

open

Christianity

an occasional newsletter
of hope for Christianity in Ireland

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Dublin group: next meeting

The Dublin branch of the OCN will hold a meeting on Saturday, September 20th in Taney Parish Centre, Meeting Room 1, at 2.00pm.

We will be discussing the book *Jesus for the Non-religious* by John Shelby Spong (2008). It is available from www.amazon.co.uk. Click on 'new and used' and you get a list of outlets who have new copies for around £3.50/£4.00. Delivery is a matter of a few days.

Jean Dolan, Andrew Furlong

Northern group: next meeting

The next OCN North meeting is at 6.30 pm on Monday September 8th, in St George's Church, High Street, Belfast, when we will be discussing the book *God without God*, by Michael Hampson (O Books, 2008. ISBN 9781846941023)

William Odling-Smee

Christians support lesbians and gays

Christians of several denominations expressed their support for gays and lesbians by walking in this year's Belfast Gay Pride on August 2nd. They did so on the invitation of Changing Attitude Ireland, a new all-Ireland network of persons gay and straight, lay and ordained, working for the full inclusion of gay, lesbian and bisexual persons in our churches. Two dozen persons walked under the Changing Attitude Ireland banner, including three clergypersons, and they were warmly received by the other participants and onlookers.

This is believed to be the first occasion that a Christian pro-gay organization has participated in Belfast

Gay Pride in this way. Given the recent controversy surrounding the anti-gay comments of Iris Robinson MP, and her use of the Bible to support her views, the presence at Belfast Pride of a liberal Christian antidote was welcomed by the LGBT community and commented on by the media.

Changing Attitude Ireland was formed in August 2007, originally within the Church of Ireland but has since become ecumenical and includes persons from all the Churches.

Their next event will be in St George's, High Street, Belfast on October 18th at 1.30 pm with a lecture on 'Living Sexuality and Spirituality Positively'. All are welcome. There will be future events in Dublin and Cork.

Further details on the CAI website at www.changingattitudeireland.org

Catholics ask Pope to lift ban on Pill

More than 50 dissident Catholic groups have published an open letter to Pope Benedict, saying that the church's ban on contraception has been 'catastrophic' and urging him to lift it.

The letter appeared as an advertisement in a leading Italian newspaper. It claimed that the ban 'has had a catastrophic impact on the poor and powerless around the world, endangering women's lives and leaving millions at risk of HIV.'

The groups which signed included We Are Church, which has a branch in Ireland.

A few weeks earlier a survey 1,500 Catholics from parishes across England and Wales found that the ban is being ignored by nearly all practising Catholics. The survey was carried out by the weekly Catholic magazine *The Tablet*. Although most of those questioned knew of the Church's official stance that contraception should never be used, more than half believed that this teaching should be revised. Most would not dream of discussing issues of family planning with a priest. Marriage was considered by most as the ideal lifelong commitment but nearly three quarters of Catholics said that separation or divorce would be better than an unhappy marriage. The same proportion also said that the Church should revise its teaching that divorced people who remarry are excluded from receiving Communion.

The Editor of *The Tablet* says that the Church's stance has damaged its message. 'The Church has much to teach society about the needs of the developing world and the nature of justice. Yet dialogue between secular society and the Catholic Church over climate change has been painfully limited and stymied until very recently. With the impact of a rapidly escalating world population playing its part in climate change, birth control has been the elephant in the room in discussions.'

*From: Reuters, and
The Times(25.07.08)*

Please forward this newsletter to your friends

Temple religion or prophetic religion

'Spirituality and Creativity' was the theme of one of the events at the West Cork Literary Festival this month. It took the form of a lively conversation between columnist John Waters, and poet-priest Michael McCarthy, and a large audience.

Asked for a definition of spirituality, Michael McCarthy said that it is when the human and the divine connect. Spirituality is older than religion, and religion that is true to it is good but religion that betrays it is bad.

The subject of Celtic spirituality came up. 'That's just sentiment,' John Waters said. 'You can't eat yesterday's dinner today. That tradition has been interrupted by the famine, which led us into a black, dark, version of religiosity.' Now we are out of that, he added, and going towards freedom.

Michael McCarthy felt that in the twentieth century the affective side of religion was lost in the cerebral. But in the past 20 years there has been a recovery of the affective. The door to the sacred has been re-opened, through the emotions, through poetry. 'From stiff regimental Catholics,' he said, 'we have become something more broad, and inclusive.'

He said there are two strands in culture and religion. One is that of the temple officials, to do with control and pragmatism. 'The Church had too much of that.' The other is the prophetic, not concerned with rules and regulations, more interested in the journey. 'It's calling people back to the sources.'

'In my childhood,' he said, 'it was all about the Answer. Now it's all about the Question.'

'Thomas Merton said the last step towards God is the letting go of all notions of God.'

HW

The survival of the spirit while mired in the toxic wastes of the ecclesiastical swamp

A significant address was delivered by Tom Doyle O.P. on July 13, 2008, at the annual gathering in Chicago of SNAP (Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests). We print here the closing paragraphs. The full text can be seen on <http://reform-network.net/?p=1892>.

I believe the Catholic Church exists but I no longer believe that the monarchical system with its attached aristocracy is an integral part of the plan designed by an unseen God who injected this Church system with fear to keep people in line. I believe that the sacraments are celebrations that speak of our encounters with Christ and not magical rituals infused with some sort of unseen power. My experience with priests and even a few bishops who reflect in their lives the loving spirit of Christ tells me that the Church as a spiritual community is alive. As a matter of fact these experiences have shown me a church that exists in stark contrast to the Church epitomized by the hierarchical organization. Even more moving than the praiseworthy lives of the Christ-like clerics I have met have been the countless experiences

with loving, generous and deeply spiritual lay men and women. I have learned over the years that the most authentic "theology" I have learned has been from people in Twelve Step meetings and from Christian lay men and women. I have learned and seen some of the most moving and bare-bones honest expressions of "faith" in the lives of men and women sexually abused by the clergy and in the responses of those closest to these victims, especially their parents.

My spiritual odyssey has had many moments of emptiness, doubt and even despair. As I experienced the very subtle yet real disintegration of the fear based-belief system I had once embraced I began to find a sense of freedom to look for spiritual answers and spiritual security wherever my questions led me. With this freedom has come a feeling of hope that I had never before experienced in my life. My hope is not rooted in ecclesiastical personages or structures nor is it rooted in rules, customs or rituals. It is grounded in my belief that the Higher Power is really a life-giving and life-sustaining power of love and that all that is good and loving and comforting about this Higher Power has been embodied in Jesus Christ.

Creation Time

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland has put together a programme of resources to encourage and assist churches to observe a Time for Creation in 2008, between September 1 and October 4, the feast day of St Francis.

A program of sermon materials and other resources can be found on their website www.ctbi.org.uk free of charge. This year's materials, based on the Lord's Prayer or the Revised Common Lectionary, examine the theme of *Hope for Creation: a time for worship and action*.

'Scientists and campaigners sometimes paint such an apocalyptic image of a future dominated by climate change that many are near to losing all hope. Some believe our hope lies in technical innovation, new regulatory frameworks, or political action. However, today it is being recognised increasingly that we also need a deeper and more profound change, and these materials are based on the hope that we have as Christians, based ultimately in God's good plans for his creation, the cosmic scope of Christ's saving work, and the Spirit's renewing power at work within and through human beings.'

CBTI was responsible for starting the Eco-Congregation movement.

Prayer for Peace day

September 21 is the International Day (of Prayer) for Peace. Each year Pax Christi International Member Organisations joins thousands of other organisations worldwide to mark the UN International Day of Peace, 21 September, a day of non-violence and ceasefire, also as an International Day of Prayer for Peace.

This initiative, launched by the World Council of Churches as part of its Decade to Overcome Violence

(2001-2010), calls on churches and communities all over the world to arrange services or vigils on 21 September and to also include prayers for peace in their services on the preceding or following Sunday. This year, September 21st is a Sunday.

Additional details are available at <http://www.overcomingviolence.org> and <http://www.worldpeace.org/peaceday.html>.

Enabling Ministry Pakistan

Do any of our readers have any contacts who might help with the situation outlined in this email received from Mrs Shaheen Bhatti, of the Enabling Ministry Pakistan? Mrs Bhatti and her husband were Catholics, and he was employed as a social worker by the Church. His employment was terminated after he criticised his employer's discriminatory attitudes to the bonded labourers. They are now working independently.

Mrs Bhatti writes: "This is a small independent Christian Service ministry in Pakistan. It initiated in 1992 as a role and response to the Christian bonded labourers around Lahore District, Punjab, Pakistan.

The ministry has a mission to enable the Christian bonded labourers:

- To dignify and respect each other mutually;
- To be united and supportive to one another in the issues of injustice and rights;
- To be reflective to weigh religiosity, religious clerics and the secular solutions for their issues of poverty, misery, injustices, exploitations, slaveries and cruelties;
- To also accept the scepticism and social sciences as per of the sources of Human liberation and freedom;
- To be more to one-ness than of our religiosity and faith; more to work together than starting our own!"

She continues:

"As being inspired by progressive Christianity I am a contact of it from Pakistan. This is where I have come to know you.

As per having our progressive views about life and God we are derived from the mainstream Christian denominations in Pakistan.

Thus I want to be in touch with other progressive Christians around the World to share our friendship and our progressive approach towards life and God.

I am much sure that your friendship would break the bonds of our isolation and fertile our gain and growth both worldly and spiritually."

Have a look ...

... at the **new** website of our linked organisation, the Progressive Christianity Network of Britain.

You can find it at www.pcnbritain.org.uk

Book review

David Boulton, *Who on Earth was Jesus?* (O Books, 2008, 419 pp)

In 1846 George Eliot, a pious young evangelical turned Unitarian, developed dreadful headaches while working on translating DF Strauss's book about the 'real' Jesus, which was to become so hugely important. To pull herself through this, says her biographer Kathryn Hughes, she placed a cast of the Risen Christ on her desk. 'This was her way of reasserting the mystery and hopeful joy of the New Testament narratives which continued to sustain her long after she had given up orthodox Christianity.'

She was not alone in that experience of the painfulness of moving from one perception of the Christ figure to another. And as the interest of active and passive Christians turns increasingly towards the misty shape of Jesus of Nazareth, more and more books about him are piling into the bookshops and libraries.

Where does a beginner begin? She couldn't go far wrong by starting with this over-view of what all the major Jesus-detectives have said.

Boulton starts with a history of the search for the historical Jesus as distinct from the 'Christ of faith.' The most important publication in the nineteenth century was that *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, by Strauss, which George Eliot was translating from the German. The search gathered steam, on up to Albert Schweitzer's *Jesus of History*, published 1906, and then dropped away. Between the two great world wars the quest for the historical Jesus was ditched and the Christ of faith was restored, under the influence of Rudolf Bultmann.

Then, in 1945, some ancient writings were found in the Middle East, including what we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the quest was on again.

In the early chapters of this book we are given a tour of the many 'gospels', like the Didache, and the Gospel of Thomas, which were not accepted as canonical by the early Church. But should they be re-evaluated? The Gospel of Peter was possibly the source of the passion narratives of our canonical gospels. The Gospel of Mary shows early resistance to the marginalisation of women.

Chapter by chapter, Boulton gives the views of the many writers and theologians who have wrestled with this subject. He tells us how the scholars of the influential Jesus Seminar of California began, in the 1980s, evaluating the four Gospels in terms of how authentic each passage about Jesus might be. Red for 'undoubtedly', pink for 'probably', gray for helpful but not historically accurate, and black meant that Jesus could not have said it. But Boulton is a journalist, not a theologian, so he also tells us what the critics of the Jesus Seminar have said.

The ideas of all the big names are explained: J.D. Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Walter Wink; the Jewish writers EP Sanders and Geza Vermes; the conservative NT Wright and one Joseph Ratzinger. Boulton even covers those for whom Jesus is primarily a figure of myth.

In the end, although the author is scrupulously even-handed in his assessments, he shows where he

stands. He is in sympathy with the views of Stephen Patterson, who says that the most logical deduction we can make is that Jesus presented himself not as an apocalyptic prophet, nor as a Gnostic revealer sent from God. Rather, he was seen in his own time as a Wisdom teacher. Borg and others add that apocalyptic expectations came not from Jesus but, post-Easter, from his followers.

Gradually Boulton/Patterson make it clear that the really big divide is between those who think of Jesus as the prophet of the Apocalypse (end-time, disaster, heaven or hell) and those for whom he is the prophet of the Kingdom of God or, as some now prefer to say, the republic of heaven. There are two very different ways of being religious, Patterson says, two different views of God. And two different views of Jesus.

Where God is a God who demands obedience to commandments, achieving justice through terror, Jesus is a figure heralding fearsome apocalypse (see Mark 13). Where God is revealed as wisdom, justice and mercy, there Jesus is seen as the voice of Wisdom, calling the world to a new commitment to love and justice, to the new Kingdom.

It is not difficult to see these two strands in the current varieties of Christianity: nor to understand why increasingly we are seeing the clashing of theologies.

HW

In the next issue of this newsletter we will be reviewing James P. Mackey's book, *Jesus of Nazareth: the Life, the Faith and the Future of the Prophet*.

The

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Subscription to this newsletter is free
News items, letters, reviews always welcomed

The OPEN CHRISTIANITY NETWORK

Do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God.
(Micah 6:8)

The Open Christianity Network exists to create an environment in which the search for truth in the light of contemporary understanding can take place. Its founders are practising members (including clergy) of most of the mainstream churches in Ireland, and also those who find themselves on the margins of belief or practice.

We affirm the freedom of each individual to develop their own spiritual vision, and accept that we will therefore cover a wide range of views on matters of doctrine, gender, and the use or abuse of power.

We are not seeking to become a new church, but we ask that this open, inclusive and questioning way of living and believing be recognised and accepted as an authentic Christian position.

WE SEEK ...

- to provide an environment in which beliefs and doubts can be explored and faith can grow, in the light of developments in areas such as Biblical scholarship, theology, philosophy and the sciences;
- to claim our Christian heritage, whilst being open to truths and resources present, or yet to be discovered, in other traditions;
- to draw sustenance from the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth;
- to value and practice love, inclusivity and justice as Jesus did, and to voice our concerns about abuse, discrimination, corruption and poverty.

The Open Christianity Network welcomes and will support everyone who wishes to join. Meetings are held in Dublin and Belfast and other regions of Ireland as and when possible.

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