



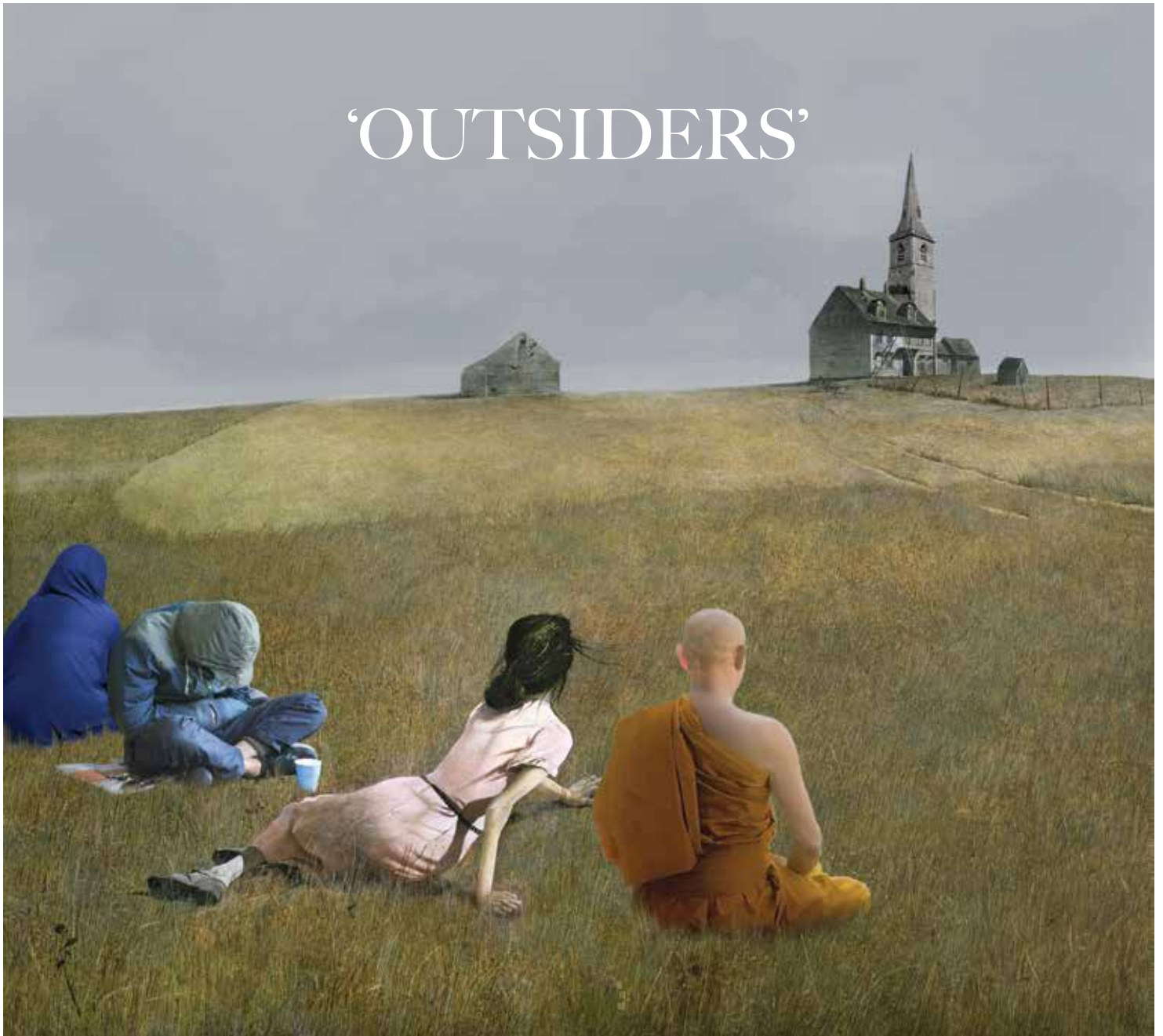
MISSION

ISSUE 2 2020

CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

'OUTSIDERS'



The voices we've failed to hear

Q&A:
MAJEDA KHOURI
04// *The refugee*

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10// *THE HUMANIST* 11// *THE WOMAN* 12// *THE HOMELESS*
MAN 14// *THE TEENAGERS* 15// *THE QUEER WOMAN*



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ARE WE REALLY READY TO LISTEN?



A Buddhist walks into your church. Followed by a homeless person, a Muslim, and a goth. No, this isn't the start of a bad joke, thankfully. But can you imagine a world in which that would ever happen? A world in which the stranger really was welcome in our churches?

When we say we want to welcome the stranger, the 'outsider', do we really understand what it's going to take? Do we really want to do it?

Talking *about* people isn't going to cut it if we actually want to reach our neighbours outside the Church. We have to be listening to them. If we want the Church to grow, and thrive, and serve in a changing world, we need to listen to the voices we don't normally hear. We live in a wealthy society, and our Church is predominantly middle class and local – that's why our featured interview in this issue of *Mission Catalyst* is with a Syrian refugee who was imprisoned for helping her displaced countrymen and women, and who would not fit simply or easily into many of our churches. Perspectives like hers should be informing the Church that is called to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and feed the hungry. And people like her are not the only outsiders we need to be engaging with.

In a predominantly post-Christian society, instead of demonising atheists, Humanists and agnostics, perhaps we need to be hearing their perspectives? In this issue, we have an article from a passionate Humanist who has been kind enough to write for a Christian magazine and share his perspective. And while our Church is ageing, we inhabit a world where Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai are some of the most inspiring voices to global culture. That's why we've dedicated space to hearing from the young people in our own orbit – the future leaders of the Church. Maybe we could let their voices inspire us too?

Our world is changing, and it's likely to lead to large swathes of the Church either welcoming the LGBTQ community or falling into irrelevance to our society. Whatever we may think of that, we must



recognise that this is a post-Christian shibboleth and a stumbling block for many who we wish to reach, including those in our own churches. So, instead of talking about the LGBTQ community, we *listened to* a young woman who loves Jesus, who identifies as queer, and who would like to offer her considerable gifts to the Church. And as we try to reach out to people from other faiths, perhaps we should hear from them what they find encouraging and irritating from Christians. We don't have to agree with any of these people, but we are poorer, less well-informed and probably less wise for not taking the time to listen to them. That is what this issue of *Mission Catalyst* is all about.

It's an opportunity to learn, to listen, and to be better equipped as we try to live out Jesus' commands. It's also an opportunity to recognise the 'insiders' we have put on the outside, sometimes without even recognising it. Women, young people, and the homeless – who have sometimes felt like second-class citizens in our churches – must also be listened to in a more active and humble way if our Church is going to be relevant in the future.

There are so many other groups we could have put in here – ethnic

minorities, single people, people with disabilities and the working poor for a start. Perhaps the elderly and blokey men also feel excluded. I myself have often felt like an outsider in the Christian Church. My left wing politics, the fact that I belong to the Gothic subculture, and the conservative views that I held when I first moved to this country from Africa have all – at times – made it hard for me to feel truly included and welcome in a church. Some things that make us different and harder to listen to are less obvious than others, and if we are to be effective as a Church in the UK, we must learn to listen differently. To listen better.

Some of the 'outsiders' featured in this issue of *Catalyst* are already within the orbit of our churches. Some are indeed outside. All are loved by God. If Jesus consistently had patience and interest to listen to voices beyond the usual suspects, so should we. Only then will we truly be able to welcome them in and be blessed by their gifts.

Jonathan Langley
Head of Creative Content
BMS World Mission

Majeda Khouri is a Syrian Christian. Originally an architect, she worked with disabled children before becoming a human rights activist when the Syrian Revolution began in 2011. She was detained by the regime and fled the country, fearing for herself and her family. She came to the UK in 2017, knowing no English. Now, she's drawing on her passion for cooking to continue her work as an activist.



MAJEDA KHOURI

SURVIVING SYRIA AND SHARING TRUTH WITH THE CHURCH. WE TALK A LOT ABOUT REFUGEES, BUT DO WE EVER LISTEN TO THEM?

How did your journey as a refugee begin?

When the Syrian Revolution started, I was working in civil society through the churches. I was working with Down's syndrome kids and with kids who had a small degree of disability.

I was documenting violence against women. Displaced people came from Homs and other places to Damascus where I was living, so I was working with them in a relief project from 2011 to 2013. I was detained by the regime for six months

in a detention centre – the Government besieged Ghouta in 2013 and I used my car to take bread into this area.

Because I was a witness in the detention centre to all the crimes committed against the people, I intensified my activism in human rights. Two months after I was released they came to arrest me again, but they didn't find me. They took my husband for two months as well. They released him, then I left my house and hid till 2015. They came again to take me, but

I wasn't at home. My children were at home and they broke down the door. My oldest son was 14 and he said to me, "We can't stand this anymore and we have to leave."

I fled from my country, I escaped with smugglers through the mountains. It was a very dangerous journey. I stayed in Lebanon for a year and a half, working with women in Bekaah, in the camps. Then I was invited to a fellowship in Edinburgh in

2017 with an organisation called Beyond Borders. I was planning to go back to Lebanon, but when I arrived at Beirut airport they didn't allow me to land. So I was forced to go back to London and seek asylum. I invited my family and they came in March 2018. Now my boys are in school and they're very happy and settled.

How did you cope with what had happened to you?

In Lebanon it was very stressful. I had depression, I went to the doctor, I felt I would not see my children or my family ever again. At least in Lebanon I was helping people in the camps – when I arrived in UK I found myself alone, and I didn't know when I could get refugee status and when I could invite my family to join me.

I'm a very sociable person, so immediately when I arrived I called anybody through Facebook and said, "I am here and I want to meet Syrians." I wanted to find any way to campaign for Syria, to keep taking about what's happening inside. So that's when I started my activism here.

Tell us about being an activist and a cook.

One of my friends invited me to an organisation working with asylum seekers and refugees called Migrateful (www.migrateful.org). I started doing Syrian cooking classes with them because I said I wanted to meet people. I have a passion for cooking. I did a big event with 100 people, a presentation of what was happening in Ghouta, and I invited a doctor to talk about the political issues, and an activist to talk about the humanitarian issues. I invited all these people to send a letter to their MPs to push the UK Government to take action for them. I had a meeting in Parliament, and one of the MPs who is working on Syria said he had received about 40 emails about this and we could evacuate 29 children from this area.

After that, I continued doing cooking classes to raise awareness of Syria. I would cook every week for about ten or 12 people, and during the meal I would speak about Syria and what was happening.

Do people really want to hear about Syria?

All the organisations who ordered catering from me invited me as an activist, and also to cater for them. They were willing to hear what I said, but they didn't want to hear anything about the



“If tomorrow something changed and I was allowed to go back, I would go back”

conflict, they just wanted to listen to the humanitarian issues. But that's not fair, because we can't separate them.

I want to speak about the abuses against civilians, and who the abusers are – it's the regime. I want to say it's not just ISIS – I was a witness to how the regime treats women and children in detention.

Church leaders in my country took the regime's side. They didn't care for the people and for the civilians, they didn't say to the regime at any time: "Stop doing this to civilians and children." They were on the regime's side and I always said to them, "I feel shame that I am a Christian because you are the leaders of my church."

What would you want to say to church leaders in the UK?

If I could say something to the church leaders here, especially to those who fund churches in Syria, it would be: "Just keep an eye on where your money goes, because they are funding churches in the regime area, under the regime's control." Sometimes even the churches inside Syria

don't have clean hands, because everyone allowed to work in the relief sector in Syria has to work under the regime, so they're not allowed to help people in need if they are on the opposite side.

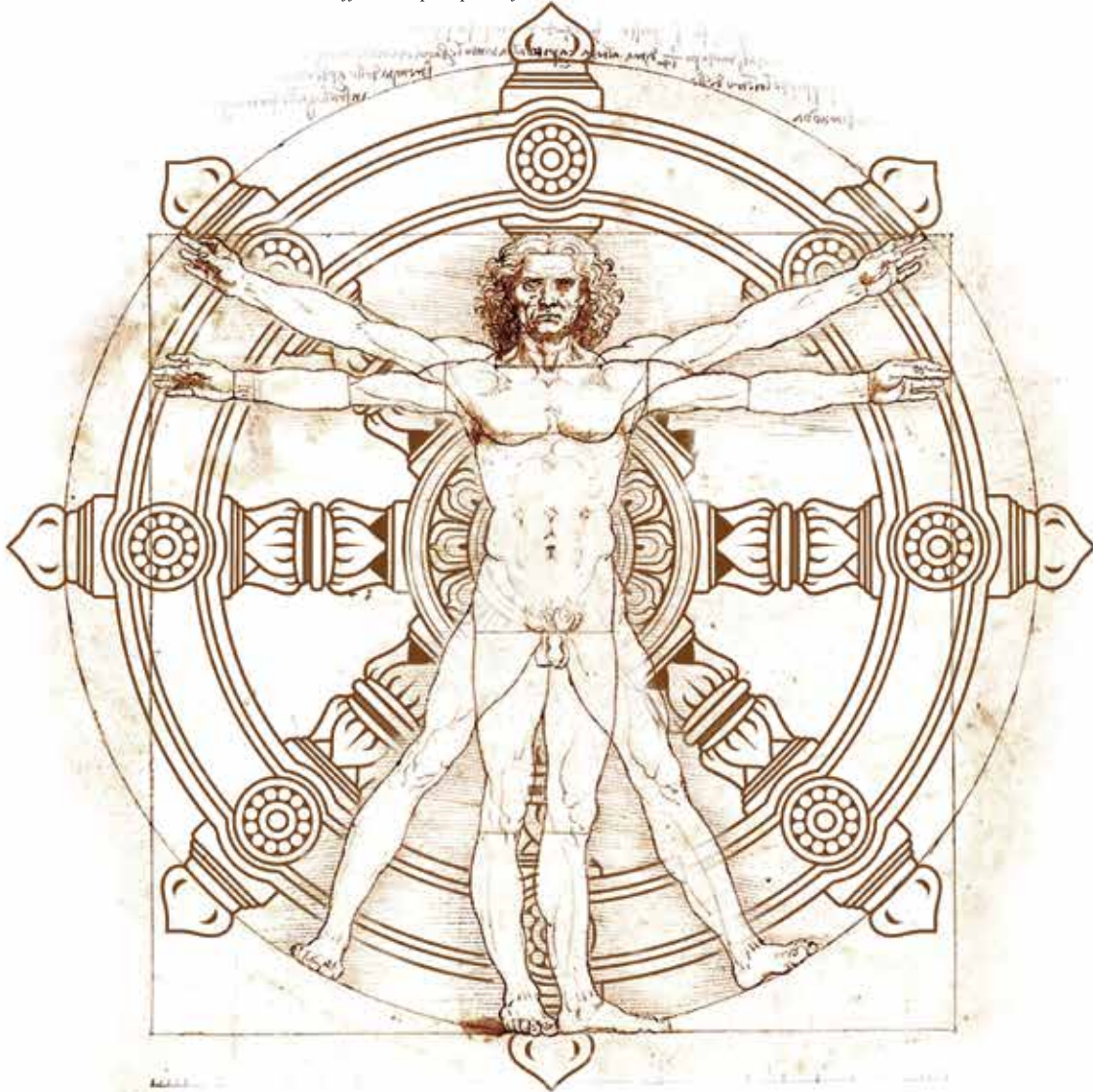
I know many people who are Christians from Nigeria and Cuba and other places, they're asylum seekers for five or ten years. They can't have refugee status and I feel like the churches should take action on this and do more to help the asylum seekers who are here – to apply for them, to help them, to push the Government to make them refugees. If they don't have refugee status they don't have permission to work and they are living in a very hard situation.

Would you go back to Syria?

If tomorrow something changed and I was allowed to go back, I would go back. This is my dream. When I start a new job – I'm working part-time with the Open University as a researcher – they ask where I see myself in three years or five years and I always say, "In Syria, absolutely." I can't imagine a future in another place.

Ken Holmes

Former Director of Studies of the Kagyu Samye Ling Buddhist monastery in Scotland, published translator of important ancient Tibetan texts and co-founder of Scottish Inter-Faith. He has worked with the EU and the Cabinet Office as a spokesperson for Buddhism.



WHAT A BUDDHIST WANTS YOU TO KNOW

*BUDDHISTS DON'T PROSELYTISE,
THEY WAIT TO BE ASKED. IT'S A CLUE
TO HOW THEY'D LIKE TO BE TREATED.*

Buddhism is a relative newcomer to Europe and the West. Like any faith, it has its own characteristic outer representations (buildings, ceremonies and artefacts) and its inner beliefs and

philosophy. One should be aware that there is no one 'Buddhism', but a half dozen and more major variants often associated with countries, such as the Zen of Japan, Theravada of South Asia, Cha'an of China, Tibetan Buddhism and so forth.

They all share the common message of the Buddha concerning (1) the inherent sufferings of existence, (2) why those sufferings occur, (3) the sacred accomplishment (nirvana) that is definitive release from suffering and (4) the dharma path that transports the mind from worldly sleep to awakening to these Four Great Truths. These truths are not conceptual, dogmatic truths but four key revelations arising from direct experience of the divine. The Buddhist traditions share a common ethic of non-harm, meaning a gentle, respectful approach



difference between the simple, devotional things lay people do and the fuller version of dharma meditation and study as practised by the monks, who live in great simplicity and celibacy, begging each day for food in a village round. Although loving kindness is part of their training, these monastics work primarily towards freeing their own existences and ending the round of incarnation after incarnation. This exit from the 'Wheel of Existences' is known as becoming an arhat (note, not a buddha).

Northern Buddhism or Mahayana, the Great Way, is a development of the basics found in Theravada. Its aim is not just to free one's own existence from egotism and delusion, but to work towards helping as many other people as possible do the same: something that will require a great deal of knowledge and understanding and great forbearance, diligence and commitment. It places great emphasis therefore on an in-depth cultivation of compassion and sees its goal as becoming like the Buddha, a refuge for the world, and working towards that over all the lifetimes to come until it is achieved. Someone aiming for a buddha's skills and enlightenment is known as a bodhisattva.

The question "what is ultimate reality?" occurs in most faiths and their theologians

to all living beings, including of course oneself. They believe in causality (karma) being the cause for our experience rather than a creator God. This implies reincarnation.

Beyond these aspects in common, the main Buddhist schools vary in their philosophical stance regarding what 'liberation and awakening' (the two main meanings of the word buddha) actually means and hence the methods required to attain it. Buddhist method includes prayer, as a way of transforming habitual thoughts, and meditation, as a way of mastering the mind and making it a suitable tool for the spiritual journey.

Buddhism should promote harmony with other faiths and respect for them, especially those that promote love, kindness, tolerance, respect for life, sharing ('generosity') and responsibility for each other rather than ego gratification. It would be a shame, as with other faiths, to judge the majority of millions by the actions of a small minority of nationalists, extremists and so forth. Buddhism does not believe in proselytising but in guidance being given on a request basis, rather than an invasive one.

Buddha first taught in India (5th-4th century BCE) over a 45-year period and

“ The distinction atheist/theist falls away in dialogue and many commonalities are found ”

to tens of thousands of followers. The teachings, known as dharma, slowly spread throughout India from an area in the north of the sub-continent. India was one of the most civilised places on earth at that time. The dharma spread from there along trade routes up into present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, spreading as far as Greece at one point. It went south to Sri Lanka and from there later spread to present-day Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Korea. It went north to Nepal and Tibet and east to China, although it now seems much of Chinese Buddhism arrived along the Silk Road via Gandhara (Peshawar basin).

Buddhism is often viewed in its Northern and Southern aspects. The latter is the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and Laos. It emphasises monasticism and there is a significant

know how complex it is to even begin to answer that. Having entered into dialogue with top scholars from the various forms of Christianity, not to mention Islam, Sufism, Judaism and Hinduism, I know how much their ideas of God vary in essence and in detail. Although Buddhism is famous as being 'atheist', the distinction atheist/theist falls away in dialogue and many commonalities are found. Northern Buddhists mainly believe in a fundamental meta-fabric of existence (in which mind and matter, being and universe, are not separate) which is (1) total compassionate love for each and every being, (2) omniscient wisdom and (3) a power of grace to help any heart open to its help. This timeless, primordial truth is not seen as a being, a creator God, separate from us.

May we all work in harmony to bring peace to the world!

Dr Shabbir Akhtar

A philosopher who has published widely on pluralism and race relations and on Islam's and Christianity's differing confrontations with the threat of a common secular modernity. He is currently at Regent's Park College, University of Oxford.



LOVE YOUR MUSLIM NEIGHBOURS

But first, understand them.

After hearing of the mid-March 2019 massacre of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, I thought of a thought-experiment that is a variation on an older one. I used to ask my students in race relations to fantasise about the cultural and economic consequences of a voluntary exit of all Muslims from the UK, without the added inducement of a financial initiative; the latter was actually proposed by Enoch Powell, whose famous speech in 1968 prophesied inter-racial bloodshed. He was a prophet without honour in his native land – and like most prophets, he was pessimistic, but unlike true prophets, he got his prophecy wrong.

“ The right motto is ‘Confront and resist’, not ‘Accommodate and capitulate’ ”

The New Zealand atrocity has immense strategic significance and can teach Western Muslims vital lessons about their future. Imagine a Brexit-style referendum asking British citizens about whether or not to expel Muslims from the UK or its equivalent in some other European nation such as France. Would the majority vote to get rid of the Muslim presence and reclaim the UK from a foreign and alien element

that is seen as contaminating its ancient culture? This conservative tendency was, after all, the motivation for Brexit – to save the UK from a peace-time invasion by the French and Germans.

Given the rise of right-wing xenophobic and especially Islamophobic movements throughout Europe, such a scenario is not altogether fanciful. There are plenty of politicians and policy makers

whose mantra is: do not let the Islam virus contaminate the white Christian continent.

In 1989, at the height of the Salman Rushdie affair, I had written in the *Guardian* that the next time there were gas chambers in Europe, we all knew who would be inside them. I was mocked for uttering an allegedly false prophecy. Yet it proved a terrible prescience: it was a mere few years before the Bosnian Holocaust. The New Fascists would add: “Unlike the Jews, Muslims deserve the gas chambers.” Such is the depth of their hatred.

Can a progressive Islam resolve the problems posed by a Muslim minority living in the open society?

Muslims ought to compromise regularly on matters of taste but never on those of principle. The result would be a progressive Islam responsive to secular demands but alert to the necessary limits on reform. Islam would not be a static religion. It would instead be a reformed, renovated, progressive faith. Certainly – but on whose definition of these adjectives?

Is the only valid template of progress one defined by the dominant Western civilisation which is religious in some vague sense, especially during the hour of war with Islamic nations, yet robustly secular in practice? Are modern progressive Islamic movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries really, like modern Reform Judaism and liberal Christianity, only disguised forms of an ultimately secular vision and ideal of human progress? Can they recognise the fact that the end of faith is the Kingdom of God, not of Mammon?

Progressive Islam is unacceptable if its moral, legal, and political content is simply rubber-stamped by Western secularism. Islamic reform and renovation are valid so long as these do not degenerate into a masked attempt to weaken Islam as a world faith and an autonomous civilisation. Islam must retain a sufficient distance from liberal open secular societies in order to have the right to offer critical commentary on them. A fully assimilated Muslim minority cannot serve this function.

Alert Muslims distinguish domestic sources and resources for reform from externally imposed demands and stimuli for change. Some pressures for change are native to Islam as a complex and

“ Progressive Islam is unacceptable if its moral, legal, and political content is simply rubber-stamped by Western secularism ”

imperial civilisation, but other pressures and challenges originated in the alien West and continue unabated. These occidental challenges cannot be dismissed wholesale but must be debated on their merits. Any large-scale sycophantic assimilation to Western norms, often quite alien and opposed to Islamic values, beliefs, and tradition, must be forcefully and intelligently resisted.

Reformations Islamic and Christian: contrasts and comparisons

The official start of the Christian reformation is dated to 1517. Islam is roughly the same age – so where is its Martin Luther? I shall argue that this is a misguided request. Imagine if Martin Luther had argued for a progressive or liberal version of Christianity. On the contrary, he was a conservative radical: he argued for a return to the roots, to an original and pristine faith of Jesus and his earliest followers. Luther was a conservative, a Salafi, a Christian analogue of the medieval (by Christian reckoning) Islamic scholar ibn Taymiyyah.

Islam was born as a reformed faith already: it had no official clerical hierarchy, and access to the Qur’an was universal, not restricted to an ecclesiastical or scholarly elite. Moreover, Muslims have aspired to centennial reformations as they take stock of their tradition in every century. However, these centennial reformations have not typically been in some increasingly secularised direction. That latter pattern of greater secularisation was adopted by Christian reformers, after the first generation.

The results have been catastrophic for Christendom. Muslims, in the West at least, should learn from the mistakes committed by Church leaders. They set a bad example by creating a shorter and acceptable canon within the entire biblical canon: only parts of the Bible retained the authority to guide modern lives. Certain liberties of thought and interpretation eventually lead, via agnosticism, to a toothless and

politically neutered theism under constant threat from polemical atheism. We must remain alert to the politics of reform and renovation of modern faiths, including Islam.

The Christian option has proven to be the wrong way to deal with secularism. The right motto is “Confront and resist”, not “Accommodate and capitulate”. You can only transmit a heritage if you first preserve it intact, institutionally and personally.

Competing histories – but a new future of just, peaceful co-existence

Our contentious histories need not dictate our only future. Both Christianity and Islam contain episodes of martial missionary effort. Fortunately, however, both crusade and jihad sustain both pacific and violent senses. Christians and Muslims can agree on the need to extract from our respective scriptures a truthful counter-narrative that underlines peace and single standards of justice. Just war may be necessary: we may need to wage war in order to secure a hearing for peace. The God we serve would want us to be just peacemakers. We serve God, not our beliefs about God.

I advise Muslims never to slander the people of the gospel. The Qur’an criticises the people of the book but always exempts some from its accusations. The result is never a stereotypical notice, some settled estimate of rival errant monotheists. Rather it is a fair and fresh assessment relevant to our age.

Christians proclaim that if you have faith in Christ’s saving grace, you have it all. That suffices and suffices on its own. Works of the divine law cannot be fully efficacious in securing salvation. No-one is saved on their merits alone. Christians boast that they are saved – but only through Christ’s merits. But we all concur on the need for God’s grace as the decisive, if not sole, criterion of success in the life of faith.



H A P P I L Y H U M A N I S T

And the rudeness of proselytism

WITH SO MANY OF OUR NEIGHBOURS IDENTIFYING AS ATHEISTS, WE MUST LEARN TO LISTEN TO RATHER THAN SPEAK FOR HUMANISTS.

O can only speak for myself: Humanists are linked only by a common perspective on life. As atheists, we have no required reading, rituals, creeds or meetings.

Atheism is a belief, not a religion, in the way 'bald' is not a hair colour and 'not collecting stamps' is hardly a hobby. Think of a TV remote control – the channel buttons all represent different religions, the off button, atheism.

We don't 'hate God' (the god of any faith) just as you probably don't hate Zeus or Odin; we can jog along quite happily in life without needing a religious filter to view issues through. Offering to pray for us can come across as patronising, passive aggressive and/or adopting a one-up position. I wouldn't say that I hope you lose your faith, the equivalent of others saying they hope I find God. Similarly, telling us what we believe or think is discourteous at best.

Society has changed to the point that an increasing majority – rising to over 70 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds – identify as 'none' regarding religion. The majority of this group do hold spiritual beliefs, but they are personal to them. When I'm working in our local hospital, people are usually happy to share their views with me, especially when they realise I'm non-religious. Some people of faith have asked for me to return rather than a religious colleague.

Most people are happy to discuss their beliefs if a suitable opening is provided, but will reject any attempt to lead or instruct them. They usually want 'a damn good listening to'. As with any conversation, the skill of 'active listening' will be helpful – especially if offered with Carl Rogers' 'core conditions' of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. The last is essential; I suggest that it is impossible to gain a rapport if thinking the other person is sinful, damned or unenlightened. Engineering a conversation with an agenda of proselytisation meets none of those core conditions.

Establishing a mutually respectful dialogue enables a path to understanding and an exploration of the views of others. Much to our mutual surprise, the managing chaplains in both the Trust hospitals I work in and I quickly realised that we share the same view about both the work we do, and how to carry it out. If under emotional strain, I can talk issues through with them and receive support without feeling any pressure to 'sign up' to their beliefs. I hope they feel the same about talking to me. If any of us changed our minds, it would be because it felt right, and it would be a conscious, unforced decision.

Based on the above, I think the Church could consider engaging with others as equals and with respect rather than pressure, and with no agenda of potential recruitment. The inherited

and increasingly inappropriately held political and social powers of the Church of England serve to distance it from others. Respect cannot be demanded, assumed or enforced (especially in schools); it can only be earned.

Focus spending on helping others. An audit of assets and a spending review could identify funds to be used productively. Actions speak louder than words; set an example and maintain a focus.

Concentrate on leading from the front and by example. Do good works quietly and consistently – when seeing publicly advertised examples of seasonal goodwill on social media, I wonder 'and tomorrow?' Perhaps a God is for life, not just Christmas.

Make good things happen, and bad things stop – not for fear of damnation or hope of salvation, but because that is the right thing to do in itself. Not with the expectation of eternal reward or fear of everlasting punishment. Greed and fear may be the motivators for the stock market. My experience is that both lead to misery in the one world we know we have.

Thank you for both your time and this opportunity. My aim was not to offend but to explain a viewpoint. I'm happy to say more if wanted, or to engage in constructive dialogue – especially on how we can all work together to help others.

Paul Hurst can be contacted via his website, www.paul-hurst.com

WOMEN IN THE BODY ♀ ARE THEY BEING HEARD YET?

GALATIANS 3: 28 IS ONE THING. IN REALITY, WOMEN ARE STILL TOO OFTEN A SILENCED MAJORITY IN OUR CHURCHES.

It's easy to pay lip service to equality, but putting beliefs into practice is another matter. Along with many friends, I have experience of church contexts where women are supposedly equal and valued, yet curiously invisible unless they're fulfilling certain roles or of a particular age and stage of life. Then there are the churches where egalitarian theology doesn't seem to extend to stamping out sexist comments and attitudes.

I've certainly noticed this lip service in churches I've attended, but I do know that my single friends often find it hits them particularly hard. I know of women who, as they've moved through their 30s and 40s without going down the 'expected' route of marriage followed by babies, have felt increasingly isolated and ignored by churches that seem to revolve around married couples with children. Churches where it feels like a woman's route to leadership is through her husband's position of influence and where single women are sometimes treated like a threat rather than individuals who have so much to offer.

These are situations that leave women feeling excluded for not conforming, or only valued if they fit a particular mould, often worried that objecting or raising an issue will see them pegged as 'difficult' or worse.

What so many women really want from

the Church here is honesty.

I've been a participant on a church membership course where it has suddenly, awkwardly, dawned on others in the room that the church they're looking to join doesn't believe women can be on its leadership team – no-one has ever mentioned it to them before. I've asked questions about why women seem curiously invisible on a Sunday and absent from cohorts of young people being trained for leadership, and listened with frustration while someone has tried to avoid giving me a straight answer. Living in the tension of that uncertainty about where you stand is hard and can be incredibly draining; an extra layer of faith-related stress.

In the last two years the #MeToo movement has entered public consciousness – and so, too, has its Christian counterpart #ChurchToo. As people – primarily women – have opened up about suffering abuse, churches have been rocked by the testimonies of survivors and new conversations about confronting the deep structural inequalities that enabled this abuse to take place.

More than ever, women need to know that church leaders will stand against wrongdoing. We've seen the reports of how leaders have stayed silent to protect reputations or completely dismissed accusations. We need to know that in turn, they will interrogate assumptions they

may have held that could lead to damaging attitudes towards women – attitudes that mean abuse can flourish and that people are unwilling to speak out about it.

At the same time as #ChurchToo, we've seen many women (and men) begin to talk more publicly about the way church teachings on sex and relationships have negatively affected their lives. A generation of people raised in churches that promoted a 'purity culture' mindset have grown up, navigated relationships and marriages, and faced the fact that things they were taught weren't always healthy or helpful.

This has often meant extreme stereotyping about gender roles in relationships, toxic expectations on young women that placed unnecessary blame and caused deep shame and discomfort with their sexuality, and further anguish if they experienced problems in their relationships and marriages.

Churches must unpick this difficult legacy. Times may have changed; many have abandoned shame-based teachings and restrictive stereotyping. The heyday of toxic purity culture has passed. But damaging attitudes persist often couched in 'softer' terminology that again can make them harder to spot at first.

It's wearying and can make it hard to build trust. I know of several women who no longer attend church, not because they have lost their faith but because of experiences echoing some of those I've described above, or the pain they've felt over the treatment of women in general. I too have found it difficult to find a church to call home. I hope that this will change in 2020, but so much more needs to be done to welcome more women in from the margins.

George Williams
George became homeless in 2014. He now lives at West London Mission's (WLM) Burgess Park House, a supported housing service for men and women who've served in the armed forces. He told his story to WLM chaplain Ruth Bottoms.



*GEORGE WILLIAMS KNOWS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE ON THE STREETS.
HE ALSO KNOWS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE LOVED BY GOD.*

George Williams was born in Jamaica and came to England on his 12th birthday to join his father. After leaving school, he joined the Royal Greenjackets in 1980 and was deployed to Northern Ireland, receiving a commendation for bravery. After his mother died in Jamaica, he lost his appetite for soldiering and left the army. During the 1990s he was an outreach worker with drug addicts, but on returning from a visit to Jamaica he was arrested at the airport when drugs were discovered in his possession and served five years in prison. In 2006 he was shocked to find he did not have the right to work in the UK because he was still a Jamaican citizen – one of many affected by the Windrush scandal. He has had mental health problems and became ‘street homeless’ in 2014 after a failed relationship. George spent time in various hostels, but has been helped by charities including Changing Lives, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA) and the West London Mission (WLM).

“ I would put on my suit and everyone thought I was OK ”

What was the hardest part of being homeless?

Sometimes it's difficult – you can't sign on with no address, so I lost my benefit. I got it reinstated after a couple of months, I gave the address of my friend's where I was staying, sleeping on the floor. But he was in a hostel so I had to be out early as they would come round and check the hostel.

I had that thing inside of me, you have to get out, you have to survive, it was like the military services kicking back in. But then I got somewhere, and then I tried to commit suicide – I don't really understand that, but I felt it was better that I just die than going through the hardship I was going through.

Who did you have around to talk to? Who was there for you?

My son and my daughter – I didn't tell them what I was going through exactly, but they knew I was going through things, they would ring me up and chat. When I went into the hospital they were both there and that was uplifting for me. I talked to the SSAFA officer as well, and he came with me to the benefits office once when trying to sort things out.

How did you get on with churches?

I was a member of a church in Eltham, I used to go every Sunday. But when I moved away I lost contact. That was about four years ago. I spoke to the minister but I didn't think he could do anything



WLM's Burgess Park House



about my housing; at that time I was living in a room. I would put on my suit and everyone thought I was OK. A lot of the time I was OK.

I would do anything to help the church. At the moment I'm wrapped up a bit in me and I need not to be. I'm doing voluntary work at the City Farm. I'm doing it for the animals. I clean out their stable, I clean six stables out and do one outer donkey pen. I do one day a week. The reward is seeing the animals, the donkeys all come up to the fence, they all know me now.

Do you think people in churches understand what homelessness is like?

The ones that go to church and just go on Sunday, I don't think they really care. I think they just go to get some spiritual healing for themselves. Those who work there do their best, but they can't fix everything. Some don't really know what you're talking about as they haven't had that void in their life, so they couldn't really understand.

What would you like people in churches to know about homelessness?

When someone is homeless the church should be very understanding, more understanding than anyone else. They

“ If you are doing a half-hour speech, you need to include two minutes about homeless people ”

will be ripping out their heart to them and they are not to be taken lightly. They want to be respected and responded to in the right way. That's why people don't pour their hearts out, they've done it before and got no help. Don't mollycoddle them, you have to try and understand them even if it's not understandable, and treat them with respect.

What about church leaders, what would you like them to know?

Church leaders need to have it in their minds. If you are doing a half-hour speech, you need to include two minutes about homeless people. Me talking and doing this interview, I'd like it to filter through to the Archbishop of Canterbury. I have great hopes.

How does Jesus matter to you?

He's always mattered to me, but I

hadn't always responded and recognised it. Since I've been in hospital, I praise him every day. I read my Bible every morning. I say my prayers every evening. I've always got my Bible with me, given to me by my friend.

When I was in rehab Jesus came to me one day and he spoke to me. You might say this was a madness I was going through, but he came to me and said "I ain't ready for you yet." I think about that every time I feel down, and I pick up my Bible and read the Psalms. There's everything in the Psalms, they lift me up. I don't think I could get out of bed in the morning without thanking him for protecting me and my family and friends. I thank him for waking me up – it's amazing to see sunlight, darkness.

I know he's got a plan for me – but I don't know what it is.



OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF TEENS

AT A TIME WHEN TEENAGE ACTIVISTS ARE SOME OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL VOICES IN THE WORLD, PERHAPS WE SHOULD PAY A BIT MORE ATTENTION TO CHRISTIAN TEENAGERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE, AND LISTEN TO WHAT THEY THINK THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR.

Abigail Francis, 15

India

We're not seeing or understanding what the young people of today want, because the Bible has just become a book of dead people for only old people.

The proof of passion is pursuit. We will never possess what we're unwilling to pursue. The younger generation of today don't care about how much you or I know. They want to know how much we care.

Jessica Brown, 18

UK, grew up in Lebanon with BMS mission worker parents

In Galatians 3: 28 it says: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." I interpret this verse as calling us to look outwards and see all of us as humans, all of us as equal and for us all to strive so that everyone can have the same rights, so there is no one who is greater than the other.

Miriam Carpenter, 18

Delhi Action Team

We're going to be growing old on a planet that previous generations have neglected to care for.

Roima, 24

Venezuela, now living as a refugee in Peru

I've been living in Lima for three years and thanks to God, I am here with all my family. Despite all the difficulties we are living through, we find a reason to smile. So, my message to you is, don't let one minute of negative emotions ruin a 24-hour day of happiness. Find a reason to smile.

Megan Hughes, 18

Delhi Action Team

The Church needs to address taboo topics around homosexuality and around sex – all the topics churches often divert. Churches should be a loving and open environment. People should feel welcomed and accepted in church; they're the future generation and we should be inspiring and teaching them as a church, but also learning from them.

Rebekah Drew, 17

UK, formerly living in Nepal with BMS mission worker parents

I love the idea that you can consciously decide to be kinder. And then you can go from being a person who does kind things to being a person who is kinder.

“ The younger generation don't care about how much you know, they want to know how much we care ”

Alyssa Pokharel, 16

Nepal

I'm most passionate about social justice and those issues inside the Church, so reaching out to people that maybe don't have as much, or homeless people. Social justice issues like human trafficking touch me the most, and I think God has called us to open our eyes to them and to act.

Jonny Wark, 20

UK, former Thailand Action Team member

I really want to encourage you, if you're a church leader – you have such a privilege to be able to lead people towards Jesus. If you keep your eyes and your mind fixed on Jesus, you're going to be leading in the right direction. We need your guidance as young people.

Grace Claydon

Identifies as queer and works at a church in Southend-on-Sea. She is part of the Wild and Holy Group on Facebook and Instagram, a safe space for LGBTQ Christians.

‘The queer community is a gift, and you’re missing out’

THE CHURCH HAS A REPUTATION FOR HATING THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY.

GRACE CLAYDON THINKS THAT LOVE IS A BETTER APPROACH.

What would you say to Christians who are more conservative and who are anti-LGBTQ people?

I do feel sympathy with them because if you’ve only ever known one opinion then why would you question it? And I don’t by any means think that Christians that are anti-LGBTQ people are bad people, but I think that you have to start asking yourself who is missing from our churches? And why are they missing? And how can we make them feel God’s love? And that applies to more people than just the LGBTQ community.

There are so many things that make people feel unwelcome in the Church and we’ve got very good at turning a blind eye to these groups that we’ve excluded. Christians have to explicitly say, you are welcome here, regardless of your sexuality or your gender, because everyone just assumes that Christians are going to be homophobic. Our reputation is that we hate other people. Our reputation should be that we love everyone, but it’s not. Sometimes I speak to people in the queer community and they say, “What do you do?” And I say, “I work for a church,” and they’re like, “What? Why are you still part of that? Have they not done enough to us?” If you ask a non-religious queer person, “what does the Church think of you?”, they’ll say, “They hate me.” How can that be our reputation? How can that be the message that we keep perpetuating?

Is it healthy to have church spaces that are exclusively for LGBTQ people?

I think that those spaces need to exist if that group has come to harm at the hands of the other people in the Church, because sometimes these communities need healing and they need sanctuary from that wider church setting. A lot of people need that space where they can be vulnerable and they can ask for help and so I think that having those queer-only spaces is



“If you ask a non-religious queer person, ‘what does the Church think of you?’, they’ll say, ‘They hate me’”

still really valuable, but it’s not to say that we’re not allowed to be part of another church community.

What would you like to say to the mainstream Church?

LGBTQ people exist and we’re here and listen to us. And don’t just listen to me, I’m one white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, queer woman and there’s a hell of a lot of other stories out there. Listen to more people’s stories and do it with love, don’t come at it from a cynical position. Ask yourself, if that person walked into my church tomorrow, how could I love them? How could I make them feel welcome? How could I be an ally to them when their rights are being challenged? The queer community is a gift and we have so much to offer to the Church and to the world

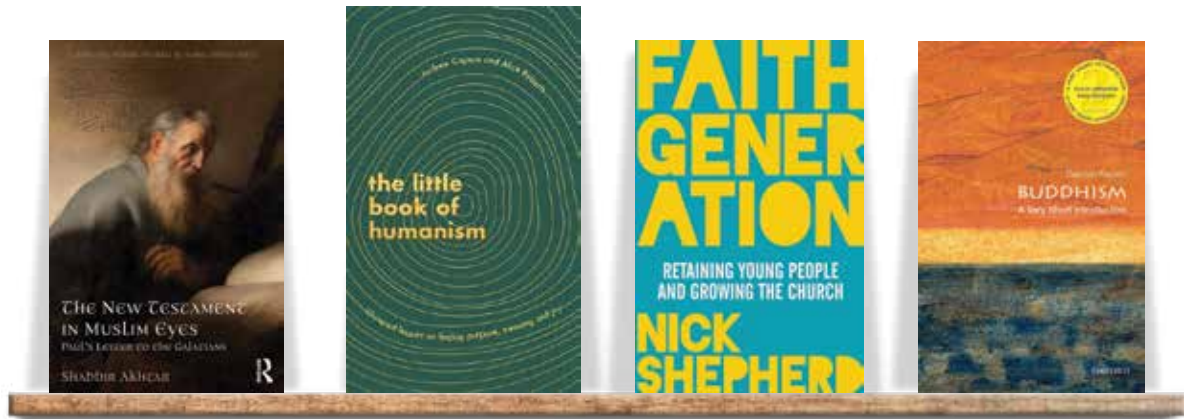
and you’re missing out. You’re going to learn so much about God as soon as you start talking to queer people, there’s so much diversity within God’s creation, why are you denying that?

Do you have anything to say to the LGBTQ community, Christian or non?

Keep going. You’re doing great and you’re really, really not on your own. I know it can really feel like you’re on your own but you’re not. There are people out there that are going through a similar thing to you and will love you for you and will not try to change you and make you anything else that you’re not. And Jesus loves you – and you can’t ever do anything to stop that. So relish in that fact that nothing you could ever do can separate you from that love.

LETTING THE OUTSIDERS IN

Some further reading suggestions from – and written by – contributors from this issue, to give you the chance to hear more from the outsiders.



BOOKS

THE LITTLE BOOK OF HUMANISM Universal Lessons on Finding Purpose, Meaning and Joy

Dr Alice Roberts and Andrew Copson

Humanist wisdom shared through stories, quotes and meditations by the President of Humanists UK and President of Humanists International.

HOMELESSNESS Grace, Truth and Transformation

Jon Kuhrt and Chris Ward (Grove Books, P135)

Christian action on homelessness is not always wise or shaped in the light of the reality of homeless people's experiences.

THE QURAN AND THE SECULAR MIND

A Philosophy of Islam

Shabbir Akhtar

How can the Qur'an be approached in terms of Western philosophy? And how can Islam engage with the challenges posed by secular thinking?

BUDDHISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

Damien Keown

An introduction to the teachings of the Buddha and to how Buddhism works in daily life.

FAITH GENERATION Retaining Young People and Growing the Church

Nick Shepherd

How do we help children and young people to form faith today – and in the process, help our churches to grow?

ISLAM AS A POLITICAL RELIGION

The Future of an Imperial Faith

Shabbir Akhtar

What should Islam look like in the context of global secularisation? A philosophical and theological approach.

THE NEW TESTAMENT IN MUSLIM EYES

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Shabbir Akhtar

A close textual commentary on Galatians, drawing out connections and tensions between Pauline thought and the claims of the Quran.

WEB

LOST AND FOUND Faith and Spirituality in the Lives of Homeless People

Published in 2013 by Lemos and Crane, this is the first study of homeless people's attitude to faith and involved interviews with over 70 people.
bit.ly/2w5j1uD

MISSION, MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Theological reflection on the future God wants for victims of war and violence, and how we can help to achieve it from the Mission Theology Advisory Group.
bit.ly/mission-migrants-refugees

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