

B r i e f i n i g

Free to Believe



OPENING

Autumn 2013

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OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Particular thanks to our guest writers, John Dominic Crossan, author, scholar of the New Testament and Comparative Religions, co-founder of the Jesus Seminar – and speaker at our forthcoming conference in March; and Tony Jaques, warden of the Othona Community in Dorset, former Radio 4 broadcaster, and aficionado of poetry, songs, wordplay and minimalist liturgy.

And thank you, too, to our other contributors, all of whom are in our Free to Believe network.

One of the most important words on my own faith journey (or really, it's a *cluster* of words) is **open, openness, opening**. A mantra or prayer I say every day is "May I open out, be more open, be a parable of openness." I cannot find in myself much aspiration to be holy or pure or humble; but right up there, next to **being attentive** (which is perhaps my number one aspiration), is being open. Open to the giving and receiving of love ('whatever love means', as Prince Charles once famously remarked); open to people, to new insights, open to different kinds of knowing - intuition as well as intellect; open to new experiences, to laughter and sorrow, to stillness and activism, to challenge and criticism, to adventure and the many different ways of seeing and understanding life.

Truth to tell, I am rather bad at being open - and that is why openness is an aspiration and the plea of my heart. It is a great deal easier to be closed, to know and be able to state confidently a 'tight' set of beliefs, to shelter with my own kind and those on my own wavelength, and not to have to try and understand those who are different. It is easier to stay with the familiar and let my world grow small, than to venture into the unknown and risk a universe that doesn't know when to stop expanding. For sheer comfort, give me 'closed' any day.

So I am delighted to be prompted again to openness by the contributions in this issue of *Briefing* – from the amazing key articles of our two guest writers, Tony Jaques and John Dominic Crossan, to Alan Coles' book review, Beryl Chatfield's meditation and Chris Avis's piece on maturing in faith - because they all instance some aspect of opening and expanding. Geoff Newton's celebration of Lawrence Sterne and Martin Camroux's appreciation of Emily Dickinson are (indirectly at least) about the qualities of openness that gave these two writers lasting appeal. By no means least, John Sowton's thoughtful remarks, and a few other brief quotations, about the first FTB retreat, bear witness to personal experiences of 'expanding' in stillness and the search for authenticity. All these contributions should help us on that difficult path towards being 'parables of openness'.

Note: Tony Jaques is the warden at the Othona Community, Burton Bradstock, Dorset. Simplicity, involvement and acceptance are key words for life at Othona, which offers workshops, courses, breaks, sabbaticals and opportunities for volunteering to people of all ages and abilities. Rooted in the Christian tradition, but open to an evolving spirituality, it welcomes those of all faiths and none. Dedicated to building community, it attempts to draw in people of many different backgrounds, and to provide everything from mindfulness meditation to hill-walking, finding your voice to 'rolling up your sleeves' for gardening and painting. Jack Spong, Simon Small and Mark Townsend have been amongst those leading thought-provoking weekend courses at Othona. See: www.othona-bb.org.uk

Almost ten years ago I wrote a short article about a kind of 'Open Christianity' emerging right across the world, albeit under many different banners. As if, I suggested, a movement were springing up spontaneously in lots of places at once. Revisiting it now I see it with an extra dimension (more of that later). But first, I identified seven main aspects of openness.

Open to all the varying strands of Christian tradition

- none of them has got it all right (whatever they may say!) but none has it all wrong either
- we are heirs to Christianity's past, as much as our most traditionalist sisters and brothers
- so we can draw freely on all the resources of Christian history, cherishing what's positive but leaving what's negative, to play our part in the evolution of the Way of Jesus

Open to the radical spirit of Jesus

- he took a revolutionary approach to the accepted social and religious ideas of his time
- as did such diverse followers as Paul, Francis, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther and Martin Luther King
- so we dare to be equally revolutionary now in his name

Open to all the faiths, the prophetic and wisdom traditions of the world

- they deserve respect and attention even where they seem most alien
- their mystical heartlands, their ethical values, their fund of stories, beckon to us
- so we seek common ground in confidence that there are many paths to God and Reality

Open to new insight from all branches of human understanding

- revelation is not limited to religions, because God is not limited and life is evolving
- key revelations for our time include the findings of psychology, earth sciences, gender studies, quantum physics, genetics, astronomy, and the study of consciousness
- so we look for real dialogue between science and spirituality in aid of planetary survival

Open to uncertainty and humility

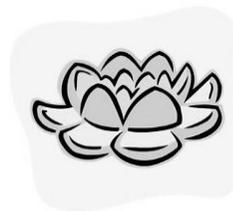
- ideas of Absolute Truth and dogmatic certainty may be necessary stages in our growth, but if clung onto they can prevent individuals and cultures growing to maturity
- old images of God always need to die and be reborn through the inspired imagination
- so we see there can be positive value in uncertainty, as a sign of Divine Mystery and human creativity

Open to the challenges of peace and justice

- human diversity and the scale of human suffering make love-in-action no easy thing
- but ‘living well’, in society and in personal relations, is the test of all healthy spirituality (“by their fruits,” as Jesus said)
- so we have faith in simple positive actions that help us to meet and respond to God in other people

Open to personal transformation

- spiritual experience of any sort can change individuals, whether gradually (life pilgrimage) or suddenly (born again)
- practices of prayer and meditation are often midwives of the true self, but not the only ones
- so we welcome, however it arises, the enlightenment and liberation which comes when human beings are open... to the Spirit however they experience it



Writing that in 2005 I tried to cover a lot in a few words, but hoping to be clear and coherent. I felt it was exciting to live in a time when such openness is possible for us - in ways it frankly wasn't for our ancestors. But I knew any Open Christianity poses uncomfortable questions for much of church tradition. It challenges all the institutional defensiveness, the blinkered attitudes to scripture, the racism and sexism and lack of imagination that still bedevil so much of church life. (Not to ignore the challenges for those of us who are instinctive liberals too. How open are we to the workings of the Spirit in the lives of other Christians, however strange their ideas or beliefs seem to us? What are we doing to turn all these fine forward-looking sentiments into action that helps change the world?)

In the years since 2005, I've become aware of 'open source' as a concept and a way of working in our multi-connected world. Dating from 1998, open source is the preferred term for software that's

offered free of charge in the public domain and where the *source code* – the equivalent of Coca Cola’s secret recipe, you could say – is not hidden. It’s available for anyone who wants to get involved with a virtual community of people across the world who are developing it. Among the best known examples of open source material are the browser Mozilla Firefox, and the Android and Linux operating systems.

Open Source, as a way of growing a shared body of resources and understandings, seems strangely familiar. Isn’t this what is happening for many of us in terms of spirituality? Just as no Microsoft can hold a monopoly on all powerful software, so no religious institution should delude itself that it holds a monopoly any longer on the resources and understandings of faith. They are out there. And we, the people, are handling, exploring, sharing and debating them - no doubt sometimes mistaking and misusing them too. Like the online forums in which software geeks tackle every newly discovered glitch in Firefox, we’re trying to support each other, sort out snags and pool our best discoveries. This is what I observe going on – oh so modestly – among people who visit the community and retreat centre I’ve been directing since 1995.

This open source freewheeling will affect and change every faith tradition in the world, in ways we can barely imagine as yet. For historical and cultural reasons it may be impacting on Christianity earlier than most other traditions. But surely it won’t stop there.

Search on the internet and you’ll find various people running websites *called* Open Source Religion, Open Source Spirituality, Open Source Christian and so on. They bagged the domain names, good for them. But they’re not necessarily what I’m getting at. And of course they can’t corner the market – that wouldn’t be open source at all! I think the vast majority of people who are already actually *practising* open source spirituality have never heard the term.

Let me end with an explicit, if simple, theological idea. In spite of every past claim to unique revelation, every attempt to assert religious authority, every knee-jerk prohibition – isn’t God, Spirit, whatever we call it, by definition the great Open Source?

Free to Think: A Celebration of Questions

John Dominic Crossan



We are free to believe because we are first free to think. We think by putting any claim deep within its original context and probing it with our questions. Here is a medley of such questions to be considered in my talks on “The Challenge of Christmas and the Meaning of Easter” at the Hayes Conference Center, 27th-29th March 2014.

For Christmas. Why do only two of the four gospel-versions give us an infancy story and why do they differ so completely? What is the purpose of such stories?

Why does Matthew have an angelic annunciation to Joseph, and Luke to Mary, even though we always talk simply about “The Annunciation?” (Do you notice how seldom we ever see images of Matthew’s version of the annunciation to Joseph?)

Why does Luke proclaim “peace on earth” at the birth of Jesus when the Roman Empire had already celebrated it at the birth of Augustus?

Furthermore, why do both Matthew and Luke declare the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem but give different explanations of how it happened there rather than at Nazareth?

If you think of where they are both in agreement, was the divine and virginal conception of Jesus intended by them as symbol, metaphor and parable, or as an actual, factual and historical event? And what is at stake in how we answer that question? For example, how do liturgical time, place and event differ from historical time, place, and event? Put another way, do you celebrate the birth of Jesus today at historical Nazareth or liturgical Bethlehem?

For Easter. That interaction between parable and history is even more important when you speak of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. What happened, in our terms, that first Holy Week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday?

If Jesus went every year to Jerusalem for Passover, how was that final visit different from any earlier ones? Or, if Jesus only went that one time, what was his purpose for that special visit? Did he go to get himself killed in sacrificial atonement for our sake? If so, why did it take a week to accomplish that intention?

Or was he finally taking his Kingdom Movement to the capital city of his people where he would be protected by “a crowd” of supporters in the Temple by day and in distant Bethany by night? Would he have expected, despite the evident danger, to get away with it - as he almost did (Mark 14:1-2). How, once again, do we distinguish between historical event and parabolic interpretation in that crucifixion. What is at stake in that distinction?

My first question for the resurrection is not the classic one: What would a TV crew have seen if they had been at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning? Could they have caught the resurrection on film or tape? Put that way the answer is too easy: CNN would not have seen anything, but Fox News would have caught everything—they see lots of things the rest of us cannot.

Here, however, is *my* question (and during the lectures it will be fully illustrated by video): The Western Christian tradition depicts an *individual* resurrection of Jesus, but the Eastern Christian tradition depicts a *communal* one. In the West Jesus arises alone, in the East he arises and liberates a host of others. Why?

Among them, and always in first place, is the Ancestral Couple whose wrist - for Adam, or wrists - for Adam and Eve - are firmly grasped by the wounded hand of Christ. They are set free from the realm of death by a transcendent Christ. How are we to understand that vision?

That *communal* resurrection was once the understanding of both West and East but was eventually rejected by the Christian West while always retained in the Christian East. Why? What is at stake? If you can imagine the Western understanding as an historical event (at least there is only a single tomb!), how could you ever take the Eastern understanding literally? If Adam and Eve, why not everyone, or does Adam-and-Eve mean everyone?? How many empty tombs would be required for all those in the *communal* resurrection?

Has the West lost and the East kept a far better continuity with the Christian-Jewish understanding of a *communal* resurrection at Easter, a collective of “those who have slept” (1 Corinthians 15:20 ; Matthew 27:51b-53)? What if resurrection is not just about Jesus, but about God’s great Peace and Reconciliation Commission with the human race? It is *with* and *through* Jesus but not at all only *for* Jesus.



Journey to the Centre

Report on the Free to Believe September Retreat

John Sowton

From tea-time on Tuesday 24th until after lunch on Thursday 26th September, twelve people of a Free to Believe persuasion spent time in reflection, stillness and silence, guided with sensitivity and understanding by leaders Kate Compston and Peter Varney.

The Place

We stayed in Abbey House, Glastonbury, a Church of England Retreat House built in the 1830s in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey. I find it hard to imagine anywhere more fitting for a retreat. The house has comfort, quietness, a



seeming infinitude of books, and beautiful grounds. The catering is high quality, the staff attentive yet unobtrusive. There is easy access to the Abbey itself and to its museum without charge via a private gate from the garden. House guests are given the combination code for its padlock.

The People

We were three men, nine women. At least two were URC Ministers, others Methodist Local Preachers. Some, but not all, were already known to one another. Some were retired. Several had come from circumstances of personal stress and difficulty. Thanks to the skill and experience of the leaders, we quickly reached the level of trust within the group needed for members to feel safe enough to make some personal disclosures. No-one appeared uncomfortable or ill at ease.

The Programme

With the leaders' guidance, the journey we sought to make towards the centre of our being was to be thought of not as a straight line, rather as one describing curves and shapes. Their aim was for "spaciousness' in which there is time for reflection, stillness and silence – and everything is optional." And so it proved. Each of the seven sessions was introduced by Kate or Peter. Discussion in pairs and threes as well as all together in the circle, and diverse practical activities followed. For example, by bringing in from a walk in the garden some objects which attracted each member, drawing 'negative' and 'positive' shapes, overlapping them one on another, we found that new, unexpected, interesting and beautiful outlines spontaneously might be created. Several people showed very impressive artistic skill. The 'Awareness/Mindfulness Walk' was especially memorable for me, reinforcing a belief I have long cherished – that the natural world and many of our human contacts have the potential to nourish the depths of the spirit, if we will receive them consciously. Thus we were encouraged, in the garden, to feel, listen, see, smell and if possible taste the surroundings and items in them with rapt attention, describing the experience in the re-convened group. This occasioned welcome laughter as well as serious thought.

We briefly explored the ancient art and importance of labyrinths in spiritual life and development.

The two evenings ended with time for reflection, including brief readings of great beauty. Silence among us was then kept until after breakfast. Each member had been asked to bring an object, a brief story or a reading, or anything else that spoke of stillness, the interior life, or the journey of the soul. In turn, each person described what had been brought to the group. The variety and poignancy revealed was often deeply moving. Finally, the question "What will you find at the centre?" was posed. Some drew their answers with consummate skill, some replied haltingly in words.

I opted for “unconditional love, offered and accepted” adding that I’m not there yet.

We closed before lunch on Thursday with a version of the Prayer in Six Directions.

Conclusion: a personal response

I found the whole retreat experience wonderfully enriching. I want to spend time with those people again. What have I brought away from Abbey House that I did not have when I went? A restored sense of the presence of the divine underlying and infusing the whole of being, a heightened awareness of mystery, I hope a realistic consciousness of the evil in the world and within myself, but strengthened hope.

I understand that this was FTB’s first retreat. This does not mean that we have ceased to advance. I see this retreat as part of our going forward.

“Despite coming from a busy life – with many worries, concerns, deadlines to meet, and decisions to be made, I was able to let these things go, and by Thursday morning had relaxed and felt I needed another day!”

“Beautiful experience in every way ... I leave knowing that I can tap into the peace that I was able to find at moments here.”

“The balance of working on one’s own and sharing things has worked well. The open approach has been helpful in encouraging exploration.”

Nimble Believing: Emily Dickinson *Martin Camroux*



To celebrate my retirement Margaret and I went over to the US, landed at New York, hired a car and drove straight to Amherst, Massachusetts. Oddly, Amherst is named after a British army general whose response to an Indian war was to suggest giving them blankets infected with smallpox – an early precursor of biological warfare! But it is also the home of Emily Dickinson, perhaps America’s greatest woman poet. In one of his sermons William Sloane Coffin asked

with sumptuous incredulity: “Can you imagine that there actually are people in the world who don’t read a poem a day?” I haven’t quite met that test but I read no-one more than Dickinson

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.*

Amherst was just the kind of white wooden house New England town that I imagined. And there was the large Dickinson family home, and 100 yards away the house her father built for her brother, Austin, when he suggested he might move away. Emily was to spend most of her life in the house.

*The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door*

But inwardly she is tempestuous, full of passion, love, doubt and faith.

*Dare you see a soul at white heat?
Then crouch within the door*

She asks us: Why wish for a soul that has cooled into religious certainty? On the other side, why accept a soul that has lost its fire to the cold resignation of un-faith? It is in the tugging between the two where real life lies. As she wrote, late in her life: “On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings*, we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble.”

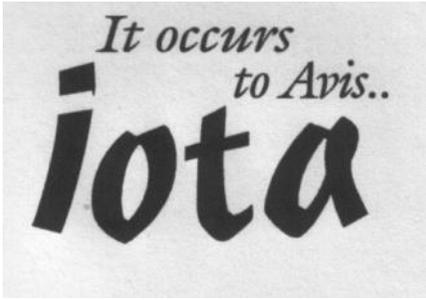
The thing which really struck me about the visit is that the family house is almost opposite the imposing 1st Congregational Church where all the family except herself worshipped. She would have seen the coming and going but she stayed away,

*Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -
I keep it, staying at Home -*

For her there was an unwillingness to be trapped in a religious system.

*Much Gesture, from the pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the tooth
that nibbles at the soul—*

Which leaves me with all sorts of questions! If she had made her way across the road with everyone else would it have strengthened or stifled the passion for God within her? But if there had been no church, from where would she have got her love of the Bible and of Jesus?



Initial Initiations *Learning the ABC*

Chris Avis

Where do Christians first learn their Christianity? I guess that for many it begins at an early age

in a 'mother's knee' environment, or perhaps later through the teenage enthusiasm of conservative evangelical friends, possibly including the beguiling influence of Alpha meetings or the Christian Union. Alternatively, any of the more bizarre 'Christian' sects can have a profound and often damaging effect when imposed on a child by a dangerously misguided parent (for example, as in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*).

Although church membership in general continues to decline, some churches of a more evangelical and Pentecostal nature continue to buck the trend with ever increasing numbers in attendance, prompting much discussion elsewhere about the whys and wherefores.

There are differing views also on the growth or otherwise of churches with a more 'progressive' ethos, with some observers predicting (with just a hint of relish?) their ultimate demise. Conferences I attend organised by networks like Free To Believe and PCN Britain have a predominantly older attendance (with some encouraging exceptions), which can also trigger heart-searching debate.

It occurs to me that most Christians today who are keen to explore beyond the borders of a rigid fundamentalist faith are not in the early stages of their Christianity but some way into their journey. For many, the initial appeal of fundamentalist certainty leads sooner or later to disillusion with, and rejection of, what was promised as the ultimate answer to human fear and insecurity: the simplistic indoctrination of 'Jesus saves' has become a cruel deception.

Sometimes it is such people who find their way, often late in life and with damaged fingernails, into gatherings of open Christians like PCN.

So perhaps groups such as we should not be surprised or disappointed by the predominantly 'mature' nature of our supporters. Rather like a traditional school education, Christian knowledge begins with some simple basics. The fact that such simplistic theological notions even now are rarely brought to maturity in the minds of 'pupils' in church pews is sad, but at least the likes of Free To Believe can offer a degree of 'further education' to those in need.

Wickedly, I like to amuse myself by thinking of this as a journey from ALPHA (All Life's Problems Have Answers) to OMEGA (Open-Minded Exploration Generates Amazement).

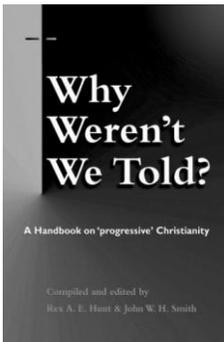


Book Review: A Goldmine of Progressive Resources

Alan Coles

Why Weren't We Told? A Handbook on 'progressive' Christianity

Compiled & edited by Rex A E Hunt & John W H Smith Polebridge Press 2013



I'm usually turned off by extravagant and often inappropriate hyperbole used widely as a sales tool to sell almost everything. However, 'excellent, inspiring, informative, encouraging and fascinating' is an accurate description of this richly packed 266-page paperback. Since I bought it in July, hardly a day has passed when I have not picked it up.

The majority of the content and its contributors are from New Zealand, Australia and the USA. The purpose of the book is to provide material for further study and to stimulate readers into clarifying their thinking on a great variety of issues. It provides examples of 'work in progress' as well as concise cameos written mainly by ordained scholars on a host of topics. Most contributors are fellows of the Westar Institute/Jesus Seminar.

The Foreword is by the remarkable Revd. Professor Sir Lloyd Geering in New Zealand who, at the age of 93, is still lecturing. He refers to the controversy that spilled out of the churches when he wrote an Easter article for his church journal headed, 'What does the Resurrection of Jesus mean?', and went on to suggest, as many scholars had already done, that the story of the empty tomb was a pious legend and not to be taken as evidence of a supernatural miracle.

In the course of the public debate that followed, a lawyer complained to him saying he had been a loyal churchman all his life and that he was reasonably intelligent. Why had he not been told all this before? Geering goes on to speak of the ‘great gulf’ opening up between thinking theologians and biblical scholars, and what was still being preached in the churches.

The book is divided up into five sections with the first headed “‘Progressive’ Cameos”. There are 60 of these written by a variety of contributors with titles such as: Autonomy, Christology in an Evolutionary World, Dubious Doctrines & Suspicious Scriptures, Earliest Christianities, The ‘Fallen’ World, Holy Communion, Queer Spirituality, Science and Religion, and so on.

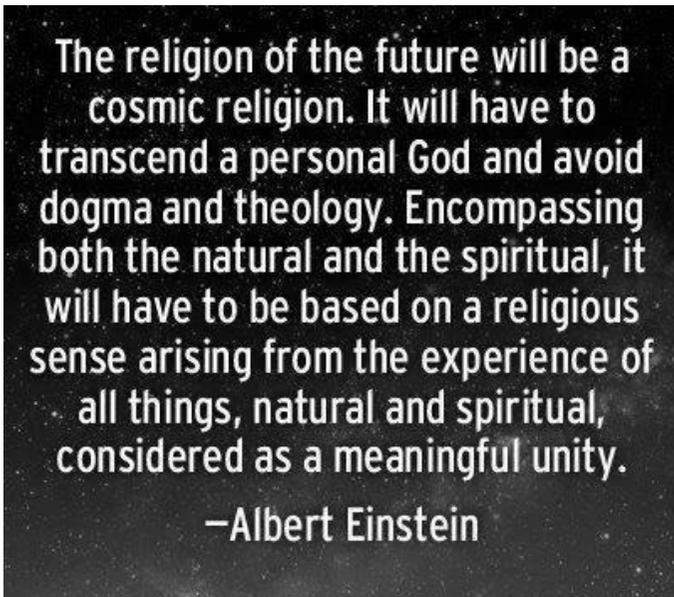
The second section is “Reclaiming the Faith’s Free Thinkers”, with Heretics & Heroes as the first of three sub-sections. Paul Laughlin provides thumbnail sketches of ‘heretics’ such as Marcion (a Radical Rationalist), Valentinus (an Unorthodox Unitist), Arius (a Debunker of Doctrines), Origen (an Eccentric Exegete), Melchior Hoffmann (a Rebellious Re-Baptizer), etc. He goes on to link these with the more modern ‘heretics’, for instance, Schleiermacher, Darwin, de Chardin, Bultmann, Tillich, Funk, and Crossan.

“‘Progressive’ Christianity Alive – Some encouragement....because we are not alone!” This heading sums up the contents of section three with 21 cameos dealing with some of the matters of faith and belief that are often very differently interpreted by ‘progressives’ from those held by the ‘average’ churchgoer. Keith Rowe summarises this section by saying: ‘....rethinking Christian belief in the light of the insights.....not available to earlier generations and to the renewal of Christian living through recapturing the radical social implications of the way of life embodied in Jesus.’ Articles with titles such as - Pushing Boundaries, Biblical and Modern Worldviews of the History of the World & Human Life, Why I Can No Longer Say ‘The Nicene Creed’, What They Told Us In Seminary but We Never Got To Preach About!, The Healing Narratives: The Importance of a ‘progressive’ Theological Approach - provide a flavour of this enriching section.

“Living the ‘progressive’ Dream” is the title of the fourth section, giving the stories and experiences of twenty four congregations/ groups self-styled as ‘progressives’. Some of the ‘grassroots’ responses by very different groups in New Zealand & Australia are absolutely fascinating to read.

The final section “Resources Toolbox” contains Progressive Hymns, Responsive Prayers/Reflections, A Liturgy for Holy Communion, A Liturgy for the Celebration of Birth/Life and Non-Theistic Prayers. The imbalance between Europe and The New World in this book is compensated for by the inclusion of hymns and ‘Singing the Theology that Can Shape ‘Progressive’ Christianity’ by our own Revd. Dr. Andrew Pratt, a Methodist minister and former Lecturer at Luther King House – an ecumenical theological college in Manchester. He is recognized as one of Great Britain’s foremost contemporary hymn-writers.

I cannot commend this book highly enough.



The Bridge

The viaduct has collapsed.
The train is fast approaching.
How can we stop its progress
before it is too late?
No-one can stop it alone,
but together we could.

The bridge of trust has gone.
Fear drives us forward
toward global disaster.
Alone, we cannot stop
in time to rebuild the bridge,
but together we could.

Patient labour is needed
to build a strong bridge,
but the five basic pillars
are already set in place:
Buddhists, Christians, Jews,
Hindus and Muslims.

All have a part to play
in building a way forward,
based on the Golden Rule:
‘Treat others as you wish
that they would treat you.’
Together we could ...

"The Challenge of Christmas and the Meaning of Easter"

with John Dominic Crossan

**Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies,
DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois**

27-29 March 2014

**The Hayes Conference Centre
Swanwick
Derbyshire
DE55 1AU**

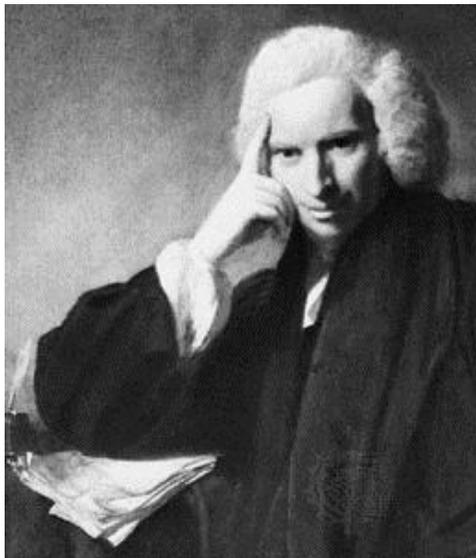
His talks will include:

The Challenge of Overtures
The Christmas Stories of Matthew and Luke
The Execution of Jesus in Mark
The Resurrection of Jesus in Paul

We are immensely privileged to have this great scholar of the New Testament and Comparative Religions coming to address our conference. John Dominic Crossan is generally acknowledged to be the premier historical Jesus scholar in the world. His many books include *The Historical Jesus*, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, and *Who Killed Jesus?* He was co-founder (with Robert Funk) of the Jesus Seminar. Though undoubtedly an academic, he writes in a way that is accessible to the ordinary non-academic enquiring reader. If you have not yet done so, please book now to secure a place at the conference, where you will be well catered for in every respect – body, mind, and soul! Come and meet others who share your questions. There is a booking form inside the back cover.

The Tercentenary of the birth of Laurence Sterne: a Man for Our Times

Geoff Newton



For ten years I have pursued a specialism in the study of the life and works of Laurence Sterne - for 30 years a conscientious Anglican clergyman with 48 excellent and readable, liberal and enlightened, published sermons - who was born 300 years ago in 1713. From July 8th to 11th, I attended the tercentenary conference also attended by 68 delegates, mostly Professors from universities around the globe. More than 60 papers were

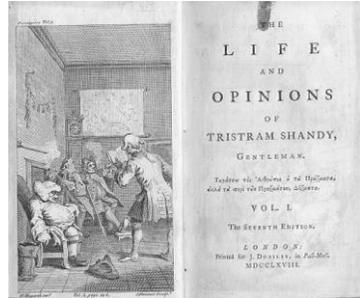
presented about Sterne and his works – mostly about his masterpiece *Tristram Shandy* - over four days, revealing not only his genius, but also his appeal, providing adequate interpretation is given. Yet Sterne is little known outside of academia, and from my reading of him and my understanding of today's world, there are, I believe, distinctive connections which make him a man for our times regarding religion, personal identity and human rights. At the conference I presented a paper on this theme, and the following is an abridged version. It seems that Sterne is a particularly relevant figure for *Free To Believe*; as his realistic, spiritual, and sane approach towards religion, is precisely its essential essence.

Religion

First: religion. Sterne's time was one of spiritual unrest, and there was a charismatic phenomenon taking place in the Methodist movement sweeping the country. Today, religious unrest has led to the expression of religious observance in many new forms, while many expressions of charismatic fundamentalism are flourishing. Sacred texts provide the backbone for most religions and it is here that we find Sterne's focus most relevant. Sterne had a unique, free flowing style, inserting, in one instance into a short passage of twenty lines, the paraphrases of seven Biblical texts, Mtt. 5.44 and 6, 14-15, I Pet. 2.11, Col. 3.2, Hebs. 11.10 and 13.14, and Ps. 50.9, and, no other preacher would have turned one of the most lurid and gory of Old Testament stories: 'The Levite and his Concubine' into an example of the beauties of companionable friendship between the sexes. To treat scripture like this was a daring and audacious thing to do and singles him out as representing an approach diametrically opposed to the literalist and dogmatic.

Personal Identity

Second: personal identity, a peculiarly modern concern. One author writes: "Tristram seeks with the anti-hero of the contemporary world an answer to the unanswerable question, "Who am I? ..."ⁱ. Sterne lived at a time of emerging scientific discovery, and he refers to that "great harvest of ... learning" and "now ripening", specifically referring to "physiological". Of the sciences, neuroscience today is making new discoveries at a brisk rate, and when we think of the brain and the workings of the mind, we can only say with Tristram: "-----Endless is the search of truth". Such humility is needed today as we learn that every scientific discovery



ⁱ Helen Moglem, *The Winged Skull, Essays On Laurence Sterne*, Methuine and Co. Ltd., 1971, 73.

opens a door onto yet another mystery, the biggest being that of our own minds.

Personal identity is inextricably bound up with sexuality, and Sterne speaks to us with particular relevance about this most basic of subjects. Today, its nature is being re-evaluated, with the undermining of taboos and inhibitions and the recognition that it is much more complex with masculine and feminine capable of interchange and multiple categories of sexuality emerging. One writer refers to the two main characters in *Tristram Shandy*, Walter and Toby as “feminised men of feeling”.

Human Rights

Lastly, for me Sterne connects with our times in his espousal of human rights. Today, religion is involved, often in a negative way, with human rights, and in society at large, discrimination, injustice and cruelty are only too painfully alive and kicking. How does Sterne relate to this? Sterne favoured abolitionism and he is against the excessive floggings which were administered in the army, sometimes on trumped up charges as noted in the case of “the poor grenadier ... so unmercifully whipped ... about the ducats”. Sterne was no religious controversialist: his criticism of the Catholics is for their cruelty in the inquisition, namely their violation of human rights, and his comments about the ‘enthusiasm’ of the Methodists is in line with his cautionary reference to those who “who govern this mighty world and its mighty concerns with the engines of eloquence, -- who heat ...cool ...melt and mollify, ---- and then harden it again to *your* purpose ---- “. With regard to women’s rights, Sterne has been read as a misogynist author, marginalising women and reflecting the view of the division of the sexes in his day, but, Tristram’s excruciating account of his birth and the way in which his mother was treated by her husband and Dr Slop, with her narrow escape from the lethal caesarean knife, reveals an acute awareness and concern for women’s lot in the 18th century.

In the penultimate chapter of the last volume of *Tristram Shandy*, we find: “HUMANITY - - - thus.”

The word humanity screams at us from the page and sums up Sterne's unique contribution.

So, is Lawrence Sterne a man for our times? I believe that he is, and that his voice, speaking of a humanity dominated by benevolence, is urgently needed to remind the religious of this basic component of their religion:- to direct people towards their common humanity; and, in the course of this to help us to determine what, in fact, it means to be human. Do you think Sterne can be adopted as the patron saint of *Free To Believe*?



How to Walk on Water *Kate Compston*

Slip anchor, lose your gravity.
Think yourself the spun thread
of a spider, stitch the spray's
lace to the wave. Breathe
so subtly you are only breath.
Let laughter bubble within you;
lighten your bones
to a fretwork of feathers.



**“The Challenge of Christmas and the Meaning of Easter”
2014 Conference Application Form**

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I wish to book place(s) for the ‘The Challenge of Christmas and the Meaning of Easter’ 2014 Conference at The Hayes Swanwick DE55 1AU, from 27th to 29th March 2014

My denomination is
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Total cost of conference per person including ensuite accommodation and all meals (from Thursday afternoon tea to Saturday lunch) is £190 per person. There are a few non-ensuite rooms available at a cost of £165 per person, allocated in order of receipt – please circle to indicate your preferred option.

Preference: non-ensuite @ £165 ensuite @ £190

Please complete and return this booking form with a non-refundable deposit of £30 per place (balance due by end January 2014), cheque made payable to Free to Believe, to:

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