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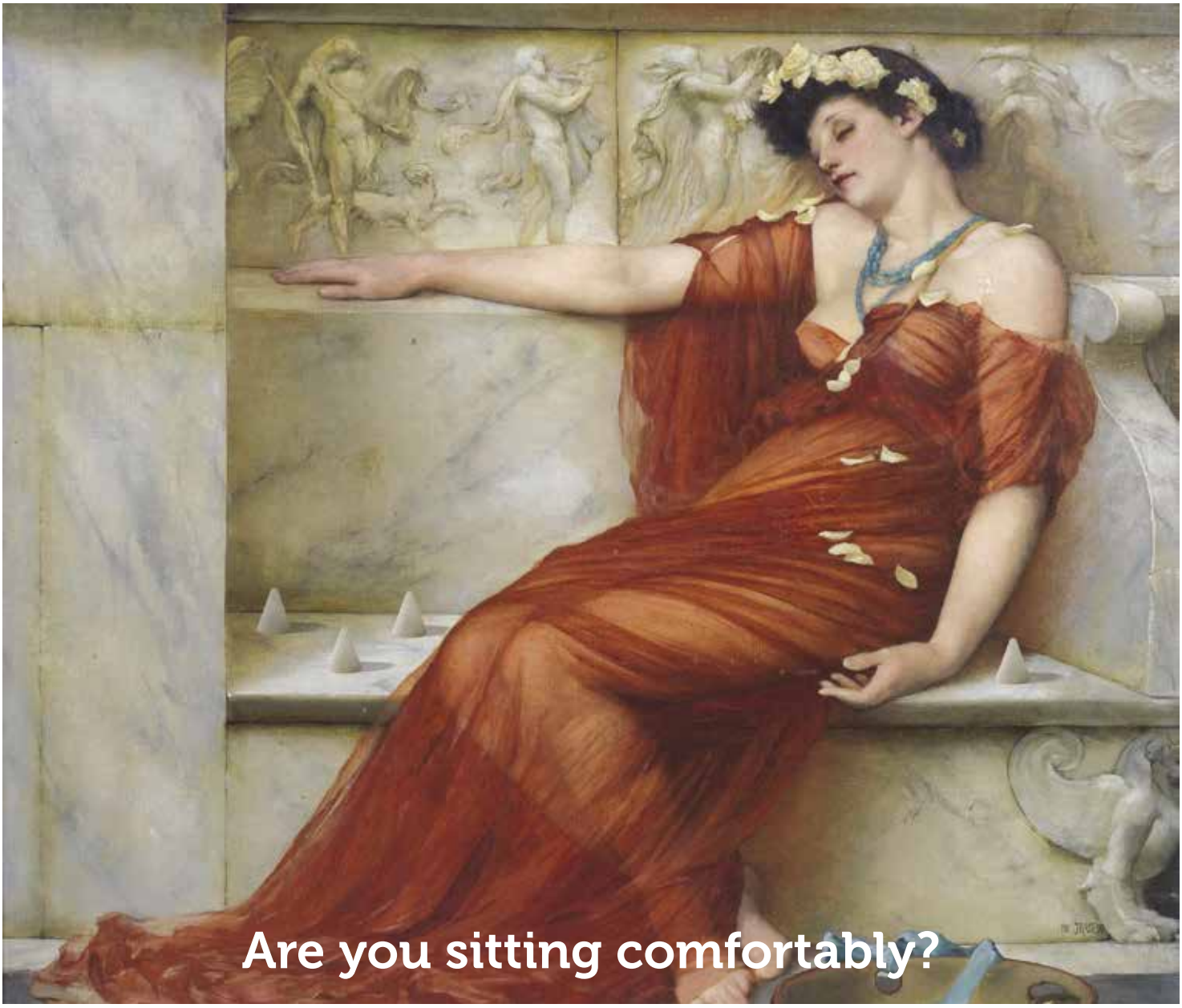
CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



Are you sitting comfortably?

Theologies of space and exclusion

Contributors

(in order of appearance)

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was born in Abergavenny to Scouse Catholic parents. After a career in sports and news journalism that took in stints in Russia, India and across the UK, he made the inevitable move to the Christian charity sector in 2019. This is his fourth issue as *Mission Catalyst* editor.

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AN EXPERIMENT IN CHRISTIAN INTERNATIONALISM

AS THE INTERNATIONAL BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY CELEBRATES ITS 75TH ANNIVERSARY, MISSION CATALYST TURNS OVER ITS PAGES TO THINKERS FORMED WITHIN ITS RADICAL COMMUNITY

Are you sitting comfortably? I know I am. Or at least I was until I got in touch with Rev Mike Pears to put this issue together. Before the discomfort to come, let me take you back to 1949. Allow me the indulgence of time-travelling back to 1949. Europe is on its knees, not literally but metaphorically. Somewhere in the region of 20 million Europeans have been killed in the concentration camps, on the battlefields, in the prisoner of war camps and in the indiscriminate bombings of cities that scarred the continent during the Second World War. Every European nation is wounded in ways we can barely conceive The fog of war has dispersed and all that is left is the horror.

'Never again' captures the atmosphere of the time: in diplomatic circles; among economists and politicians; in the ration queues; and within communities of faith. The drive for creating an unprecedented sense of European unity comes from leaders whose deep Christian faith undergirds their politics, people like Italy's Alcide De Gasperi, Germany's Konrad Adenauer, Belgium's Paul van Zeeland and France's Robert Schuman. It is against the backdrop of the horror of war and the genocide of the Nazi regime that commitments are made to seek common values and guarantee that such devastation will never again be visited on the continent.

The result was the Council of Europe, signed into existence on 5 May 1949 by the Treaty of London, which set out the three basic values that should guide its work: democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The first Assembly was held in Strasbourg in August 1949. 100 members, parliamentarians drawn from the twelve member nations, took part in 18 sittings lasting nearly a month in total (I write this as leaders gather for a NATO summit in Washington DC scheduled to last less than 48 hours: political leadership as theatre). In 1949, they debated how to reconcile and reconstruct a continent still reeling from war, yet already facing a new East–West divide, launched the radical concept of a trans-national court to protect the basic human rights of every citizen, and took the first steps in a process that would eventually lead to the creation of an offshoot organisation, the European Union. 75 years later, the Council of Europe still exists with the goal of upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe – and the United Kingdom remains a member.

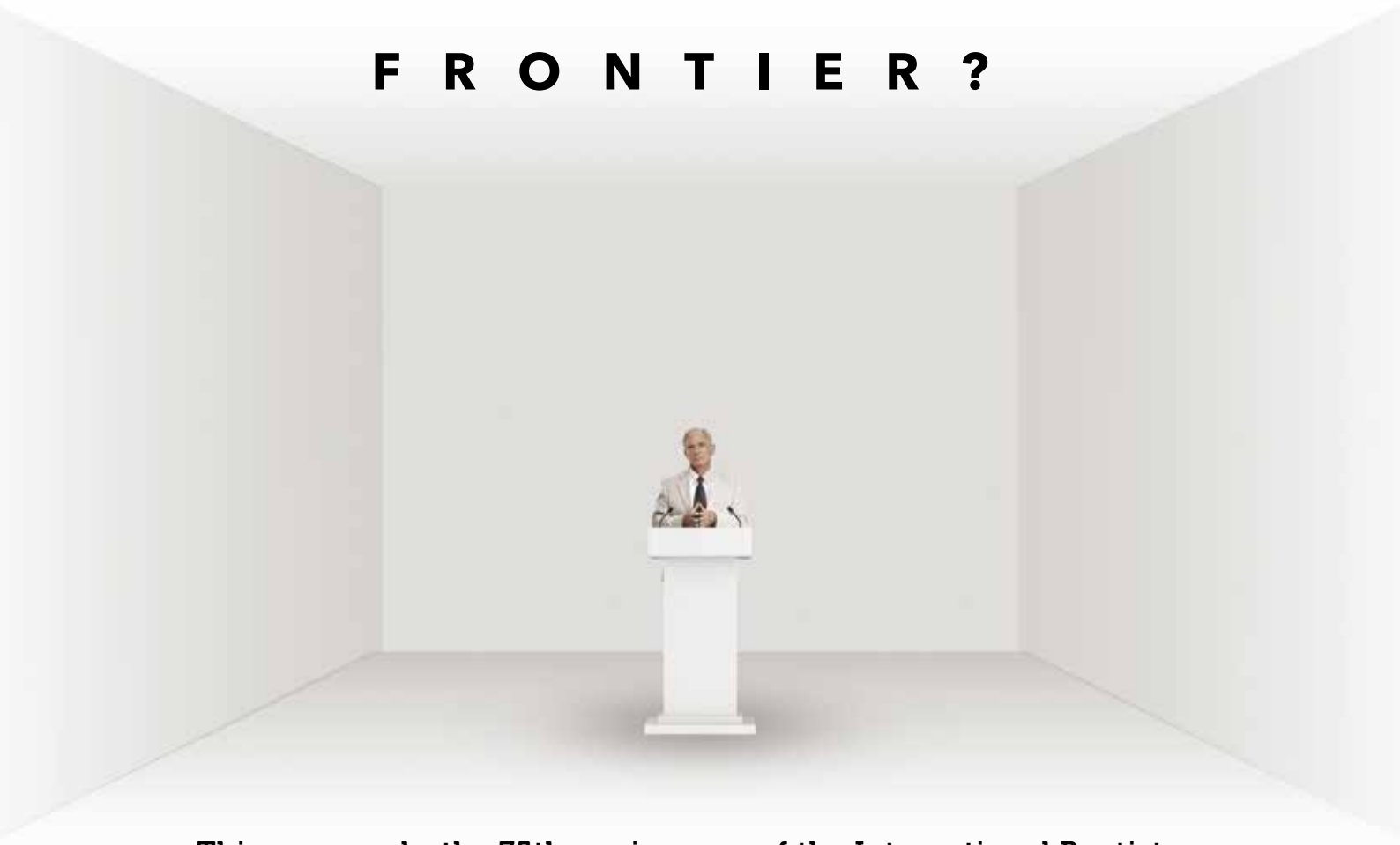
If the Council of Europe felt radical - remember, in 1949 it was only the present and not yet a point in a history we have too quickly forgotten, if we were ever indeed taught it in the first place – what was taking place among European Baptists was just as radical. Out of the same ashes in the very same year, grew an experiment in Christian internationalism: the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS). Just like the Council of Europe and NATO, in 2024, IBTS is an institution celebrating 75 years of existence and discerning its place in the world now and in the future.

To mark its anniversary, this summer edition is full of theologians with deep connections to IBTS. I invite you to join them in playing your part in the fostering of an intentional cross-cultural community founded to bring together communities of faith, academia, mission, church development and spirituality to specialise in the research of, and reflection on, Baptist ways of being in the world.

Matty Fearon
Mission Catalyst editor

S P A C E

T H E F I N A L T H E O L O G I C A L F R O N T I E R ?



This year marks the 75th anniversary of the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS). It also marks the end of Rev Mike Pears' six-year stint as Director. Editor Matty Fearon sat down with Rev Pears to reflect on his time in charge - and on how questions of exclusion have shaped IBTS as a space.

What did you bring with you on your journey from marginalised urban areas to an educational institute in one of Europe's most cultured cities?

I was profoundly shaped by my experiences over decades amid people experiencing social, political and economic marginalization: Peckham in London in the 80s; parts of Vancouver; and then Bristol. I was always seeking to pose – and answer – the question of how people in marginalised communities 'do theology', how they engage with reading the Bible and living Christian lives when there's so much stacked against them. I took that question with me to IBTS.

I've never really been interested in being at the centre of mainline denominational institutions, but I did have a real soft spot for IBTS because I did my PhD there. It was just moving its centre from Prague to Amsterdam and was in a very vulnerable time as an institution. It was there waiting to be shaped and I just felt it was an incredible opportunity to bring a shape to IBTS from out of my own experience of doing theology, in what I considered was a grounded and also Baptistic way.

Can you say a little more about that idea of 'grounded' theology?

As a Christian community, whether on the estates of Peckham or in study halls in Amsterdam, if we're going to do theology that really matters and makes a difference socially, politically, and spiritually, then we need to pay attention to places of woundedness, which can be both personal and social. My question is, 'how do we do theology from the street up?' I ask with the conviction that good theological reflection needs to be at the heart of mission, otherwise you end up with a hollow shell of mission, which objectifies and alienates people.

“ good theological reflection needs to be at the heart of mission, otherwise you end up with a hollow shell of mission, which objectifies and alienates people ”

“THE WHOLE COMMUNITY OF GOD SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THEOLOGY. SO, WHAT DOES THEOLOGY LOOK LIKE FOR A SINGLE MUM ON A NORTH PECKHAM ESTATE?”

Theology isn’t just what we believe, it’s the way we are together. It is the acts of doing theology that is itself the theology. It’s not just what comes out of that in books and conferences. It’s the practise of theology that really matters. In this polarised age, good theology nurtures conversational practise and fosters an ability to disagree with each other, being able to listen and respect each other in the space of disagreement is fundamental.

Good theology requires an openness. We don’t need to define what we believe in terms of a statement of belief, but we do need to define what the conversational space looks like. It is Christ-centred, it is a place where people are shown respect and listened to, and it can be a place of transformation and quite profound peace-making and reconciliation.

Unlike the European Baptist Federation, IBTS doesn’t have to be so interested in uniting or representing the voices of the 53 countries. IBTS does theology within the same geographical territory, but its role is distinct. IBTS creates the space for conversation, for argument, for thought into action.

Conversation sounds like it is important to you and to the shape of IBTS?

I think what we’ve done particularly through these ideas of encountering the other in the context of cross-cultural conversation, which is a very post-colonial approach, has opened IBTS up to the 21st century. A lot of the baggage carried over from being a European institute across the second half of the last century was embedded and unexplored. In some ways there’s a continuity in the journey of IBTS from the 20th to the 21st century. But there’s also a sharp discontinuity. We explore that through this new theological conversational space, which is much more aware of the social and political power dynamics that alienate a lot of people, that is, anybody who’s not a European white man.

Would you mind expanding on that? I ask because I feel like it ties up with a phrase, “well-earthed theology”, which I heard often when talking to people about their experience of IBTS.

Applied theology in the 20th century was mostly about some white theologians over here in a library - *that’s a bit of a stereotype* - doing theology. You would take your library-produced work to these different places; you’d apply it and contextualise it. That’s a dangerous approach. “Well-earthed” describes a practical theological method that listens intently to what is going on within a social space and recognises that the encounters that happen in that social space are themselves theology.

Theology isn’t the reading of books and the studying of the Bible, it follows Missio Dei thinking, that we meet God in the ‘other’, in the marginalised ‘other’, in the ‘other’ of another faith and the cultural ‘other’, the social ‘other’. That we meet Christ in the ‘other’ is as much a revelation of God and a theological experience as reading Scripture.

Theology that is “well-earthed” begs to differ from applied theology. It seeks an alternative epistemology. In other words, there are ways of knowing that are different from the kind of rational, scientific objective ways of knowing that we’ve applied to Western Christian theology for so many decades. And those ways of knowing are to do with sensing, feeling, relational, ways of knowing that we intuit as we engage with people of difference.

What I really mean is that the whole community of God is involved in theology. And then the question is how do you do that? What form should that take for it to have an impact on the community? What does theology look like for a single mum on a north Peckham estate or for somebody from the LQBTQIA community struggling with their identity?

What does that look like for IBTS?

Our way of being theological is much more inclusive of different kinds of epistemologies and ways of knowing and exploring. What I’ve tried to do through the six and a half years is to lead our staff and students in that direction. Practically that meant completely restructuring the way our research community encounter and talk to each other.

I want to open that theological space, which is what we’ve been doing through the IBTS Learning Network and through our doctoral community. The Learning Network is a new element of IBTS, which is much more to do with including people, ordinary Baptists, ordinary ‘others’, from a whole range of vocational backgrounds - journalism, healthcare, the arts, leadership - to explore how you do theology in practical ways. We are trying to develop an innovative pedagogy, a Baptist pedagogy, a Baptist way of doing things, of thinking, of being of acting, which is Jesus-centred and transformative.

At one level that’s simple. It just means let’s get in a room together someone from Kazakhstan, someone from Spain, someone from Norway, someone from Britain, maybe someone who’s a teacher or someone who’s a social worker. Let’s get together and talk about what really matters. And then let’s think about how this is relevant. How our faith is relevant is, at one level, simple. But, at another level, for that to be a robust pedagogical experience where it isn’t just a kind of free for all, you must define a journey that you can engage each other on as you travel. We strive to create a substantial theology or substantial theological experience. What we’ve tried to do in the Learning Network is take that simple idea and develop a pedagogy around it, a pedagogical philosophy and a pedagogical practice.

I know the radical geographer Doreen Massey’s work has been vital to your theology. Can you say how she has informed your thinking and your time at IBTS?

Massey’s work on space provokes many questions that have so much resonance for spaces of faith: who is this space for? Whose bodies are here and whose are not? Why do some feel they belong while others are excluded? What must happen to ensure all can belong irrespective of starting place? Who is going to make that happen? She bought a fresh set of thinking to the idea that space was not fixed but fluid. She refused to call it place, believing the fluidity of space was far more accurate.

My missional work with people on the margins placed me in spaces of exclusion. And I continue to grapple with the question of why people’s experiences of deprivation seem to be so chronically embedded, and so difficult to challenge and change. I was reading work by social scientists on this understanding of place and space, and asking myself, ‘How is this theological?’ And I couldn’t find any work exploring this idea. I would sit in a local café thinking, “Who isn’t here?’ And there’s a very long list of people missing, and then you ask, ‘Why aren’t they here? How are they being excluded?’ Our cities are arranged precisely around those kinds of exclusionary practises; some of them intentional, some of them just everyday normalised practises that keep people out. Our politics works on those bases as well.

Increasingly, I tied these thoughts together with ideas about how we are as a Christian community, because

L.S. Lowry, 'Going to Work', 1943

“THAT WE MEET CHRIST IN THE ‘OTHER’ IS AS MUCH A REVELATION OF GOD AND A THEOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE AS READING SCRIPTURE”

most of the time we simply mirror those practises. We are not challenging them. We are doing our good works and are trying to love our neighbour and be a good Samaritan, but at the same time we are implicated in, and conforming to, the arrangements in society that are causing the problems we are preaching about and trying to address. It is fundamentally important that we recognise that and begin to think about how we do theology in ways that could really begin to get beneath the surface and the mucky reality of what we are complicit in.

It sounds like the challenge theology faces is the same challenge Doreen Massey made to those working within the social sciences: 'how do we come into those spaces and disrupt them through our thinking and through our conversations?'

If we are going to be effective in seeing change happen, then we must think in terms of place and space and how an ideology is embedded in space and place. To put it another way, you can't talk about power without talking about place. As Christians, we have been occupied by these poor people, that country, this context, and we go and contextualise our gospel. We have done too little thinking about the relationship between power and place. We just continuing to exercise our own power over our own global place in a very uncritical way.

Forgive me for doing this, but I'm going to quote you at yourself. There are two quotes, if I could read them out to you and ask you to respond in the moment. The first is about the establishing of identities in the gospels and claims about who we are in relation to God. You wrote this in an earlier essay, "When Jesus declared that all foods were clean, he was not simply making an argument about religious practice, he was deconstructing and undoing the spatial imagination of Israel. He was in effect claiming that the world was being changed and that the whole social-spatial infrastructure upon which all power was predicated was being displaced to make room for a new arrangement." In the same essay, you go on to write this about how Jesus acts as if the boundaries did not exist: "...his declaration of the kingdom seems to be no less than an inauguration of an

> *“I’m not very bothered with what happens in the Church, but I’m very bothered with what happens in the world.”*

entirely new spatial imagination, accompanied with a host of social-spatial performances that witness to and *embody an as-yet unseen and unknown kind of place, indeed, nothing less than a new creation.”*

In my PhD, I went on to call that “Jesus space”. It is the space associated with the resurrection that we may taste. When we pray ‘your kingdom come’, we are thinking about this new spatiality. Part of what’s motivating me at IBTS and in developing the Learning Network, is to think about what those spaces look like. How do we learn to operate at least with a hope that we might begin to experience some of that sort of new spatiality? It requires the sort of practises I talk about Jesus doing, especially this costly business boundary crossing. And Jesus did that with impunity, it’s what for him resulted in death on the cross.

I decided that to live as a Christian, to live in the reality of the cross, doesn’t just require a belief in the death of Jesus, it’s the embodiment of a cruciform lifestyle by following Jesus as a boundary crosser. If you look, for example, at the story of the good Samaritan, I read it as a story about how somebody crossed the road and violated the respective boundaries of the day. Similarly, the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts is very much about the incredible boundary crossing Peter takes part in.

I wonder what it must have been like for him to go into a home that had been, for thousands of years, associated with disgust. The Bible doesn’t talk much about the way our bodies are inculcated and socialised to smell, but Peter must have gone into Cornelius’s home and encountered smells of cooking meat, and the smells of gentile life that for him would’ve been profoundly inculcated to a gut reaction of disgust. This boundary crossing and this new central space is happening miraculously because it involves us going into these forbidden or forgotten spaces.

And as you prepare to step down as Director after six years, what does that look like for IBTS?

My hope for IBTS is that they will continue a journey of grounded theological exploration that is socially and politically exciting and really engages with the things that matter in the world. I’m not very bothered with what happens in the Church, but I’m very bothered with what happens in the world. I think if the church stopped navel gazing and started to engage with what’s going on in the world, it would be a very, very exciting church to be part of. I hope for IBTS to be passionate and interested and engage with what’s going on in the world and find ways of theologising around that, not just theologising about it; to be deeply embedded in the stuff of the world and engaging with people of all kinds to witness to God or to find some hope in God as they go on their theological journey.

SHELF AWARENESS

The books that formed us

INGEBORG TE LOO TAKES US THROUGH THE KEYHOLE OF HER STUDY TO PEAK AT THE WOMEN WRITERS WHO SHAPED HER FAITH

Books shape me in different ways. They mirror, they challenge, they help me ask new questions and see perspectives. Here are some books by women who have inspired and challenged me.

Sarah Miles ('Take this bread') has greatly influenced my thoughts and practice around the Eucharist. As a questing cook and journalist, she walked into a church unsuspectingly one Sunday morning, sat down, let the service wash over her and partook of the Eucharist. An intense moment that turned her life upside down. She connects inclusivity and hospitality with the Lord's Supper and set me on a track to read and write more about the Supper.

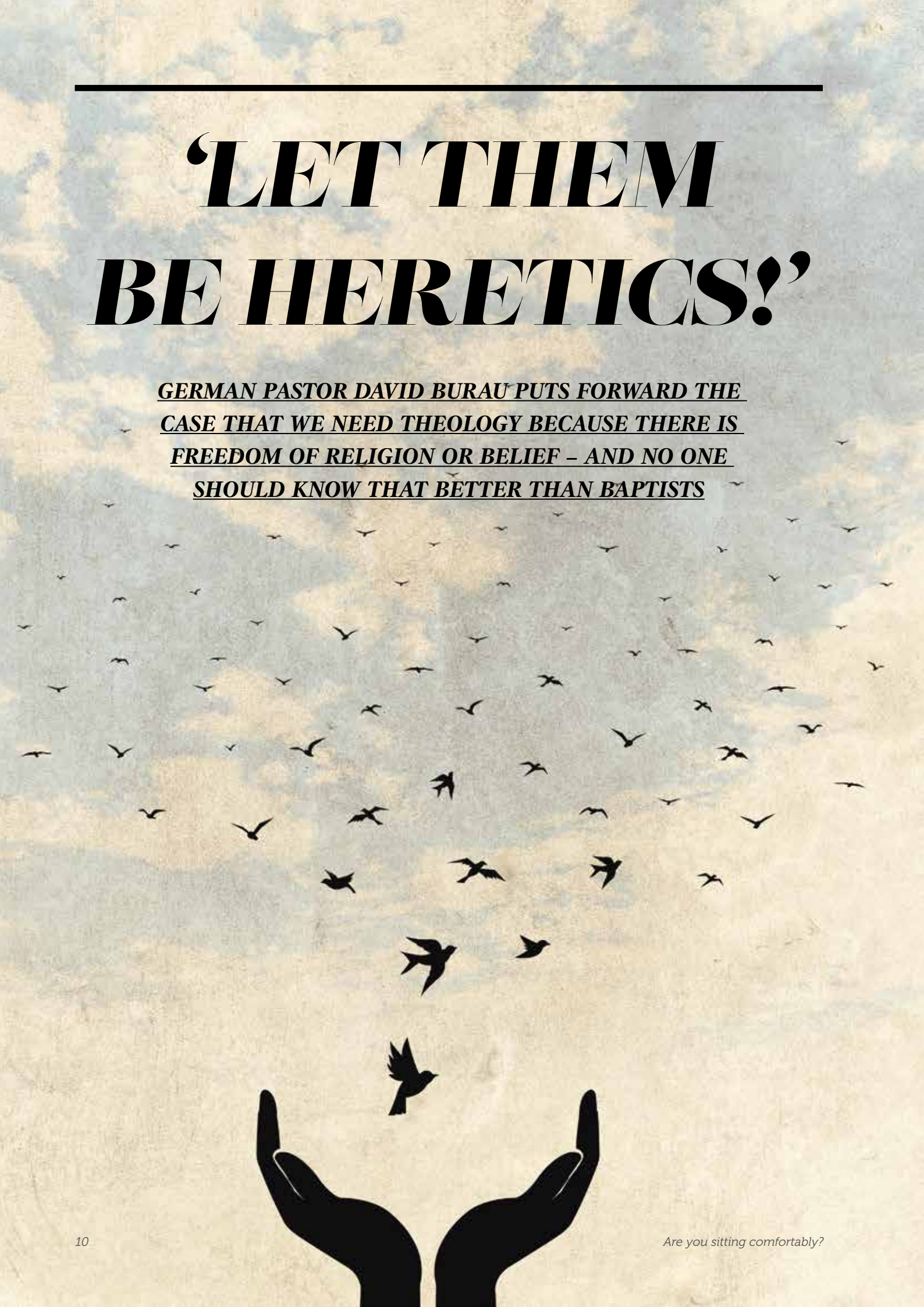
Christine Sine ('Godspace') writes about spirituality of everyday life with beautiful and everyday prayers. This book gave me a different and calm perspective on ordinary life, taught me that there is not so much to do, that rhythm is important. This is one of the books that put me on the track of new monasticism. In a similar vein, Margaret Guenther's book Holy Listening inspired me to move towards spiritual direction and the essence of listening. The metaphor of the spiritual director as midwife and her vision for hospitality helped me along the way.

When I travelled through the USA in June and discussed the political climate, people asked me if I had read Kristin Kobes due Mez's 'Jesus and John Wayne'. I hadn't, but now I have. It's not only a way of understanding life in the States, but it also gives me a new perspective on my evangelical upbringing in the Netherlands and the influence of American evangelicalism on Europe.

The diversity of books written by these women is huge: on leadership, exegesis, discernment, feminism, spirituality, practical theology, history. I urge you to take a look at your bookshelves and discover how many books are written by women.

‘LET THEM BE HERETICS!’

GERMAN PASTOR DAVID BURAU PUTS FORWARD THE CASE THAT WE NEED THEOLOGY BECAUSE THERE IS FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF – AND NO ONE SHOULD KNOW THAT BETTER THAN BAPTISTS



We need theology because there is freedom of religion or belief. Because we have a conscience, can think and decide, because we want to shape our lives in relation to God or a truth, we have no choice but to do theology. After all, we must answer the question: 'what are we are actually deciding in favour of and what exactly does that means in our world today?"

It is also a matter of assigning the right place to freedom of religion or belief in our theology, in our faith, in our unions and our churches. We also need theology for this. Freedom of religion or belief must be a structural principle of Baptist theology, and it is to be located as an abstract norm outside identity.

What is religion and how does it relate to society? I refer here to the German theologians Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Heiner Bielefeldt and the philosopher Gunnar Folke Schuppert.

Religion always has to do with people. Without people, there is no religion. Religion becomes recognisable in belief systems and conviction systems of people. People organise their lives in their historical, cultural and political context according to these beliefs. Individual faith is a very personal or even intimate matter. Nevertheless, religion is never just a private matter. Religion is also a cultural phenomenon.

Freedom of religion or belief is a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in other international covenants. Freedom of religion or belief is intended to enable people to have religious or other beliefs, to change or abandon them, to speak about them or remain silent, just as they wish. They have the right to join with others and to live and profess their faith in public. Only individuals are protected. Never abstract truths, individual doctrines or religions. Human rights find their limits in the rights and freedom of people. They are not a religion or belief themselves: state cannot prohibit or prescribe doctrines to religious communities.

> *"In their endeavours in favour of religious freedom, the Baptists even allied themselves with enemies of the majority churches"*

Today, the commitment to freedom of religion or belief is not a cause particular to the Baptist or Free Church, nor even just Christians. However, Baptists were among the first to demand freedom of religion or belief. Thomas Helwys, founder of the first Baptist church in England, argued in 1612:

"For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and men, Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the last measure."

This understanding is impressively clear and extensive. It includes not only the call for freedom for one's own convictions, but also the right to have

> *"freedom of belief must be respected in all actions and teachings under all circumstances"*

no convictions, to be Jewish, atheist or Muslim. What is important today is what German theologian Martin Rothkegel points out, The Baptist understanding of religious freedom amounted to a demand for the complete disempowerment of the Christian religion."It is impressively logical that Baptists and other religious minorities used natural law arguments in their defence. It was important to them, Rothkegel writes once again, to argue in favour of religious freedom based on the separation of church and state using arguments of reason and not theology. After all, religious truths can neither be the justification nor the content of state laws. In their endeavours in favour of religious freedom, the Baptists even allied themselves with enemies of the majority churches. The idea that even sinful people, who are part of the fallen creation, have rights of freedom from birth, and that these rights even apply to the area of faith, was long regarded as scandalous and incompatible with Christian doctrine. It is also due to Baptist endeavours that religious freedom was included as a human right in the *Virginia Bill of Rights* of 1776 and in the *First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America* of 1791.

It is important to note that the origin of this powerful conviction lies at the core of the Protestant faith. Godless people are justified by grace and not by their own works. Faith is a work of the Holy Spirit that cannot be achieved by force. This is why freedom of religion or belief is a structural principle of Baptist and often also of Free Church doctrine. To quote Rothkegel once again: "What is not voluntary cannot be Christian from this perspective."

Heimbach-Steins has worked out the consequences of freedom of religion or belief very precisely. She points out that freedom of belief must be respected in all actions and teachings under all circumstances. Truth cannot simply be accepted. Every realisation in faith must go through the conscience and be accepted or rejected there in freedom and on one's own responsibility. That is why religious freedom also means the church's disempowerment.

Despite their structural principle, Baptists have not always succeeded in consistently orientating themselves towards freedom of religion or belief or in standing up for it. They have not always stood up for the rights of other religions, nor do they do so today. Migration from mostly Muslim countries is a huge challenge for some. But there are also challenges in Baptist churches. There are various conflicts over ethical views and theological convictions in which other opinions are not accepted. In most cases, women or people with a different sexual orientation are affected; the freedom for them to live their faith according to their conscience is often frustrated.

> *"Instead of standing up for what connects all people and applies equally to everyone, people are increasingly appropriating human rights for their own interests and convictions"*

Identities are pitted against each other. And it seems to me that believers find it difficult to concede the same rights, freedom or values to others that they claim for themselves. Rights, freedoms and values are associated with one's own identity. And of course, it is difficult to share your own identity with someone else, especially if that person is completely different.

That's a big problem, because wherever identities confront each other, there will be fierce disputes and ultimately division or mutual annihilation. That is the view of Israeli philosopher Omri Boehm's and that brings me to my idea that freedom of religion or belief must be located as an abstract norm outside identity.

According to Boehm, we find ourselves in an era in which the acceptance of the universal validity of human rights is decreasing more and more. Instead of standing up for what connects all people and applies equally to everyone, people are increasingly appropriating human rights for their own interests and convictions. Instead of fighting for equal rights for all, both the right-wingers and the left-wingers are now fighting for specific identities. The right-wingers for traditional values and the left-wingers in the name of gender and race. For Boehm, an important sign of the loss of the universal significance of human rights is that many no longer speak of human duties, but only of human

rights. Duties have a claim on people and can also call on them to act against their will. Rights, on the other hand, are chosen by people themselves. And rights are often chosen in a way that they can't be interpreted as duties. Social consensus and thus commercial and political interests take the place of universal justice.

To avoid this, Boehm explains, with reference to Immanuel Kant, that the definition of humanity must always be abstract. It must not be based on the description of concrete facts, such as biological characteristics. Human dignity is based on the fact that people can ask for right action, i.e. are capable of moral thought and action. Nobody and nothing can determine how we think. Not even God. "The ability to think freely [...] [becomes] the basis of radical universalism."

The ability to think freely as the basis of human dignity is something completely abstract. For this very reason, human dignity applies equally to all people everywhere. It cannot be restricted by anything and everything must be measured against it.

Instead of mere identities facing each other in conflicts, which have no choice but to extinguish each other, the overarching universalism of human rights connects people with each other, and the claims of identities must be measured against them. This ensures that identities are preserved and protected. Together, we can embark on a path that does not begin with a "we" that excludes others, but instead ends with a common "we".

For me, Boehm's thoughts are very close to what I have just said about freedom of religion or belief. It is a right that applies equally to all people too. It is abstract and must be filled with life to have meaning. God honours man so much that the freedom of conscience becomes an absolute law for him. Freedom of religion or belief cannot exclude anyone and is aimed at a "we" in which everyone is equally involved.

Freedom of religion or belief is in danger when people put their own insights and thus their own interests above other people. In doing so, they put their own interests in the place of universal freedom. We see this very clearly when states restrict this freedom or misuse religion for political purposes. Within religions, for example, in cases of spiritual abuse.

Abstract freedom of religion or belief cannot provide identity. Neither can a religion or any other conviction per se. It is therefore important to let go of these and allow them to apply or be able to apply equally to all people as abstract norms.

Then no one and nothing can question this abstract norm or truth. Letting go frees up the strength and freedom to fill freedom of religion or belief - in Christian language: justification by grace alone - with life. This is how identity is created in practice. In this way, values and the Christian faith can be shared without jeopardising identities or violating people's rights.

Letting go

I associate a great hope with the thoughts contained in this essay. I imagine that these thoughts will give us great freedom and new possibilities and ways of encounter. Because we can orientate ourselves on something that connects all people with each other. This makes a community possible that is not based on divisions or distinctions.

We are all in conflict on different levels. In our families, in our communities, in our unions or even between our unions. Many of these probably have to do with opposing identities. I hope very much that we will succeed in letting go. Letting go. Letting go of what we can't do ourselves anyway. Letting go of what will destroy us and others. Letting go and live what connects us to each other by grace. Letting go and then filling grace with life.

I hope that this will enable us to achieve a much better understanding and greater enthusiasm for freedom of religion or belief in our congregations and neighbourhoods. That we will succeed in integrating other opinions and approaches in the organisation of our churches and our theology. That barriers to interreligious dialogue will be broken down and that we will find a common language in standing up for human rights. I hope that this will enable us to find new partners with whom we can work for a good life in society. In this way, people might also feel at home in our communities who have had to stay outside until now.

> *"Despite their structural principle, Baptists have not always succeeded in consistently orientating themselves towards freedom of religion or belief or in standing up for it"*

WHY THEOLOGY?

As part of the 75th anniversary celebrations for the International Baptist Theological Seminary, theologian Kieryn Wurts and missiologist Matt Norman convened a conference on the question posed by this article. In conversation with Matty Fearon, they get personal as they respond to this most abstract yet practical of questions.

Matty: I'd like to start by asking you both, what brought you into connection with IBTS?

Kieryn: From 2018 to 2023, I worked at the European Baptist Federation in the area of advocacy for freedom of religion or belief. I encountered IBTS through that role and the really quite generative partnership that EBF and IBTS have. I was excited about IBTS' approach to theology and theological education and found a warm welcome there as part of a community doing deep reflection together. I find it to be unique and really personable, which has something to do with their focus on hospitality and politeness. I don't mean in the sense of being polite, more that there is an honesty to the way they do theological reflection, the way they work and create together that I really appreciate. I ended up serving in the Learning Network for Freedom of Religion or Belief for quite a while.

Matt: I've had a connection with IBTS for quite a long time. My parents were missionaries and when I was really young, we were in Africa. Then we were transferred to Greece and in those days, IBTS was in Rüschlikon in Switzerland and then they moved to Prague. In my adult life, I work with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and we've had quite a big partnership with IBTS through the years. In 2017 I started my PhD with IBTS. When

> *“ God’s centre of gravity is the human person, all human persons, and we must deal with that as Christians ”*

Mike [Pears, see interview on p4] came on board shortly after that and started talking about his ideas for the Learning Network, I thought, ‘Wow, this fits perfectly with the work that I’ve been doing, thinking about learning and how theological education happens, how people learn.’ It’s been a great relationship and a lot of fun because I’m the type of person that likes to say, ‘Why not? Let’s just try things and see what sticks.’ IBTS is a place that is open to that through its focus on academic freedom and academic exploration, it’s a beautiful environment towork in.

Matty: Can you tell me a little about your respective areas of research?

Matt: I am focusing on the intersection of pedagogy, homiletics and practical theology, particularly looking at talking about an earthy, grounded approach to theology. What does preaching look like in today’s world? I live in Barcelona, that’s where I do my ministry and a lot of the preachers are asking that question and a lot of the people who have never been in church are asking that same question.

Kieryn: I started my PhD last year at the Humboldt University of Berlin. That’s where I’m based, that’s where I live and I’m working at the faculty of Ethics and Hermeneutics. I’m stationed on an international research project called Transformative Religion. It’s a partnership with universities and scholars and researchers from Germany and South Africa mainly. My PhD focuses on the question of repentance, particularly in the context of young people, using the case study of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa from the 1990s to talk about the way that repentance shows up and doesn’t show up in kind of social and political spaces.

Matty: I’m going to ask you both the question you posed at the conference you hosted last May, why theology?

Matt: In our context, in Barcelona, it’s only three generations since the Spanish Civil War, when people really left church and religion altogether. Surprise is the reaction we get from most people when they find out we are Christian. It’s not that people don’t want to talk about God, they do, but they’re really surprised that people still go to church and still believe.

‘Why theology?’ is the question we must reflect on every day and reimagine in many ways because of the way people in our context understand God because of popular culture, because of history, because of wars. These are things that reconfigure who God is for them and how God is working in the world. It’s a question that helps us stay grounded and helps us focus on where God is in today’s world, where is God working and moving.

Kieryn: ‘Why theology?’ is simultaneously the most abstract and most practical of questions. In Matthew 16 and in Mark 8, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who are people saying that I am?” He asks Peter and he gets an answer and then he comes back with the question, “Who do you say that I am?” This is directed towards Peter and then to the disciples, but also implicitly to

the reader, "Who do you say that I am?"

I think when you're around other theologians, we sometimes we get caught in answering who are others saying that God is and we forget to answer the question for ourselves. There's often not space for that, in a church context, particularly in churches that are struggling over theology or struggling over ideology. In those spaces "who do you say that I am?" is a hard question to answer. It's delicate, it can be painful, but I think it's the most fruitful question if you can really ask it from an existential place where your heart is in it too. It has social implications, political implications, and big implications for mission. Who is God? What I love about the story and the gospels is that Jesus doesn't answer the question for them, right? You're continually required to ask, 'who is God and who am I, and what does that mean? And I think that's the centre of the Christian life: to keep posing the question and keep engaging it.

Matty: Let's talk about the implications for mission posed by the question.

Matt: I am really starting to think about mission as a way of being in the world, and that changes completely the way we've understood mission historically – and I say that as a third culture mission kid. It's traditionally been something we do. I'm starting to think of mission as the way that we be, which goes back to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

> *"what we think is normal or right or orthodox is very historically and locally contingent"*

Whenever I hear somebody's answer I want to ask, 'how did you get to that place?' And the answer is experiential, always. And many times, in our world that experience is negative. Your experience of God, or of what people think or tell you God is or who God is, affects the way you are in a community. The thing about living in such a multicultural polycentric mission world is you're going to have lots of different people who have lots of different experiences and humility is required to live and accept a space where the answer is, "This is who I understand God to be because of these experiences." That really does change the way you are in a space.

Kieryn: When you're a part of a dominant culture, I think it's very tempting to think that your perspective, your way of seeing the world is the centre of gravity. This is just a very human thing and everything that is slightly different from that is not normal. You can see this in the way that theology is done and what we think is normal or right or orthodox is very historically and locally contingent. In 2016, I moved to Vienna from the US. I spent two years working in a church at the beginning of what is now called the 'refugee crisis' in Europe. A lot of the work of the church was helping people who had freshly come to Europe from very dangerous situations, who were navigating the asylum system, cultural integration, and also their faith, because the vast majority of the people that came to our church had a faith story. Some had persecution stories in their countries of origin and some experienced social persecution from coming to Christian faith in the settings that they were in. It was in part a consequence of those experiences, that my centre of gravity, or the centre of gravity of the people back home who were so sure that they knew what the faith is, is not God's centre of gravity. I think the big learning is that God's centre of gravity is the human person, all human persons and we must deal with that as Christians.

UNSETTLING THE WORD

Romans 5: 1-5. Peace and Hope

IN THE LATEST OF OUR SERIES OF EXPERIMENTS IN READING THE BIBLE THROUGH THE EYES OF ANOTHER, DR MARION CARSON RESCUES AND RE-ENVISIONS A PASSAGE OFTEN ABUSED IN PASTORAL CARE SPACES

When Lorna's daughter and granddaughter died in a car crash, she found herself struggling to hold on to her faith, and began to lose hope. Was life worth living after all? Before the accident, Lorna's world had seemed secure. She was active in her church and had no doubts about faith. She was certain God loved her and would take care of her and her family – so long as she did her part and lived in obedience to Him. Now, however, her life had collapsed, and everything she believed in was called into question.

Lorna decided to go and see Peter, her pastor. As she told her story, Peter became increasingly concerned. He was, of course, desperately sorry to hear of her loss, but as a pastor, he was particularly alarmed to hear about her struggles with faith and hope, and wondered what he should say to her. How could he make sure that she continued in faith? Recalling that in Romans 5:1-5, Paul speaks of faith and hope in times of suffering, he opened his Bible and shared these words:

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

> *"Seeing the Bible primarily as a book of information and instruction carries the risk of reducing pastoral care to a matter of telling people what they should be doing"*

This passage, Peter explained, tells us that when we are going through tough times, we need to persevere in our faith, and put our hope in God, who knows exactly what we are going through. "You just need to have faith, Lorna" he said. "The Bible says that when we are suffering, we are to hold on to God's promises and put our hope in Him. You must persevere, Lorna" he said, "God will not let you down."

Lorna did not receive the advice well. She felt that God had already let her down, and the pain and sense of betrayal were overwhelming. Not only that, but it also now seemed that God was asking her to do the impossible: she had somehow to find the resources within herself to maintain hope and faith when everything was collapsing round about her. She left feeling angry and let down, and doubted if she would be going back to church at all now. For his part, Peter felt that he had been able, by means of Paul's words in Romans 5, to offer comfort to Lorna in her loss, but also to remind her of the necessity of holding on to faith and hope when times are hard. Surely, God's word had provided all that Lorna needed to know and do to get through these difficult times with her faith intact.

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When it comes to matters of pastoral care, it is natural and appropriate to look to the Scriptures to help us. It is, however, worth considering how we do this. What is it we are looking for Scripture to tell us in situations such as this? In our story, Peter's approach to pastoral care was largely

informed by a worldview which has been called "foundationalism" and which has been described by the theologians Stanley J. Grenze and John R. Franke as "the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs."

This need for certainty influenced Peter's response to Lorna's story in two ways. First, he found her admission of difficulties with faith and hope alarming and felt that he needed to correct her potentially faulty thinking. Second, he looked to Scripture to provide him with advice which would restore her to the confident faith she once had. Unfortunately, however, his approach backfired. For Lorna, the implication of Peter's response was that her faith was somehow faulty, and she had the distinct impression that she had been scolded for her lack of faith and hope.

Like many readers of Scripture, Peter's tendency was to see the Bible primarily as a book of information and instruction. Romans 5: 1-5, he felt sure, would be able to provide Lorna with all that she needed to know in her current situation. While this common approach to using the Bible in pastoral care can be of use in certain situations, it carries the risk of reducing pastoral care to a matter of telling people what they should be doing. And as we have seen here, in times of crisis and trouble, this can miss the mark and even be counterproductive. How can we avoid this danger?

Thankfully, there is another approach to Scripture which, I believe, can be enormously helpful in the pastoral care of people who are going through times of severe suffering. We have noted that Peter was concerned about Lorna's doubts and feelings of hopelessness, which he felt put her at risk of disobedience. For theologian Stanley Hauerwas this tendency within the church to be overly concerned with piety and obedience is problematic: we can become preoccupied with behaviour (our own and other people's), inward-looking and critical of others. Rather than focusing on what individual believers ought to be doing, he says, we should be concerned with becoming the kind of people God wants us to be. Drawing on the work of Thomas Aquinas, he sees virtues such as perseverance and courage, and the "theological" virtues of faith, hope and love as the church's "distinctive excellences". The church should consist of "communities of character", made up of disciples who are on a journey of transformative faith together, whose virtues mark them out as different in a materialistic and individualistic world.

What difference does this make to our understanding of Paul's words in Romans 5: 1-5? Quite a lot, it turns out. In the first place, it means that the question we are asking as we read is no longer "what ought I to do?" but rather "what kind of people does God want us to be when times are hard"? The answer is that God wants us to be faithful, hopeful and loving people. However, faith, hope and love are understood as "theological virtues" rather than matters of obedience. They are God-given gifts which enable us to withstand when suffering comes. Certainly, the gifts must be used, but we are not left to our own devices: God gives us the capacity to become the faithful, hopeful and loving people he wants us to be. Lastly, from a character ethics perspective, faith, hope and love are given to the community, not just to individuals. They are the "distinctive excellences" of the community of believers which enable us to share the journey, supporting one another through good times and bad. We can be faithful in response to what God has done, hopeful on the basis of that knowledge, and sustained in that hope by the love of God which "has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Romans 3: 5).

All this, in turn, affects how we view the use of this passage in pastoral care. The focus shifts from looking for instruction to discovering how God enables his people to persevere in times of trouble. Christians have been given what they need to be faithful, hopeful and loving when suffering comes. The task of pastoral care is not so much to give advice to those who are struggling but to accompany and support them through difficult times. Crucially, spiritual struggle of the sort that Lorna experienced is not seen as potential spiritual failure, but as a temporary lessening in her ability to use the gifts God has given her. In such a case, her community can exercise the gifts on her behalf, providing for her needs and reaching out to her in *agapé* love. As the community accompanies her on her journey of grief and spiritual wrestling, she may just catch a glimpse of the hope that she felt was slipping away from her.

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Perhaps we should not be too hard on Peter. There can be no doubt as to his good intentions – he really did want to help her and the choice of Romans 5: 1-5 was entirely appropriate. Paul does speak of how Christians can be resilient in times of trouble. However, Peter's need to find an answer to the question "what ought Lorna to do?" led him to see an imperative in the Biblical passage which he felt he had to pass on to help Lorna avoid losing her faith and hope – a tactic which proved to be mistaken. Had he read the passage with the question "what kind of people does God want us to be?" foremost in his mind, however, he might have taken a quite different approach to helping Lorna. Rather than feeling it his duty to tell her what she should do, he might have asked other members of the congregation to rally round and support Lorna through the dark time of bereavement and bewilderment. And who knows, rather than feeling that she was a second-class Christian, Lorna might have been able to begin to dare to hope once again.

"rather than focusing on what individual believers ought to be doing, we should be concerned with becoming the kind of people God wants us to be"

This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in Issue 8 of the Journal of Baptist Theology in Context (2023).

DEARLY OTHERED,
WE GATHER HERE TODAY...

FROM A MULTIPLICITY OF ANGLES, REGULAR COLUMNIST NATALIA-NANA LESTER-BUSH KNOWS WHAT IT IS TO BE MAJORITY AND TO BE EXCLUDED - OFTEN IN THE SAME PLACE AND TIME

Well, I loved reading this issue. I was provoked, stimulated and inspired reading about history, theology, space, books, even human rights (or lack thereof!) and pastoral support which hurts when it seems to help. I want to hold space for us to reflect more on Theology and Fear. To me, the two are so often entwined. I jumped on the explanation of the word 'Foundationalism' in Dr Marion Carson's Unsettling the Word as a summary for my previous post-evangelical approach to theology.

Back when theology was, to me, based solely on The Word and Spirit's interpretation - usually helpfully exposited through my married middle-aged white male vicars (whom I love & appreciated very much!) - I used to buy into a more cognitive approach to theology. I read and listened to theological beliefs and answers that were 'Biblical'. I've now learned there's no such thing! Wait, don't stop reading just yet. What I mean is that the Bible can be used to justify any and all human behaviours. It's used by people both pro- and anti-access to abortion, pro- and anti-LGBTQIA equality or marriage, by both fiscal socialists & conservatives and all in between! I've realised the approach where we take The Word as a handbook of answers and Highway Code guidance is not only false but causes hurt to myself and others, and usually more harm for those who are Othered.

I now see that Foundationalism is very Fear-based. It treats Holy Scriptures (plural because The Bible, Christian & Jewish, are multiple books of histories, poems, biographies & letters not a Q&A answer book!) as a defence and balm to the risk and sting of challenge. Previously, if asked 'Did Jesus *really* resurrect from death?', I'd jump into an impassioned sharing of the evidence for resurrection and pray they were convinced and thus converted. Now? Well part of me still does that but I also let myself sit with the question. Now, instead of the satisfaction of feeling I may have convinced someone with evidence and 'Biblical truth', I actually enjoy the question and the openness of not having an answer, or at least not having the answer. And on a good day, I enjoy considering, instead of correctly answering, the question and allow myself to consider what it would mean for my faith and my life if Jesus didn't resurrect to physical life after his execution.

Now though I think, 'gosh what a small and lazy view of Theology, Natalia-Nana' (I talk to myself in third person A LOT!). Now, I take a more expansive approach. Now, I let Spirit talk to me about God through an array of vessels: through the sensations in my body; the feelings in my heart; the questions in my mind; the conversations in my social circles and workspaces; the articles and opinions in my news feed and social scrolling; and through the bodies and experiences of the people I meet, pass or connect with. Especially those who look and sound different to me.

In many ways, my identity is liminal. I was raised by a White dad and Grandad and have both worshipped and worked comfortably enough in White majority spaces. But I'm also raised by those men and my Black Mum to be Mixed, equally honouring and embracing my Ghanaian heritage and identity alongside my White English Middle-Class one. I'm physically disabled, in multiple ways, but present as non-disabled so, I experience life as both Black & White (as much as someone with melanin ever can) and Disabled and Non-disabled (I hate the term 'able bodied'- ugh, able to do what, juggle?!). I share this not as a weird Dating Profile but as a way of introducing that I know what it is to be Majority and to be 'Other', often in the same place and day. It makes me reflect on what it is to know and relate to oneself as both the one who others the Other and the one who is othered by Others. I think this is just part of being Human. I may be more cognisant of it because of my dual heritage and body.

But surely, we all know how it feels to be Othered? If we let ourselves remember, that is. It's a horrible thing to remember and experience but I really believe that encouraging ourselves to remember and feel that Othering in our bodies is living out 'well-earthed theology'. If we let ourselves feel it, maybe we can reflect more wisely on how we serve and whether our service is inclusive, is empowering, and is truly respectful.

Because Jesus, our beloved Messiah, Christ and Teacher, is so secure in his self and his God that he doesn't try to convince or convert. He just loves and connects, with no agenda. And thus turns the Other into Beloved.

SPACES AND THEIR HIDDEN MEANINGS

If the voices in this issue have lit a flame within you and you wish to journey further along the path of well-grounded theology, I hope the resources below can be your compass and your guide.

JOIN

THE LEARNING NETWORK
The International Baptist Theological Seminary
Discover a new way of doing practical theology through IBTS' new approach to theological training, which replaces the intensity of academic study with grounded conversations and supportive content. Current themes include: 'Freedom of Religion or Belief' and 'Eco-Crisis and the Gospel'.

READ

BONHOEFFER'S BLACK JESUS
Reggie L. Jackson
IBTS Senior Research Fellow, Reggie Jackson, follows Bonhoeffer as he defies Germany with a Christology he learned in Harlem's churches, centred on a black Christ who suffered with African Americans in their struggle against systemic injustice and racial violence—and then resisted.

MISSION AND PLACE: from Eden to Caesarea
Rev Dr Mike Pears
Delve deeper into Rev Pears' theology of space with this mind-bending essay from the February 2018 issue of the theological journal Anvil (www.churchmissionsociety.org/anvil/). Rev Pears argues that the familiarity which enables us to navigate through complex social and spatial landscapes without a second thought also functions to hide from us whole worlds of meaning and power.

LISTEN

THE BATTLES THAT WON OUR FREEDOMS
BBC Radio 4
Professor Justin Champion explores how the idea of religious toleration emerged from the struggles of post-Civil War England, going from being a horrifyingly radical idea in the 1670s to becoming law in 1689. While Dr Richard Scott, author of 'Christians in the Firing Line', speaks about his experience as a Christian doctor in Britain today - and how it relates to the innovations of the 17th century.

WATCH

JESUS AND THE DISPLACED
Rev Dr Willie James Jennings
Last year, in 2023, Rev Jennings became the first black person to deliver the Bampton Lectures at Oxford University. You can watch all four talks as he confronts a crisis of space that joins the problems of housing, homelessness, and forced migration to the horrors of white supremacy, patriarchy, and war. In doing so, Rev Jennings presents a Christology aimed at redeeming our spaces of habitation.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq3fFwQ7a8c

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