *20 Pentecostal Pioneers in Nigeria: Their Lives, Their Legacies* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2011).

[22] Clifford Hill, *Black Churches: West Indian and African Sects in Britain* (London: Community and Race Relations Unit of the British Council of Churches, 1971).

[23] Roswith Gerloff, *A Plea for British Black Theologies: The Black Church Movement in Britain in its Transatlantic Cultural and Theological Interaction with Oneness (Apostolic) and Sabbatarian Movements*, vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

[24] Roy Kerridge, *The Storm is Passing Over: A Look at Black Churches in Britain* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

or the 'Dread thesis' as it is now known,[25] can be found in Beckford's first two books.[26]

If Beckford's work was considered a work of liberation theology and too radical for BMC, Joel Edwards' theology can be considered evangelical with an integral mission perspective, as he served among British evangelicals. He worked through the ranks to become the first Caribbean and black General Director of the Evangelical Alliance in 1997 since its formation in 1846. In a book edited by Edwards,[27] one of the contributors, Arlington Trotman, explored the identity of the so-called black or black-led churches, arguing that the term 'black-led' or 'black church' was an imposition by outsiders and that the terminology does not satisfactorily describe these churches.[28] Trotman critiqued these terms sociologically and theologically, arguing that they were not adequate in describing African and Caribbean churches. Here we see an insider's articulation of how African and Caribbean churches perceive themselves. Other contributions in the book explored liturgy, such as the nature of worship and preaching within African and Caribbean Pentecostalism.

A gap created in the literature explored so far on BMC is their history and efforts at reverse mission. To fill the former gap was the book by Mark Sturge, *Look what the Lord has done: An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain*.[29] A similar book published in the same year is Joe Aldred's *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity*,[30] which explored intercultural ecumenism from a Caribbean British perspective. While these two works have contributed to our understanding of the history of black Christianity in Britain, they both did this through the lens of Caribbean British Christianity. This means that African Christianity in Britain was not given prominence. To complete that task was the pioneering research of Chigor Chike in 2007 to mark 200 years since the abolition of the slave trade.[31] Chike's book surveyed the doctrines and practices of African Christians in Britain, but nothing much was said about their history and neither was reverse mission considered. That same year, and to

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[25] David Muir, 'Theology and the Black Church', in Joe Aldred and Keno Ogbo (eds.), *The Black Church in the 21st Century* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), pp. 8-27.

[26] Robert Beckford, *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998); Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostalism: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000).

[27] Joel Edwards (ed.), *Let's Praise Him Again: An African-Caribbean Perspective on Worship* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway, 1992).

[28] Arlington Trotman, 'Black, Black-led or What?' in Joel Edwards (ed.), *Let's Praise Him Again*, pp. 18-24.

[29] Mark Sturge, *Look What the Lord has Done: An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain* (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 2005).

[30] Joe Aldred, *Respect*: *Understanding Caribbean British Christianity* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005).

[31] Chigor Chike, *African Christianity in Britain* (Milton Keynes: Author House, 2007).

commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, was *Black Theology in Britain*, edited by two well-known black theologians, Michael Jagessar and Anthony Reddie.[32] The book surveyed the current state of black British theology by considering the works of some of its exponents, such as Robert Beckford. However, this work did not explore reverse mission as such.

Perhaps a more robust African scholarship that has considered the implications of migration and globalisation on the diaspora mission of African churches in Britain is the research work of Afe Adogame.[33] Adogame is possibly one of the best-known African scholars, not only in Britain but also in Europe, North America, and Africa. He has written, contributed to, and edited more books and articles than any other African scholar I am aware of in Britain. Adogame's work explored reverse mission from a sociological perspective and not from an ecclesiastical or theological one. Writing from within the Pentecostal and Charismatic tradition was Hugh Osgood, whose PhD thesis explored African Christianity in Britain by looking at the sending of African pastors to Britain from 1980-2005.[34] Richard Burgess' work also addresses the mission of African churches in Britain, using the Redeemed Christian Church of God as a case study.[35] While Osgood and Burgess' works are important contributions, it should be noted that they are not writing as African reverse missionaries.

Building on the earlier scholarship of Adogame, Osgood, and Burgess was my own first publication in 2010.[36] This was an introduction to the subject of reverse mission by looking at the history of European missions in Africa and then African missions in Europe through the prism of reverse mission. The contribution of this book lies in the fact that it was the first monograph on the subject of reverse mission in the UK. In addition, here was a theological reflection on reverse mission written by a reverse

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[32] Michael Jagessar and Anthony Reddie (eds.), *Black Theology in Britain* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2007).

[33] Afe Adogame, 'African Christian Communities in the Diaspora', in Ogbu Kalu (ed.), *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2007), pp. 431–45; Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*: *New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

[34] Hugh Osgood, *African Neo-Pentecostal Churches and British Evangelicalism 1985-2005: Balancing Principles and Practicalities* (unpublished PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2006), pp.95-98.

[35] Richard Burgess, 'African Pentecostal Spirituality and Civic Engagement: The Case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Britain', Special Issue of *Journal of Beliefs and Values on Global Pentecostalism*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2009), pp.255–73; Richard Burgess, K. Knibbe, and A. Quaas, 'Nigerian-initiated Pentecostal Churches as a Social Force in Europe: The Case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God', *PentecoStudies*, vol. 9 (April 2010), pp. 97-121; Richard Burgess, 'Bringing Back the Gospel: Reverse Mission among Nigerian Pentecostals in Britain', *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 4 (3) (2011), pp. 429-449.

[36] Israel Olofinjana, *Reverse in Ministry and Mission: Africans in the Dark Continent of Europe* (Milton Keynes: Author house, 2010).

missionary who serves within a British church denomination. My own story is that I came as a missionary from Nigeria in 2004 to plant a Nigerian church, but on reflection left that idea and decided to join an existing British church. Since then, I have had the privilege of leading three multicultural churches in London. Therefore, the book argued that reverse mission is taking place by surveying the various mission approaches used by African pastors and leaders. However, this work is limited because BMC were considered through the lens of African Christianity in Britain and, since its publication, there is now more information available. A fuller treatment addressing the history and mission of BMC is Babatunde Adedibu's *Coat of Many Colours: The Origin, Growth, Distinctiveness and Contributions of Black Majority Churches to British Christianity*.[37] While Adedibu's book is a ground-breaking research work on the history and diverse theologies of BMC in the UK, he did not consider in depth the idea of reverse mission. A recent book, also written by an African reverse missionary serving within the Fellowship of Churches of Christ in the UK, is Hirpo Kumbi's book, *Mission and Movement*.[38] This book addresses reverse mission through charting the missional history of Ethiopian and Eritrean evangelical churches in the UK. While this is a pioneering work, because it documents for the first time Ethiopian and Eritrean evangelical churches, it is however narrow as it fails to situate these churches within the context of BMC.

## Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) Presence within British Historic Churches

From this brief survey of studies on African Christianity and BMC, it appears that there is a gap in exploring the mission practices of African Christian migrants within historic churches in Britain. Rebecca Catto's PhD thesis in 2008 was the first in Britain to explore the subject of reverse mission, considering various case studies of missionaries from the Global South serving in what she described as mainline churches.[39] The case studies she considered consisted mainly of short-term missionaries serving in Anglican and Methodist churches. Within the Catholic church in Britain, reverse mission appears to be taking place, with a shortage of priests leading to invitations being sent to priests in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.[40]

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[37] Babatunde Adedibu, *Coat of Many Colours: The Origin, Growth, Distinctiveness and Contributions of Black Majority Churches to British Christianity* (London: Wisdom Summit, 2012).
[38] Hirpo Kumbi, *Mission and Movement: A Study of Ethiopian and Eritrean Evangelical Churches in the UK* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2018).
[39] Rebecca Catto, 'Reverse Mission: From the Global South to Mainline Churches', in D. Goodhew (ed.), *Church Growth in Britain* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), pp. 91-103.
[40] Harvey Kwiyani, *Sent forth: African Missionary Work in the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), pp. 123-128.

While the discussion above presents recent mapping of missionary activities of African migrant Christians in the West, it is important to mention that since around the 1940s, with the arrival of large Caribbean migration with the Empire Windrush to Britain, there has been some African and Caribbean presence within historic churches. The general assumption is that, when British historic churches rejected black Christians from around the 1940s, they left to start their own churches, hence the founding of BMC. A similar assumption is that all African and Caribbean people were rejected by these churches. These assumptions are not accurate; there were other reasons, such as mission to Britain and loyalty to Pentecostal denominations back home in the Caribbean or Africa, that led to the founding of some of these churches. In addition, some African and Caribbean Christians, due to their church affiliations back home, decided to stay within historic churches. It is the stories of those who stayed within the historic churches that are easily forgotten and lost today in the midst of the successes of BMC. Take, for example, the story of Sybil Phoenix (MBE), who came from Guyana to London in 1956. Despite much racial discrimination she experienced within and outside the church and personal tragedy, she remained part of the Methodist church. Sybil did not start her own church or join a BMC but worked within the Methodist church structures, creating independent agencies such as foster homes, youth clubs, and community projects to cater for the needs of black young people. It was in recognition of her work in the community in south-east London that she was awarded an MBE in 1972.[41]

The question is: why did Black Asian and other Ethnic Minority (BAME) people stay within British historic churches? There are several reasons for this as mentioned above, but an important reason is the fact that not all Africans, Asians, Caribbeans, or Latin Americans like independent Pentecostal churches (either white or black Pentecostals). Some African and Caribbean Christians within historic churches cannot even bear the fact that some of these churches exist, because they consider some of their teachings unbiblical – such as the Pentecostal doctrine of speaking in tongues, viewed by some as leading to confusion. Another reason accounting for the presence of African and Caribbean people in historic churches is that they want their children to attend church schools because of the standard of education within these schools. In order for their children to gain admission into these schools the parents have to at least attend these churches, if only to be recognised by the priest or vicar. We now have a situation where some people belong to two churches, attending Catholic mass in the morning and going to a Pentecostal church in the evening. One of the effects of this is that second- and third-generation Africans and Caribbeans are growing up in historic churches.

[41] J. Newbury, *Living in Harmony: The Story of Sybil Phoenix* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985), pp. 14-15.

The presence of Africans and Caribbeans within British historic churches has not been an easy journey, as there have been issues around race and ethnicity. An example, which will be considered in detail later, is the Baptist Apology for the legacy of the transatlantic enslavement of Africans and ongoing racism. But to remedy the issue of racism within these churches, racial justice ministries or agencies were founded. These ministries were set up to care pastorally for BAME Christians and to tackle racism within the historic churches. These agencies have also help facilitate conversations on the challenges of participating in multicultural, multi-ethnic churches. In the Church of England this led to the founding of the Committee for Black Anglican Concerns, later renamed the Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns; in the Baptist Union of Great Britain (Baptists Together), the ministry is known as the Racial Justice Group; in the United Reformed Church (URC) it is known as the Committee for Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministries; in the Methodist Church, it is the Committee for Racial Justice; and in the Catholic church the Catholic Association for Racial Justice.

## Examples of African Presence and Mission within Baptists Together

In this section, I offer various examples of African Christians and their mission approaches and practices to illustrate how reverse mission is taking place within the Baptist denomination in Britain. The ministry of African Christians within the Baptist denomination in England started with an African American, Peter Standford (1860-1909). Peter was born a slave in Virginia and became an ordained Baptist minister in 1878 in Hartford, Connecticut, USA. He came to England in 1882 and was invited to be the minister of Hope Street Baptist Chapel, Highgate, Birmingham in 1889 – making him the first black Baptist minister in Britain.[42] Other black Baptist ministers who were contemporaries of Peter Standford are the Jamaican-born Joseph Jackson Fuller (1825-1908), who served as a Baptist Missionary Society missionary to West Africa, and African American, Thomas L. Johnson (1836-1931), a Baptist minister who trained at Spurgeon's College in London and served the Baptist Missionary Society in West Africa as well.[43] Peter's story is significant as it offers us an earlier example of reverse

[42] See Paul Walker, *The Revd Thomas Peter Standford (1860-1909): Birmingham Coloured Preacher* (unpublished PhD Thesis, Manchester University, 2004); David Killingray and Joel Edwards (eds.), *Black Voices: The Shaping of our Christian Experience* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007).

[43] Sturge, *Look what the Lord has done*, p. 69; Black Baptists: Joseph Jackson Fuller (1825-1908) <http://israelolofinjana.wordpress.com/2014/02/06/black-baptist-joseph-jackson-fuller-1825-1908/> [accessed 14 November 2014]
Black Baptists: Thomas Lewis Johnson (1836-1921)
<http://israelolofinjana.wordpress.com/2014/02/18/black-baptists-thomas-lewis-johnson-1836-1921/>

mission, with the fact that he was invited to be a pastor of a white British church. The stories of his other contemporaries also serve to illustrate that the modern missionary movement was not an entirely European affair, because African Americans and Caribbeans were equally involved.

Probably one of the first Africans to be ordained as a Baptist minister in the 1960s was William Fransch, who came from Zimbabwe in 1968 in what was known then as Northern Rhodesia. William studied at Cliff College (1968-1969) and then at Bristol Baptist College (1970-1973). While studying at Bristol, he became the student minister at Stapleton Baptist Church in 1973. His other pastorates were Frithelstock Baptist church (this was a group of Baptist churches) in north Devon (1977-1982), Spurgeon Memorial Baptist Church in Guernsey (1982-1998), and finally Brockley Baptist Church in south-east London from 1998 to 2011, when he retired. Fransch did something quite significant in 1977: he walked with the cross with his wife Celia and their two children from Aberdeen, Scotland to Land's End (the south-western tip of England). This gave him and Celia the opportunity to share the gospel with many people along the way. The walk across the country took twenty-three days. Again in 1980, inspired by the story of Abram walking the length and breadth of the land God promised (Genesis 13.14-17), William walked across the breadth of the country (from Hartland Point in Devon to Margate in the east) with some people from Frithelstock Baptist Church. The walk, which took nine days, afforded Fransch and members of his church the opportunity to share the gospel with people along the way. Fransch's approach to mission through evangelism by applying the story of Abram as a migrant serve as an example of a missionary migrant, thus challenging the notion that most migrants are economic migrants. Missionary migrants are those who have migrated to other countries for the purposes of mission. Fransch came to Britain to pursue ministerial training and opportunities. As a missionary migrant he understood his mission primarily as evangelism and pastoral work.

The 1980s witnessed the beginning of the story of Kingsley Appiagyei, Senior Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in London. Kingsley's story is of particular interest because of his immense contributions to Baptists Together through church planting and also because he considers himself to be a reverse missionary.[44] He came to England in 1985 to study biblical Hebrew, with the intention of going back to Ghana to teach in a seminary. While he was studying for a degree programme at Spurgeon's College, he felt called to stay in the UK. After completing his studies, he started Trinity Baptist Church in his house in South Norwood. In 1994 they

[accessed 4 November 2014]

[44] Trinity Baptist Church documentary video about their history and vision (2017). This video documentary was shown at the opening of their new premises in Croydon on 16 April 2017.

moved to their current building on Thornlaw Road in South Norwood. Trinity Baptist Church, under the leadership of Appiagyei, has planted around seventeen churches in Europe and an orphanage home in Ghana called Trinity Hope Centre. Two of these churches are in Italy, one in Denmark, another in the Netherlands, and a further one in Ghana.[45] There are about twelve Trinity Baptist church plants in the UK. Apart from the extensive church planting strategy of Kingsley, he also became the first African man to become the president of the Baptist Union in 2009-2010. Appiagyei's ministry and leadership have raised many emerging ministers who have gone to train for the Baptist ministry either through Spurgeon's College in London or alternative routes.

On 16 April 2017 (Easter Sunday), Trinity Baptist Church opened and dedicated its new premises called Oasis House in Croydon. The event was quite significant and heralded a new chapter in the history of the church. In attendance were local politicians in Croydon as well as national politicians. The occasion also included many high-profile church leaders from within the British evangelical church and BMC in the UK.

The new church building with a seating capacity of 3000 people was dedicated by the general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Enoch Adeboye. One significant feature of the new premises was its vision for the second-generation members of the church, who were not only actively involved at the opening ceremony but are also involved in the shaping of the vision and mission of the church. Many of the second-generation members who were born and dedicated in the church since its inception in 1987 spoke of how they have grown in the church and have been given space to follow God in their own way. As a result, the young people have their own choir and there are many other opportunities to engage in the life and mission of the church through sports, music, and social and community action projects. The engagement with second-generation Africans is quite impressive, considering that many African churches are struggling to engage this generation in Britain. Appiagyei's story illustrates that of a reverse missionary whose mission approach and strategy is primarily through church planting, church growth, and training emerging leaders.

One of the significant leaders to have emerged from Kingsley's leadership is Francis Sarpong. In 1995, Francis Sarpong founded Calvary Charismatic Baptist Church in East London, which today is recognised as one of the largest Baptist churches within Baptists Together. Calvary Charismatic Baptist Church has also embarked on extensive church plants, planting about twenty church congregations all over the world. They have around fifty pastors and Sarpong is the president of the Progressive National

[45] Olofinjana, *Reverse in Ministry*, p. 46.

Baptist Convention – an international regional association of Baptist ministers and churches. Sarpong's ministry serves as an example of an African pastor and missionary involved in church growth. This becomes significant in the climate that sees churches declining and closing.

An important African pastor whose leadership emerged within the 1980s is Kofi Manful, Senior Pastor of Faith Baptist Church in London. He has been involved in various conversations and committees among Baptists in London regarding racial justice issues. He, with other African and Caribbean ministers, formed the Black Ministers' Forum in London in the mid-1990s to respond to the loneliness and isolation felt by black ministers in the London region.[46] Kofi Manful's ministry approach combines racial justice and leadership development, as he has also supported pastorally and trained emerging leaders.

Kate Coleman is a significant leader in the unfolding story of Africans within Baptists Together. Born in Ghana, she came to the UK at a young age to join her family. She later became the first accredited and ordained black woman in the Baptist Union in 1991 and the first black woman to be the president of the Baptist Union in 2006-2007. She has served in various national capacities within the wider UK church, such as being the chair of the Evangelical Alliance Council. Kate is one of the foremost thinkers in the area of British womanist theology, as she reflects on what it means to be a black female Christian minister/leader within the Baptist context.[47] Kate's ministry illustrates uniquely that of a pioneer and theologian engaged in leadership development and transformation internationally.

Osoba Otagie's story as a reverse missionary who came from Nigeria to Britain in 2005 illustrates the intentionality in mission and sacrificing a good job in Nigeria to answer God's call. Osoba recalls saying, "I love London for holidays but not to live permanently." But he felt God telling him to let go of the mission work he was doing in Nigeria and his business. God assured and encouraged him that he was not going to leave him bored and frustrated in London after the very busy time of mission work and corporate business in Nigeria. This encouragement served as his call to minister in Britain. Osoba had a strong desire to work with the locals to spread the gospel rather than join a Nigerian fellowship. Since moving to live in the UK, Osoba has been involved in pastoring three Baptist churches, working within the local ecumenical scene in London and beyond. He currently works with the

[46] Sivarkumar Rajagopalan, 'Racial Justice', in Faith Bowers, Joe Kapolyo and Israel Olofinjana (eds.), *Encountering London: London Baptists in the 21st Century* (London: London Baptist Association, 2014), p. 256.

[47] Michele Mahon, *Sisters with Voices: A Study of the Experiences and Challenges faced by Black Women in London Baptist Association Church Ministry Settings* (unpublished MA Dissertation, Oasis College, 2014), p. 7.

Bible Society, serving as a regional director. Osoba's ministry encompasses that of mission strategist and thinker, as he sits on a number of boards of mission agencies or organisations offering missional insights. He is also a qualified and certified cultural intelligence trainer, offering intercultural courses in churches and the corporate world. Osoba is a unique reverse missionary, because he brings an understanding of the church and the business world in his mission approach.

While the above stories illustrate the different mission practices engaged in by African Christians within Baptists Together, it must be highlighted that the significant presence of Africans and African Caribbean people within Baptists Together has contributed immensely to the survival of our churches and also led to important discussions. The London Baptist Association (LBA) recognises that, without the presence of Africans, African Caribbean, and other migrants in the LBA churches, many of its congregations would have declined and closed. In essence, their presence ensures the continued survival of LBA churches. This is an important factor for the continuing mission of Baptist congregations in London. As mentioned briefly above, the presence of Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) in historic churches has led to racial justice conversations within these churches. Among British Baptists this has taken the form of the Apology and the follow up strategy called The Journey. The next section explores this in more detail.

## Reflections on the Apology as a Paradigm for Racial Justice

A significant part of the journey of Africans and African Caribbeans within British Baptist history is the pivotal moment in 2007 when the Baptist Union (now known as Baptists Together) decided to offer an Apology for the pernicious legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and ongoing racism. One might ask why the Baptist Union apologised for the slave trade, as it was not even in existence when the horrific trade took place for centuries. The rationale behind the Apology can be gleaned from the following statement:

> In a spirit of weakness, humility and vulnerability, we acknowledge that we are only at the start of a journey, but we are agreed that this must not prevent us speaking and acting at a Kairos moment.
>
> Therefore, we acknowledge our share in and benefit from our nation's participation in the transatlantic slave trade.
>
> We acknowledge that we speak as those who have shared in and suffered from the legacy of slavery, and its appalling consequences for God's world.
>
> We offer our apology to God and to our brothers and sisters for all that has created and still perpetuates the hurt which originated from the horror of slavery (Sam Sharpe Project 2014).

The Apology was followed by an initiative described as The Journey, which is a vision strategy by the Racial Justice Group of Baptists Together to ensure that our structures change to reflect the diversity that God has given us. It is important to know that many African pastors within the Baptist denomination have different views about the Apology. Some of my colleagues welcomed the Apology, noting that it was a start of a conversation towards racial justice. Other colleagues observed that more work still needs to be done in regard to racial justice within Baptists Together, as the Apology was not enough. One colleague commented that the Apology came rather late as it should have been made ages ago, while another colleague felt the Apology was divisive and not helpful.

My own reflections about the apology started on 3 June 2008 at the Museum of London, Sugar and Slavery in Docklands. It was a Baptists Together meeting to follow up on the conversation about the Apology. Different views about the Apology were presented: one from those who struggled to understand why a whole new generation who have nothing to do with the transatlantic slave trade have to apologise to current descendants of the victims of the slave trade. The other view was from those who felt that, because we still experience the consequences of the slave trade such as racism, prejudice, and neo-colonialism, an Apology is necessary for reconciliation in order to move forward. A question that always arises within these conversations is whether there is any theological or scriptural justification for the Apology. John Cowell, one of the eminent Baptist theologians at the Museum of London, Sugar and Slavery, argued that there is, if we consider what Paul said: 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it' (I Corinthians 12.26, NIV). In essence, if our brothers and sisters who are from African and Caribbean background are feeling oppressed through the pains of racism and marginalisation, then, as the body of Christ, we should feel that pain too and do something about it. The question remains as to what changes the Apology will effect in the life of Baptists Together?

As explained earlier, The Journey is a racial justice strategy to move British Baptists from words to actions in regard to issues of integration, inclusion, and cultural diversity. The Journey's vision was to set out practical steps to enable Baptists Together to become fully integrated in ways that reflect their rich cultural diversity and so live out their core values of being a culturally inclusive community.[48]

The Racial Justice Group is working towards ensuring that Baptist churches, colleges, BMS World Mission, regional associations, and other

[48] Sam Sharpe Project: The Journey <http://www.samsharpeproject.org/about-the-project/the-journey> [accessed 9 September 2014]

structures within Baptists Together represent and reflect the multicultural, multi-ethnic, intergenerational diversity that exists within our denomination. My reflection and observation since 2010, when I became involved with the processes of The Journey, is that Baptists Together is gradually and slowly shifting towards a fuller representation, but I agree with some of my colleagues that more work still needs to be done. A current concern is the need for our theological colleges to move from teaching only Western theology to including and teaching theologies in recognition of the fact that World Christianity has shifted to the Majority World. Part of this process will be to have tutors and teachers in our theological colleges who are from African, Caribbean, and Asian backgrounds.

The year 2017 marked a decade since the Apology was presented. To reflect on this journey, a book was commissioned and edited by Anthony Reddie, with Wale Hudson-Roberts and Gale Richards.[49] This publication was the first of its kind, with contributions from Baptist scholars drawn from Jamaica, USA, Britain, and African backgrounds. In addition, other resources to help Baptist churches reflect on issues of cultural diversity and migration were also produced. Finally, a conference was organised at Spurgeon's College in London on 8 April 2017 themed *Justification and Justice: The Two Luthers*. The conference reflected theologically on the Apology by looking at the connection between the theology of Martin Luther (1483-1546), Justification by Faith, and the theology of racial justice of Martin Luther King Junior (1929-1968) through the work of the Civil Rights Movement. The conference speakers stimulated a lot of thought around the issues of racial justice and gender justice as essential categories of mission.

One person who has been involved in the Apology, The Journey, and the ten years' reflection on the Apology is the British-born African Wale Hudson-Roberts, the Racial Justice enabler for Baptists Together. Wale is an African minister who holds one of the most senior positions within Baptists Together. He has personally and officially been involved in facilitating the conversations around the journey of the Apology. As the Racial Justice enabler for Baptists Together, his mission policy and approach has been to see integration, representation, and diversity at every level of our governance and structure. These policies are being implemented through the Racial Justice Group, working in conjunction with various executive teams of the denomination. Wale has been at the forefront of challenging Baptists Together in regard to institutional racism, because he considers issues of racial justice to be an important part of mission. His approach to mission is through the lens of black liberative theological praxis. This approach is very

[49] Anthony Reddie, Wale Hudson-Roberts and Gale Richards, *Journeying to Justice: Contributions to the Baptist Tradition across the Black Atlantic Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2017).

different from the other examples considered earlier in that they express mission primarily through discipleship, church planting, and evangelism. These varied mission practices stem from how these leaders understand mission, but one thing that is clear is that Africans within Baptists Together are making significant contribution to mission.

## Conclusion

In this article I have explored key literature on the study of African Christianity, especially as it relates to reverse mission in Britain. This served to put into context the missionary activity of African migrant Christians within Baptists Together in Britain. It became clear from this survey that African Pentecostals and Charismatics have dominated the scene, but that there is the need to begin to map and document the increasing numbers of African Christians' activities within historic churches. The article has considered some of the reasons that account for the large presence of Africans within historic churches, arguing that African migrant Christians within Baptists Together are making their own contributions with varied mission practices. Part of their mission contributions include pastoring some of the largest churches within Baptists Together, evangelism, church planting, and championing racial justice matters. This contribution must, however, be put into perspective as we still have mono-cultural churches – African congregations led by Africans.

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# The Inclusion of People with a Learning Disability in the Church: A Case Study

Ross E. Hamilton

This paper is a case study of Dumbarton Baptist Church's response to a particular ethical issue within their local Scottish community.[1] The article will include a description of the ethical issue and the church's response, explaining the theological and social reasons that have led the church in its thinking. Subsequently, a thorough evaluation and critical assessment of the ethical stance taken will be included, with the purpose of offering suggestions regarding ways in which such ethical challenges might be handled in the future and the impact these may have on current practices. This is intended for multiple audiences interested in theological social ethics and the involvement of those with a learning disability in church life.

## Keywords

Theology; social ethics; learning disability; church

## Learning Disabilities and Social Needs

In 2011, a Scottish Government census estimated that out of approximately 5,000,000 people residing in the country, roughly 26,000 had a learning disability.[2] For many of these communicating, concentrating for long periods, and processing new information can be very stressful and difficult to cope with.[3] As a result, church services in their current format, which may cause little issue for the vast majority of the congregation, risk excluding those with a learning disability.[4] Although Scottish Baptist church services are not denominationally bound to a specific structure, they generally adopt some variation of 'scripture, prayer and sermon, interspersed with hymns' –

[1] It would be appropriate to mention my own self-involvement with this project, as this is the church community of which I am a member.

[2] 'Population Characteristics', <https://www.sldo.ac.uk/> [accessed 10 May 2018]

[3] 'People with Learning Disabilities and the Scottish Criminal Justice System', *Learning Disabilities and the CJS*, 5 (2011) <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/03/21142925/5> [accessed 13 May 2018]

[4] The National Health Service (NHS) describes learning disabilities as ranging between 'mild, moderate and severe'. For some this means learning new skills may take longer than usual, though they are able to look after themselves and communicate easily. For others, however, they may not be able to communicate at all, requiring help for simple everyday tasks. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/learning-disabilities/#mild-moderate-or-severe-learning-disability> [accessed 13 May 2018] Importantly, it must be recognised that a learning disability is *not* the same as a learning difficulty or mental illness.

a fair description of a standard Sunday morning at Dumbarton Baptist Church (DBC).[5] As a result, an ethical question is raised: what can the church community do to involve and serve those with a learning disability?

There are various social reasons which have led this particular church to become involved in this issue. In 2018, a minimum of £1.2 million future social welfare cuts were announced in West Dunbartonshire alone.[6] With the town of Dumbarton already listed 'among the most poverty stricken in the country', there is increasing pressure on those who require special services and support.[7] The pressure is felt more strongly in relation to *isolation* and *connection*. Though cuts vary from region to region, a reduction in day services has generally led to increased loneliness and disconnectedness among the disabled community, heaping additional pressure onto family and professional carers. According to Mencap (a UK charity whose vision is a world where people with a learning disability are valued, listened to, and included), a drop in social welfare support means these people 'can be left socially isolated, bored and lonely', losing important friendships and support networks in the process.[8] For this reason, there is a strong social need for the church in this area.

## Theological, Biblical, and Charitable Inspirations

There were two primary theological 'inspirations' which have led the church in their ethical thinking. The first of these occurred in the summer of 2017, when I spent a month in my old home city of Tunis with my mother. Extreme heat and limited internet connection led her to pick up (and not put down for the entire stay) the wonderful book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* by Miroslav Volf.[9] For Volf, the church is founded on the generosity of her own self in Christ, making it 'a community founded on generosity'.[10] As a result, 'giving' must be at the core of its very identity. Not only giving, but giving selflessly, with enthusiasm and without pride, forgetting the self and his sufferings for the sake of the other.[11] My

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[5] *New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. by Paul Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 482.
[6] Andrew McNair, '£1.2million axe falls on West Dunbartonshire health and social care' (2018) <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/12million-axe-falls-west-dunbartonshire-12501609> [accessed 10 May 2018]
[7] Carla Donald, 'Revealed: The most deprived areas in West Dunbartonshire', (2016) <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/revealed-most-deprived-areas-west-8749261> [accessed 10 May 2018]
[8] 'Stuck at home: the impact of day service cuts on people with a learning disability', (2016) <https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-08/Stuck_at_home.pdf> [accessed 10 May 2018]
[9] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2005).
[10] Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 87.
[11] Ibid., p. 103.

mother was compelled to share this with the church body, asking them to consider what it means to give selflessly and, more specifically, what it means to give to 'those who cannot repay the favour'.[12] For love to truly be 'self-giving' – without agenda - it must be practised 'in God'.[13] If practised 'in God', the gift becomes both 'for God' and 'from God', bearing fruit in a 'bountiful harvest', even when the receivers are unable to reciprocate the gift.[14] From this theological perspective, the church was compelled to offer the gift of time and resources for those who needed it.

The second theological inspiration was the *Sermon on the Mount*. One line was particularly influential: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.' (Matthew 5.8). As the idea progressed, others became involved, many of whom had first-hand experience with vulnerable adults. Several of this group had been touched by the 'uncomplicated clarity' sometimes held by people with a learning disability and connected this with the above beatitude.[15] Together they agreed that the church could learn a great deal from people with a learning disability and suffer a tremendous loss without them. Though not always the case, their experience had taught them that people with a learning disability are generally not bound by the cultural norms and expectations with which many high-achieving people find themselves bogged down. The dynamic of their social and physical powerlessness means that interactions occur on a far simpler level and therefore without hidden agenda. It is through such interactions that a form of purity of heart and kindness can be felt and experienced in a very real way. For the group at DBC, they see their calling as not only to include these people for the joy of it, but to enable them to see God in a clearer way.

Over the next few months, the idea developed from the creative thinking of a few to a serious project, desiring to make all aspects of church life more accessible to people with a learning disability. To do so, DBC partnered with *Prospects: Access to Life*.[16] *Prospects* was an independent Christian organisation (now under the *Livability Group*) working with local churches, offering training and resources to ensure that people with a learning disability have the opportunity to celebrate and journey in the

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[12] *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2011), p. 379.
[13] Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 103.
[14] This is not to suggest that no enjoyment or moral benefit can be experienced, but it is not the reason for the giving.
[15] Debra Dean Murphy, *Happiness, Health, and Beauty: The Christian Life in Everyday Terms* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), p. 27.
[16] Jonathan Edwards, Executive Ambassador for *Prospects*, does acknowledge that every person is unique, and it is difficult to generalise people's individual needs. However, their programme is designed to be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbiSfgqUhcA> [accessed 5 May 2018]

Christian faith.[17] Using these resources, the church attempted to create a ministry group in which anyone can worship, learn, and build relationships, no matter what their intellectual, literary, or social capacities. Though still in its early stages, the Dumbarton group meets every month at the local community centre – familiar and known to the group – where there is simple, sung worship, a strong emphasis on visual learning involving props and actions, crafts, and biblical texts explained in a simple and inclusive way. Everyone has the chance to give and receive support and make connections they otherwise would struggle to find within the current community conditions.

## Assessment of the Ethical Stance

The next part of this article will provide a thorough evaluation and critical assessment of the ethical stance taken, then I will offer suggestions for ways in which such ethical challenges might be handled in the future and what impact these suggestions may have on current practices.

### 1. Learning Disability and the Capacity for Spiritual Development

An excellent starting point would be to explore the capacity for spiritual development and its importance among those with a learning disability. In order to critically evaluate the ethical response of DBC, this part of the discussion will allow the practical benefits of their actions to be evaluated. To do so, we turn first to John Swinton. Swinton claims that the spiritual needs of the learning disabled community have been largely neglected, stifled as an 'underused resource' in their lives.[18] To investigate this claim, he was commissioned by the *Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities* to conduct a qualitative research paper, the result of which allowed him to conclude that spiritual care has had immense benefits for those with a learning disability. The research reported that people were left 'feeling happier' and feeling a 'sense of strength and support' as a result.[19] On this basis, people with a learning disability are certainly capable of experiencing spirituality and spiritual development. Furthermore, the development of spiritual 'meaningfulness' is of huge importance, and

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[17] <https://livability.org.uk/celebrating-40-year-journey-charity-prospects-people-learning-disabilities/> [accessed 29 August 2019]

[18] John Swinton, 'Spirituality and learning disabilities: a qualitative study', *British Journal of Nursing* (2002), Vol. 11, No. 14, p. 949.

[19] Ibid., p. 951.

contrasts with the often shallow support they receive.[20] Meaning or meaningfulness is an aspect of social care which has received increased attention over the last two decades and has seen growing benefits alongside it. Examples of this involve an increased focus 'on what "good" looks like' within 'community, education, employment and leisure activities' for those in care.[21] Rather than moving from one source of entertainment to another, carers are encouraged to help those with a learning disability find something important or meaningful which has proven to be 'an important determinant of psychological wellbeing'.[22]

This holistic approach is what DBC wish to adopt, bringing an intentionality and practical quality to their missional endeavours. This approach is holistic in the sense that it seeks to approach more than one aspect of the needs of those with a learning disability. It could be asked, however: to what extent can this be achieved without involvement in Sunday services? More specifically, to what extent will they benefit from it? Within a greatly simplified definition, the benefits of church are twofold: social and educational.[23] Australian education expert Slee insists that social inclusion and educational benefits go hand in hand, for everyone involved in the community. For him, an inclusive approach to education has huge social benefits, where 'every child is valued and experiences a sense of belonging'.[24] From this perspective, people with a learning disability would certainly benefit from attending Sunday morning services. However, despite Slee's confidence, his opinion is not widely accepted. It is perhaps slightly idealistic to presume that inclusion on every level will be universally positive. In 2015, the Guardian revealed some of the damaging effects such an 'inclusion […] at all costs' approach can have in educational contexts.[25] 'Behavioural difficulties', particularly among children with a learning

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[20] Jenny Webb, *A Guide to Psychological Understanding of People with Learning Disabilities: Eight Domains and Three Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 164.
[21] Jim Mansell, 'Raising Our Sights: Guide to What People do in the Day', in *Raising Our Sights* (2010), No. 9, p. 5.
[22] Webb, *A Guide to Psychological Understanding of People with Learning Disabilities*, p. 164.
[23] Arguably, 'spirituality' should have its own category. For this section, however, it has been placed under 'education'. In order for spiritual development to occur, there requires some shift in knowledge or 'learning'.
[24] Cited in Cathy Cologon, 'Students with and without disability: it's always better when we're together', (2013) <https://theconversation.com/students-with-and-without-disability-its-always-better-when-were-together-21014> [accessed 18 January 2019]
[25] 'Secret teacher: I am all for inclusion in principle, but it doesn't always work' (2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/may/23/secret-teacher-support-inclusion-but-not-at-any-cost> [accessed 18 January 2019]

disability, can be very difficult to manage for those who have not had the necessary training – which most church-goers will not have had.[26]

Harshaw is a prominent figure within the area of learning disabilities and theology and is a worthy contributor to this discussion.[27] Harshaw has been critical of the church's engagement with people with a learning disability and the various 'prevailing assumptions' upon which their exclusion has been justified.[28] Using the social model of disability as a starting point, she sets out a theological challenge to the church to practise 'genuine inclusion, […] recognizing and valuing their relationships not only with *us* but with *God*'.[29] The social model is an encouraging starting point, but Harshaw is convinced that further development is required, particularly if the goal is to 'respect their capacities for spiritual experience as individuals in their own right'.[30] Perhaps Rachael Sharman's suggestion (an expert in Psychology and Education) that people 'find the right balance' when merging people of vastly different social and educational capabilities is a wise one.[31] This seems an appropriate approach, particularly in light of both the mixed reviews of contemporary research and the uniqueness requirements of each individual.[32] In this way the ethical response of the church is meeting a spiritual need amongst those with a learning disability and they are certainly capable of benefiting from it on a very deep level. However, given the potential challenges which may follow, the church may have to confront difficult situations in the future which will require further thinking.[33]

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[26] The purpose of exploring these issues is to avoid tackling the ethical issue 'in theory' without acknowledging the, often difficult, realities that such practices contain. See 'Secret teacher: I am all for inclusion in principle, but it doesn't always work' (2015).

[27] She is helpful, given that only educational perspectives have been considered thus far. Jill Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016).

[28] Jill Harshaw, 'Autism and Love: A response to "Autism and Love, Learning What Love Looks Like" by Professor John Swinton', *Practical Theology* (2012), Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 1.

[29] Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, p. 50 (italics original). The social model of disability 'proposes that what makes someone disabled is not their medical condition, but the attitudes and structures of society', found in <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/s/social-model-disability> [accessed 28 August 2019]

[30] Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, p. 50.

[31] Rachael Sharman, 'Can inclusive education do more harm than good?', (2015) <https://theconversation.com/can-inclusive-education-do-more-harm-than-good-43183> [accessed 18 January 2018]

[32] Experiences are generally both negative and positive. See Gary N. Siperstein and others, 'A National Study of Youth Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disabilities', *Council for Exceptional Children* (2007), Vol, 73, No. 4.

[33] Later in this paper some suggestions for future practice will be presented.

## 2. 'Humanhood' and Value

'Humanhood' and human worth have been widely discussed in contemporary bioethics.[34] In order to navigate troublesome ethical situations, bioethicists have been forced to consider the essence of humanity and its implications for medical procedure.[35] Hauerwas sees humanity as far too complex to be reduced to a 'criterion', claiming many traditional definitions have had exclusionary consequences for those with 'developmental disabilities'.[36] As an example, Joseph Fletcher's 'indicators of humanhood' intended to measure human value through factors which include 'self-awareness' and 'self-control', controversially stating that 'any individual who falls below the I.Q. 40 mark in a standard Stanford-Binet test […] is questionably a person'.[37] Such a perspective attributes human worth to people 'based on their ability to perform', a stark contrast to the biblical narrative.[38] A biblical perspective reveals that we are all human created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27), each given value by God himself through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[39] In this way, people with a learning disability are in no way less-than-human, but live as 'icons of the crucified son' in whom we find the 'ultimate foundation of human existence'.[40] In fact, at the very heart of Jesus, we see a God who 'disabled' himself for the sake of humanity.[41] In his life he took upon himself the rawness of human experience and the trials which accompany them, disabling the fulness of his own power (Luke 4.9-12), and in his ministry walked alongside those who were socially considered less-than-human, built friendships with the rejected, and invited the marginalised to his side. According to Brett Webb-Mitchell, this is the challenge to which more churches should be rising, by 'inviting, welcoming and accepting' those whom society has left outside (Luke 14.15-24). On this basis he claims that both those with and without disabilities are called by the power of the Holy

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[34] For example, see *Source Book in Bioethics: A Documentary History*, ed. by Albert R. Jonsen and others (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1998), pp. 22-28.
[35] *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*, ed. by John Swinton (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 127.
[36] Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Retarded and the Criteria for the Human', *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* (2004), Vol. 8, No. 3/4, p. 127.
[37] Joseph Fletcher, 'Indicators of Humanhood: A Tentative Profile of Man', *The Hastings Centre Report: Institute of Society, Ethics and Life Sciences* (1972), Vol. 10, No. 5.
[38] *Graduate Theological Education and the Human Experience of Disability*, ed. by Robert Anderson (London: Haworth Press, 2003), p. 62.
[39] Neil Messer, *Theological Neuroethics: Christian Ethics Meets the Science of the Human Brain* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), p. 134.
[40] Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Illinois: IVP Books, 2008), p. 39.
[41] Jennifer Anne Cox, *Jesus: The Disabled God* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017), p. xii.

Spirit, 'regardless of our abilities or limitations, toward the Kingdom of God', affirming the ethical response of the church community.[42]

## 3. Otherness and Diversity

This case study raises some significant areas for theological reflection, including matters of otherness and diversity in the body of the church. According to a UK government report (2014), people with disabilities are 'significantly more likely to experience unfair treatment at work' and a 'substantially higher proportion of individuals who live in families with disabled members live in poverty'.[43] In addition to this, there is overwhelming evidence of social discrimination towards those with a learning disability.[44] For this reason, the 'self-giving love' described by Volf, which has underpinned much of the church's theological ethical reasoning, is an excellent starting point to begin bridging this social division. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf writes of the 'self-giving love which overcomes human enmity and the creation of space in the self to receive estranged humanity' demonstrated by Christ on the cross, which is to be modelled by his followers.[45] This vision Musekura interprets as one in which Christ is open and inclusive – 'accepting the other in others'.[46] It is a vision which inspires the members of such a community to cross the boundary between alienation and acceptance, engaging in 'mutual affirmation' through the enrichment of their own humanity.[47]

Through the *Prospects* group at DBC, people with a learning disability will be affirmed in their worth, accepted for who they are, and engaged in a way which enables the development, and flourishing, of their spirituality. In encouraging a community to welcome the 'other', it demonstrates an ethical practice which seeks to follow the command of Jesus to love one another in the same way that he has loved them (John 13.34). For Hays, this is the 'one clear directive that Jesus issues for his followers', bearing testimony to the

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[42] Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009), p. 19.

[43] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-facts-and-figures/disability-facts-and-figures> [accessed 10 May 2018]

[44] This will be expanded later in this paper. See, for example, Jane Kirby, 'People with learning disabilities face NHS discrimination' (2010) <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/people-with-learning-disabilities-face-nhs-discrimination-2006395.html> [accessed 10 May 2018] and Rachel Williams, 'Poll reveals widespread discrimination against people with learning disabilities' (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/jul/14/discrimination-learning-disabilities> [accessed 10 May 2018]

[45] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1996), p. 127.

[46] Célestin Musekura, *An Assessment of Contemporary Models of Forgiveness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 98.

[47] Ibid., p. 93.

love of God through the 'humble service of others'.[48] The benefits of this will be twofold – it will be informative and transformative. It will be informative for those currently involved in the church as well as those with whom they connect, gaining a richer understanding of the experiences of those with a learning disability and raising their awareness of alternative forms and streams of spiritual development. However, it will also be transformative, as prejudices, attitudes, cultural perspectives, values, and theological interpretations will be challenged, pushing for a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, to be a community, and what it means to be a follower of Christ for everyone involved.[49]

## 4. The Sermon on the Mount as the Basis for Christian Ethics

Having established that the church's ethical response will challenge those within the church, one could ask whether the Sermon on the Mount *should* be the basis for the development of theological ethics. For Glen Stassen, much of 'malformed Christian practices, moral beliefs and moral witness' can be directly linked to what he terms a 'Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount evasion'.[50] What this means is that this area of scripture in Matthew's gospel is rarely used in developing and forming church practices. Seeking to change this, Stassen calls on the church to 'let Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, set the agenda for Christian ethics.'[51] In their book, *Kingdom Ethics*, Gushee and Stassen cleverly present the teachings of Jesus as the foundation of ethical practices, elevating the Sermon on the Mount as 'the charter document for Christian living'.[52]

Scholars such as Weiss and Schweitzer differ slightly in their view, interpreting the sermon rather as an interim ethic, 'developed and proclaimed as a temporary way of life by Jesus under the pressure of an imminent Parousia'.[53] Weiss, especially, interpreted the sermon as 'otherworldly' and not a 'present reality', claiming that to interpret it as such 'is to violate its enthusiastic mood'.[54] There is certainly an eschatological aspect of this passage, but Lawson shares the concern that the Sermon on the Mount could

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[48] Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 144.
[49] John Swinton, 'Disability Theology', in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Ian A. McFarland and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[50] David Gushee and Glen Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), Preface.
[51] Ibid., p. 12.
[52] Ibid., p. 31.
[53] Cited in Raymond Collins, *Christian Morality: Biblical Foundations* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 224.
[54] Cited in Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 95-97.

be reduced to a set of 'rules, regulations, and requirements that a believer must rigidly keep in order to qualify for heaven'.[55] Instead it should be a 'way of life that governs, guides, and saturates the character of the individual believer as well as the faith community in general', echoing Stassen's hope that it could halt 'the vicious cycles of greed, judgment, lust, hatred, and violence', certainly not fuelling oppressive legalism.[56]

Fedler also believes the Sermon on the Mount has been underused in Christian practice, but cites a Niebuhrian position as the cause.[57] Fedler claims that many believers would rather accept Niebuhr's, arguably nihilistic, claim that 'the goodness of man is too corrupted by sin' to adhere to such principles,[58] in order to 'avoid the hard work of trying to transform their lives'.[59] Though this is a strong statement to make, like Stassen, Fedler convincingly insists that what Jesus taught were 'practice norms', intended for transformation and redemption.[60] For this reason, it would be fair to say that 'the Sermon on the Mount cannot be isolated from the Gospel, nor from the life and person of Jesus', and therefore must function as part of the basis for the development of theological ethics.[61]

## Evaluation, Concerns, and Suggestions for Future Practice

Considering what has already been discussed, there is a clear need for the church to involve those with a learning disability in various areas of its practice and community, and it may be well-timed within the UK context – considering recent social welfare cuts. Since the introduction of austerity measures in 2010, 'cuts to social security and public services, falling incomes, and rising unemployment' have heaped pressure onto the poorest areas in the country.[62] According to Oxfam, 'austerity will increase inequality in what is already one of the most unequal developed countries', widening the gap between those at the top of the wealth bracket and those near the bottom. This is of great social and theological significance, as many instances across the globe point to inequality as a breeding-place for

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[55] Dan Lawson, 'Transforming Initiatives: Leadership Ethics from The Sermon on The Mount', in *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* (2008-2009), Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 30.
[56] Lawson, 'Transforming Initiatives', p. 30.
[57] Kyle D. Fedler, *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2006), p. 171.
[58] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2013), p. 31.
[59] Fedler, *Exploring Christian Ethics*, p. 171.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Lawson, 'Transforming Initiatives', p. 30.
[62] <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/cs-true-cost-austerity-inequality-uk-120913-en.pdf> [accessed 2 April 2018].

otherness and exclusion.[63] In this case, it could be argued that, in order to overcome otherness and alienation, there needs to be some form of systemic change. It could be argued further that, if this is not on the agenda for DBC (and other churches in the area), its 'transformative' potential could be limited. This would be the position of Bradshaw, who believes the key to social transformation is through 'transformative subordination', in which Christians 'influence social institutions by simultaneously submitting to (them) […] and maintaining the integrity of their own moral agency'.[64] This is not to diminish the work of DBC, but to highlight ways in which this transforming initiative and its theological reasoning may be further developed.

At this point Volf's social vision of giving comes into question, in which he believes society will be changed by the individual social agents themselves,[65] whereas others have a more structural outlook. That is, Volf feels social change will be achieved through the changing of hearts, one by one, while Swanson and Williams' statement that '*everything* is affected by politics' suggests they operate within a wider social paradigm (although they do not directly contradict Volf).[66] Liberation theologian Boff would also approach this scenario differently from Volf, insisting that oppressive systems and structures which draw society further from God's image must be challenged and called out.[67] In light of this, the critique to DBC's ethical stance is that to overcome social otherness you also have to challenge the practices which have led to social inequality in the first place.

Considering this evaluation, it would be appropriate to suggest three specific ways in which this ethical challenge might be handled in the future:

1. The implementation of a *Prospects* group is inherently good, marking an enormously positive step towards the church's commitment to inclusivity and hospitality. However, in an interview with CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International), Jonathan Edwards acknowledged the need for Sunday morning services to also become more accessible to those with a learning disability.[68] For instance, a

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[63] For example, the experience of the Roma people, see *Social Inequality & The Politics of Representation: A Global Landscape*, ed. by Celine-Marie Pascale (Washington: Sage, 2013), p. 71. Also the Haitian hierarchy, see *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality*, ed. by Elisa P Reis and Mick Moore (London: Zed Books, 2005), p. 127.

[64] Bruce Bradshaw, *Change Across Cultures: A Narrative Approach to Social Transformation* (Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2002), p. 142.

[65] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, p. 21.

[66] Eric Swanson and Sam Williams, *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), p. 159 (italics original). However, they do acknowledge that means that '*every* person in *every* domain can be engaged in the process of kingdom transformation' (italics added).

[67] Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. xvii.

[68] A Vision For An Inclusive Church: Jonathan Edwards, *Prospects*, online video recording, YouTube, 28 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbiSfgqUhcA> [accessed 5 May 2018].

Sunday service which is 'more visual' can help on a number on levels, taking the emphasis off written material for those who cannot read, allowing others to maintain concentration levels for longer periods of time. In this respect, some considerations should be made to involve and include people with a learning disability in all areas of church life, especially a Sunday morning. Although inclusion and participation are largely dependent on individual abilities and limitations, the church has a duty of hospitality to all those who attend.

2. A second suggestion for future practice is the use of 'Makaton'. Makaton is 'a language programme using signs and symbols to help people to communicate' in a flexible and personalised way.[69] Three ways in which Makaton can be used are to 'share thoughts, choices and emotions', 'take part in games and songs', and 'listen to, read and tell stories' at a level suitable to the person communicating.[70] Makaton training is highly useful for those who wish to work among people with a learning disability, as it greatly enhances communicative possibilities. Training is available through online resources, textbooks, and sessions which are delivered in person if there is a tutor nearby.[71] Makaton training sessions would be a highly useful and beneficial way of using church resources, enabling those involved in the church group to feel more skilled and prepared for the work they intend to carry out. A related suggestion is the creation of a liaison between those with a learning disability and the rest of the church community – even having one trained Makaton volunteer or member of staff could be hugely beneficial.[72]

3. Thirdly, having explored the potential social implications of challenging the current systems which are in place, suggesting that 'otherness' is not only a natural cultural condition but caused in part by social inequality, DBC could challenge the public health system in one form or another. This is particularly pertinent, given that 38% of people with a learning disability will die of avoidable causes, compared to 9% of the general population.[73] The case isn't softened by the fact that over half the doctors working within the NHS believe

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[69] <https://www.makaton.org/aboutMakaton/> [accessed 10 May 2018].
[70] Ibid.
[71] <https://www.makaton.org/training/> [accessed 10 May 2018].
[72] This is an approach which many hospitals have taken, appointing trained nurses to act as a liaison officer between people, but also to train other people with learning disabilities to represent the needs of their community. See in *Learning Disabilities: Towards Inclusion*, ed. by Helen Atherton and Debbie Crickmore, 6th Edn (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2011), p. 233.
[73] <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/concerns-over-lack-clinical-training-causing-avoidable-learning-disability-deaths> [accessed 29 August 2019].

the learning disabled community receive poorer care than other groups.[74] The significance of transforming individual hearts cannot be underestimated, and the church certainly has a responsibility to model the love of God to wider society. Furthermore, it could be argued that an aspect of this responsibility is to communicate the sentiments of injustice of those who cannot do so themselves. Believers are bound by their covenant with the oppressed, following Christ who suffered in solidarity with the oppressed.[75] On this basis, going forward, I would suggest that DBC become active, not only partnering with those with a learning disability, but speaking on their behalf.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study of Dumbarton Baptist Church's response to a particular ethical issue within their local Scottish community. Inspired by the Sermon on the Mount and by Miroslav Volf's book *Free of Charge*,[76] the church was challenged to become more accessible for people with a learning disability. In the midst of increased government cuts and social isolation among those with a learning disability, this paper has sought to explore and critically examine the social and theological factors which have inspired the church's timely new project, concluding by offering some suggestions for future practice.

I have examined the impact of spiritual development among people with a learning disability, to explore whether the church's response would have any tangible impact on those invited. Drawing from John Swinton's research and a new move towards meaningfulness within social care, it became evident that spiritual care is extremely beneficial to people of all intellectual abilities. Secondly, I have argued that a biblical understanding of human worth requires all people to be viewed as created by God and called by him through the Holy Spirit towards his Kingdom. Thirdly, I raised the question of otherness and diversity, and how bearing witness to Christ, whose love welcomes the other into the self, could have both informative and transformative effects upon the church community and those with whom they connect. Fourthly, the church's use of the Sermon on the Mount as a basis for ethical practice was explored, based on Stassen and Lawson's work, who argue that it is underused in matters of moral practice. Finally, suggestions for the future were offered, considering the potential issues

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[74] Kirby, 'People with learning disabilities face NHS discrimination', (2010).
[75] *Images of Christ: Ancient and Modern*, Ed. by Stanley E. Porter and others (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 188.
[76] Volf, *Free of Charge*.

raised in earlier sections, proposing that more accessible Sunday services, the use of Makaton, and the implementation of a liaison member could greatly benefit the church in its project.

In the final section, a challenge was laid to the church members to confront the systems and structures which have led to the ostracisation of the learning-disabled community in the first place. However, this suggestion does not take away from the work already in place and may not be the route they wish to take. In conclusion, as this project progresses, it offers a fascinating opportunity for future qualitative research.

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# Integrating Ecclesiology and Ethnography in Christ

Roger Jasper

Criticism of using qualitative methods in practical theology, including the ecclesiology and ethnography movement, has tended to set up a tension between two worlds, one of theology and one of social science. This article demonstrates how the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation in the writings of Paul Fiddes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer can help practical theologians integrate ecclesiology and ethnography in the person of Jesus Christ.

## Keywords

Ecclesiology; ethnography; Paul Fiddes; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Trinity; incarnation

## Introduction

The ecclesiology and ethnography movement in practical theology has developed in recent decades to address the concern that modern ecclesiology had drifted too much into the abstract and had become too disconnected from the lived reality of the church and its members. This movement has sought to use methods developed in ethnography to observe the experiences of communities and individuals and to create dialogue between those experiences and Christian theology. Some have been concerned that these attempts are tempted to accept a naturalistic world view by making theology contingent on the social-historical. In what follows we will review a history of some of the tension in integrating ethnography into theology and explore how Paul Fiddes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's use of the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation may provide resources for us to work through this tension.

## Egyptian Gold

St. Augustine, around the turn of the fifth century C.E., writes,

> For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burden which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority,

but by command of God.[1]

In this passage Augustine references a long-standing allegorical reading of Israel's exodus from Egypt. At least as early as Origen, Christian theologians had read the story of the Israelites taking gold and other treasure from the Egyptians in the exodus that would later be used to build the tabernacle, and they saw in this story a model for the appropriation of concepts from pagan thought being put to use in Christian theology. There is a long history in Christian theology of recognising and utilising the wisdom of insights and methods developed outside of the church.[2] Likewise there has always been push-back against using outside wisdom. It is argued that non-Christian writing cannot be integrated with Christian theology as it denies the very premise of the Christian religion: that God has most clearly been made known in God's incarnation in Jesus Christ.

## Developments in Practical Theology

The ecclesiology and ethnography movement that has emerged in the last quarter of a century is an attempt at this kind of collaborative theology.[3] Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen trace this movement to a shift in practical theology that began in the early 1990s. Don Browning began working on a theology that focused on describing lived faith from a hermeneutical perspective. Campbell-Reed and Scharen show how this movement was expanded by the work of Johannas van der Ven in statistical analysis and Hans-Gunter Heimbrock using phenomenology. Elaine Graham and Bonnie Miller-McLemore helped to draw the field's attention to dynamics of power and context in qualitative research.[4]

Still, all of the insights gained in the 1990s largely took for granted research methods drawn from the social sciences and, according to Campbell-Reed and Scharen, it was not until the mid-2000s that practical theologians turned their attention to the question of how qualitative research methods themselves could be transformed in order to be properly theological.[5] The ecclesiology and ethnography movement seeks to bridge a gap between modern ecclesiology, which is perceived to have become overly

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[1] Augustine, 'On Christian Doctrine', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First Series, Volume Two,* ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. F. Shaw (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), p. 554.
[2] David Lyle Jeffrey, 'Egyptian Gold', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 226.
[3] The author similarly summarises the history and contentions of the ecclesiology and ethnography movement in Roger Jasper, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Mind of Christ: How the Baptist Tradition of Discernment Can Serve as a Resource for the Dialogue between Practical Theology and the Social Sciences', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* Vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 111-126.
[4] Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Christian Batalden Scharen, 'Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing Is Practical Theological Work', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17, no. 2 (2013): p. 234.
[5] Ibid., p. 242.

theoretical and disconnected from the lived realities of Christians, and secular social science, which would regard the church as merely a social or cultural grouping and not as the body of Christ on earth.

To demonstrate this growing dissatisfaction with theoretical and disconnected ecclesiology, John Swinton tells the story of a conference panel discussion he participated in with Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. The panel of well-known theologians was enthusiastically discussing Hauerwas' writings on persons with disabilities in the Christian community when a deflating question came from the audience. One woman's experience of the church had not been quite so idyllic. She asked, "Where is this community you are talking about? Where is your church?"[6]

Similarly, I was leading a small group in my local Baptist congregation a couple of summers ago discussing James K. A. Smith's book *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.* In part of the book Smith argues for the character-forming nature of the traditional Christian liturgy.[7] During one week's discussion a member of the group finally voiced her frustration with the author's assertions about the liturgy. She said that she had grown up through her entire childhood and adolescence attending Roman Catholic mass regularly. She complained that if these rituals were supposed to be forming her character over all those years, no one had told her about it. To her these rites had been completely disconnected from how she lived outside of the sanctuary. Of course, it may be that she was formed by the mass in ways she has not yet recognised. We may even wonder if she is so active in this Baptist congregation today because of the good that the mass did in her character formation. However, the point is that it is important to hear her story and to let her story speak to our liturgical theologies, even as we hope our liturgical theologies will speak into her story.

Often, in the past, practical theology has taken an applied approach, using the conclusions of more abstract fields like biblical studies, systematic theology, or historical theology, and applying those insights to the practices of ministers and lay Christians, hoping for improved outcomes in those practices. The ecclesiology and ethnography movement uses the qualitative methods of the social scientific field of ethnography to explore the embedded meaning of Christian practices first. It recognises that there is much to learn about faith from the way it is actually lived. Assuming that all of our practices are already value-laden, this approach to practical theology observes and reflects critically and theologically on habits and behaviours in order to gain deeper insights into what theology is already being lived out by

[6] John Swinton, 'Where Is Your Church? Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography', in *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 71.
[7] James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

individuals and communities. These insights can then be brought into a mutual critical dialogue with more formal understandings of Scripture and tradition.

However, integrating ethnography and theology is not without complications. Christian theology claims to be derived from sources revealed by God and the social sciences claim to be empirical. John Swinton and Harriett Mowat, in their book *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, recognise this epistemological tension. They suggest that dialogue between practical theology and qualitative research requires 'hospitality, conversation, and critical faithfulness'.[8]

## Mutual Critical Dialogue

Swinton and Mowat propose a four-stage model of mutual critical conversation. Stage one is a surface level observation of the practice being considered. In Stage two, a more complex understanding of the practice is drawn out through qualitative research methods. Stages three and four constitute the mutual criticisms. First, the practice, understood more deeply through the above methods, is critiqued in light of the Bible and tradition. Finally, the investigation of the practice is able to offer back criticism and recommendations for revised practice.[9]

Swinton and Mowat's model is a revision of an earlier one put forward by Seward Hiltner and David Tracy. Hiltner and Tracy were themselves developing the thoughts of Paul Tillich. Tillich had proposed that Christian theology should seek to answer from Scripture and tradition those questions asked by reason and experience.[10] Hiltner and Tracy's criticism of Tillich's model is that it does not empower experience and reason to critique theology and practice. They insist the process must allow for mutual criticism.[11]

Whereas Swinton and Mowat largely adopt the mutual critical method proposed by Hiltner and Tracy, they maintain concerns that simple mutuality leaves theology and qualitative research to be considered as equals that must negotiate what is true. Instead, Swinton and Mowat insist that in Christian theology revelation must maintain a 'logical priority'.[12] So, the tension remains. How can practical theology and qualitative research be integrated in a way that allows for mutual criticism, but maintains the logical priority of information believed to be revealed by God? About Swinton and Mowat's

[8] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,* 2nd edn (London: SCM Press, 2016), p. 86.
[9] Ibid., pp. 89-94.
[10] Ibid., p. 74.
[11] Ibid., p. 75.
[12] Ibid., p. 82.

revised mutual critical method Andrew Root writes, 'The authors simply assert that hospitality, conversation, and critical faithfulness should frame the dialogue between practical theology and qualitative research, but they fail to articulate how this would be done.'[13]

## Logical Priority in Theology

The issue of logical priority is also what concerns John Webster about the ethnography and ecclesiology movement. He writes,

> Christian dogmatics does not concede the ontological primacy and self-evidence of the social-historical; and it considers that apprehension of the phenomenal visibility of social-historical realities is not possible in the absence of reference to their ordering to God, that is, in the absence of reference to their creatureliness.[14]

To do Christian theology is to recognise that everything observed by the social sciences is part of a creation defined by its relation to a Creator. This relationship and the doctrines that flow from the conviction that this relationship exists are not less real, but more real than what can be observed and analysed by social scientific observation.

Webster especially takes exception to qualitative research meddling in ecclesiology, as he understands the church to be defined foundationally by doctrinal assertions about God. 'Ecclesiology has its place in the flow of Christian doctrine from teaching about God to teaching about everything else in God.'[15] So, what it means to be the church flows out of the eternal reality of the triune God. The God who exists eternally as a community within God's own self established a community among God's people as a reflection of that divine nature. This reality defines how the community understands human life, not *vice versa*. For this reason, Webster believes that you violate the premise of ecclesiology by deferring theological reflection until after the community has undergone social scientific observation.

So, Webster's core concern is to ensure that in ecclesiology, as in all theological inquiry, the theologian maintains an order of inquiry that reflects the relationship between the Creator and the creation. A study of the social phenomena of the church should not be undertaken without first recognising the church's origin and purpose in the triune God who created it. To neglect this order would be to allow ecclesiology to become 'naturalized'.[16] He suggests that those who wish to use ethnography in ecclesiology recognise this order and that the observed phenomenon is only a sign of a deeper reality

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[13] Andrew Root, 'Practical Theology and Qualitative Research', *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 6, no. 2 (2008): p. 114.
[14] John Webster, ''In the Society of God': Some Principles of Ecclesiology', in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* ed. by Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 204.
[15] Ibid., p. 205.
[16] Ibid., p. 221.

that will, ultimately, always be a mystery beyond social scientific inquiry.

Christopher Craig Brittain, while acknowledging the importance of Webster's warning to safeguard a starting place for ecclesiology in the nature of God, interprets Webster's account of the church as 'a firm marginalization of the visible historical church, in deference of the pure invisible church'.[17] By focusing on the individual, the abstract, and the eschatological, Brittain believes that Webster renders ecclesiology incapable of dealing fully with collective sin by the church. Brittain argues that, if for Webster 'the acts of the church are not acts of pure natural spontaneity, but movements moved by God',[18] then when members of Christ's church commit great evil it must be reckoned either as a movement of God or merely the sinful acts of individuals. Brittain sees Webster's construction as inadequate to talk about the sin of the church and thus as incapable of helping the church to uncover and repent of corporate sin.[19]

## One World

We seem to be left hanging between these two great dangers in bringing ecclesiology and ethnography into dialogue. On the one hand, ecclesiology, if done without reference to the lived experience of Christians, leaves our understanding of the church aloof and disconnected from the needs of the church's members and the world they are called to love. On the other hand, if ecclesiology cedes the descriptive task to social sciences before undertaking theological reflection, ecclesiology runs the risk of passively adopting an essentially naturalistic view of the world and being relegated to a second-order science behind scientific sources of 'real' knowledge.

Paul Fiddes suggests a balance in his discussion of integrating ethnography into ecclesiology. He, like Webster, grounds the doctrine of the church in the nature of God as triune. This is arrived at through deductive use of scripture, tradition, and liturgy.[20] However, he argues that deductive approaches to ecclesiology have to be used alongside inductive methods, like those in ethnography. He argues this, not only from 'external' reasons such as how Western thought has had a disproportionate influence on traditional theology, but also from 'internal', theological reasons.

Fiddes points to the incarnation. To this he adds sacrament and revelation as theological ideas that lead us to look for the presence and

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[17] Christopher Craig Brittain, 'Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live by Doctrine Alone', *Ecclesial Practices* 1, no. 1 (2014): p. 19.
[18] Webster, 'In the Society of God', p. 215.
[19] Brittain, 'Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live by Doctrine Alone', p. 21.
[20] Paul Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?' in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* ed. by Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 13.

direction of God in human history and culture.[21] These ideas push us to do more than simply overlay received theological principles on our experiences, but to seek God in our cultures and tangible, ordinary realities. 'God communicates God's own self through actions, relationships, and symbols in daily life, though this self-offering is fully expressed only in the person of Jesus.' So, the person of Jesus Christ, for Fiddes, is both the warrant and the boundary for seeking the presence of God in empirical study. The incarnation of Jesus reveals that 'faith is not a mere matter of words but is *embodied*' and this same incarnation directs us away from relativism.[22]

Even if it is accepted that both the deductive and inductive are needed in faithful ecclesiology, the problem remains of how these two are functionally brought together. Even if it is accepted that the church is defined in the triune God through God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, how will this lead to a methodology that will enable us to utilise ethnography to better understand the theology of the church without doing violence to either?

Fiddes proposes a model that does not simply resolve the tension between two worlds in dialogue but imagines one world. Writing about practical theology using social scientific inquiry, he says, 'It is not a mere matter of correlation, but integration.'[23] This is possible because all of our research is in the 'all-embracing environment of the triune God'.[24] He sees the doctrine of the Trinity as not only being reflected in the community of the church, but also revealing that God had included all of creation in the divine life. This means, according to Fiddes, that the body of Christ in the world may be found outside of the church also. Fiddes writes of the body of Christ:

> Different bodies in the world – the individual body of Christ; the sacraments of bread, wine, and water; the eucharist community; groups in society; and all the variety of matter in nature – are then all related to a common space. The space they occupy in God is not a kind of container, but a reality characterized by relationships, and in this way Christ can be embodied in all of them; his form can be recognized in them, and in all of them he can take flesh.[25]

What is indicative of finding the body of Christ is whether the body observed reflects a relationship like a father sending a son and a son selflessly consenting to give himself. Fiddes finds this expansive view of the body of Christ also reflected in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, where Bonhoeffer claims that 'Christ 'takes form' in the world.'[26] For Fiddes, finding these different forms

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[21] Ibid., p. 18.
[22] Ibid., p. 19 (italics original).
[23] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: One World Revisited', *Jurnal Teologic* 15, no. 1 (2016), p. 13.
[24] Ibid., p. 9.
[25] Paul Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?', p. 32.
[26] Ibid., p. 31.

of the body of Christ means there is plenty of room for social scientific models and ecclesial models to interact in a single integrated world of reflection.

## Research in the Penultimate

Following Fiddes to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, we find other resources for help in understanding how theological convictions and qualitative observations can exist together one world and how the researcher can navigate the epistemological tension between them. The two dangers for aloof theology and naturalised social science are similar to the ways that Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests we are tempted when acting in the penultimate. In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer talks about how we care for someone pastorally who has experienced the loss of a loved one. He writes that he would often stay silent instead of sharing hopeful words of Christian doctrine. In this Bonhoeffer was not denying the reality of the resurrection, but 'adopting a penultimate attitude'.[27] For Bonhoeffer, the redemption which is accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, made available through grace alone, is the ultimate reality to which everything else in creation is cast as penultimate.

Bonhoeffer describes two temptations in relating this penultimate reality with the ultimate: radicalism and compromise. Radicalism sees the penultimate as the enemy of the ultimate. 'Everything penultimate in human behavior is sin and denial.'[28] It must be avoided or destroyed. This reflects a view of ecclesiology similar to the one advocated by Webster, one where ecclesiology is almost entirely incompatible with ethnography and cannot risk being made impure by its methods.

The other temptation that Bonhoeffer describes is that of compromise. In this temptation the ultimate is seen as being too far-off and inaccessible to really matter.

> The world still stands; the end is not yet here; there are still penultimate things which must be done, in fulfilment of the responsibility for this world which God has created. Account must still be taken of men as they are.'[29]

This temptation is reflected in an ecclesiology that is dissolved into the naturalised world view of ethnography.

For Bonhoeffer, radicalism betrays a hatred for God's creation and compromise betrays a hatred for redemption by grace alone. He, like Fiddes,

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[27] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* ed. by Eberhard Bethge, trans. by Neville Horton Smith. (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 126.
[28] Ibid., p. 127.
[29] Ibid., p. 127.

argues that the solution for how to relate the penultimate to the ultimate is found in the person of Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus Christ is key for how our doctrines *about* the church relate to our lived experience *of* the church.

> In the incarnation we learn of the love of God for His creation; in the crucifixion we learn of the judgment of God upon all flesh; and in the resurrection we learn of God's will for a new world.[30]

These elements of Christian faith cannot be separated. Incarnation alone leads to compromise or ceding authority to the social sciences. Cross and resurrection alone leads to radicalism or abstract ecclesiology aloof from lived experience.

## Conclusion

So, we conclude, the practical theologian must accept that we live and study in the penultimate. We exist in a time and space defined by God's love of God's creation and God's choice to honour the human experience by taking on flesh and participating in that experience. The incarnation insists that practical theologians listen to the human experience from the beginning of their research. This does not confuse the ordering of Creator and creation, as Webster warns, but recognises the presence and revealed knowledge of the Creator among the creation. Likewise, the practical theologian recognises that the ultimate is yet to come. The crucifixion and resurrection shine a light on the ways that our human experience falls short of the full humanity revealed in Jesus. The crucifixion invites us to reflect theologically on the distance between our humanity and Jesus' humanity. The resurrection invites us to propose revisions to the practices of our human and church experience.

These insights of Fiddes and Bonhoeffer help to move the philosophical conversation of the ecclesiology and ethnography movement beyond two separate worlds, with the radicalism of abstract theology set over and against the compromise of social scientific naturalism. However, methodological specifics for this integration are still contested. Much more work and prayer are needed.

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[30] Ibid., pp. 130-131.

# Unorthodox Christology in General Baptist History: The Legacy of Matthew Caffyn

Kegan A. Chandler

In Baptist histories, English preacher Matthew Caffyn (1628-1714), thanks to his unorthodox Christology, is regularly identified as a theological deviant, and one working under the influence of 'eighteenth-century rationalism' or other external forces. By reconsidering the progress of unorthodox Christology among the early Baptists and other Reformers, I argue that Caffyn's Christology represents not a sudden aberration, but an unsurprising expression of the elemental Baptist instinct. This instinct includes a commitment to being scriptural, to primitivism, and to theological tolerance within the community. In this light, I argue that Caffyn's place in the Baptist tradition must be revisited in future histories.

## Keywords

General Baptist history; Matthew Caffyn; unorthodox Christology; unitarianism; freedom of interpretation; religious freedom

## Introduction

In many surveys of General Baptist history, the name of Matthew Caffyn (1628-1714) is spoken with a mixture of reticence and lamentation. His legacy has regularly been portrayed as a catalyst for the deterioration of the General Baptist tradition, a 'decline' that was 'theological, spiritual, and moral […]'[1] As Leon McBeth put it in his grand review of Baptist heritage, it was thanks to 'Joseph Priestly and Matthew Caffyn, [that] the General Baptists absorbed Unitarian Christology and their churches plunged into steep decline'.[2] Indeed, Caffyn's doubts about orthodox Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity are often treated as a sudden aberration, a surprising and unfortunate episode, and as something not in keeping with Baptist heritage. But where do the boundaries of the Baptist tradition actually lie? Considering the theological topography of the modern Baptist world, it hardly seems possible that Baptist tradition could ever have been inclusive of Caffyn's unitarian Christology. Baptist historians typically presume that Caffyn read the New Testament in the way that he did, not because he was a

[1] Anthony R. Cross, *Useful Learning: Neglected Means of Grace in the Reception of the Evangelical Revival among English Particular Baptists* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), p. 3.
[2] H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), p. 152.

Baptist, but because he had succumbed to some external influence. Likewise, any deviant, non-trinitarian theology thriving among other General Baptists must be the byproduct of a similar infiltration. As McBeth concluded: 'Doubts about the deity of Christ formed a part of the rationalism which affected all Christian groups in England during the eighteenth century.'[3] This seems to suggest that these two phenomena – the doubting of orthodox Christology and eighteenth-century rationalism – are necessarily related, and that any historical Baptist propensity towards unorthodox views of the Trinity was only the result of peripheral, inherently non-Baptist energies which must have entered through Caffyn (or the unitarian scholar Joseph Priestly). But this is, I argue, rather short-sighted analysis. Framing Caffyn's legacy in the wider context of Reformation and Baptist history will provide a better vantage point for judging where his Christological conclusions actually fall on the spectrum of Baptist tradition.

This article represents only the next step in a series of recent historical advancements. Attempts have already been made to bring Caffyn's wider career and contribution to the General Baptist faith into view,[4] and some have challenged the conclusion widely shared by Baptist historians that acceptance of Caffyn's views directly led to a 'decline' of the General Baptists.[5] Caffyn's theological proclivities certainly deserve to be part of this historical reconsideration, but so do the boundaries of Baptist heritage. I will argue in this paper that in light of: early Protestant and Anabaptist history; the Christological instinct of early Baptists; the traditional Baptist impulse towards primitivism; the Baptists' deeply-rooted commitment to being scriptural; and the Baptists' dedication to freedom of interpretation—that Caffyn's unorthodox Christology should not be seen as the infiltration of 'rationalism' or some alien and non-Baptist principle, but as a rather predictable expression of the elemental Baptist instinct. I will furthermore argue that, despite contemporary assumptions, the General Baptist tradition was once understood to be inclusive of such theological convictions.

## Matthew Caffyn: Committed Baptist?

Matthew Caffyn was born in Sussex to Thomas and Elizabeth Caffyn in 1628. His mother was descended from Protestant martyrs, namely the 'Marian Martyrs' murdered by Queen Mary I in the 1550s. Her family's spirit of dissent evidently lived on in her son: at seventeen Matthew was already questioning infant baptism and the doctrine of the Trinity, and openly

[3] Ibid., p. 155.
[4] See Alexa Carver, 'Matthew Caffyn Revisited: Cooperation, Christology, and Controversy in the Life of an Influential Seventeenth-Century Baptist', *Baptist Quarterly*, 47 (2016), pp. 44-64.
[5] Merrill Hawkins, Jr, 'Assumptions or Conclusions: The Treatment of Early General Baptist Doctrinal Conflict by Selected Surveys of Baptist History', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 49 (2014), pp. 64-77.

pushing Baptist theology at his college at Oxford, for which he was promptly expelled in 1645. Three years later he was made the head minister of a General Baptist church in Southwater.

During his vibrant preaching career, Caffyn was ultimately thrown in prison no less than five times for his vigorous, skillful, but 'unauthorized' teaching in English towns. He came into public conflict with other Baptist preachers, like the hot-headed Joseph Wright, who was himself imprisoned by the government on religious grounds. Caffyn's involvement in intra-Baptist controversy continued in 1677, when there occurred a genial split in a congregation in Staplehurst over the Trinity – one side ultimately agreeing with Caffyn's unitarian views. In a famous episode, a frustrated Joseph Wright made a call for Caffyn's dismissal to the General Baptist assembly of 1691, but the assembly refused to denounce Caffyn. Wright tried once more in 1693, but was again unsuccessful. Further petitions for Caffyn's rejection were made in 1699 and 1700 by two churches in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, and again the assembly refused to oust him.

We unfortunately have no record of Caffyn's ministry following the year 1701. We know that he died and was buried in a village churchyard in West Sussex in 1714, and that his ministry was passed on to his son Matthew. But what are we now to make of Caffyn's legacy and his place in General Baptist history? Our search for answers begins at the dawn of the Reformation.

## Unorthodox Christological Instinct: A Protestant and Anabaptist Heritage

We recall that McBeth, in describing the emergence of unitarian opinion in General Baptist circles, connected this phenomenon to the later infiltration of foreign principles. However, a closer look at the early decades of the Reformation begins to paint a different picture, and one that leads us to believe that doubts about the doctrine of the Trinity in Protestant circles, even in Baptist circles, cannot be relegated to an infatuation with 'rationalism' contracted in the eighteenth century, nor should they be reduced to the effects of some particular and undue influence from Caffyn (or Priestly). Indeed, Caffyn's precise sentiments were already present in the Protestant bloodstream when the Reformation drew its first few breaths in the sixteenth century.

Martin Cellarius (1499-1564), a friend of Martin Luther, and the polymath Michael Servetus (1511-1553), provide examples of major theologians who had arrived at non-trinitarian conclusions about the

Scriptures at a very early stage in the Reformation.[6] These figures represent, in fact, a larger trend among early reformers, a trend certainly motivated not by eighteenth-century rationalism, but by the combined power of Reformation principles like *sola scriptura*, restorationism, *ad fontes*, and free Bible translation. Indeed, Luther had translated and published his New Testament in German in 1522, and the first Dutch Bible was printed in 1526 by Liesvlet, followed by a host of vernacular translations quickly spreading throughout Europe. Hot on the heels of these translation efforts we detect a shift in attitude towards Catholic (orthodox) theology and Christology among the radicals. Already by 1527 the great council of Anabaptists in Switzerland had drafted a comprehensive, unanimously endorsed statement featuring no mention of the Trinity. The *Schleitheim Confession*, 'the most representative statement of Anabaptist principles',[7] appears to identify the one God as the Father, not as the Trinity, and habitually distinguishes between 'God' and 'Christ', and even refers to 'God *and* Christ'. Regardless of how consciously unorthodox this statement was, we know that already in the late 1530s we have reports of Protestant Christians being burned to death for 'anti-trinitarian' opinion.[8] In this light, we might be permitted to say that only several years after the wider distribution of the biblical documents had begun, the clarion call for primitivism and the license for free interpretation of the Scriptures won by Luther had already fostered non-trinitarian theology among some Protestants. Budding non-trinitarian interpretations of the Scriptures across Europe received a boost in the 1540s through the work of Italian Anabaptist and unitarian theologian Lelio Sozzini (1525-1562), who was a colleague and at one point a guest and correspondent of Calvin and Melanchthon.[9] After Luther's death in 1546, non-trinitarian theology continued to swell in Anabaptist circles, climaxing in the Council of Venice (1550), which formally agreed on explicitly unitarian principles. Reports from all over Europe of Protestants being executed for doubting the Trinity soon increased, featuring such victims as the Dutch surgeon George van Parris (d. 1551), the Spaniard Michael Servetus (d. 1553), and the Englishmen Patrick Pakingham (d. 1555) and Matthew Hamont (d. 1579). It is clear that at least by 1540-1550, non-trinitarian Christology had become a vibrant strain in the genetic makeup of wider Protestantism.

Looking back at the first several decades of the Reformation, we can recognise two general approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity, and thus to

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[6] Other noteworthy figures often thought to have espoused non-trinitarian theologies include the Anabaptist theologian Hans Denck (1495-1527). The Anglican priest John Assheton (fl. 1548) had, at least at one point, embraced 'Socinian' (unitarian) views before the year 1548.

[7] Howard Clark Kee, *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 281.

[8] For example, Catherine Vogel, wife of Melchior Vogel, was burned to death in 1539 at Krakow.

[9] Lelio's better-known nephew, Fausto Sozzini, 1539-1604, would become the primary theologian of the Socinian movement and the Minor Reformed Church in Poland.

orthodox Christology. On the one hand, the likes of Luther and Calvin, belonging to the so-called 'Magisterial Reformation', were uninterested in challenging these points of doctrine. While these Magisterial reformers were prepared to challenge other congenital dogmas, primarily on the basis of a lack of explicit scriptural explanation, they did not touch the Trinity doctrine – an item long-understood to be essential to the Christian faith and life. Luther, Calvin, Melanchthon, and others indeed appear, in the words of the great Protestant scholar Emil Brunner, to have wholly 'by-passed it [rather] than made it the subject of their own theological reflection'.[10] On the other hand, criticism of this doctrine (or family of doctrines) proved a serious interest of many of those Reformers belonging to the so-called 'Radical Reformation', and, as we have seen, such criticisms were already being entertained within the first few decades of the Reformation. What might identify these latter Protestants as 'radical' may be the degree to which they endeavoured to roll back the theological clock, compared to their Magisterial cousins. In the 'radical' view, Luther, an Augustinian monk, had only repealed Christian tradition back to Augustine (indeed, the Magisterial Reformation ultimately proved the revival and great triumph of Augustinianism). The 'radicals', on the other hand, unsatisfied with this allegedly limited repeal, were prepared to go much further, and at all hazard. And it must be recognised that it was by this extreme dedication to primitivism that the impulse to challenge orthodox Christology was begotten within only a few decades (at the very latest) of Luther's *95 Theses*. It is thus not surprising that we locate unorthodox Christological tendencies also at the birth of the Baptist tradition a generation later, and neither is it surprising that we detect the same dichotomous approach to orthodox Christology within the earliest ranks of Baptists.

## Unorthodox Christology in Baptist Beginnings

Scholars today are somewhat divided over the historical connection between the Anabaptists and the later Baptists. While some may argue, and with good reason, that there is no organic (ecclesial) link between them, it is nevertheless possible to discern a spiritual (theological) connection. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, Baptist J.R. Graves still pointed to 'those ancient Anabaptists, whom we alone represent in this age'.[11] Regardless, modern Baptist historians like Joseph Early Jr reveal that the first Baptist church was actually brought into existence in 1609, and it was this event

[10] Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), p. 205.
[11] J.R. Graves, 'Old Landmarkism: What Is It?', in Joseph Early Jr (ed.), *Readings in Baptist History: Four Centuries of Selected Documents* (Nashville: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 118.

which marked the formal beginning of the so-called 'General Baptist' movement.[12]

The General Baptists' original founder, John Smyth (c. 1565-1612), clearly entertained serious doubts about orthodox Christology, as evidenced by his espousal of Hoffmanite (Anabaptist) Christology, which denied the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation in favour of a 'heavenly flesh' doctrine akin to the old Christology of Valentinus (second century CE). Smyth's one-time partner Thomas Helwys (d. c. 1616) had worked to refute Smyth in this regard, standing strong for the orthodox interpretation, and finally breaking from him around 1610. But there can be no doubt that from its earliest years, vital constituents within the General Baptist movement were already mounting serious challenges to orthodox Christology and exploring doctrines of God quite outside the shelter of conciliar tradition. This is not to say that an 'orthodox' spirit was not dwelling vibrantly alongside this impulse in early General Baptist history, as it surely was. But we might say that John Smyth and Thomas Helwys formed two sides of a General Baptist coin: the former representing a radical commitment to the Reformation ideals of primitivism and *sola scriptura*, and the latter also embracing those ideals but in a way that circumvented certain theological fundamentals understood to be both essential and moot points. These twin impulses, while perhaps silently travelling together in Smyth and Helwys' earliest days, came to visibly clash by 1610, and it was in that year that the Smyth-Helwys alliance ruptured. These two Baptist impulses would clash once again in the time of Matthew Caffyn.

In a way, we see that early General Baptist history forms a microcosm of general Protestantism in the preceding century. Again, in the 1530s-1550s we can observe both of the aforementioned theological impulses among the Protestants – the radical commitment to primitivism being represented by the likes of Cellarius, Servetus, and Sozzini, and the Christologically conservative spirit being represented by Luther, Calvin, and Melanchthon. Many of these individuals, we recall, were at one point friends, or at least friendly, until the two spirits clearly recognised each other and could no longer share the same space. And we find a similar divide in the days of Caffyn, as the General Baptists separated into those who followed Caffyn's restless spirit (and at an elemental level the dissenting, radical spirit of Smyth, their founder) and those who opted to leave the essentials undisturbed. After Smyth's death in 1612, it is clear that his unorthodox Christological spirit did not die with him, but only took on new life, and soon developed (matured? deteriorated?) into the outwardly non-trinitarian

[12] Joseph Early Jr, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), p. 25.

(unitarian) theology which took centre stage in the intra-Baptist disputes of the 1670s-1700s.

Today, most Baptists self-identify in terms of trinitarian theology and Christology. But we must take care that we do not allow modern Baptist standards and expectations to cloud the reality of Baptist beginnings. Indeed, Christian denominations often pace beyond the original confessions of their founders. Many members of the Church of Christ, for example, will be surprised to learn that their founders, Stone and Campbell, were not orthodox trinitarians, though such a doctrine is now confessed by their denomination.[13] In a similar way, Herbert W. Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God, taught an unorthodox, binitarian view of God, while today his denomination is openly trinitarian.[14] Clearly the Baptist tradition founded by Smyth has likewise moved beyond his unorthodox impulse and into (small 'c') catholic waters, but that does not change the fact that the 'Baptist tradition' was Christologically diverse from its inception. Indeed, the first Baptist church was officially founded by Smyth in 1609, and it was by 1610 that Smyth's Christological rupture with his partner Helwys was already complete.[15]

If what motivated early General Baptists in unorthodox directions regarding the Trinity and the deity of Christ was not the urgings of the Enlightenment, then what was it? I argue that such developments were not the result of cavalier Baptist attempts to 'rationalise' the biblical data, nor were they the products of overtly 'speculative' methodologies, rather, they were expressions of the Radical Reformation principles which first drew the Baptist movement up from the water, namely, *primitivism* and a fervent worry over the Scriptures. It is well-known that all Reformers, and Baptists in particular, have insisted that every attempt should be made to derive doctrine exclusively from explicit scriptural teaching. And herein lies the unique challenge for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity inherited by Protestants from the historical-conciliar system, a doctrine which Protestant historians remind us that anti-Baptists like Luther and Calvin had 'bypassed' in their own reflections. Modern Baptist theologian Millard J. Erickson, famed author of the evangelical systematic standard *Christian Theology* (1990, 2013), makes the following observations about this doctrine in light of the biblical data:

> It is claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity is a very important, crucial, and even basic doctrine. If that is indeed the case, should it not be

[13] Douglas A. Foster, Anthony L. Dunnavant, Paul M. Blowers, and D. Newell Williams (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 356.
[14] 'The Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert Armstrong, held this 'binitarian' view. Doctrinal changes in favor of Trinitarianism took place in 1995,' (Anthony F. Buzzard, Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Oxford: International Scholars Publications, 1998), p. 15).
[15] Early, p. 35.

> somewhere more clearly, directly, and explicitly stated in the Bible? If this is the doctrine that especially constitutes Christianity's uniqueness, as over against unitarian monotheism on the one hand, and polytheism on the other hand, how can it be only implied in the biblical revelation? In response to the complaint that a number of portions of the Bible are ambiguous or unclear, we often hear a statement something like, "It is the peripheral matters that are hazy or which there seem to be conflicting biblical materials. The core beliefs are clearly and unequivocally revealed." This argument would appear to fail us with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, however. For here is a seemingly crucial matter where the Scriptures do not speak loudly and clearly. Little direct response can be made to this charge. It is unlikely that any text of Scripture can be shown to teach the doctrine of the Trinity in a clear, direct, and unmistakable fashion.[16]

Are these kinds of biblical questions, which are still being drawn by modern Baptist authorities like Erickson, asked under the heavy rod of rationalism or under the guiding hand of deeply Baptist principles? In the first one hundred years of the General Baptist faith, these concerns over Scripture, wherever they first came from, manifested in diverse ways: at first in the form of Smyth's heretical Christology, and then in the unitarianism of Baptists like Matthew Caffyn. As McBeth acknowledges, 'Whatever the reasons, the fact is clear that General Baptists tended to weaken or even deny the deity of Christ, and many of their churches eventually became Unitarian.'[17] But there seems to be little reason to continue to connect this General Baptist tendency, as McBeth ultimately does, to external influences. I suggest this is merely one expression of the Baptists' own internal commitment to Radical Reformation principles. Indeed, it seems clear that the abundance of unorthodox Christology thriving in the General Baptist world by the late seventeenth century does not represent an intrusion of foreign and non-Baptist instincts, but that such impulses had, in a fundamental way, formed a part of its matrix since its earliest period, precisely as it had in wider Protestantism in Europe. We can easily observe this instinct towards unorthodox Christology, and towards radical theological reflection, exploration, and inclusivity, in the first ninety years of General Baptist creeds.

## Radical Christology and the General Baptist Creeds

The earliest faith statements authored by the Baptist's first two leaders are very similar. Smyth may have entertained unorthodox Christology, but his *Short Confession* of 1610 certainly seems trinitarian in its general outlook, and describes the Father, Son, and Spirit as 'being three, and nevertheless

[16] Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1995), pp. 108-109.
[17] McBeth, p. 155.

but one God'. Smyth does refrain from using the word 'Trinity', however, and leaves the precise relationship between the Persons somewhat ambiguous. On the other hand, his counterpart Helwys' subsequent confession, the *Declaration of Faith* (1611), penned following his Christological rupture with Smyth, emphatically states that 'these three are one God, in all equality' and explicitly refers to 'the Trinity'.

It is clear that the overt and decidedly orthodox trinitarianism of Helwys' declaration progressively waned in General Baptist circles in the subsequent decades. This waning is discernible in *The Faith and Practise of Thirty Congregations Gathered According to the Primitive Pattern* (1651). Here the humanity of Jesus is prominent, while little to nothing is said about his 'deity': Jesus is 'the second Adam', the man whose 'Lordly or Kingly preeminence over all mankind, is vindicated or maintained in the Scripture account, by virtue of his dying or suffering for them; Rom. 14:9'. The confession habitually distinguishes 'God' from 'Jesus Christ', and speaks freely and regularly of his humanity and death without qualification. There are some triadic passages: one says that 'God's Word, Son, or Spirit, are one […] The Word quickneth […] The Son quickneth […] And the spirit quickneth […] So they are one.' These triadic sections are, upon close inspection, rather vague and could still be assented to by unorthodox Baptists, even unitarian Baptists.[18] Interestingly, the relationship between the Persons in the above triadic passage, if intended to be read ontologically (which is by no means clear) may even suggest that the Son is the Holy Spirit – a decidedly unorthodox sentiment.

By the production of *The True Gospel Faith* several years later (1654), explicit trinitarianism appears to have all but disappeared from formal Baptist confession. Here we read only that '[Jesus] is now a priest, a prophet, and a king.' There is no mention of the Trinity, and there are no triadic references at all. There are two verses cited together, that when juxtaposed as they are, might be taken to imply a belief that 'Jesus is God' (in some sense), nevertheless such belief is not clearly stated, much less explained, and is not necessarily implied.

The 1660 *Standard Confession* made to King Charles II illustrates how powerful the unitarian instinct became among the General Baptists. The confession clearly says that 'there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, from everlasting to everlasting, glorious, and unwordable in all his attributes' (*Confession*, I). Again, here the one God is not the Trinity, but the Father, and Jesus is not mentioned until the confession's third section. The Holy Spirit is not brought up until the seventh section. Quotations of the

[18] Unitarian theologians of various shades throughout Church history have been able to maintain a 'unity' between three members of a trinity, or divine triad, while nevertheless maintaining that the one God is the Father, and ultimately not subscribing to a co-equal and co-eternal triune God.

spurious I John 5.7 appear, but with no further comment or clarification, and also included are traditional subordinationist favourites like I Corinthians 3.22-23, likewise without comment. Jesus is, ultimately, 'the second Adam' (*Confession*, X). Of course, all of this is not to say that the General Baptists were unanimously unitarian by 1660, rather, as McBeth put it, they 'tended' in this direction. But more than that, they continued to demonstrate their commitment to Radical Reformation values, and therefore operated with an aim towards inclusion and freedom of conscience.

Matthew Caffyn added his signature to the 1660 standard, and it is easy to see why. But other General Baptists joined him in assenting to that statement who did not necessarily share his views – surely an ongoing manifestation of the same spirit of diversity which characterised the Baptists' earliest days. Certainly, trinitarian elements within the wider Baptist family laboured earnestly to swing the pendulum in the other direction: the 1689 *London Baptist Confession*, written by the Particular Baptists, is explicitly trinitarian, for example, though it openly condemns the idea that the ancient Catholic councils (which set down the Trinity doctrine) were infallible, and affirms that 'all decrees of councils' are to be judged by Scripture, 'the supreme judge'. Nevertheless, it is evident that the general desire among General Baptists was regularly towards inclusion. In 1699, a General Baptist named Daniel Allen, a supporter of Caffyn, wrote a powerful tract titled *A Moderate Trinitarian, containing a Description of the Holy Trinity*, contending for unity among General Baptists of dissenting Christological opinion. Allen was able to write of both his own disagreement with those General Baptists who held to 'Socinian' (unitarian) Christology, as well as his sincere 'charity for them'; his ultimate goal being to demonstrate 'how far the contending parties are agreed in the fundamental point of faith in God and Christ'.[19] It is this same spirit which ostensibly motivated the subsequent General Baptist Assemblies of 1699-1701 to not merely tolerate Caffyn, but to adopt what has been called 'the first deliberate and formal endorsement of latitudinarian opinions in the article of the Trinity by the collective authority of any tolerated section of English Dissent'.[20] Indeed, until the formation of the New Connection in the 1770s (which the older churches did not join, and so eventually died out) Caffyn's unitarianism remained to some degree an element of the General Baptist identity and heritage.[21] But as we have seen by a brief survey of the evolution of other Christian denominations, time and circumstance have an uncanny ability to obscure the histories of even the most durable people-groups (Christian denominations notwithstanding), and

[19] Daniel Allen, *A Moderate Trinitarian*, cited in H. McLachlan, *The Story of a Nonconformist Library* (London: University Press, 1923), pp. 68-69.
[20] Alex Gordon, quoted ibid., p. 69.
[21] Nevertheless, in 1803, the National Assembly of the New Connection allowed unitarians to join.

to assign to them new histories and heritages surprisingly beyond the orbit of their primitive designs.

## Freedom of Interpretation

The final element of Baptist heritage to consider, which we have already touched on in the previous section, is the Baptist emphasis on religious freedom and the freedom of biblical interpretation. This good quality of the Baptist tradition has long been appreciated by both Baptists and non-Baptists alike as one of its most noble and admirable features. As the unitarian Christian philosopher John Locke once pointed out, 'The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.'[22] One Baptist voice observed thus of Locke's praise:

> Ringing testimonies like these might be multiplied indefinitely […] Our fundamental and essential principles have made our Baptist people, of all ages and countries, to be the unyielded protagonist of religious liberty, not only for themselves, but as well for everybody else.[23]

In this way, Baptists have perhaps more fully embodied that Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, and its necessary component: *the right to interpretation*, than many of their Protestant cousins. Early Baptists seem to have recognised what Stefan Zweig pointed out in his book on the concept of heresy in the Reformation, that 'In and by itself, the very notion of a 'heretic' is absurd as far as a Protestant Church is concerned, since Protestants demand that everyone shall have the right of interpretation.'[24]

One assumes, of course, that there are nevertheless certain fundamental or essential doctrines set down by any group that constitute its core identity, and that when an individual betrays or disposes of those convictions, such a person can no longer claim that group identity which is necessarily defined by adherence to those principles. The voting record of the General Baptist Assemblies of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries demonstrate what the essential doctrines were for the General Baptists in that era, or rather, what they were not. Since Caffyn, a unitarian Baptist, was repeatedly admitted not only to fellowship but to an official preaching position, despite several dogged appeals to have him excommunicated, it seems clear that General Baptist fundamentals did not include a belief in orthodox Christology or the doctrine of the Trinity. The General Baptists at large remained true, despite internal pressures from

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[22] John Locke, cited in George Washington Truett, 'Baptists and Religious Liberty', in Early, *Readings in Baptist History*, p. 146.
[23] George Washington Truett, ibid., pp. 146-147.
[24] Stefan Zweig, *The Right to Heresy: Castellio Against Calvin* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1951), in Gospel Truth <http://www.gospeltruth.net/heresy/heresy_chap6.htm> [accessed 9 May 2018]

certain parties to force agreement, to their deeply rooted principles of religious freedom and the right to interpretation in those other areas not thought to be essential. The question is, of course, as to whether the doctrine of the Trinity's absence among the list of Baptist essentials in Caffyn's day was a development essentially tied to Caffyn. Or perhaps it should be tied to 'rationalism' or to the unitarian scholar Priestly? I believe, in light of the preceding analysis and a fair consideration of General Baptist principles, that diversity in the realm of Christology had been flowing in the Baptist bloodstream apart from and before any particular influence from Caffyn. It was, in fact, this sense of freedom and inclusivity which had enabled Caffyn to ever conceive of himself as a unitarian Baptist.

## Caffyn the Baptist

It ultimately seems right to agree with Baptist historian Anthony Cross that '[the early Baptists'] unorthodoxy owed a great deal to the Baptists' primitivism, or restorationism, understood as their 'emphasis on the first, earliest form of Christianity,' and their resulting desire to be scriptural'.[25] And in the end it becomes possible to see Matthew Caffyn as not the agent of some non-Baptist philosophy, but as a Reformer committed to that side of the General Baptist coin which had always reflected the Radical, not the Magisterial, approach to Christology and to religious freedom. Doubtless many modern Baptists will not feel compelled to recognise Caffyn as a true Baptist or as anything other than an unfortunate heretic. But whatever Baptists may think of Caffyn today matters not at all for Baptist history. Modern interpretations of the boundaries of Baptist heritage must be reconciled with the fact that for at least the first century and a half of the Baptist faith, a good many Baptists travelled in Caffyn's general (unorthodox) direction, both before and after his rise to prominence, and that in the final analysis, the majority of Baptists in Caffyn's day, whether they agreed with him or not, invariably and publicly considered him not 'a heretic' but 'a Baptist'. Whether modern Baptists will do the same for those in their own midst who are likewise driven by similar commitments to the Radical Reformation is theirs to decide.

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[25] Cross, p. 3, quoting T.L. Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, p. vii.

# Book Reviews

Richard W. Voelz, *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 103 pages. ISBN: 978-1501868078.

The sixth book in The Artistry of Preaching Series, this book follows the series' goal of offering practical advice related to neglected themes to inspire creativity in preaching. Voelz, assistant professor of preaching and worship at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, begins his work by asking a question of image and authority. How preachers understand their role, and thus how they understand their authority for preaching, is important to him. A re-casting of the image of preacher-as-teacher via critical pedagogy, Voelz claims, can offer a pertinent image of preaching for today's context.

The book draws upon critical pedagogy research and literature in the North American context. However, despite this, Voelz's book offers important insights for pastors, no matter where they currently live.

Following the introduction, the book offers four chapters explaining how critical pedagogy re-imagines preaching. Chapter one explores how the preacher can contribute to the formation of public life. The second chapter examines critical pedagogy's call to teach toward a vision of the public square in relation to preaching. Teaching practices in critical pedagogy and their intersection with preaching is the topic of the third chapter. The relationship between the congregation, understandings of authority, the preacher-as-teacher, and the sermon are addressed in the fourth chapter. A final fifth chapter offers a helpful overview of the core themes and terms presented in the book and three sermons with comments explaining how each sermon uses preaching-as-teaching as envisioned by Voelz.

Building upon the work of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and Peter McLaren, Voelz re-frames the traditional understanding of preaching to teach. Preaching-as-teaching is different when done from a critical pedagogy, argues Voelz, because it can encompass many forms of preaching. This includes prophetic and pastoral preaching, as it allows the preaching to address the major issues of the day in a manner that encourages participants in the sermon to find both personal and social healing. Critical pedagogy stresses a move from giver of information to what may be passive listeners, to preaching to empower critical thought and conversation about church, community, world, and a vision of individual and communal transformation toward the *basileia tou Theou*. This term, rather than the

*kingdom of God*, is preferred – due to the many connotations that *kingdom* may have.

Overall, the book presents a needed reflection on preaching. Voelz shows that critical pedagogy can give insight and offer preaching that invokes theological reflection and participation of the church in their local community and world. This effort I commend, but I find it hard to see, in the examples offered, how Voelz builds fully upon the practices of critical pedagogy. Where are the moves in the sermon from monologue to dialogue, demonstration to brainstorming, critique or interpretation of reality to joint discovery and the faithful communal implementation of this discovered vision for an embodied future? Nevertheless, this is an important lens through which to view preaching and offers the reader imagination as to how this image of preaching might be implemented.

**Reviewed by Matthew Norman – Area Coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Field Teams in Europe (Barcelona, Spain).**

Paul Avis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 672 pages. ISBN: 978-0199645831.

The four parts of this handbook on the Church present the sources of ecclesiology in Scripture, its contours through history, and its present-day situation, which is approached via prominent ecclesial theologians and modern movements and influences.

The biblical material in Part One is well structured and covered in engaging fashion and by a good representation of varying ecclesial traditions. The presentations of church traditions in Part Two, presented by respected representatives of various denominations, is lively and informative. These serve as a reminder that between the biblical texts and the present context there is a rich and complex lived experience, from the ancient Western and Eastern Churches right through to modern Pentecostalism, which shape and resource present-day ecclesiologies. The theologians considered in Part Three are all important and dealt with by authoritative scholars. These essays give us a sense of how the Church has dealt with key issues in recent history and how we have become what we are now. The range of white men considered tells its own story, both of the Church and of the focus of this handbook. Part Four, though, gives us the most interesting snapshot of the Church today: rooted in issues of equality and gender, engaged with the social sciences, as an observable and not only ideal social reality, and, above all, global. These interesting chapters are asked to do a lot of work in a relatively short space, especially the chapters on Asian and African ecclesiologies.

A handbook of this sort is bound to have limitations, on account of the scope of the subject matter and the need for a clear structure. What is covered is rich, worth engaging with, and speaks of the depth and wealth of the Church. That said, a more sustained appraisal of evangelicalism and the Church, and churches, of the Global South feel like a deficit in text that aims at being compressive. The content is heavily slanted towards the West and is male dominated, both in terms of historical interest and contributors. These factors tell their own story about the Church and ecclesiology, but both in the historical Church and world Church there is more to be told, and more diverse voices to hear.

**Reviewed by Revd Mark Ord – Director of BMS World Mission, Birmingham, UK.**

Philip Salim Francis, *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 203 pages. ISBN: 978-0190279760.

This book by P. S. Francis is a thought-provoking study on how aesthetic experiences have transformed the religious beliefs of young people who have been raised and formed in American evangelical communities, especially those considered 'fundamentalist'. Although the study has a clearly defined American evangelical context, I suspect that anyone who has been raised in the twentieth-century evangelical tradition and still dares to read it, will find disturbing similarities with his or her own church culture. Evangelical suspicion of the arts is not just an American phenomenon. Therefore, I believe, the value of this book reaches much beyond the geographical borders of its origin.

This study is based on interviews and memoirs of eighty-two American Evangelical Christian students who at different times have studied in the programme called Oregon Extension, or in the Bob Jones University School of Fine Arts and Communication. These accounts, often cited at length and analysed in great depth, are the gems of this study. They convey the students' pain and grief when, after having been exposed to aesthetic experiences, they distance themselves from the American evangelical tradition and often from Christian faith in general. The 'absolute certainty' defined by their religious communities did not answer the complex questions of human experience which they first encountered in different art pieces and which then became their own.

Francis describes how through aesthetic encounters – literature, music, painting, film, etc. – the students experienced a different kind of 'knowing' than that of certainty. They also experienced a different kind of

meeting with the 'outsiders' than that of 'evangelising' as they were exposed to listening without a possibility to preach the Gospel as required in their religious communities – novels and paintings wouldn't hear. And in spite of pain and often accompanying depression, they have been able – or at least are on a journey – to overcome the need for 'absolute certainty', the divide between 'insiders' (members of their own religious community) and 'outsiders', and the demand for 'all-or-nothing commitment' to their religious community.

Francis' study engages profoundly with the question of how religious communities (and not only 'fundamentalists') preserve their identities, how challenging it can be to move away from these inherited patterns of life, and how multidimensional and complex may be the role of arts and other humanities on this journey. And, although written in the American evangelical context, Francis' study offers a challenge to all denominational institutions and theological schools whose role is to preserve and shape their own denominational identity.

**Reviewed by Helle Liht – Assistant General Secretary, European Baptist Federation.**

Emma Scrivener, *A New Day: Moving on from Hunger, Anxiety, Control, Shame, Anger and Despair* (London: IVP, 2017), 192 pages. ISBN: 978-1783594412.

Emma Scrivener's first book, *A New Name*, described her experience of severe anorexia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and self-harm as a teenager, and the spiritual experience which kickstarted her into recovery. This second book builds on the first, and acts as a self-help manual for people struggling with similar problems. Written for a popular market, it seeks to provide a biblical perspective on dealing with issues such as anger, control, anxiety, shame, and despair and how they shape the ways we think and behave.

The book is aimed at middle-class, Western young people, as its preppy cover design underscores. Worried by simplistic messages such as "I was a drug addict, but now I'm clean" which tend to permeate evangelical rhetoric, Scrivener wants to help people who are discovering that emotional and psychological difficulties do not disappear after conversion. We should expect 'mess, weakness and suffering', and rely on Jesus, our broken Saviour, to help us through.

The book's structure is provided by Genesis 1.5 ('And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day'). We move from the darkness of the night towards the daylight. Reflection questions, Scripture

meditations, practical advice, thoughtful prayers, and information on mental health issues help us on our way. Inward-looking emotional self-indulgence, is, thankfully, avoided. Scrivener is aware of the need, even in the darkness, to take personal responsibility and develop healthy responses to our experiences and thought patterns.

From a pastoral perspective, this is a helpful resource for youth and pastoral workers. From a practical theologian's point of view, however, its use of Scripture is rather incoherent. Genesis 1.5 and the Adam and Eve story are full of promising ideas for a discussion of behaviour and emotion, and would have been sufficient, fertile resources for the whole book. Unfortunately, she too often reverts to a kind of Christian Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, urging readers to replace 'non-Biblical' thinking with 'Gospel truth', an approach which risks the sort of simplistic thinking of which Scrivener herself is suspicious. Nevertheless, there is enough interesting material here to encourage the hope that the church can move away from literalism and proof-texting in pastoral work. It is the responsibility of pastoral theologians to enable popular authors like Scrivener to go much deeper.

**Reviewed by Dr Marion Carson – member of Adjunct Faculty, IBTS Centre, Amsterdam.**

Tom J. Obengo, *The Quest for Human Dignity in the Ethics of Pregnancy Termination* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 155 pages. ISBN: 978-1498233828.

In Kenya abortion is illegal, except when the woman's life is in danger. Nevertheless, 700+ pregnancy terminations are carried out daily on 15-17 year olds. Obengo, who is ordained in the Africa Inland Church and teaches at Moffat Bible College, is troubled by a lack of 'human dignity' in the church's response to those who have terminations. Besides experiencing physical and psychological ill-health caused by dangerous procedures, girls are excommunicated from the church.

Obengo provides a wealth of information on the legal, historical, and current context of abortion in Kenya. He gives a history of attitudes to abortion in the Christian tradition, noting that although abortion does not feature in Scripture, the moral status of the foetus does. The qualitative research consists of interviews with doctors, lawyers, and pastors and focus group discussions with church members. Doctors are willing to consider legalising abortion for healthcare reasons, while pastors and lawyers disagree. The focus group discussions reveal a need for teaching on abortion in churches, and on the morality of sex for young people. Obengo thinks that

chastity remains the best preventative of abortion, but dislikes the 'all or nothing' approach to termination found in the churches, which he believes contributes to stigmatisation. Giesler's theory of graded absolutism and Martin Benjamin's concept of moral compromise help him towards the conclusion that abortion may be justified in certain situations – threat to mother's life, incest, and rape – and that education and counselling, rather than excommunication of 'sinners', is required. He provides recommendations for church and public servants.

I hope that leaders in Kenya and beyond make use of the research and recommendations provided in this meticulously researched book. There are some problems – the argument tends towards circularity and the theological reflection could be much stronger. For example, his analysis of biblical sources is scant, and a promise to build on Reformation theology is not followed through. It is good, however, that double standards in treatment of boys and girls in the Kenyan church are identified, and that the stigmatisation of those who have abortions is challenged. The cultural and religious assumptions behind these practices require further investigation.

**Reviewed by Dr Marion Carson – member of Adjunct Faculty, IBTS Centre, Amsterdam.**

Alan Thomas, *Tackling Mental Illness Together: A Biblical and Practical Approach* (London: IVP, 2017), 206 pages. ISBN: 978-1783595594.

Alan Thomas is Professor of Old Age Psychiatry at Newcastle University. His belief is that mature church leaders can help those with mental illness and so he sets out to share some of his expertise to enable them to do so. His perspective is that of the clinician, but he also wants to 'construct a Biblical approach to mental illness'.

Thomas offers his views on the limitations of current psychiatry and defends its strengths. Troubled by the anti-psychiatry movement which, in both its secular and Christian forms, questions the existence of mental illness, he argues for a 'Biblical' view of people as psychosomatic wholes – mental illness, which can have biological and inter-personal causes, affects the whole person, not simply the mind. Disturbed by a tendency in modern psychiatry to medicalise everyday distress, he criticises current views which equate certain behaviour with disorder. Unsurprisingly, he dismisses all things Freudian as unscientific, asserting that the Bible gives us a 'surer guide to dealing with the influence of the unconscious mind'. Psychoanalytic explorations of childhood trauma are, he thinks, incompatible with biblical teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation. Further, non-religious

techniques, like the currently fashionable 'mindfulness' should be avoided lest they lead some people into sin.

As we might expect, he is at his best when discussing his area of clinical expertise. He argues strongly for the efficacy of Electro-Convulsive Therapy, and tackles the common criticism that psychotropic medicines are ineffective. He is cautious about certain psychotherapeutic approaches but supportive of the use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. His writing is limpid when he describes the various illnesses and their treatment, and his description of 'stepped care' will be of much practical use in the pastoral setting. He provides helpful vignettes from his long experience.

Unfortunately, however, his attempts to link the pastoral and clinical are less successful. He seems preoccupied with the relationship between mental illness and sin, while having little to say on the profound suffering which patients and families experience. His tendency is to use Scripture as though it were a textbook, which leads to simplistic assertions of the sort noted above, and a less than nuanced approach to pastoral care. His desire for the church to be involved in the care of the mentally ill is admirable, but the question of how the biblical texts are to help us in this task requires a much more sophisticated approach than is presented here.

**Reviewed by Dr Marion Carson – member of Adjunct Faculty, IBTS Centre, Amsterdam.**

Tim Noble, *Mission from the Perspective of the Other: Drawing Together on Holy Ground* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 218 pages. ISBN: 978-1532650482.

Whereas missiology has tended to focus on either God or the missionary as the agent(s) of mission, Tim Noble seeks to reimagine mission by recovering a third vantage point – the perspective of the other. His argument is as simple as it is profound: instead of seeing the other as a threat or problem to overcome, what if we reimagined the other as a gift? In this way, Noble invites us to discover how encounter with the other may be 'mutually enriching for the missionary and the addressee of mission'(p. ix).

The book unfolds in two parts and according to a distinct 'other-centred' logic. In the first part, entitled 'The Other', Noble attends to the way 'the other' gets portrayed in Scripture, in contemporary trends in missiology, and finally, in contemporary philosophy, particularly in the work of Jean-Luc Marion.

Instead of seeing the other as the static 'object' of mission, Noble displays how the other is an active subject in his/her own right – someone

whose presence may bring both blessing and challenge. The upshot: it's otherness all the way down! We are always encountering and being encountered by 'those who draw near' (the Greek etymology of *proselyte*); therefore, authentic encounter lies in welcoming and receiving the other without attempting to categorise him/her in advance. In this way, mission is not something that we possess, rather it is a 'a response in love to the other who draws near' (p. 181).

The second part of the book develops the first, by offering biographical sketches of three missionaries (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, William Carey, and Bishop Innocent Venianminov) who, in their own way and historical context, sought to embrace the possibility and challenge of authentic missionary encounters with the other.

Noble's book, which extends his previous writings in mission and liberation theology, offers a compelling approach to mission studies for a number of reasons: first, its generosity of spirit and ecumenical appeal; second, its timeliness in a world where patterns of globalisation and forced migration mean that encountering the other has become inescapable for most of the world; and third, its attempt to uphold the other's otherness and the possibility of mission.

Of course, every book bears limitations as well: many readers will question why the second part features an all-male cast of missionaries; others will want a more prescriptive approach that lays out what a non-possessive approach to mission looks like. And, to be fair, Noble does anticipate these criticisms.

The enduring appeal of this book is Noble's ability to raise the following question in such a way that the reader wants the question to become his/her own: "How can we leave our vision of mission open to the challenge of the other, so that together we travel towards a deeper understanding of who God is?"

Wherever we are placed and engaged in intercultural mission (whether that be overseas or in one's own neighbourhood), this book reads as a call to (re)discover that mission is not so much a technical blueprint waiting to be executed but a relational possibility waiting to be discovered.

**Reviewed by Dr Samuel E. Ewell – Community Animator with Companions for Hope, Birmingham, UK.**

Robert H. Nelson, *Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy* (Aarhus, DK: Aarhus University Press, 2017), 324 pages. ISBN: 978-8771842609.

As a Canadian Baptist residing in Norway, I read this book with great interest. The author describes himself as 'an economist with interest in the political and economic roles of religion in society, including the diverse forms religion has taken in the modern age' (p.11). His intended audience encompasses 'economists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, students of Nordic history, students of the history of religion, theologians, and anyone interested in the role of religion in its diverse forms in shaping modern societies'.

Nelson demonstrates convincingly that the social democratic structures of Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland are a result of the secularisation of their common Lutheran heritage. While examining these countries collectively, he has a special emphasis on Finland. He compares his analysis with that of Max Weber, who charted the influence of Calvinism in the rise of capitalism.

The longstanding formative influence of Lutheranism within the Nordic countries has evolved into what Nelson refers to as 'secular Lutheranism', which he sees as the underlying foundation for the rise of the social democratic political structures of these countries in the twentieth century. The superior positions that the Nordic countries have occupied in the 'World Governance indicators' published by the World Bank since 1996 indicate that they distinguish themselves from other countries in Europe and the rest of the world. Nelson points to their common Lutheran religious and cultural heritage as the prime collective influence that has been formative for their common values and similar social and political structures.

Nelson begins by 'setting the stage' with a brief historical overview of the history of the church in the Nordic countries from the Vikings to Lutheranism. He goes on to present a complex portrait of Martin Luther, whom he views not only as a religious reformer, but as a political revolutionary, who, albeit inadvertently, was responsible for

> opening the way to wide new religious, political and religious freedoms and resulting experimentation, and indeed to whole new directions of thought and action in society that in the space of a few hundred years would yield the modern world (p.80).

He also makes the claim that Luther's main contribution to the reformatory process has been his emphasis upon the freedom of individual conscience. This, despite his observation that it would be the other branches of the Reformation that would truly spearhead its cause (pp. 82-84). The complexities and paradoxes evidenced in Luther's writings and actions are

recognised by Nelson, who points to the Peasants' War of 1525 as a watershed event in his life and his role as figurehead for the Lutheran Reformation. Luther's defence of the authority of secular authorities in their enforcing of 'uniformity of worship, confession and ecclesiastical usage' (p. 86), the violent means that Luther advocated in supressing the Radical Reformation of his day, and the later tirade against the Jews (1943) are some of the problematic issues that Nelson addresses. He notes the irony of the development of the kingdoms of Lutheran Europe becoming small versions of the universal Roman Catholic Church, where the kings and princes wielded the same religious authority in their territories as the Pope in Rome – a 'Lutheranized' version of Roman Catholicism (p.95).

Nelson highlights the fundamental differences in the respective working ethics and theologies of calling between Calvinism and Lutheranism, and concludes that Luther's emphasis on the state's responsibility in providing for the social welfare of its citizens and his critical attitude to the pursuit of personal gain in business have provided the foundation for the current social democratic welfare states of the North.

Nelson's presentation is remarkably astute and insightful, and he skilfully demonstrates how Lutheranism is the fundamental collective force which has been defining for the social democratic Nordic countries. However, because the volume is compact, there is little possibility for a nuanced and differentiated presentation of each of the countries. This is particularly the case in his portrayal of the various Pietist movements, where he focuses primarily on German state Pietism, whereas Moravian Pietism with its Calvinistic emphasis on business enterprise and industry was profoundly influential at grass-roots level in both Denmark and Norway.

I would warmly recommend this volume as required reading for theological studies to enhance an understanding of the Nordic social democratic context.

**Reviewed by Revd Linda Aadne – Assistant Professor, Norwegian School of Leadership and Theology (HLT), Norway.**

Gene Daniels and Warrick Farah (eds.), *Margins of Islam: Ministry in Diverse Muslim Contexts* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publishing, 2018), 240 pages. ISBN: 978-0878080663.

These essays illustrate the diversity of Islam as lived by Muslims throughout the world and argue for an 'adaptive missiology' that approaches Muslims 'with a studied appreciation for their specific context' (p.144). The essays

are written by sixteen practitioner-scholars with a wealth of first-hand experience in often-sensitive Muslim settings, as witnessed by the fact that five of the authors use pseudonyms. The collection is comprised of eighteen essays: two introductory chapters 'conceptualize' Islam and argue against an essentialist view of one 'true', orthodox Islam, fourteen case studies illustrate Muslim diversity, and two concluding chapters seek to 'reframe' missiological engagement with Muslims in light of this diversity.

The case studies that make up the heart of this volume let the reader share the experience of meeting various kinds of Muslims, none of whom seems to fit stereotypical expectations for Islam and its followers. Along with this shared experience of encounter, these essays offer practitioner reflections supported by a wealth of relevant detail: the words of Muslims and converts from Islam, theoretical perspectives, statistics, trends, historical and political context, and cultural and linguistic issues. Rather than focusing on contestations between Islamic and Christian orthodoxies, these studies take a social science approach that explores the meaning of these diverse Muslims' experience and questions how bridges of understanding might be constructed in sharing the gospel with them.

This collection has assembled an admirable array of contributors who have experienced the diversity of Muslims around the world and are thus able to offer thought-provoking insights. Yet it must be observed that, of sixteen contributors, only one is a woman. This valuable collection of essays would surely have been greatly enriched – and better able to serve its intended purpose – had it included the voices, experiences, and insights of more female practitioner-scholars.

This volume explores a *missiological* approach to Muslims in all their diversity, so it is not surprising that most of the contributors confine themselves to discussions of how to 'reach' various kinds of Muslims. In today's world access to Muslims of all kinds has greatly increased. Yet we are also witnessing the historically unprecedented increase of Christians of Muslim background (CMB) and the emergence of congregations made up of such believers. Of fourteen case studies, four (chs. 3, 11, 13 and 14) touch helpfully on issues of discipleship and Christian formation for CMBs. A similar collection that delves into issues of discipleship and Christian formation for CMBs from such diverse Muslim backgrounds would be a valuable addition to the contribution made by this excellent book.

**Reviewed by Charles E. Faroe – PhD researcher at IBTS Centre, Amsterdam.**

Stephen B. Bevans, *Essays in Contextual Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 215 pages. ISBN: 978-9004366718.

This collection of essays, all by the prominent missiologist Stephen Bevans, presents as a defence and a further explication of tenets central to his significant work, first published in 1992, *Models of Contextual Theology*. Bevans' thesis develops the notion that there is no such thing as 'a theology' that holds true, regardless of context; but that theology arises out of a conversation between Scripture, Tradition, and our present experience in a given time and culture.

In this collection of essays, Bevans addresses criticisms that arise out of what he regards as misunderstandings of his central thesis. His argument might well be represented by a quotation repeated throughout this work, attributed to Charles Kraft, that, 'when a theology is *perceived* as irrelevant, it is *in fact* irrelevant'. In chapter 1, Bevans helpfully condenses and explains the six different models that he offered in *Models of Contextual Theology*, in looking to work through towards an appropriate theology for a given context: countercultural, translation, anthropological, praxis, synthetic, and transcendent models. He posits that a preference for, or blending of, one or more of these models is characteristic of the writing of contemporary theologians.

In the chapters that follow, Bevans engages with the challenge of shaping a practical theology that maintains orthodoxy and yet is truly contextual, recognising the pervasive mission of God in and towards all that is in the World. Going further, Bevans addresses and engages with the work of a number of significant, missiological thinkers, whose works have been published in the intervening years.

Interestingly, Bevans' representation of contextual theology runs parallel to a stress found in baptistic theology, as expressed in the writing of James McClendon, insisting that a dialogue needs to take place between the context of the present and the Scriptures, that conversation being peculiar to the circumstances and location in which it takes place. What differs most significantly is that Bevans is speaking to the wider church out of a Roman Catholic base.

This works serves as an excellent introduction to the well-expressed thoughts of a leading, contemporary missiologist.

**Reviewed by Revd Dr Jim Purves – Mission and Ministry Advisor, Baptist Union of Scotland.**