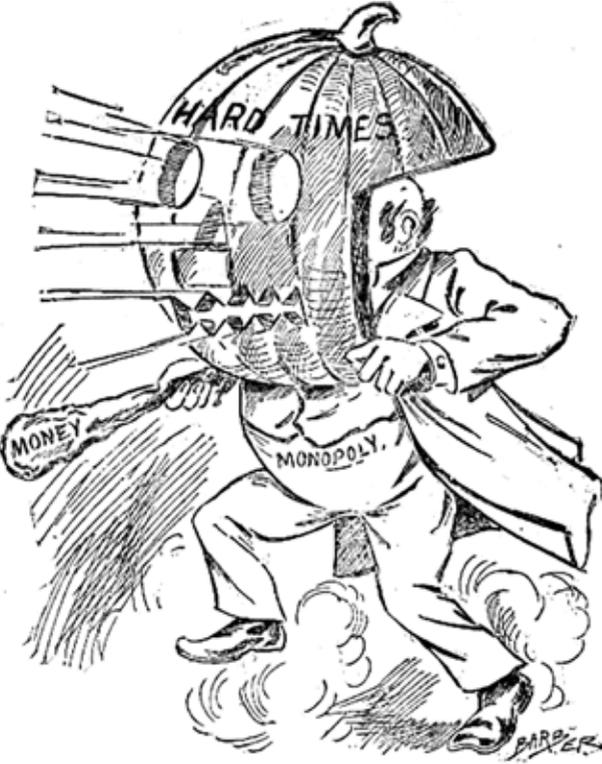


BRIEFING

Autumn 2014



METAPHOR

Free to
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*Cover illustration: 'The Republican', taken from
The Los Angeles Times, 1894*

St. Columba meets the Higgs boson

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The Life of St. Columba (*Vita Columbae* is the original Latin title) is a story-book from the wilds of 6th Century Scotland. Since so few texts remain from that time and place, the Life is a prime source for profiling early medieval Celtic culture, which was both pagan and Christian and endlessly fascinating. It tells stories that sound strange if not fantastic to the modern ear. So does contemporary particle physics, for that matter, with its strange cast of characters including quarks, leptons and the recently discovered Higgs boson, which is why we group these wildly divergent products of the human mind in the same title. For all their difference—and the thirteen centuries separating them is the least of it—important things connect St. Columba and the Higgs boson and

the worlds they represent. That band of Celtic monks in St. Columba's monastery at Iona and today's scientists at the European Center for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, surprisingly, are kin to each other—and not just by the strangeness of their stories. They both pioneer imaginative pathways to truth.

Not to some “absolute” truth proven once and for all, signed, sealed and delivered. That kind of truth is beyond our reach if it exists at all. No, the promising pathways lead to dynamic truth rooted in where we live and what we experience, when we constantly reach for new discovery and new language to express what we find. They lead to humble truth that is challenged rigorously by friend and foe and gets passed on because it makes the best sense out of things, leaving room for change. They lead to resilient truth because it makes what we experience or discover more coherent and because it possesses a mind-satisfying elegance. The promising pathways conduct us to truth that is urgent and demanding, because the substance of this truth matters to who we are and how we live. (Thomas Berry described such a pathway to truth in what he called the Great Work of our generation: we must learn, by engagement, what being human means in terms of our integral participation in nature as against our domination over it—to live in creative harmony with and deep respect for all things.)

We build the cosmic house we live in. The name of the building material is the world and the name of the architect is imagination. The Celtic Christian imagination, fueled by their trinitarian theology and the untamed, evocative lands the Celtic saints inhabited, built a spacious, truthful house for that vital medieval civilization. So what kind of imagination is constructing our 21st Century global civilization—the house we and our children and grandchildren live in? Can it meet those standards of dynamic, humble, resilient, demanding truth? Is it an imagination that loves beauty, connects with nature, sustains compassion and gives hope? Is it cognitively grounded in the environmental and social contexts that anchor it to what is observed and shared? Is it able both to draw sustenance from the biosphere of the earth, the energy and matter of the universe, and to create worthy architectural design for a house that can accommodate the emerging human spirit?

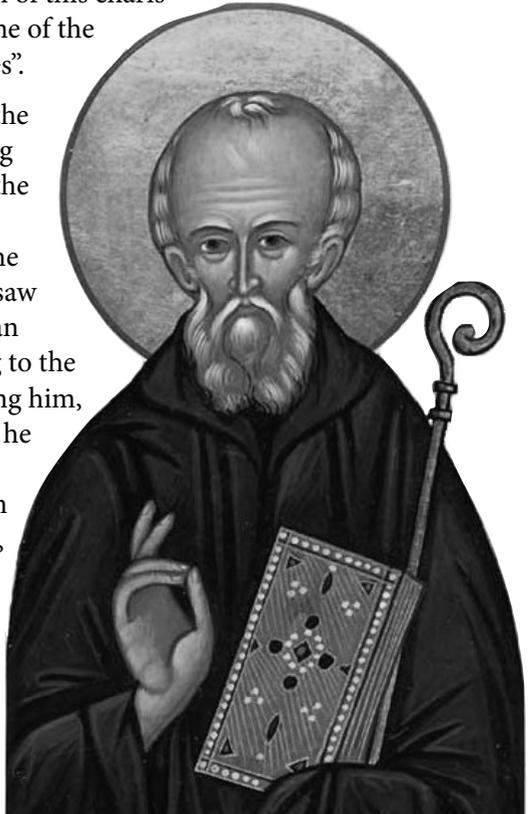
What kind of imagination can build such a house? That is an urgent question because the stakes are high. To the end of refining such imagination today, I want to use my own limited imagination to pass over first into the distant world that St. Columba and Adamnan, his biographer, lived in, and then into the modern scientific world where the recent discovery of the Higgs field is a

significant event. We will compare these two vastly different “worlds” separated by thirteen centuries to learn something important about who we are and what we’re doing here.

The Life of St. Columba (Vita Columbae)

The Vita is an early medieval “hagiography” or saint’s story written by Adamnan, ninth abbot of the monastery Columba founded at Iona in 563 AD. Columba, son of a noble Celtic family in Donegal, had sailed from Ireland to the tiny Hebridean island of Iona accompanied by twelve Irish monks and there they settled in community. He must have been tireless in covering the mainland hills and glens to spread the new faith: his charisma stamped the character of the Christianity that spread through what is now Scotland and northern England. Adamnan’s “Life” was written a century later when stories about Columba had been told for generations in sermons and around hearth fires, gathering mass and taking form in the rich loam of the Celtic imagination. The work is a lengthy series of prophecies, miracles, and angel stories that magnify the works and reputation of this charismatic saint and founder. Here’s one of the best stories from Part II, “Miracles”.

On another occasion also, when the blessed man [Columba] was living for some days in the province of the Picts, he was obliged to cross the river Nesa (the Ness); and when he reached the bank of the river, he saw some of the inhabitants burying an unfortunate man, who, according to the account of those who were burying him, was a short time before seized, as he was swimming, and bitten most severely by a monster that lived in the water; his wretched body was, though too late, taken out with a hook, by those who came to his assistance in a boat. The blessed man, on hearing this, was so far from being dismayed, that he directed one of his companions to swim over and row across the



coble that was moored at the farther bank. And Lugne Mocumin hearing the command of the excellent man, obeyed without the least delay, taking off all his clothes, except his tunic, and leaping into the water. But the monster, which, so far from being satiated, was only roused for more prey, was lying at the bottom of the stream, and when it felt the water disturbed above by the man swimming, suddenly rushed out, and, giving an awful roar, darted after him, with its mouth wide open, as the man swam in the middle of the stream. Then the blessed man observing this, raised his holy hand, while all the rest, brethren as well as strangers, were stupefied with terror, and, invoking the name of God, formed the saving sign of the cross in the air, and commanded the ferocious monster, saying, “Thou shalt go no further, nor touch the man; go back with all speed.” Then at the voice of the saint, the monster was terrified, and fled more quickly than if it had been pulled back with ropes, though it had just got so near to Lugne, as he swam, that there was not more than the length of a spear-staff between the man and the beast. Then the brethren seeing that the monster had gone back, and that their comrade Lugne returned to them in the boat safe and sound, were struck with admiration, and gave glory to God in the blessed man. And even the barbarous heathens, who were present, were forced by the greatness of this miracle, which they themselves had seen, to magnify the God of the Christians.

Well played, Columba! I confess though that I am less impressed by the “greatness of the miracle” and more by the wondrous imagination of the people who delightedly passed this story on from generation to generation. What kind of cultural imagination was creating a framework for seeing a world where miracles like this could happen? Where a man’s action could transparently reveal the power and compassion of the Divine amid the everyday landscape and common life of country folk? What kind of imaginative energy radiates from the poetic narratives of the Celtic writings we still have, including this one—an energy at once intelligent and full of wonder, reflecting the poets’ perception of a world alive with amazing creatures and forces we don’t recognize today?

We do recognize the Loch Ness monster, of course. I bought a small ceramic “Nessie” years ago in a village souvenir shop by Loch Ness and still have it. But that is playful fantasy. Imagination is not the same as fantasy. It is not make believe or let’s pretend and it is not something that is untrue. What is it, then? The human imagination is the threshold between intelligence and mystery. It is grounded in the stuff of everyday life yet reaches for meanings that lie beyond everyday explanations, meanings or inklings often expressed in the language of picture, metaphor and symbol. Imagination opens a world—some might say creates a world—not of fantasy but in which people take stock, make decisions,

choose relationships, name feelings, test ideas, and explore new possibilities for themselves and their communities. It sees beneath the surface. It perceives reality as multi-layered and slips its toe into unexplored waters. Imagination requires courage and creates freedom. It generates the world each of us lives in every day. It pushes rationality beyond its self-imposed limits to new and profounder understanding. Hence Einstein's familiar observation: Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand. (Einstein, *Cosmic Religion*, 1931, 97)

First, try to feel the gravity and soaring arc of the Celtic Christian imagination. The ethnic Celts were older than Christianity. When they arrived in Britain and Ireland centuries before Christ they brought with them a living tradition of awe before the mystery of the world, patterns of response to the mystery (myth and ritual), and exemplary heroes who embodied responses they found authentic, ennobling and archetypal. When Patrick introduced Roman Christianity to the Celtic heartland of Ireland, all that religious culture did not simply go away. A marriage ensued between Christian beliefs and practices and those ingrained in the Celtic people from time immemorial. It was an unusually happy marriage. They were what we today call soul-mates. That marriage produced a spiritual movement that flourished from the time of Patrick to about the 9th Century, a movement of singular energy and intelligence—imagination, that is, that continued to inform the larger Church in various ways through the centuries and does so today.

When the Celtic folk told the story of St. Columba and the Loch Ness monster, how factual was their understanding of what happened there at the lake? Or how metaphorical—a story displaying the power of the Word that speaks the will and power of the Creator to calm the deep unconscious forces that bedevil humanity? Or how moral, telling about the move from brute, selfish use of power to the compassionate power that helps another? We would probably be on the mark to say all of the above and more; that there was then a spectrum of belief from the factual to the metaphorical, just as there is among Christians today. Or among Hindus or the Navajo or any religious faith, for that matter. Like a vivid story resonating on different levels, truth is not the same as bare, literal fact; and yet truth is not completely subjective either. Truth: the questing imagination grounded and disciplined by shared experience (criticism) and expressed in language that can't quite contain all the meaning. Adamnan knew more than he could tell. The story may seem fanciful to us, but to the 7th century Celtic monk or peasant it disclosed truth about how this wonderful world really works.

The Celtic Christians imagined a world in which earth and heaven intertwined, like those intricate Celtic knots illuminating their manuscripts and engraved on their high stone crosses. Remaining distinct, heaven and earth were interwoven and integrated as a single reality. The places where their strands particularly crossed, such as a spring or hill or river ford where a saint had lived or something wondrous happened, were holy. “Thin places,” George MacLeod called them, where the veil between the seen world and the unseen was “as thin as gossamer.” In today’s terms, this conjoined world was neither material nor metaphysical. It was a “storied” world, a world told by the shared imagination of a people—and story does an end run around the modern duality of physical and metaphysical. Story is an integral way of knowing that is personal and holistic and that brings mind and body into unity with that valuing, relating, wondering faculty we humans call spirit. And that is just the kind of world the Celtic Christians told about and lived in— were “cognitively grounded” in: full of earth, full of spirit.

Thomas Merton describes such a world when he wrote a journal passage that merits careful reading, dated 10 July 1964:

I am deeply moved by Adamnan’s extraordinary life of St. Columba. A poetic work, full of powerful symbols, indescribably rich. Through the Latin. . . appears a completely non-Latin genius, and the prophecies and miracles are not signs of authority but signs of life, i.e. not signs of power conferred on a designated representative—a “delegated” power from outside of nature—but a sacramental power of a man of God who sees the divine in God’s creation. Then the miracles are words of life spoken in the midst of life, not words breaking into life and silencing it, making it irrelevant, by the decree of an absolute authority (replacing the authority of life which life has from its Creator).

The Journals of Thomas Merton,
Dancing in the Water of Life, Volume 5, 1963-1965

Something is happening in Columba’s universe, Merton says, that I think echoes quantum mechanics’ idea of superposition. Common sense says that something can only be in one place at one time and it can act on another something to cause an effect--”mechanics.” But in the universe of elementary particles whose behavior is described by quantum mechanics, weird as it may sound, a particle may be in two positions at once; and if A is the cause of B, B can also be the cause of A. Normal mechanics is turned on its head. Of course that doesn’t make any sense at all to those of us who dwell in the land of gigantic clusters of particles (i.e. things) that we observe and measure and take as real, where cause and effect reign. But all that is smaller in size than

a molecule—atoms and the subatomic universe described by quantum physics—operates that way; and that is probably the way the universe of an infant operates; and that is the way the sacred or “sacramental” universe operates in which words of life are spoken in the midst of life. Consider things we observe: now what happens in our world looks like ordinary life and things are only themselves; now the happening looks miraculously extraordinary, the thing or event is multi-layered with meaning. Now it is earth; now it is heaven. An inseparable Celtic knot. Such is the world of the Celtic imagination.

It may seem disingenuous to compare the Celtic mental construction of the world to the scientific world of supercolliders and quantum mechanics. Maybe it is. But what if it is not? What if the imagination of the 7th Century monk or fisherman or hearth keeper is integrally related to the imagination of a 21st Century particle physicist? The latter notices a pattern or problem and collects “data,” the stuff of careful observation, to expand on it; and then he thinks up or tests a theory to explain the data on the basis of rules that can’t be proven, allowing a lively imagination to project thought-patterns (models) that land on the other side of anything that has been tested before. Imagination is what happens when intelligence meets mystery. That happens whether it is an Irish sailor wondering why a sudden change of winds blew his frail coracle to a safe harbor instead of out into the teeth of a tempest, or a theoretical physicist wondering how elementary particles acquire mass and stars are born.

The Higgs Boson

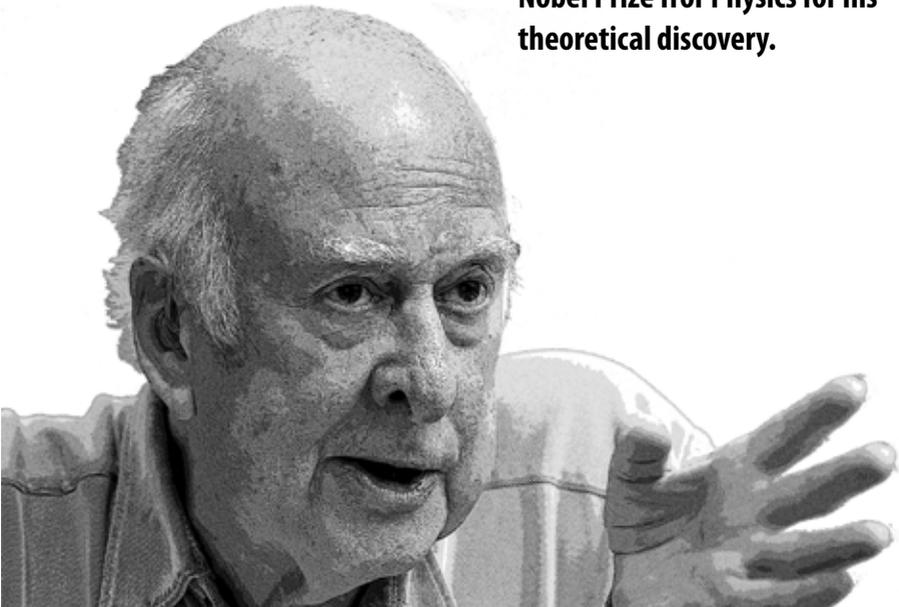
Neil deGrasse Tyson, astrophysicist and Director of New York’s Hayden Planetarium, says that science is a way of equipping yourself with the tools to interpret what happens in front of you. The greatest poetry reveals to us the beauty of something so simple we had never looked at it before. The elegance of the universe as it is displayed by both science and poetry, says Tyson, impels us to inquire further, to construct new models of understanding, and to do so in several different ways, using different tools.

Surprisingly, although we know it mainly through songs, blessing-poems and stories that have come down to us, Celtic theology can be seen as more like science than like art. The reason is that theology and science are both communal activities. Granted, there are scientific virtuosos like Einstein who came up with a breakthrough theory largely on his own. Tyson points out, though, that if Einstein hadn’t come up with “ $E=mc^2$ ” for example, somebody else would have a little later on; and the reliability of that formula was validated by the work of experimental physicists and the whole scientific community. “Whereas,” says Tyson, “look at Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night’—if he hadn’t painted ‘Starry

Night' nobody's gonna paint 'Starry Night.'" The arts are more individual-specific to the creative person than a scientific idea is to the one who comes up with it. Yet even Brian Eno, an artist-composer, talks in communal terms about how intelligence comes into being: "The classical picture saw great men with great ideas. . . but now we tend to think more in terms of fertile circumstances where uncountable numbers of minds contribute to a river of innovation."

In some way like that, Celtic imagination was more communal than individual. What we know of the early Celtic virtuosos, like Patrick and Columba, comes from stories that passed through generations of storytellers like particles through molasses, picking up more and more of the cultural imagination they themselves helped generate. Stories get either discarded or "trued up" to fit current needs and then kept by their passage through the historical communities in which they are told—much as scientific theories get discarded (like ether) or trued up and kept by a critical scientific community (like the Standard Model in physics). In both cases, Celtic stories and scientific theories, what happens is that the community which passes them on preserves the core and keeps changing the rest of it to fit the best current understanding of the tradition or discipline. Merton's interpretation of Adamnan is a good example of keeping the "core", which is the conviction of a sacramental world, and discarding or

Peter Higgs, who won the Nobel Prize for Physics for his theoretical discovery.



changing the details or culture-bound examples—in the Loch Ness monster story, the monster itself is discarded. (If you dare discard a monster!) Thus Merton revises the basic story for the core or essence to make sense in the much different cultural cast of the Christian community today.

So what of the Higgs boson? Change that: the “story” of the Higgs boson? There are reasons for making that change. For starters, nobody knows for certain what the Higgs boson is or whether the subatomic activity observed by CERN scientists really IS the Higgs boson. Their claim is to have discovered a “Higgs-like boson,” because it looks and acts like the theoretical entity predicted to exist (in relation to the Standard Model of particle physics) by Peter Higgs fifty years ago. The Standard Model, a mathematics-based explanatory system that combines quantum mechanics and relativity, assumes all elementary particles to be without mass, flying around space at the speed of light. Obviously some particles do have mass, so to make the Standard Model work in view of that fact, Higgs predicted that there was an undiscovered field pervading the entire universe that does the job of bestowing mass on particles passing through it. The field reveals itself empirically by the evidence of a very elusive but now discovered particle: the Higgs boson. So, is what CERN identified this year the entity predicted by Higgs’ addendum to the Standard Model fifty years ago? Or is it something that will force scientists to make changes in the basic narrative—to tell a different story? Or both?

The second reason for saying the story of the Higgs boson is that even this breakthrough discovery is part of a process of imagination—theory building—that is more like a story “to be continued” than like a new scientific fact for undergraduate physics students to memorize. In Tyson’s words, “Science loves what it doesn’t know.” That expresses the essence of science: knowledge is unto discovery, not vice versa. That is what keeps the story going from one chapter to the next. Stuart Firestein, who heads the Department of Biological Sciences at Columbia University, says it plain in his book *Ignorance: How It Drives Science* (2012): “Scientists don’t concentrate on what they know, which is considerable but minuscule, but rather on what they don’t know. . . . Science traffics in ignorance, cultivates it, and is driven by it. Mucking about in the unknown is an adventure; doing it for a living is something most scientists consider a privilege” (p. 15).

“Mucking about in the unknown” does little justice to the meticulously careful process of gathering and analyzing evidence for the Higgs boson generated by the largest and most complex machine ever built by humans—though it may have poetic overtones of Columba mucking up a storied monster from the

unknown of his day. Empirical evidence for the Higgs boson reached the level of “discovery” as of July 4, 2012, and the scientific community announced the success of their technologically advanced mucking about. The large hadron collider probed nature at levels of energy never before seen, although dreamed of, and its people are now face to face with the particle they think explains how other elementary particles acquire mass. That is a big question in physics, related to the big question in philosophy: why is there something rather than nothing? The whole business is more complex than that, granted. But if elementary particles darting around in space with no ability to coalesce in patterns (atoms) could be called ‘nothing,’ and then they acquire mass and start sticking together and behaving like larger and more complex entities (stars, molecules, galaxies--‘something’), then the Higgs field theory answers that question.

One obvious difference between Adamnan and Rolf-Dieter Heuter, General Director of CERN who announced the Higgs boson discovery, is that Heuter uses different tools to deal with the monster. His large hadron collider accelerates and smashes protons, and scientists “observe” the smithereens in the medium of energy values translated into numbers on the screens of digital computers. Of course he did not do all this himself. He “announced” the discovery for his highly collaborative enterprise, much as Adamnan had announced the Life of St. Columba for his communal enterprise. Thousands of scientists working with that research program, manning the computers and crunching the numbers, getting ideas and following new leads, contributed to the work as sure as Rolf-Dieter did. Scientific investigation is a community thing. Together, they had re-created conditions resembling the Big Bang 800 trillion times over



Inside CERN

before announcing the discovery of the Higgs boson; they had analyzed the data from the debris and used the Standard (theoretical) Model to interpret the results. With those tools they found what they were looking for and they named it.

They did not name it “the God particle.” The Director of FermiLab in Chicago did that several years earlier in a book about the Higgs boson—possibly for the “why something instead of nothing” reason—and he has regretted it ever since. However apt or foolish an analogy we may think “god particle” is, the tools used to discover the Higgs boson are not the tools of theology and their findings are not in the domain of divinity. And because the tools of science are indispensable in equipping the imagination that weaves a world of sense and meaning today, we cannot and should not foolishly try to transport the Celtic universe to the 21st Century and implant it in a world of nuclear reactors and digital information systems. That is not only naïve, that is vain and unholy.

St. Columba Meets the Higgs Boson

But there is an honest question that does move us forward and it is this: If the universe works like the scientific community describes it, how then do we think about God? To put the question in broader terms: If the tools and methods of science are figuring out fundamental questions about nature, nature from the unimaginably small to the indescribably vast, then how do we continue to tell the story of that same world so that it resounds with transcendent (spiritual) meaning and value and beauty and wonder, as the Celtic world did?

These are questions not of fact or information but of truth. Information, which today is exponential and its availability easier and faster than ever, brings us to the threshold of the question, but it is our imagination that must carry us over and into the unknown. We require an imagination that loves beauty, connects with nature, has faith in uncertainty, finds pleasure in mystery, sustains compassion and gives hope. It must draw sustenance from the biosphere of the earth, the energy and matter of the universe. It must be lawful. And our imagination has to create a worthy house that can accommodate the emerging human spirit and reconcile us with the earth and its creatures. All of that is what combines with knowledge to become truth.

First, then: “the universe like the scientific community describes it.” That is not a caveat but a recognition of reality. Scientists are people. They test their ideas rigorously by the data they observe repeatedly, at very high levels of analysis, and they critique each other with equal rigor to eliminate idiosyncratic notions and drive for consensus. Their product is the most effective means available for

mapping reliable mental images of the world we live in. But they are people, and the knowledge they acquire is personal knowledge, filtered through human consciousness. That means, among other things, that everything we (read scientists) know is shaped by the way we know, the contours and bounds of the human intellect, what we are looking for, why we are looking for it, what tools we use to find it, and the cultural frames by which we interpret what we find (or what analogies are available to us to describe it). Similar to the way elementary particles filter through the Higgs field and acquire mass, what we call objective data filter through personal consciousness and objective knowledge acquires the touch of personal imagination. All knowledge, to use the descriptive phrase of physicist Michael Polyani, is personal knowledge.

What is revealed by science is the humanly knowable, evidence-indicated and interpreted universe. There is nothing absolute about it—science is consensual but not absolute. Even solid mathematical formulas can be upset by quantum weirdness—and who knows what’s to come? The realm of what is knowable seems to keep expanding but cannot escape the frame of personal consciousness. In fact, what we discover about the universe keeps enlarging the frame of human consciousness into dimensions earlier generations could not even dream of. Yet what we know and the meaning of it all remain completely in the domain of personal knowledge. And personal knowledge derives from consciousness.

Take a step now in a different direction. Does consciousness pervade the universe? More local a question would be, does consciousness pervade every living cell, to some degree, and even what we call inanimate matter, on Earth? Is there a consciousness that exists on the level of elementary particles? That would not mean “personal” qualities, which have evolved in our species over hundreds of thousands of years, but it means some expression of awareness and mindful connectedness that bears some relation to the complex electrical and chemical patterns happening in the human brain. Einstein famously said “The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible” (A. Vellentin, *Einstein: a Biography*, p 24). Is consciousness a commonality between us and the universe that permits human knowing?

Freeman Dyson, renowned mathematician and physicist at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, would seem to support such a view. Citing the experimental evidence showing that it is hopeless to look for a description of anything as small as an atom or electron independent of the role of the observer and the mode of observation, he goes on to say that the very laws of subatomic physics simply cannot be formulated without reference to the (human)

observer. “The laws leave a place for mind in the description of every molecule. . . . That is to say,” he continues, “I think our consciousness is not just a passive epiphenomenon carried along by the chemical events in our brains, but is an active agent forcing the molecular complexes to make choices between one quantum state and another. In other words, mind is already inherent in every electron, and the processes of human consciousness differ only in degree but not in kind from the processes of choice between quantum states which we call ‘chance’ when they are made by electrons” (F. Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, p. 249, italics mine).

These questions and observations unpack what I mean by “the universe like the scientific community describes it.” Where might this lead when we pose the question: how then do we think about God? It would be wrong as well as totally unjustified, I think, to make a facile equation of mind or consciousness with God. At the same time, “mind inherent in every electron” may get us close to an insight that radically transforms common ideas about God. There is the suggestion of a unifying, even integrating, mysterious quality within yet also beyond every elementary particle that in some sense has the capacity to choose. This amazing proposition seems to resonate with the Celtic conviction that God is in all things, animate and inanimate, making the natural order in some sense divine. It points towards pantheism, God in all. “God was thoroughly at one with creation,” says Chet Raymo, astrophysicist writing about the Irish Celtic mentality, “animating every instance of the here and now” (Raymo, *Climbing Brandon*, p. 89). In this they differed radically from orthodox Roman Christianity which separated the Creator from creation as the sacred is separate from the profane. The Celtic mentality never desacralized nature or abstracted God. Experiencing and reflecting within the limits of their physical worldview, the Celtic saints recognized within all nature a presence, a mystery, that they interpreted as divine.

A related learning about the nature of the subatomic universe takes us another step in response to the question, how then do we think of God? What we know is that the Higgs boson, along with all other elementary particles, is not a “thing.” It is more like an action, observed and known by what is happening. This is true of all the universe at the level of the very small. Nothing is static. The universe, it would seem, is more like a verb than a noun.

When people of faith speak of God (at least those of a Celtic mind!), they are not speaking of something (some thing) outside the universe, apart from it, different stuff (Descartes: *res*) than the universe comprises. This is what Merton meant when he spoke of the word of life spoken in the midst of life, not acting

upon it from outside. This is what Raymo meant when he said “In the early Irish Christian understanding, exceptional events occur not because of the intervention of a supernatural deity who temporarily suspends the ordinary course of things, but rather because of the divine potentialities inherent within nature itself” (Ibid, p. 95). God is in and through the universe—just as consciousness, or whatever word our culture gives us to call it—is in and through the universe.

And this is an even harder part to grasp: God is in and through the universe not as a substance, like helium, much less as a Supreme Being with an omnipotent finger in every worldly pie, but as action, becoming, happening. The Celts and we might add: relating, integrating, protecting, and in a word, creating. And because of our human way of processing the information that goes into making such an assertion, we believe also that that Divine Action, that Process of Spirit, is to some small degree comprehensible by personal knowledge. We know it in personal ways. So Dante could speak of “the Love that moves the sun and all the stars.” And the Bible speaks of the universe both personally and actively as Creation.

The methods of theology are more obviously analogical than those of science. Theology calls upon and enlarges human imagination by describing things beyond empirical knowledge in terms of things familiar to us. So Sally McFague, then dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, could speak of the world as God’s body. That is, the relation that “personhood” bears to our physical body, so God is to the physical world. To unpack the analogy: personhood is more than just the tangible, physical, biological life of one of our species, as marvelous as that is. Personhood is more: our awareness, loving, valuing and meaning-making capacities and sense of self (may we say “selfing”?). Personhood has emerged as “something else from nothing but” (Ursula Goodenough); and that “something else” makes all the difference. Yet individual personhood is conditioned by and even depends on physical life to be actualized—it is always embodied. God, in like manner, is like that to the world—fully immanent in the world and its natural and physical processes yet at the same time transcendent of all we see and measure and know. Analogies are always imperfect and that one is, yet it points us to a way of thinking about God that makes sense, to me at least, in a worldview that contains Higgs bosons.

Buckminster Fuller included a poem in his book *No More Second Hand God* that expresses in a fresh way the dynamic relation of God to the world.

*For God, to me, it seems,
is a verb, not a noun,*

*proper or improper;
is the articulation, not the art,
objective or subjective;
is loving, not the abstract 'Love,'
commanded or entreated;
is knowledge dynamic,
not legislative code,
not proclamation law,
not academic dogma,
not ecclesiastic canon.
Yes, God is a verb,
the most active,
connoting the vast harmonic
reordering of the universe
from unleashed chaos of energy.*

The Celtic imagination in the 7th Century did not possess the range of Fuller's imagination in 1963, informed by centuries of scientific learning and three basic paradigm shifts in how (Western) humans conceptualize the world they live in. Yet I sense a resonance in the divinity they both experienced. The here and now-ness of action and process, like a story, like a verb—even wondrous, outside-the-box action—not the static, metaphysical abstraction of dogma, is what made the faith of Celtic saints first-hand, original, robust, and poetic, powered by an earth-embracing imagination. Good science is like that too. Both in its method and in its findings, physics displays a world that is energetic, not static, always changing and marvelously challenging to our understanding, and elegant, which may be another word for beautiful. It too is powered by imagination, where intelligence leans forward into mystery. That is why lively dialogue between the (living) Celtic tradition and cutting edge science, such as that which gave us the Higgs boson, may provide the 21st Century a response to the prayer of Alfred Lord Tennyson (In Memoriam):

*Let knowledge grow from more to more,
yet more of reverence in us dwell;
that mind and soul, according well,
may make one music as before.*

Albert H. Keller

Strange Ideas

Some people seem to have quite strange ideas
concerning God.

They say they do not want a God Who asks
for constant praise

And Who demands submissive penitence
from humankind.

But these ideas just do not fit the God
revealed by Christ.

Christ showed humility and sought to serve
in simple ways:

He fed the hungry, healed the sick and washed
dust-covered feet,

He rode a gentle donkey and He wept
at human pride

Which would not let our hardened hearts receive
eternal life.

The God revealed by Christ does not ‘demand,’

He just invites;

Despite His infinite and sovereign power,

He humbly seeks

Our partnership in meeting human need

with love and grace,

And leaves us to accept or to refuse

as we desire.

But when we see His deep humility

and suffering love,

That grieves over our proud rebelliousness

and evil ways,

Yet still respects and honours our freewill –

we’re filled will awe,

Which brings us to our knees in penitence

and heartfelt praise.

Beryl Chatfield

Is Religion Dangerous?

From the antisemitism of the fourth century St Chrysostom the 'golden mouthed' and sixteenth century church reformer Martin Luther, via the Spanish Inquisition and on to contemporary Jihadist extremism, the answer to the question posed by a Conference at Immanuel United Reformed Church, Swindon on 14th June, 'Is religion dangerous?' was not in doubt. URC minister and co-founder of Free to Believe, 'an informal network of liberally minded Christians striving for an open, inclusive and thinking church', Martin Camroux, first addressed us on the subject heading of the gathering before delivering two further talks on 'The critique of Religion' and 'How can we get religion right?'

In groups we were asked fifteen anonymous quotes from various faiths and discovered that in one instance, a verse from the Christian Scripture. This was the speaker that the statues



to identify the origins of the world. It is possible to read, for example, the Koran as words from the lips of truth tellers above the

main entrance of Riverside Church, New York include Mohammed and Charles Darwin, demonstrating that we are to be open to truth from whatever source it comes. This is a mark of religion getting it right, in contrast to the negative influence of those who possess 'an unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness'. Our experience of God is not the same as the human explanation for that experience which is always provisional. Karl Barth argues that historic religion must constantly be subject to the criticism of the Gospel. 'Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda' – 'Reformed and always being reformed' recognizes the need to read our scriptures and traditions in the light of the truth that God is ever revealing to us through our expanding knowledge of the world and our human condition. God is ultimate, all else is penultimate.

Thirty-two folk from Immanuel and other local churches attended this day which for some of us gave clear articulation to fears and thoughts about the nature and effect of religion that we sometimes find difficult to clarify. We are grateful to Martin for shedding light on this subject.

Tony Barnes

All at sea with life rafts

Are we better for a metaphor? Would life be liveable if not through the lens of metaphor? So much speech is figured with figures of speech, it seems life without metaphors would be TV without pictures. Whether life be rag bag, lucky dip, treasure chest, vale of tears – tempting Christian metaphors abound to calm fears and strengthen faith, if believed.

So here am I all at sea in my Harrowing Metaphorical Sloop (HMS) *Dogpaddle*, trying to navigate a course on the sea of faith amid a plethora of perplexing would-be life rafts.

Here float promises of guidance for my vessel, with protection from the hidden rocks of reality, avoidance of shipwreck, and reassuring clear-
ance above the unfortunate flotsam and jetsam of those struggling in the murky waters of unbelief

of these life rafts is
structed from authen-

The Bible is meta-
metaphors: Jewish writ-
important truths for their

would quickly 'get the message' hidden in the tales. Unfortunately many 'gentile' readers of today, far removed from that ancient culture, distort and weaken the messages of these stories by literalizing them. A Christian faith enriched by recognized metaphors can be stimulating; a Christian faith entrenched by literalised metaphors can be stultifying.

For me, Christianity is a metaphor extending beyond the Bible. Jesus is a metaphor for all that points to a life of fulfilled purpose and love. Metaphorical resurrection stories posit the continuation of 'me' beyond death. As for 'God', the ultimate metaphor, our flawed images must be regularly updated if humanity is to be 'saved' from itself.

Meanwhile, I'll keep my head above water in *Dogpaddle*, aided by an occasionally useful faith compass whose fallibility adds variety and excitement to my voyage. As for destination, I'm content to run before the life-giving wind as I make my voyage of discovery which, to mix metaphors, is more than enough of a bowl of cherries (with stones) for me.

Chris Avis



etc. And the seaworthiness
guaranteed: they are con-
tic biblical materials.

phorically awash with
ers use them to highlight
mainly Jewish readers who

Illumination and Transformation

A Free to Believe retreat at Bishop Woodford House, Ely,
September 28-October 1, 2015.

Discover the wide horizons of divine love by exploring how we may integrate our creativity and imagination, with opportunities for contemplative experience and silence. Thomas Merton wrote: 'We are called to share with God the work of creating the truth of our identity'. Working with our creativity accesses different insights within us to illuminate and transform. We will create a safe space to engage in the creative process, and listen for the invitations and discoveries that want to emerge.

To sustain and nurture us we will include:

- Guided reflections • Journal writing
- Art work, including making prayer mats and responding to our environment.
- Opportunity for one-to-one sessions
 - Personal space for reflection
- Exploration of our surroundings, the cathedral and the riverside
- Silence after our late evening worship until after breakfast the next morning

We hope we may see ourselves in a different and more life-living way, as Richard Rohr suggests in *Falling Upwards*, by finding some of the stepping stones in our lives that enable us to grow spiritually.

Co-leaders: Peter Varney has worked as a hospital counsellor, chaplain and spiritual director. In retirement he is exploring the spirituality of art. He is a Quaker and Anglican priest.

Zam Walker is a URC minister and member of the Iona Community. Her interests encompass body theology, assumptions we bring to interpreting life and the Bible, and multimedia in worship and creativity.

All are welcome, wherever you are on your journey.

The cost for the four days will be £230 (or £250 for an en-suite room, if available). If you would like to book please send a deposit of £25 to Tim Richards (richardstim@hotmail.com)

AN ESSAY ON METAPHOR AND FAITH

Ian McPherson



Epigraph (a): ‘Your faith is too small. I tell you this: if you have faith no bigger even than a mustard-seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there!”, and it will move; nothing will prove impossible for you’ (Matthew 17: 20-21 NEB).

Epigraph (b): ‘If the “greatest of all the obstacles” between reader and poem “... is the notion of ‘poetic diction’ ... the next in order of obfuscating power is preoccupation with metaphor” ... The language of poetry is ... “language at full stretch ... A verbal structure is literary if it presents its topic at more than one level of presentation at the same time – or, alternatively, if one and the same utterance has more than one function in the structure of meaning in which it occurs” ... In the case of Shakespeare, “you feel him to be a poet, inasmuch as for a time he has made you one – an active creative being”’. (See end-note 1).

Both Jesus and Paul had things to say about faith strong enough to move mountains (Mark 11:23; Matthew 17:20 and 1Corinthians13:2). Does anyone believe that they were recommending faith as a resource for improving civil engineering, mining, landscaping or military operations? Is prayer being recommended as more effective than dynamite and

bulldozers? If not, this suggests that the New Testament talk of ‘moving mountains’ is to be understood as metaphorical rather than literal.

For a first attempt, I’d like to say, by way of a feeble paraphrase: in faith, as we trust in the faithful love of God, what we have previously experienced as impossible for us to do in relation to God, we come to experience as possible, because actual, in response to God’s active presence. In prayer we can act to change things because God is pro-active in changing things for us and with us. Moreover, learning how to live with the appropriate metaphors is a vital part of such transformation. The supposition that we would only be entitled to such metaphorical language if we were able to translate it into some literal language representing the lowest common denominator turns out to be an illusion.

Jesus and Paul are able to draw on the shared resources of a whole ecological network of culturally familiar metaphors and analogies involving mountains, valleys, hills, rocks, high and low places, earthquakes, eruptions and so on, all connecting in varying ways with the reliability, and so the unique truth and goodness, of God. As Paul expresses this succinctly, neither heights nor depths can separate us from the love of God in Christ crucified (Romans 8:39). As the author of Psalm 139 puts this, God is present with us, inescapably and inexhaustibly, in whatever height or depth may have seemed too much or too distant. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews interprets this, we may be confident as God shakes whatever can be shaken both on earth and in the heavens, so that his unshakeable truth and goodness are more fully revealed (Hebrews 12:26-29).

The mountains that oppress

The mountains that need moving, we might say, are the mountains that seem so crushingly to block our way to share in God’s way of ways for us. God’s faithfulness in coming among us as the true and living way strikes us as an earthquake that changes the whole landscape in which we can sense and speak, think and act. No mountains or hills, whether those of the Roman empire or of the Jerusalem establishment, or any other, can block his way. He even undermines the mountains or hills that most closely oppress us, so as to leave them on a slippery slope, waiting for us and allowing us to play our part by giving them a final

shove in the form of our little bit of loyal solidarity with Jesus as he heads for Jerusalem and his greatest test. For that is what faith means here – our little seed of solidarity with Jesus as the true and living way.

Notice how Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth; ‘I may have faith strong enough to move mountains; but if I have no love, I am nothing’ (NEB). The whole sentence hangs together. Paul realised that the Christians in Corinth were likely to be Gentile rather than Jewish converts, and so probably unfamiliar with the relevant network of metaphors and analogies relating to mountains that we could call the background network of understanding and significance. This unfamiliarity among the Corinthians means that speaking of faith strong enough to move mountains is in this context at risk of becoming, if not a cliché or a dead metaphor, then at least a borderline metaphor, what we might call a frozen or smouldering or imprisoned metaphor. Can a dead metaphor still be a metaphor?

A series of nothings

For this reason Paul at once offers a key to unlock our understanding: ‘but if I have no love, I am nothing.’ Notice how this use of the word ‘nothing’ chimes with the series of implied nothings when Paul answers his own question, in his Letter to the Romans, ‘what can separate us’ from the love of God in Christ crucified? In Paul’s reply the series of nothings, his repeated ‘neither’, includes ‘neither heights nor depths’, as I mentioned earlier (Romans 8: 39). In a context less embarrassed about dangers of anthropomorphism, someone might want to add that the words ‘if I have no love, I am nothing’ are precisely what the mountains would or should say, if we could but hear their voices, when challenged by faith, the faith of solidarity with Jesus as the true and living way of God for us and with us all, and so the way of humanity and all creation with and for God. For in him, through him and for him all things are created.

And so, along with Paul, we may also recognise here that if our attempts at faithful solidarity are not permeated by this love of God in Christ, then such attempts could only be as obstructive and heavy and dead, as impossible, as the false mountains, the caricature hills, needing to be shaken away or shaken up and transformed. Hence, if the expression

‘faith strong enough to move mountains’, as written by Paul to the Corinthians, seems at risk of becoming a sleeping metaphor, he himself also offers us ways to arouse, and wake up to, such metaphors.

Moving the Mount of Olives?

Turning from Paul to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew as they present Jesus’ words about mountain-moving, we find an interesting contrast with Paul. While Paul writes of moving mountains as if this is a general or non-specific matter, in Mark and Matthew we find Jesus referring to ‘this mountain’ as something both he and his first hearers can recognise and point out. The context of the episode in Mark implies that ‘this mountain’ is the Mount of Olives, on the way to and from Jerusalem.

This suggests we are intended to recall the prophecy of the day of the Lord at the end of the Book of Zechariah (14:1-21, the whole chapter is relevant). On that day the feet of the Lord of Hosts, the true king of Jerusalem, will be placed on the Mount of Olives and the mountain shall be cleft in two by an immense valley running east and west; half the mountain shall move northwards and half southwards. The old valley shall be blocked and a new valley will open up. The chapter and the book end with the disappearance of traders from the house of the Lord that is the Jerusalem temple, and with this a transformation of our sense of what is holy.

If Jesus had Zechariah in mind when he spoke of faith moving ‘this mountain’, this would confirm he was alluding to an earthquake experience. The Gospel of Matthew later draws on what seems like much earlier Christian material involving just such earthquake imagery. This is in order to bring out the significance of Jesus’ crucifixion as an earthquake. For here Jesus breaks up and breaks through the estrangement of both the inner temple, the holy of holies, and, by contrast, the most unholy underworld (Sheol in the Hebrew scriptures), with the latter breakthrough known in Christian tradition as ‘the harrowing (or raiding) of hell’.

Accordingly Christ crucified means that here God breaks through the barriers with which we try to regiment the holy and the unholy, the realms of the blessed and of the accursed, and the negotiated border-

land between these. This means that the lost are found and the dead are raised up and the estranged are reconciled. And in a gesture of astounding courtesy, all this happens, so Matthew tells us, in advance of Easter. The standard, regimented account of these matters has so repressed this nonconformist version that it is worth rereading it here and now:

‘Jesus again gave a loud cry, and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. There was an earthquake, the rocks split and the graves opened, and many of God’s saints were raised from sleep; and coming out of their graves after his resurrection they entered the holy city, where many saw them. And when the centurion and his men who were keeping watch over Jesus saw the earthquake and all that was happening, they were filled with awe, and they said, “Truly this man was a son of God”’. (Matthew 27: 50-54 NEB).

Given that the ‘harrowing of hell’ begins, according to Matthew, in advance of Easter, we could see Jesus’ challenge to his disciples to have enough faith to move this mountain as an invitation to join him in the radical earthquake of the passion that is the harrowing of hell.

The mountain in Matthew

When we turn again to Jesus’ saying about faith moving a mountain, this time in Matthew, the context here, by contrast with Mark, implies that ‘this mountain’ is the one where Jesus was transfigured, appearing between Moses and Elijah. Here the suggestion we are offered is that while Jesus fulfils the work of the Old Testament prophets and law-givers, he is not limited to this, but is free to go beyond the ancient holy places in the mountains of this land, and expects his followers to share in this freedom. (Compare John 4: 19-26 on real worship in spirit and in truth).

And then the language of mountains and earthquakes also recalls a psalm that converges with that final chapter of Zechariah, almost as a commentary on it, regardless of questions about historical sequence.

God is our shelter and our refuge,
a timely help in trouble;
so we are not afraid when the earth heaves
and the mountains are hurled into the sea,

when its waters seethe in tumult
and the mountains quake before his majesty.
There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God
which the Most High has made his holy dwelling;
God is in that city; she will not be overthrown,
and he will help her at the break of day.
Nations are in tumult, kingdoms hurled down;
when he thunders, the earth surges like the sea.
The Lord of Hosts is with us,
the God of Jacob our high stronghold.

Come and see what the Lord has done,
the devastation he has brought upon earth,
from end to end of the earth he stamps out war;
he breaks the bow, he snaps the spear
and burns the shield in the fire.

Let be then: learn that I am God,
high over the nations, high above the earth.
The Lord of Hosts is with us,
the God of Jacob our high stronghold.

(Psalm 46: 1-11. NEB).

Compare Psalm 82:5, NEB: ‘while earth’s foundations are giving way’: here the gods who have wanted to constitute the high court of heaven, and who represent the nations, are judged and overthrown by God on account of their injustice and inhumanity. Thus the collapsing of the earth’s foundations represents both the overthrow of the gods and the collapse of justice, the injustice with which they are associated. Thus our faith through its little bit of solidarity with God’s faithfulness assists in overthrowing the mountainous establishments of injustice and false worship. And in Psalm 46, so as to complement the metaphors of earthquake and high stronghold, we are also given the metaphor of the river and its streams flowing with living water, and the suggested metaphor of God’s way flowing between the highest and the depths in which we keep company with Jacob.

Such are some of the ramifications of the rhizome-shaped metaphor of faith strong enough to move mountains. If I were to try to paraphrase all

of this in some supposedly literal, non-figurative language, what could I say that would not seem ridiculous? Perhaps it would be better not even to try. If, however, some fool were to rush in where angels fear to tread, perhaps he might say: 'The hopeless situation will change. All this will take you by surprise. However, you can make your contribution to this. Dare to hope. Even a tiny contribution can have surprisingly huge results. Commit yourself to changing your language and perception, and learn what happens as you try. Self-help begins with receptivity; and so on...'

The lowest common denominator

But why should we impoverish ourselves in such a way? Why should we be pushed to imagine that the essence of language is or should be as literal or neutral as we can make it? Why should we be captives imprisoned by the lowest common denominators decreed by selected dictionaries? Such pressures come supercharged in large measure from the effectiveness and so the status and authority of the languages or symbol systems of the natural sciences, mathematics, symbolic logic and computer coding, and the technologies that use these systems, where to some degree language can successfully be more regimented for special purposes.

However, all these specialised contexts depend on wider human contexts, not just for their sources but for their continuing sense and relevance and worth. Moreover, whether we like it or not, we can neither escape nor exhaust our sense of the context of contexts, coming through within the sense of direction and coordination this offers us. Deeper and higher, more central and wider, than all 'our' contexts, we may seek and find the always richer context to which we already belong, the context of contexts that already seeks and finds us through metaphors and analogies and icons. It is striking how the very language of analogy, for example, is shaped by Trinitarian patterns, as it generates and nurtures (echoing the Father), reconciles and renews (reverberating with the Son), and liberates and fulfils (resonating with the Spirit).

This analogical gracefulness is no arbitrary or accidental phenomenon. For the Tri-unity of God gives us the very archetype and paradigm of uniquely generous non-competitive self-sharing, enabling us to relate

to and with all else, and so to include and transcend and transform all our contexts and their characteristic patterns of relationship. As metaphors carry significance across and between contexts they may become tiny reminders of this peaceable Kingdom, this overflowing Spirit, this triune Life, coming again and again as it has already come, in endless analogies of itself - like father, like son; like parent, like child; like friend with friend, as we come to know as we are known. As metaphors share understanding they encourage our self-involvement and participation. All the feedback loops, both inner and outer, both social and individual (see end-note 2), in which we live and move and have our being, find themselves more and more at home in the always greater feedback loop of the life and love of God.

Two of the many questions left hanging by this essay are how we should understand connections between metaphors and similes or analogies, and how we should respond to figurative language we find questionable or unacceptable with respect to gender, politics and other issues. I hope to turn to these and related matters in a further essay, in effect a second part, provisionally called 'Analogy and metaphor: the fuel and fire of thinking'.

Ian McPherson (27/09/14)

Note 1: In the second epigraph, the outer, wrap-around, quotation is from Terence Hawkes' book on Metaphor (London, Methuen 1972) pages 71-72. The inner quotations are from Winifred Nowotny's book, *The Language Poets Use* (London, Athlone Press 1962).

Note 2: For an enlightening summary of the pervasiveness of feedback-loops throughout all forms of finite life, not to mention less complex forms of finite being, see Professor Jamie Davies' online essay dated 24 September, 2014:

<http://aeon.co/magazine/science/why-the-symbol-of-life-is-a-loop-not-a-helix>
(accessed 27/09/2014).

A startling, challenging concept from Gretta Vosper :

‘With or Without God’

Gretta writes:

“My congregation belongs to The United Church of Canada, probably the most progressive Christian denomination in the world. It ordained women over seventy years ago and has been ordaining openly LGBTQ leaders for decades.

But theologically it remains in the closet about the human construction of religion and all its trappings. I couldn’t stay in that closet and came out as an atheist in 2001. After I spontaneously preached a sermon in which I completely deconstructed the idea of a god named God, rather than fire me, the congregation chose to step out on an unmarked path. With them, I’ve laboured, lamented, lost, and loved. It’s a hard road but a worthy one with no finish line in sight.

Let’s walk this road together. I promise you’ll be inspired.”

See and hear Gretta talk about this bold, courageous adventure with her church, and the inevitable challenges it is creating. Two packaged DVDs (total time 90 mins) contain the talk and resulting Q&A at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London on 24 Sept 2014.

The 2-disc set is available for £10 inc postage (please make cheques payable to C. Avis) from Chris Avis, 37 Clifton Road, Exeter EX1 2BN. Alternatively, save a stamp by ordering via Paypal, paying to chris.avis1@tiscali.co.uk

£1 will be donated to PCN Britain for every set sold.



*There was a time when SCM wasn't just at the heart of contemporary Christian thinking and action, in some ways it was that heart – and it provided a generation of Christian leaders. The advent of denominational chaplaincies saw SCM decline to a shadow of its former glory. **Hilary Topp**, SCM's National Co-ordinator, wonders whether **Briefing** readers can contribute to SCM's renaissance...*

My son has just learned the word 'space' – he needed space to put the rest of the stack-a-cups on the coffee table, but didn't know that all he needed to do was move the newspapers out of the way. Knowing how to find the space we need is one of the challenges we all face in our modern fast-paced world. Many of the students I meet through my work with the Student Christian Movement are also looking for space – a space where they can be themselves, ask some of the big questions about life and faith and work out what they believe.

The student groups that SCM supports at universities across Britain are needed now more than ever. Recent research has shown that the majority of students who identify as Christian hold liberal views on social issues, and are not part of a church or student group. In fact only about a quarter of Christian students are involved in a student society or church during term time.

SCM is a very small charity, but for our size we achieve a huge amount.

We support student societies across Britain, run annual training for student leaders, student workers and chaplaincy assistants and bring students together for conferences and study days. We work closely with university chaplains and local churches as well as with like minded organizations like Free to Believe, the Progressive Christianity Network, Christian Aid and Church Action on Poverty. This September we have new groups launching in London, Oxford, St Andrews and Durham.

When I was at the Free to Believe conference earlier this year, someone asked me what their church, which doesn't have many students or young people involved, could do to support SCM.

Here's a few things you can do right now:

- Invite someone to speak about the work of SCM at your church or area synod – perhaps during Fresher's Week, for National Youth Sunday in November, or Education Sunday or the Universal Day of Prayer for Students in the spring.
- Consider whether you could have a collection for the work of SCM – we can provide magazines, leaflets and gift aid envelopes.
- Does your church have a mission fund or similar? Perhaps you could add SCM to the list of beneficiaries?
- Order some free copies of our magazine Movement which you can share with members of the congregation.
- If your church has a student group, would like help with starting one or someone to come and run a workshop or discussion then please get in touch.

You can find out more about our work and join our SCM friends' network at www.movement.org.uk/friends.

Hilary Topp,
National Coordinator,
Student Christian Movement

 0121 2003355

 hilary@movement.org.uk

Literally true?

Taking a confirmation class of bright, questioning, 6th formers one asked “could the 7 days of the creation story actually be seven ages?” I said the Genesis stories were myths and folk tales revealing profound truths of the human condition – not scientific or historical accounts. He was relieved. Born into a fundamentalist family he was thinking his way to a personal faith. Taken factually, parts of the Bible were problematic.

This is no new problem. Over the last 200 years the rise of science and modern history thinking have changed our world view.. The Bible is a mix of history, folk tales, allegories, poetry, and myths. People once mixed them without thinking one excluded others or drawing clear distinctions. Not today. For us, truth must be factually verifiable. In this sense Karen Armstrong is right “We now approach our scriptures with a literalism that is unparalleled in the history of religion”.

The problem is clear: the Bible’s manner of conveying truth is not, and never was, that of a science textbook. The writers lacked our obsession with fact-based presentation: their varied palette wove history and metaphor with a boldness we no longer appreciate. This is why a scientist like Richard Dawkins quite fails to understand the kind of book the Bible is.

Christians react to the dilemma in a variety of ways. Some seek to establish the Bible as literally true – a world created in seven days with the sun on day four, dinosaurs fitted nicely in the ark and Jesus found a way to multiply bread and fishes. Others edge in that direction in more sophisticated ways. In a new book *No Irrelevant Jesus*, Catholic scholar Gerhard Lohfink criticizes historical scholarship for prejudging what is possible. If we stop importing our scepticism, he argues, why should not Jesus have turned water into wine or walked on water? But no historian can approach documents in that way. Judging the balance of probability is essential to history and to abandon it is to replace faith with credulity.

To others the historical element is unimportant – as I think Dominic Crossan was saying at our National Conference when he told us metaphor is always more important than history. I think that goes too far. As George Caird says, “Much of the Bible consists of historical narrative, and parts at least ... are central to the biblical faith”. For me what makes

Jesus' story so powerful is that it centres on a real life, a vivid personality, whose love was inclusive and who was willing to sacrifice himself for what he believed. If in fact he was not like that, how could I go on being a Christian? As James Barr says, "Few would be willing to risk content with a Jesus who in historical fact was an unprincipled crook". Or suppose, thinking of the resurrection, the disciples in fact stole the body or Jesus took a drug, appeared to die, and revived later. In either case Christianity would be based on a deception and would surely be untenable. Christianity depends on a basis of historical fact.

If someone asks, "Do you take the Bible literally?" The correct answer is: "I take the literal parts literally, the figurative parts figuratively, and I use common sense, my experience, my knowledge of language and grammar, and the techniques of hermeneutics to know the difference and help me interpret the statements."

But the fact that Christianity is a historical religion does not make its metaphors and stories unimportant. Spanish poet Antonio Machado defined poetry as a "few true words". The metaphors and stories of faith are a few true words that help us get our bearings in life and keep us on track in a vast and mysterious world.

This is above all true of our belief in God. The great theologian Paul Tillich warned his students against arguing about God's existence. God, he said, does not exist the way you, or a tree, or a house exists. God is not a being among other beings. God is Being, the Ground of all being. No literal description is possible. Metaphors and stories are the only way to cast light on the gracious reality of God.

Our belief in Jesus may be based on historical facts but facts come with interpretation and sometimes the metaphor may be the vital thing in the story. Every Christmas this comes home to me. That Jesus was born is historical fact. By contrast the stars, angels and Virgin birth are stories the historicity of which is, to say the least, improbable. But they are "a few true words", catching the wonder of the moment God had a cradle on earth. Experiencing that wonder, the question of what kind of stories these are seems infinitely less important than the fact of their truth.

Martin Camroux

Let us sing of earth's progression

Let us sing of earth's progression
from the cruel, base and mean;
not all wrong and all transgression
has our story always been.
On good Francis birds alighted;
Kevin held his hand as nest;
human thought has wrought regression,
yet by humans, life is blest.

Such was Cuthbert's revelation;
he stood singing in the sea
as the seals in celebration
barked their Benedicite.
Though we take these tales as legend,
in them shines divinity
and we make our sung elation
for all insights gained of thee.

Not of force and domination
over land and air and sea,
but with love's co-operation
sing we this theology.
God of stars and God of spider,
God of fruitbat and of flower,
we are agents with creation
working with the Spirit's power.

Angus Martin Parker

(appears in the Unitarian hymnbook Sing Your Faith' at No. 93)

Blind guides

I can still remember the smugness with which I used to deploy the story of the blindfold philosophers and the elephant. Like the prince on the balcony in some versions of the story, or simply the omniscient reader, I could look down with a kind of detached tolerance at the poor fools who thought they had some kind of exclusive access to the truth about God.

It was years later on a study weekend, that Lesslie Newbiggin pointed out that the only reason the story appeared to work was that there was someone, prince or reader, with a view of the whole elephant. Since there was no such person, the story was meaningless. There is no trunk, tail or leg, only snake, rope or tree. And there may or may not be a creature called 'elephant' to unify the different experiences.

When it comes to the things of faith, we are all blind philosophers. We cling to things that we know are, at one and the same time, both true and misrepresentations. Every statement that we make about God is inadequate to the point of falsity. As Augustine said: "If you comprehend, it is not God. If you are able to comprehend, it is because you mistook something else for God. If you almost comprehend, it is again because you allowed your own thoughts to deceive you."

That is why metaphor is so vital in matters of faith. Personally, I would go further and assert that in some sense metaphor is the basis of all understanding – that language itself is a treasury of dead metaphors that were once living attempts to stretch meaning beyond its then-current limitations. From our first day, we approach what is genuinely new and outside of our experience in terms of what is already real to us, trying to stretch what we know in our mind or in our gut, to fit the unfamiliar. That is at least partially why exactly the same new experience may elicit indifference, revulsion, enjoyment, anger, ecstasy or any of the whole gamut of emotions – or lack of them – in different individuals. And why – who knows – those reactions may be no more nor less than an embodied metaphor of a long forgotten first loving touch or angry voice.

Regardless of that flight of fancy, when it comes to matters of faith we have little or no choice. There is no plain speaking about God and

perhaps not even about God's purposes that is 'true'. There is only the painful and inadequate stretching of what we already know to map what is incomprehensible. Our best statements of truth about the holy, and our best embodiments of their meaning in religious practice are just that – the best we have. And they are also misrepresentations – intentional untruths we tell just because they are the best we have.

That is why fundamentalists are wrong, because they are living a lie, believing it to be the totality of the truth. And the proof of that statement is the frequency with which fundamentalism ends up perpetrating horrors which stand in complete contradiction to the faith for which the fundamentalist purports to stand.

And that is why those who think they have risen 'above' denomination-ism and its accoutrements are wrong. Much of the dynamic of faith is



found in the struggle to say true things, specific things, shared things, actionable things about the holy in terms of what is already real to us, despite knowing that what we say is partial and misleading.

It took me a long time in life to puzzle out why so many of the lightest, most gracious and least exclusive Christians I met were people who were committed to a particular practice, discipline or institution in a way that seemed quite alien to me. It only gradually dawned on me that these gracious ones were also those who seemed genuinely able to respect people on paths that appeared to contradict their own. In other words, for all

that they knew their own truth was partial, they lived it.

Anyway, a story.

I was once chaplain to the late great Michael Ramsey. It was for a period of around 300 seconds and I did not appreciate the honour at the time. It happened not so long after his period as Archbishop of Canterbury, while I was a student at Westminster College and serving as student assistant at Emmanuel URC in Cambridge. The occasion was the annual Palm Sunday service shared by Emmanuel and Little Saint Mary's, during which the two congregations paraded through the adjacent churches, led by the clergy. The invited preacher that year was the retired Archbishop and, naturally, he took the lead in the procession, resplendent in his robes and carrying his crook.

As we set out he turned to me, held out the crook and mumbled, "Would you mind carrying this for me?" To be honest, part of me thought it was a bit of a cheek. It was only afterwards that I learned there had been muttering in the biretta-brigade who had turned out to bask in the arch-episcopal presence. To carry the crook – however briefly – was apparently the task of the bishop's chaplain and to bestow that honour on a mere non-conformist of not even ministerial rank was little short of an insult in some eyes.

Both I and they missed the point. It was precisely the man in the gold-embroidered robes and mitre, who had served the institution of the Church of England so faithfully for so long, who was the right person to disrupt the right order of things and make a small point about the partial nature of our Christian understandings. And it was precisely that act, by a man who in some ways stood for much that I rejected in ecclesiological terms, that meant one young ordinand would never forget that day, nor ever think of the Christian church in quite the same way again.

There are really only two dangers when it comes to tried and tested metaphors in matters of faith. The first is that we will not commit ourselves to live passionately within one or other of them. The second is that we will not see, and act upon, the need to disrupt them in obedience to new glimpses of the truth.

David Lawrence

Briefing for an electronic age

I confess that I had forgotten what a joy and what a pain editing is. I have always enjoyed the process of gradual and repeated sifting of a text to reveal the gold that it contains. Contrariwise, I have always found painful the decision to discard partially or entirely something which another has laboured over.

But I had not realized how much my understanding of text and reading had changed in the years since I last practiced the editor's trade. I found myself resenting the need to truncate or discard material in order to fit the straightjacket of 22 sides of A5 paper. And it was not until I had nearly finished the task that I realized that I was living in the past.

As a result, this edition of *Briefing* will appear in three forms. Firstly and secondly there will be the paper and parallel PDF format, as with previous editions. The difference will be that there will be a third format carrying some material which was too extensive to be practically edited for the paper edition and the full texts of some articles which were extensively edited to fit.

The only real change in the paper edition will be a page (inside the back cover) signposting some of the material included in the longer format and a pointer to the location where the electronic editions can be downloaded. These will be in PDF format as usual but also in Kindle and epub formats for those who prefer to use an ereader.

David Lawrence

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The intention is to provide Briefing for download in two versions, both of which will come in three formats: PDF (Adobe Reader), AWZ3 (Kindle ereaders), EPUB (most non-Amazon ereaders).

“Short form” files are electronic versions of this paper edition.

“Long form” files contain a version which includes longer, less edited versions of articles in this edition, plus some material which was not included, for reasons of space, in the current edition.

This edition of Briefing is supplied in both lengths but in pdf format only, while questions of design, given the imitations of the ebook formats, are sorted out.

The 2015 Free to Believe Reading Party

Reason, Faith & Revolution:

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Reason, Faith and Revolution is a passionate, witty critique of the new atheism of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Many of the charges they bring against religious practice are true yet their arguments are fatally undermined by their own unacknowledged dogmas and doctrines, and they completely fail to understand Christian faith (or any other kind) except in its stupidest and most literal-minded form.

At the same time, Eagleton levels a broadside at faith too. The history of religion is "a squalid tale of bigotry, superstition, wishful thinking, and oppressive ideology." Just as communism has misunderstood Marx, he argues, so the Church has betrayed Christ by backing an establishment of warmongering politicians, corrupt bankers and exploitative capitalists for centuries. The Jesus of the gospels, he insists, was a radical revolutionary who took the side of "the scum of the earth". The love he offered was as transformative as true socialism.

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