

A Personal Review of the Free to Believe Reading Party – May 2017

Three factors prompted my decision to book a place on the *Free to Believe Reading Party* in May 2017: the leader, the choice of book and the venue:

- David Peel was one of the Northern College tutors during my training for ministry. Almost twenty five years after ordination I was keen to “sit at his feet” again and benefit from the stimulation of his insight.
- I needed little persuasion to book a place on a course for which Jonathan Sacks’ writing was to be the focus but it was the subtitle of Jonathan Sacks’ book, *Not in God’s Name*, that caught my eye: “confronting religious violence”.
- The Windermere Centre is among a small number of places that are associated with happy personal memories across the years.

The fact that the reading party was a *Free to Believe* event was, to be honest, almost entirely coincidental but I have, for some time, been interested in trying one of its events, chiefly because of one of its founder-members. The late Donald Hilton was among the most inspirational influences on my years of discerning a call to ministry. Few preachers have moved me as he did; few ministers have had his gift with words and insight into ‘the Word’. Donald was among those who, at District level, interviewed me as a candidate so I was delighted that his year in office as Moderator of General Assembly coincided with my reception as a newly-ordained minister. I have always thought that if Donald valued *Free to Believe* it might be a place and company in which something of his inspiration might be found.

Regarding content I was not disappointed. Twentyfive years on, David Peel’s theological astuteness and ability to provoke thought are as fresh as they were in my College days – as is his dry sense of humour. Sacks’ content was thought-provoking and insightful. Little could we know, as we wrestled with the question as to why anyone of faith would resort to violence, that the week after our reading party such violence would erupt in Manchester. David Peel’s sessions were supplemented by Martin Camroux’s thoughtful acts of worship. His choice of poems and hymns was particularly helpful.

Regarding company, I was not disappointed either. I could see why Donald Hilton would have felt at home here. There was an openness and willingness to question; mutual respect for others’ views too. Grace and graciousness made their presence felt in encounters and in sessions. I must confess, however, that I was somewhat surprised to be the youngest bloke attending. And I was further surprised – and disappointed – that the event had attracted only three of us who are currently serving ministers. (I appreciated being able to make use of my EM3 allowance to attend and had assumed several other ministerial colleagues would have done so.) In short, the attendance at this reading party was disturbingly similar to all too many of our Sunday morning congregations. In both cases such an observation is in no way a negative judgment on those attending. It is, however, one of a number of concerns about our shared future.

I packed my bags and made my way to Windermere conscious that the day we arrived Mission Council’s decision about the future of the Centre would be announced to the staff. Little could I have known, when booking, that our reading party would be the final group to benefit from the Centre’s refreshment and hospitality. Memories of my first *Free to Believe* reading party are likely always to be associated with it being my last visit to this special place. And as for a concluding reflection ... let Sacks be the inspiration: *search for the trace of God in the face of*

the other. Never believe that God is defined by and confined to the people like you. God is larger than any nation, language, culture or creed. He lives within our group, but he also lives beyond. (pages 203-04)

Thank you, David Peel, Jonathan Sacks, *Free to Believe* and Windermere Centre staff: God was encountered in your company *and* he also lives beyond.

~ Geoffrey Clarke