



MISSION

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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

EUROPE'S CHRISTIANS: ARE WE LISTENING?



Guest edited in Amsterdam

**THEOLOGY:
CLOWN OF THE
SCIENCES**

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IT'S 2019. WE'RE HANDING OVER CONTROL TO EUROPE.



It's becoming almost fashionable to talk about listening to the World Church these days. And that's a good thing. It's not virtue-signalling or PC gone mad, it's just wisdom and humility. The World Church is growing and we in the UK are experiencing contraction and a loss of privilege. We'd be arrogant or delusional to think we had nothing to learn from Christians in the Majority World. And we'd be poorer if, in this connected age, we didn't make use of emerging opportunities to hear voices we are not used to hearing. Voices from beyond the heartlands of our established western theology in Britain, Germany and the USA.

But, there's a danger in our automatic thinking as to who (and where) the World Church is. Too often, our habitual reflex in the UK is to think of warm climates, ethnic differences and hostile or competing religious traditions. In short: Africa, Asia and Latin America. These continental contexts have much to offer us in terms

“ There are many Europes ”

of fresh practice and challenging, new theology, it is true. But so does Europe. Though perhaps a Europe beyond our reflexive imagining.

'Eurocentric' is often used as a catch-all criticism of hegemonic thought or praxis, but, as different stances towards the continent throughout the Brexit saga have shown us, there are many Europes.

Can we really criticise Croatia's export of theological training to the Global South? Is Ukrainian thought actually what we mean when we say Eurocentric thinking? Are we really in danger of being too influenced by Lithuania?

No.

Which is why we've invited the

International Baptist Theological Study Centre (IBTSC) to guest edit this issue of Mission Catalyst. Based in Amsterdam, they have deep roots in Prague and students from all over the world – with a huge number from the Europe most of us never get to hear from.

So, I'm delighted to hand this issue over to Mike Pears, IBTSC and Christians from Europe.

It's not meant to be a comprehensive survey or a coherent introduction, but a sample – an appetiser platter for the mind, hopefully inspiring a taste for more. The Europes have important things to say. I hope we are ready to listen.

Jonathan Langley
Head of Creative Content
BMS World Mission

We all have our struggles

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It's such a hassle.

But it feels great to know you've made a difference.

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Watching them crawl.

But you hope someone on the other side will help you.

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Brave the form. Give today.

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SOUTH SUDAN'S
CONFLICT SURVIVORS

Mike Pears

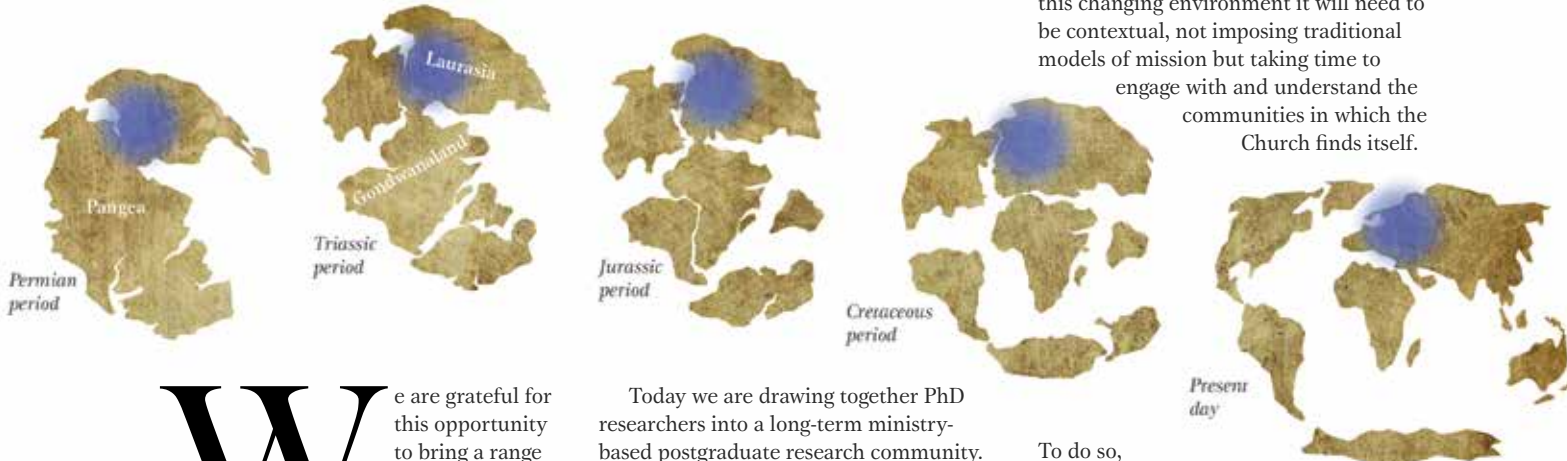
Centre Director, International Baptist Theological Study Centre (IBTSC), Amsterdam, and author of *Mission in Marginal Places*.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE



AN ANXIOUS RESPONSE TO A CHANGING WORLD COULD RENDER CHRISTIANS COMPLICIT IN IMBALANCES OF POWER.

understood and doing so from a position of economic privilege is destined to compound the growing gap between the Church and the communities in which it is set. For mission to be meaningful in this changing environment it will need to be contextual, not imposing traditional models of mission but taking time to engage with and understand the communities in which the Church finds itself.



We are grateful for this opportunity to bring a range of voices from across Europe to *Mission Catalyst* readers. One clear feature of life across the European Baptist Federation (EBF) region is the challenge of adjusting to change, a feature of a number of the contributions in this issue. From Ukraine to the UK, whether through war, immigration, austerity or populist politics, none of us are immune from the need to address a changing landscape.

Here at IBTSC, Amsterdam, we too have had to adjust to change. From seminary-based education beginning in the post-war era of the 1940s on the shores of Lake Zurich in Rüslikon, Switzerland, to a post-Soviet, postgraduate emphasis in the Jenerálka 'castle' in Prague, to the new institution in the shared facility of the Baptist House in Amsterdam, change has been a major part of the IBTSC(C) experience. The changes haven't always been easy or without pain, but each new expression of the institution has brought with it new opportunities and renewed energy.

Today we are drawing together PhD researchers into a long-term ministry-based postgraduate research community. We now have the John Smyth Library, a research-focused European Baptist facility, and the Digital Theological Library providing immense resources for our researchers and other academics. On the horizon is a major new initiative to make theological education more accessible and affordable in collaboration with partners across the EBF region. Each transition has taken time but has brought with it additional opportunities and new ways of seeing our role, as the context of Baptist life across Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East changes.

One of the greatest changes we face is the Church's decline in many European contexts, paralleled with changing demographics marked by increasing marginalisation, exclusion and deprivation. An anxious response to these changes with an emphasis on 'Church growth' could mean that we become complicit in society with the forces that privilege the powerful and disadvantage the vulnerable.

Speaking a language that is not

To do so, the Church will need to hone its skills in dialogue and restrain the inherited tendency to proclaim first and listen second (if at all).

Dialogue with those in marginal places will engender sensitivity and create the possibility of authenticity in witness to the good news of the kingdom. It will also better shape our practical expression of that good news when engaging with those in marginal and excluded places. Such dialogue and engagement will sharpen our awareness of the ethical and political issues associated with welfare, provision of care and justice. It will also open us to new ways of working and living incarnationally.

Rev Dr Mike Pears

Guest Editor, *Mission Catalyst*
Director of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam.



Walter Klimt is the General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Austria and CEO of Austrian Baptist Aid. He is the great grand-nephew of Viennese painter Gustav Klimt. He is Executive Pastor at Projekt:Gemeinde (Project:Church).



Andrea Klimt is Professor of Practical Theology at the Baptist Seminary in Elstal, Berlin, specialising in Christian Education and Pastoral Counselling. She is married to Walter. She serves on the pastoral team at Projekt:Gemeinde.



David Bunce is Director of Project Vienna Bible School and Pastor of Projekt:Gemeinde. He is British and also a web developer.

THE KLIMTS WITH DAVID BUNCE

IMMIGRATION, MINISTRY FORMATION AND LEARNING TO LOVE THEOLOGY, AT THE CROSSROADS OF EUROPE.

What does your ministry look like in Vienna?

David: Projekt:Gemeinde is a young Baptist church with congregations worshipping in Farsi, Spanish and German. It is an exciting mix of students, young adults, families and refugees from Iran and Afghanistan. Almost every year interns come to us from all over the world to work with us for a short time. Out of this, the church started Project Vienna, a gap year program me combining Bible school, a church internship and social work, all exploring the role of faith in the 21st century.

What are the values that shape your ministry?

Andrea: A key value for me is 'sharing life'. Our ministry in Vienna has revolved around shared life in a community. We have lived with students sharing the same building for the past 27 years, so shared life is not just an abstract value but a practical outworking of how I understand ministry.

Walter: It's too easy in traditional church life to just have a Sunday face. When you live in community the Sunday face usually lasts to Wednesday, then you face reality; so for me there are three values

that need to shape the way we operate as a community. First, we need to be authentic; life has to be real, honest and open. Second, we need to be committed to empowering people to develop their gifts, drawing the best out of each other. And third, we need to be committed to working together as a team. It is very rewarding to see the students who have lived with us now serving as leaders and pastors in other places across Europe. It's simply the outworking of Ephesians 4, preparing God's people for works of service.

You live at the crossroads of European politics. Austria has been dealing with

the politics of the far-right at the heart of government. How do you respond to the political context in which you work?

A: I think it is really important to think about the language we use in political discussions, the political context. For example, many people talk about a 'wave' or 'stream' of refugees overwhelming our society. I see it as a blessing and opportunity. Also, it is important to remember that people come one by one, they are each human beings, each one is a potential brother or sister. The language we use is very important.

W: It's important that our Christian communities should be international. Too often there is limited openness to other cultures. Right-wing populism makes me angry, especially the way people speak about others who are different. I have learned from my own biography. My grandfather spoke out against Hitler and spent seven years in a concentration camp. I must speak out against this populism. I'm a Baptist, I believe in human rights.

How have you given practical expression to your views?

W: In politics everything is moving to extremes but not everything in government is bad, or has been bad, so it's important that when there is something good, we say so, as well as speaking out against what isn't good. People want to put you in one box or the other and we need to educate people, our own people and others, that as Christians we're not in their boxes. Also, where is the prophetic voice in society if we are not that voice and the voice for the voiceless?

Over the years we have been taking people from our churches to other places around the world. Europe, Africa, South America, Cuba. It's important that people get the opportunity to learn from others and be able to help others. And it's important that people get a chance to see what's good in Europe and at the same time develop a worldwide perspective.

Also, here in Austria it has been good that we have been part of conversations with the government when there have been problems. Along with other churches we have together been challenging the Government and educating them about our beliefs.

A: One thing I did to try and make a difference was to invite two pastors from South Africa to come and spend time with us. They went into our churches and into

schools to talk about difference and their culture. It was part of the project 'Without Borders'. I felt I had to do something within our church, as churches are often monocultural. It was a small thing to do but it was an attempt to help take away the fear of strangers. In German we have a saying: "if the stranger becomes a friend then the fear will go."

“Changes in society aren't threats”

What do you see as the key issues in ministry formation in Europe?

W: There seem to be a lot of leadership seminars that people run to and that's not good. It's not what I see Jesus doing. There's a culture of leadership that wants to rule, to hinder, to control – that's not Jesus' way. We need a ministry formed of servants, and servants who are willing to work in teams.

A: Ministry development shouldn't be about programmes, it needs to be about attitudes, changing attitudes, shaping the attitudes of Christian ministry. We need new theologies like a theology of dealing with the stranger. Things like this need to be foundational in ministry training and formation.

We need to concentrate more on communication, developing skills in communication and understanding the importance of good communication. It is so important in situations of conflict whether in the Church or community.

D: There needs to be space for millennials to grow and be developed as leaders. There needs to be space for millennial leadership. Millennials don't come with the same concerns as previous generations; we need to invest in young adults as leaders in our churches. We invest in the young people we have with us in Vienna, knowing they will become the ones who will lead the renewal of Christian witness across Europe.

W: We love theology! It is good to love God with our minds. We want others to love theology. It is helpful when people learn to love theology.

What are some of the key things you have learned from your ministry in this crossroads context?

D: Austria sits on the border of the East and West of Europe in what was largely a Catholic culture. We have learned that changes in society aren't threats. The urban and cultural diversity we've seen taking place here aren't threats to the Church if we're clear on our core identity.

W: Within our Union there are different biographies; churches and people are different. We are not all the same so we shouldn't expect our society to be monocultural. Through the refugee crisis we have been seeing an awakening among Muslims. We see many Iranians becoming believers and hear of a growing underground Church developing. God has given us these people to us to care for and minister to. Christians must have a missional perspective on the changes that are taking place in European society. We are not first Austrian, British or whatever, we're called to be different and to see people differently.

A: We must not see ethnic churches as guest churches within our buildings. We need to function as one church with different congregations. We have three services in our church, one in German, one in Farsi and one in Spanish – three congregations and shared leadership as one church.

W: Once a month we have a service with all three congregations together. It can be chaos but it's a blessing. It's church. We have to learn to live with difference – reconciled diversity. Research has shown that there are different milieus within society and churches are not reaching all the different milieus. We need to learn to identify the different milieus around us and seek to reach them. I am very concerned for those who are disillusioned with church and have been lost to the Church. We need to find them again. To do that we need to be authentic and honest about the Church's failings and mistakes.

Actually, I think one of the key things I have learned is that every church needs an Andrea! Churches can become too focussed on their problems; they need someone who can help change the perspective. Andrea always does that. For example, often when our church eats together it is messy and chaotic but Andrea will say: "It's ok, it's the sign of a growing church." We need the same capacity with ethical issues and conflicts. Yes, every church needs an Andrea.

Ksenija Magda

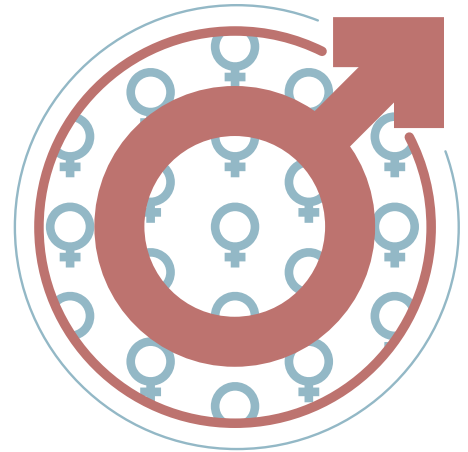
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NATIONALISM



SCRIPTURE V DOCTRINE



THE ROLE OF WOMEN

3 CONTROVERSIES IN CROATIAN THEOLOGY

TOLERATED NATIONALISM, THE MARGINALISATION OF WOMEN AND BIBLICAL ILLITERACY ARE CONTROVERSIAL FEATURES OF EASTERN EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN LIFE. PERHAPS WE'RE NOT ALL THAT DIFFERENT AFTER ALL.

It is almost hyperbole to talk of top controversies in Central European theology. In contrast to the West, where academic theology seems to be and become increasingly non-denominational, Central and Eastern Europe tend to have fragmented theological controversies depending on denomination. In addition, as 'New Europe' incorporated main-line churches as partners in political structures, controversies have been discouraged. In Croatia, for example, the majority Roman Catholic Church has such an immense political influence that its theology is governed by Europe. Well-established and financed by the Government, they do not want to rock the

“ Communism insisted on equality of men and women ”

boat, and those on the fringes are too tiny to have a voice. In addition, evangelicals (Baptists included) only have a few people capable of theological discussion. Only recently and very slowly, such a community has started developing. An interesting project, Langham's *Central European Contextual Commentary on the*

Bible finally points to a recognizable group of evangelical scholars.

This said, here are the top four controversies, as I see them. Almost all of them are more sociological than they are theological, but I point to those here, because they will constantly be affirmed by theology.

1. Nationalism

A gigantic banner appeared on the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Zagreb on Holocaust Remembrance Day this year and everyone was startled. It commemorated the horrors of the Holocaust in both Croatian and Hebrew. Cardinal Bozanić, Archbishop of Zagreb, stepped outside his church to deliver a speech in the square to a smallish assembly consisting mainly of the Jewish community and of bystanders. Only a few official Government representatives were present. “Recognizing the powers of evil, we put before us the values of the good, of unselfishness, and love,” he said, remembering those 9,000 Zagreb Jews who were killed 74 years ago in the city. Everyone was taken aback with this event at first, some agencies claiming that “The church has done a gigantic thing,” and that Bozanić’s speech must be termed “historic”. As the days passed it became evident that the biggest controversy in Croatian theology – nationalism – has not really been addressed. Research conducted by Yale and Grinnell and endorsed by the European Union for Progressive Judaism put Croatia among the top three most fascist member bodies of the EU, thus presenting a political problem both to the Croatian Government and to the Roman Catholicism of Pope Francis. It seems that the Church’s gesture grew from outside pressure rather than from nationalism having been dealt with.

2. The Scripture v doctrine divide

Our environment in Central and Eastern Europe is mainly doctrinal, and was so for centuries. While evangelicals pay lip service to the Bible as their only and verbally inspired source of faith, their discussions on issues including inspiration are less biblical, and mostly doctrinal. This approach uses Scripture for superficial proof texting, without taking seriously the Word in its context. This is the outcome of a generalised Bible illiteracy among evangelicals, who have adopted a “verse for the day” reading method.

Anyway, the mainline churches subscribe to doctrines as primary for faith and practice. Work in biblical theology is considered unnatural and uninteresting, or even – as the Bishop of Sisak, Vlado

Košić, termed it in an article about the publisher Kršćanska Sadašnjost – “a bad experiment.”

But rather the contrary is the case: in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, several Croatian Catholic theologians decided, in line with the requirements of that Council, to finally give the Croatian people the Bible. A first translation of the Scriptures in Croatian, the Croatian Bible, appeared in 1968. Translation attempts since the Middle Ages never made it past local church authorities to the people. This Bible trend, triggered by the Second Vatican Council, was evident in Croatia’s piety and theology right up until the early nineties. It created a common ground for

decision-making. This is particularly interesting as Communism insisted on equality of men and women. Now, any ‘feminism’ is being revised theologically by tradition or in evangelicalism by the import of conservative complementarian theories (through Piper’s or MacArthur’s ‘ministries’), destroying on the way whatever smallish steps were taken in the 80s towards an integrated church ministry. ‘The King’s Daughters’ and ‘Promise Keepers’ have their lush and well-funded segregated festivals.

Diverse ethical controversies for which, directly or indirectly, women are blamed – are utilized for political smoke screens when needed. They are issues like divorce, low birth rates, abortion, and violence

“ Evangelicals only have a few people capable of theological discussion ”

ecumenism and many new developments. It gave the Croatian Roman Catholic Church a new face at that time – that is, it was widely appreciated among the young and the intellectuals. Evangelicals, too, gained two theological institutions, the Matthias Flacius Illyricus University Centre for Protestant Theology in Zagreb and the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek. I think it is safe to say that whatever is left of biblical scholarship in Croatia remains the outcome of those years in the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, the letting go of Scripture in the Croatian public space stopped these processes.

3. The role of women in marriage and in the Church

Again, there is no real controversy on this issue as the region is safely tucked away in mainline doctrinal monolithicism, that women are created ontologically inferior to men in all areas of life, including the spiritual. This makes them ideal to complement their husbands and bear children, but unsuitable for any

in the home. The recent discussion at The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and whether the Croatian Government may ratify it, exposed the immense lack of theological reasoning in evangelicals. Wholeheartedly and without questioning, they embraced the uproar against this document in the Roman Catholic Church because it was cunningly tied to conspiracy theories that ‘they will make you change your sex’. Because of its traditional male structures, the Roman Catholic Church understood the legal implications of the document which could potentially ask questions of them. Many evangelicals ate the bait and viciously harassed their own who dared to suggest that the Convention put teeth on the many laws against violence against women, which were rarely utilised.

It seems that easy fixes and not-thought-through arguments which are served up as biblical, have an easy way to win over the masses. The only cure for this is more serious evangelical scholars in Central and Eastern Europe.



*HUMOUR PUNCTURES POMPOSITY AND OPENS THE WAY TO MODESTY
AND TRUTH – AS THE PROPHET JONAH LEARNED, AMUSINGLY.*

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor 1: 27)

THE FOOLISHNESS OF CLOWNS

Clowns are generally known for their playful foolishness. They do not possess institutional authority, nor do they claim power for themselves, but through their oddity they have a power nonetheless.

The origins of clowns go back to the early civilisations of Egypt and Rome, where the fool played before the empires,

and as jesters at the royal courts of medieval kings. Their task was not just to bring entertainment and laughter, but to provide critical reflection, or mock rule. Fools or clowns are licensed to speak the truth to power and provide an ironic critique of the State, the Church, and society at large. The authority of the fool is thus not one based on the vantage point of strength and dominance, but on vulnerability and marginality. A form of power not characterised by superiority but one exercised in folly. Clowns represent and produce a counter-world, a ‘foolish’ perspective on life. A good example is

found in Robin Williams’ movie *Patch Adams*, about the enigmatic and peculiar life of medical student Hunter ‘Patch’ Adams. During his studies, Adams’ playful approach to the study of medicine is a thorn in the side of his ambitious roommate. When asked about his dislike of Adams’ approach, his roommate answers: “You make my effort a joke. I want to be a doctor! This isn’t a game to me. This isn’t playtime! This is serious business.”

Clowns have the subversive yet ‘control-less’ authority we need to navigate theology in a secular environment. Humour subverts the pretention of the

“To speak of God at times like ours, you must be joking”

powerful and fits a people who participate in the story of ‘the folly of the Cross’ as the Apostle Paul so aptly pronounces (1 Cor 1: 18-2: 5). Theologians – like Patch Adams – should not only seek to be good doctors of the Church, but they must be great clowns as well, discovering the healing powers of laughter, for: “a cheerful heart is a good medicine.” (Prov 17: 22)

FOOLING AROUND WITH JONAH

To rediscover a good sense of humour, we might begin by recovering the ‘playfulness’ of the Bible. We often – certainly those who call themselves Bible-believing Christians – take the Bible so seriously that its redeeming jokes are lost in translation. The great clown of the Bible is the prophet Jonah. I believe he can help us to learn what it means to ‘fool around’.

The comical intent of the book of Jonah is obvious. Already in the opening, echoing the preamble of many other prophets, Jonah makes a fool out of himself. Like good slapstick, Jonah makes himself ready but runs the other way. Called to go “up to Nineveh”, he goes “down to Joppa”, even all the way “down into a ship”. And, then the waves come crashing in and the fierce and experienced boat crew call upon their gods. It’s a time when one might need a prophet of Israel – but our man is in a deep, deep sleep. But now comes the real pun. After the boat crew have awoken Jonah, he responds in all seriousness: “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.” Funnily enough, Jonah is so serious that he fails to see what the boatmen grasp immediately: if this God is indeed the creator of all sea and land, why bother running away? Nonetheless, through his folly, Jonah turns out to be the vehicle by which the boat crew comes to know the God of Israel. The irony of grace finds these ‘pagans’ but misses the Hebrew prophet who sank even deeper – being tossed in the water.

Clearly not about the kind of prophet we would have expected, the book of Jonah never becomes cynical. He may be the worst prophet ever, but we never resent him. Deep down in the sea he finds himself swallowed by a sea monster. And, like you do when you find yourself in a fish, he composes a beautiful psalm, pure poetry, in which he sings about his conversion. He might be a Hebrew prophet – he now knows that “salvation comes from the Lord.” Once he is thus ‘baptised’ he goes ashore. After three days, the fish seems to be sick and tired of Jonah, “and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” His big mouth and clear language on board the ship are exchanged for the worst sermon

“The comical intent of the book of Jonah is obvious”

ever while walking through the streets of Nineveh. It is as if he purposefully tries to sabotage his mission by giving this evil empire only the slightest chance to receive grace. His ridiculous behaviour is absurd, yet to his surprise his words have brought a turnaround among the Ninevites; even the animals take heed to his words! Of course, the irony is clear: where Jonah needed to hear the message twice, Nineveh listened carefully, only needing to hear it once.

Awaiting the city’s doom, Jonah withdraws to a hill to enjoy the view. There, God pulls a joke on him. He grows a tree in whose shade Jonah’s anger melts like snow in the sun. When God dooms the unlucky plant, Jonah is in tears, even losing the will to live. His overly dramatic grief over the bush stands in stark contrast to his willingness to see the city burn. And then the story suddenly ends with a question posed by God, almost as if turning to the readers: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?”

LEARNING TO BE A CLOWN

Jonah, the prophet, turns out to be the fool of the story. The whole story of Jonah testifies that the so-called Other can be part of divine self-disclosure. Encountering others is a way through which the ‘insider’ learns and receives a fuller understanding of God. Jonah is a great help in finding our inner clown. The story dismantles the superiority of grand theological claims that are not supported by life testimony. He might be a Hebrew prophet, yet his life shows he has yet much to learn about the God he confesses to worship. The awkwardness of his robust claim to the boatmen stands in contrast to his minimalist prophecy to Nineveh. However, when he is “turned around himself” – being spat out and smelling like rotten fish – his words carry enormous authority. Jonah thereby enables us to develop a healthy form of

self-mockery by offering us a good look in the godly mirror of modesty. Despite all his silliness, the book of Jonah opens our eyes to see what God is doing in other places and through other peoples. Where Jonah assumed that nothing good could come out of Nineveh – the empire where evil “never sleeps” – he learns that God’s compassion for this godless city is the same compassion that gave him, a prophet, a second chance.

To speak of God at times like ours, you must be joking. Theologians are “the clowns among the scientists.” Like clowning, theology should be entertaining. If it has a place at university, its self-deprecating authority is a pointer to God. It takes guts to be defenceless and vulnerable.

This is an edited and shortened version of the forthcoming article The Clown of the Sciences: Theology at the Secular University, in Baptist Theologies (2019).

David McMillan

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THE BREXIT CHALLENGE

*BREXIT, SECOND CORINTHIANS AND
BAPTISTS. WHAT A COMBO.*

One of the few things that most people in the UK are agreed about, and that most onlookers are astonished at, is that the United Kingdom is now anything but united. People constantly ask us: *what on earth is going on in your country?* It's not easy to explain how we got into this mess, or how we will get out of it. I must confess, coming from Northern Ireland where flags and flag waving are an integral part of sectarian demarcation, I never expected to see so much flag waving outside Westminster – a visual portrayal of the deepening divisions. It seems that the historical divisions of social class and status, Conservative and Labour, have at least for the present been superseded by the divisions of Leaver or Remainer. The fault line runs deep and is becoming deeply damaging to long-term social cohesion.

In an opinion piece in the *Guardian* newspaper, John Harris lamented the hardening of the debates around Brexit, noting that: "...there is something that is increasingly obvious: loathing and denigration not just of the Brexit debate's figureheads, but the millions of people seen as being on the wrong side of the

“Baptists are no strangers to labelling, stereotyping and condemning”

argument.” While holding a remain or leave position is perfectly legitimate and does not automatically imply either insanity or prejudice, the longer the political stalemate goes on the deeper the divisions and more deeply ingrained the stereotypes.

This fragmented situation creates a ‘Brexit Challenge’ and an opportunity for the Church to step up and seek to be a kingdom witness, a place of healing and acceptance in fractured communities. This is easier said than done and begs the question of how, and on what basis, the Church can approach the challenge.

Sometimes other difficult situations are a good place to start looking for help. One such difficult situation is Paul's relationship with the Church at Corinth. His second letter to the Corinthians is not an easy read. Written to a fractured community about fractured relationships, Paul's continual pressing the case for his apostolic authority makes for embarrassing reading at times – but in the

course of the letter he hits on some key issues that speak powerfully to contexts of conflict. Bearing in mind that at one stage in his life he had a pathological hatred of fellow Jews who followed the way of Jesus, his comment that “from now on we regard no-one from a human point of view even though we once regarded Christ in that way” should not be missed (2 Cor 5: 16). This once violent religious fanatic now tries to see his fellow human beings, Jew or Gentile, as valued persons for whom Christ died to effect their reconciliation with God and with one another in the community of believers. The innate aggression in Paul's personality is now targeted, not at those he deems to be different, but at those who seek to maintain difference and division. Paul also suggests that it's not enough just to be nice about other people and think kindly of them. He insists that Christian discipleship includes a commitment to actively pursuing reconciliation – it's a ministry given to us by God.

It is unlikely that any British politician



is going to be able, even if they really wanted to, to bring people together in the near future. It may take a generation for a new kind of politics to become a reality in the UK, but it only takes a generation for deep divisions to become entrenched in a society, as we discovered in Northern Ireland. The Church needs to rise to the challenge of being identified as a credible safe space for people to find one another, on whichever side of the Brexit divide they presently stand. It will require humility and imagination. The skills that many churches have developed in mission and social engagement will need to be re-imagined for a ministry of reconciliation.

The challenge to no longer see anyone from a merely human point of view needs to begin at home. We need to eschew labels like ‘progressives’ and ‘conservatives’ within the Christian community. These labels that we take for ourselves, or attach to others, are

heal ourselves of the labels that divide in order to learn the process of neutralising the divisive power of labelling that is crippling our society – and no longer see others from a merely human point of view.

The challenge to engage in reconciliation leads us into uncomfortable territory but can bring great rewards. It

early 1980s. Over the years its ‘open to all’ reputation meant it became known as a safe space for people to gather to work and pray for peace and transformation in their society. The church became one of the main catalysts in the mass movement that led to the fall of the wall in 1989. The Berlin historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk is quoted as saying: “The churches were places of active political education, a process that melded the border between action within the church and within society as a whole.” St Nicolas’ influence in the wider society began with a prayer meeting – imagine that!

Many British churches have, with imagination and commitment, risen to the challenge to address poverty, homelessness, bereavement, disability, human trafficking and many more contemporary issues. But a new challenge is presenting itself and, by the grace of God, if the Baptist community takes up the Brexit Challenge, it could contribute much to the healing of the nation.

“The longer the political stalemate the deeper the divisions”

inherently divisive. They are boundary markers, statements saying ‘you’re one of us, or one of them’, a form of pious othering. Our Baptist history tells us that we are as capable of division and derision of those who see things differently as anyone else. Our record for brotherly compassion is hardly exemplary. Whether at the local church, association or national level, Baptists are no strangers to labelling, stereotyping and condemning those who don’t meet our own exacting standards of righteousness and rightness. We need to

can begin as simply as praying (publicly) for: church buildings used as safe spaces for hustings and managed forums for discussing Brexit; engagement with broadcast media, social media and the press to challenge harmful stereotypes; compassion and exhorting balance and restraint; invitations to neighbours to come and talk about the issues over coffee. All these can contribute to creating spaces of reconciliation.

St Nicolas Church in Leipzig started prayer meetings for the country in the

Denys Kondyuk

Academic Dean at Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary, founder of Art-Improve and co-founder of Artarea in Kiev, Ukraine. He is the author of several pieces of film criticism and is currently working on a PhD in theological aesthetics in film studies in Prague.

E U R O P E I D E A M I S S I O N A N D T H E W E S T

An arts and mission conference in Stockholm, Sweden, was hosted by the European Baptist Federation recently. Participants from Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the Middle East shared their art and discussed theology and the practical aspects of mission. The influence of the West loomed large. A Baptist academic from Ukraine explores why.

Something struck me during the arts and mission conference. Most of art that was presented was inspired or strongly influenced by western art traditions. Even if people used their own language, the themes, forms and tunes were strongly western in most cases. It seems that mission in the eastern countries brought a culture that is associated with 'true Christianity', and for many post-Soviet countries and post-iron-curtain countries, western culture is subconsciously seen as a Christian liberation culture. Many contemporary theologians and missionaries do their best to give voice to those that used to be viewed as post-

colonial (or now the "Majority World") countries. But the irony is that many of the representatives of these countries accepted the duality of culture that was introduced before, and either choose to pick current western trends in culture and theology (something that global culture does to many countries in our age of global media and online social networks), or overreact to the western influences, looking for alternative Christian identity by romanticising some periods from the local past (and often getting under cultural and political influence of right-wing politicians and activists).

It is a very hard task to find your own

cultural voice in times of global turmoil over identity. Ironically, it was in art that culture was always 'pronounced', identified and created for future generations as a legacy. As Christians, we are called to be messengers of hope, peace and joy, to be messengers of the kingdom of God. It is impossible to see who we are and what shapes us outside of this dialogue. It is also hard to identify ourselves without a different perspective that usually comes from those of a different culture who face different questions of life. Art helps us to express and be healed of our traumas (many of which are subconsciously buried under

a layer of our good Christian life or our utopian national memory).

The conference was a good place and space to meet the Other, to learn to see our personal stories in light of stories told by others. Even if I had a westernised impression of the art forms and messages, this dialogue helped me to see myself from a different perspective, and to examine questions of my own cultural identity.

Dualism, blood and bones

One of the topics that came up during the conference was a dualistic perspective on culture and the Church. We often forget that, as Christians, we are the blood and bones of our local cultures. This is both a blessing (because we are incarnational in our presence among our people) and a curse (because we struggle with the same traumas and pains our society does, often not fully giving them away to God for healing as they are unseen by us). It also means that we can get involved in public discussions that are not started by Christians and may not always be connected to God's perspective on our reality. We are in urgent need of a prophetic distance from the fights that are going in our political and cultural life (or, perhaps, in our "culture wars"). And this distance may be a gift of sharing the space of listening and watching the mirror of art with Christians from all around the world.

Cultural Pentecost

Art may be a way of giving God a 'voice' to speak to our local identity traumas and search for forms that would be unique but understandable. We are in need of a cultural Pentecost, where we speak different languages but can hear and understand the common prophetic worship of God that brings people to a real transformation that only God can do. Why is art so important in this quest for our cultural faithful self identity? Because art is a language everyone may share, as it goes beyond our agreements and disagreements and creates an experiential sphere that may be a voice of healing (and God's voice) in our countries, nations and communities.

It was interesting to experience some irritating moments, like facing people of different age, sex and nationality, and people who experience their Baptist identity in a way you do not expect. But it is in this uncomfortable space of the Other who fails your expectations and challenges your view of yourself, where the meeting with your real self takes place. It is at



An artwork that came out of the conference

“Western culture is subconsciously seen as a Christian liberation culture.”

these moments that you suddenly realise your own struggles and prejudices. It is in this interpersonal meeting space that you learn to love and learn to express this love through your art. This is also a space that we may share outside of our Christian communities, as our neighbors are also involved in their own quest to overcome their past and present challenges and traumas. They are open to some models of life that may be almost safe and definitely true (when you feel it not with your rational mind but in your guts). It is in this space that we may learn to grow and learn to love together, as Christians and those

that are only discovering Christ. It is in this space of ambiguity and vulnerability that we find Christ among us, who has power to transform all and start bringing small changes to our local and global community.

The arts and mission conference started a movement of ideas, of emotions and a quest for identity that is important to preserve. It also raised very important questions of identity that we may face only together, by facing each other's difference, pains and joys. By facing each other's cultural language and learning to speak our own, even if we never really spoke it before (at least fully).

Henrikas Zukauskas

Missionary of the Baptist Union of Lithuania and co-founder of Portico, a school of theology, arts and philosophy.



IT'S A THEOLOGICAL

A R T

CREATING A SPACE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD IN LITHUANIA.

Already in the first half of the 20th century some theologians inquired into the social and cultural reasons for the unbelief in Europe. The cultural milieu, which had

earlier engendered and fostered faith, was changing. Some Catholic theologians sought to address the widening rift between the Church and culture by going deeper into the sources of faith

and calling for the renewal of the face of the Church. The imagery of incarnation was central; it helped to see how to connect faith to the wholeness of human experiences and activities, which were

all to be drawn into the fullness of Christ. This imagery of 'continual touch', however, would seem to be irrelevant to the experience of countries occupied by former Soviet Union. They suffered an intense and violent form of secularisation which sought to eradicate Christian memories and milieus, and restructure life altogether. Any attempts to re-create cultural milieus engendering faith and a view of any continuing touch would be disrupted. The believers resisting such attempts should have had bleak visions of the progress of the world or its incorporation into Christ. In this onslaught of totalitarianism, however, the national struggle brought us closer to the one organised group of resistance, the Catholic Church. And though this existential dimension faded, the theological ambition of these theologians need not be discarded even in such violent circumstances.

Growing up in Lithuania's second biggest city, Kaunas, I remember the reverberations which surrounded new theatre events. In the totalitarian environment, their symbolic way of speaking provided a breathing space. Artists were almost prophets and theatre spaces exuded a spiritual fervour of contact with a more truthful reality. Then, Lithuania's liberation which followed was breathing apocalypse. During this historic event, the book of Revelation was publicly read in the main square of popular resistance. Later, theology and catechesis re-entered education and Bibles were widely distributed, but in some ways the Bible remained a closed book. When the monolithic wall of history began crumbling and there was a fresh air of change, a renewed sense of agency and communion amongst people emerged. Against such a background it could be understood, then, that existential questions would lead us to study theatre in the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. While studying theatre, in the last years of our studies, without any experience of Christian faith, we [my wife and I] began working on the book of Revelation. We intended to perform it. In this process of artistic work on the text, the reverse happened. While we intended to prepare a drama, we realised that we ourselves are already involved in the bigger drama. It all became existentially alive – we, creation and the Risen Lord were participating in this drama through the living waters, which brought everything together. This vision and experience withstood a sceptical glance, but it was also aesthetically satisfying and

“ One can ask how bodily movement in particular can be liberating, empowering and transformative ”

convincing enough for us to bring our skin to the public sphere.

Since then our attempt as missionaries has been to search for the implications of such vision in Christian action. Now both of us are missionaries with the Baptist Union of Lithuania. When we served in Klaipėda, in the old Baptist church with a building in the centre of the city, we created a space called Portico. It was architecturally in-between the church and the world (part of the church-building, but with different entrance and an open space for gatherings). We prepared it as a place for dialogue and engagement between theology and art, philosophy and social analysis, where none of these dominate. Before her drama studies, my wife Gilija was trained as a dancer. She then studied choreography and media philosophy, and I studied theology. Our approach was developing; artistic dance performances were created, and in the process different burning issues were analysed and also looked at from biblical perspective. The performance was a conclusion,

movement in particular, are liberating, empowering and transformative, but in this encounter the creative, prophetic and healing potential of the Church community is also revealed. And the theological reflection itself is seen as engaged, embodied and communal. This helps to realise the human-divine touch in the world, which is primarily a realm of the divine Spirit.

All this time Lithuania was rapidly entering the western world. The prophetic air around artists also evaporated and their role in society changed. The Church had an opportunity to enter public life but has limited its role to the issues of the family and catechesis of children, effectively withdrawing from other areas of human experience. Generally, a feeling of agency and freedom gave way to the new visions of achieving success mediated by new, western, ways of life. The people, who grew up under the totalitarian system which rewarded servility, did not always ask about the truth and validity of these new ways.

“ The Church had an opportunity to enter public life but has limited its role to the issues of the family and catechesis of children ”

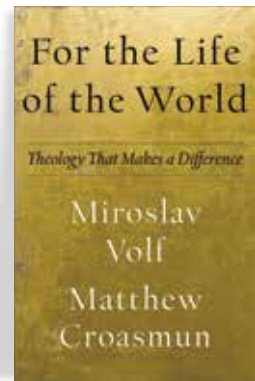
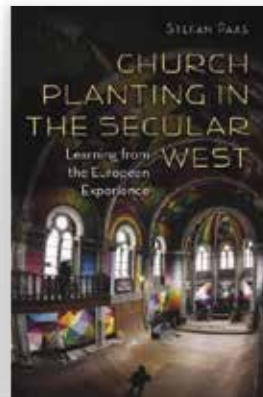
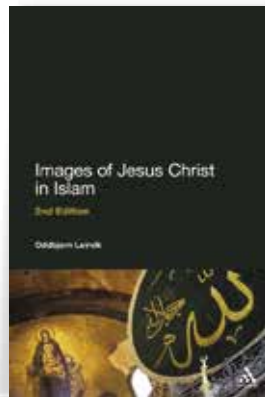
frequently in public spaces, and there was a discussion afterwards. A community around our activities was forming. We were also leaders in the church and this has influenced the approach to worship and preaching. When we later moved to Vilnius, this continued in a different way.

These emphases on the body, performance and on artistic practices contribute in their own unique and essential way. This allows us to review existing church practices and culture, but it also reveals the prophetic edge of divine Word in society. One can ask how creative communal practices, and bodily

Does one have to accept that the tide of the Holy Spirit has subsided? And should the initial spiritual fervour be defanged and the immediacy it provided, lost? Or should the ambition to re-perform the world, which was enflamed in this briefly opened eschatological crack, be followed? Art can be an unexpected ally in such a quest for truth and creativity. Even if memories were being destroyed and servility instilled, the Holy Spirit may create and convince about new intimate visions of God's world and humanity and create new spaces and practices to live them out.

LEARNING FROM THE OTHER EUROPE

We asked members of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre (IBTSC) Board, supervisors and students what they were reading that they would recommend. Here are their recommendations (with a few others for good measure).



THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN CONTEXTUAL COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE

Langham Partnership
Recommended by Ksenija Magda, this exciting project will bring Central and Eastern European readings of the Bible to new audiences.

PROJECT:VIENNA

The church where Walter and Andrea Klimt minister with David Bunce at the crossroads of Europe.
www.projectvienna.at

REBIBLE

Ontdekking van vergeten verhalen

Inez van Oord
A Dutch language rediscovery of the cultural riches of Christian stories, by a non-Christian.

IMAGES OF JESUS CHRIST IN ISLAM

Oddbjørn Leirvik
Historic tensions between Islam and Christianity as well as a broad examination of representations of Jesus in Muslim writing and history, written by a Norwegian scholar.

CHURCH PLANTING IN THE SECULAR WEST Learning from the European experience

Stefan Paas
A Dutch perspective on what has worked and what hasn't in European church planting endeavours.

THE INSTITUTE FOR ALBANIAN AND PROTESTANT STUDIES

Discover and explore Albanian Christian history and thought

through this institute and learn from a context in which openness to Christ was once thought impossible.
institutu.org

VISTA Communicating research and innovation on mission in Europe

Redcliffe College
An e-bulletin hosted by Redcliffe College, focusing on developments and issues relevant to Christian work in Europe.
europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk

JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN BAPTIST STUDIES

IBTSC
Stay abreast of the latest European Baptist thought by signing up to this excellent journal.
www.ibts.eu/publications

FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD Theology that makes a difference

Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun
Popular with many at IBTSC, this is one of many great works by the renowned Croatian theologian and former **Catalyst Live** speaker.

PARBIBLE How Jesus' story might look if it happened today

Alexandr Flek
A modern retelling of the key gospel stories in the context of the Czech Republic, by a Czech postgrad student at IBTSC. It's taking the Czech Republic by storm and is well worth exploring.

Tell us *your* favorite books from or about the other Europe. Write to us at the address below.

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