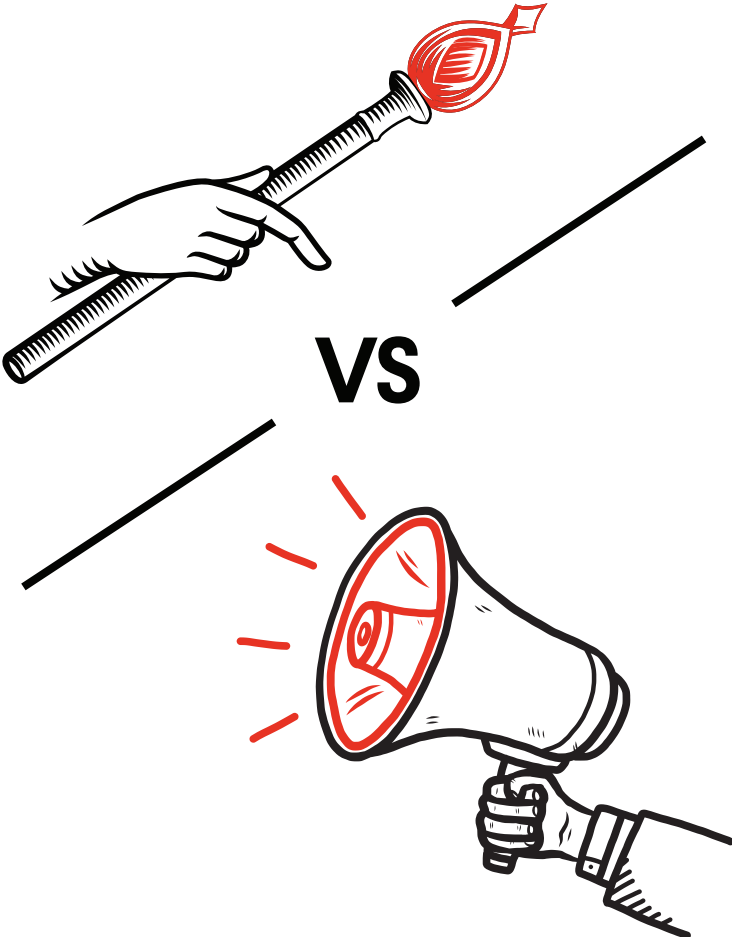


**THE JOURNAL OF  
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July 2026



**Crucible**

**Speaking truth to power**



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<b>Editorial</b>		
Turning a page		03
<i>Edward Cardale</i>		
Introduction: Speaking Truth to Power		07
<i>Elaine Graham</i>		
Turning a page: Welcoming Our New Editor		11
<i>Matt Bullimore</i>		
<b>Articles</b>		
Learning to be Brave in the Face of Christian Nationalism		13
<i>Katie Day</i>		
The Power of Listening		21
<i>Dominic Budhi-Thornton</i>		
Christian Witness and Law Breaking		31
<i>Tatjana Ljujić</i>		
Speaking Truth to Power: The Power of Activism		43
<i>Helen Burnett</i>		
<b>Book reviews</b>		54

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# Editorial

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## Turning a page

EDWARD CARDALE

With this issue of *Crucible* I am handing over to a new Editor, Matt Bullimore, who also introduces himself. Not that he is at all a stranger, since he has often commissioned Forum articles, and recently edited and written for our January issue with its theme of Identity Politics. He has assisted me for the whole of my time at the helm of the journal, which has been almost ten years. So, I gladly pass on the task to him and to our Managing Editor at Hymns A&M, Rebecca Goldsmith.

It has been a tumultuous ten years for our country and for the world. Starting with the Brexit referendum and its chaotic aftermath, we have faced one crisis after another, been plunged into the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020, and seen the devastation of Ukraine since 2022. Underlying it all has been the decline of democracy, the rise and rise of autocrats, and the spectre of wider wars. If I have an obsession, readers will know that I view the single biggest threat of them all to be the slow but relentless process of global warming, which will cause such suffering and loss to so many as this century unfolds.

The quiet responsibility of this journal is to be one of many Christian voices, reflecting seriously on these and many other social dimensions of our human life. We are a journal of *Christian Social Ethics*, and yet we do not always acknowledge the theological foundations of the ethics we profess. Every so often we do go 'backstage' to re-discover how the roots of our Christian social responsibility have in fact been nourished by theologies old and new, or (as in our previous issue this year) we note the bridge-building work of one such as Ronald Preston.

Our book reviews are theologically informed, and consistently interesting. Overall, our theology remains implicit rather than overt and restrained rather than decisive.

And so, we share the view of thinkers in every time and place who have professed that '*we know that we do not know*'. In particular,

Christian ethics like Christian faith itself must reckon with the reality of human sin and the tragedy of human failure. This is the point where we may diverge from the more optimistic humanist thinkers of our time, who have left religion behind and may look on the Christian project as historically important, even inspiring, but now philosophically irrelevant.

And yet we share ethical views with people of many backgrounds, including atheists, and may draw inspiration ourselves from those who disavow Christianity as a source of moral authority. I think of the immense learning and authority of the BBC Reith Lecturer 2025, Rutger Bregman, who spoke powerfully of the possibility of Moral Revolution in our current period of oppression. He could draw from the historical example of the abolition of slavery while hardly crediting the faith or spiritual impulse of the abolitionists themselves, on their long march.

The breadth of our faith and our understanding of divine providence enables us to value many sources of ethical insight which do not depend upon Christian faith. And the breadth of the mission statement, which we produced at the start of my time as editor, has given help and guidance to our thinking, though not by any means the final word.

Crucible is an essential source of inspiration for all who are interested in Christian Social Ethics and the interaction of Church and society. We believe that the Christian gospel is inescapably relevant to the social questions and upheavals of our times. The articles are complemented... by in-depth reviews of recently published books. Crucible renews the long tradition of social responsibility expressed by the churches of the British Isles. Contributors come from a wide range of religious belief and sympathy.

The deepest age-old principles and tensions within Ethics of many traditions lie behind the thinking for this journal, even if not explicitly explored by our articles. And beyond the question of how distinctively 'Christian' should Christian ethics be, there are enormous dilemmas such as:

- Is Ethics about how to live better lives, or how to try and make the world a better place?

- What is the relation between love and justice?
- Are we moral human beings though part of an immoral society?

These and other such questions may be part of an ethics syllabus and are worthy of great study. And I have always felt a debt both to the academics who nurtured me and to the communities where I have worked and belonged. But *Crucible* is not a journal *for academics*. It aspires to be a bridge between ‘thinkers’ and ‘disciples’.

It has been my privilege to walk back and forth across a bridge like that, many times over. My failure and our failure to do it more faithfully is part of the common human failure which (we may thankfully say) is recognised at the heart of the Christian gospel. If my Christian belief has become simpler over the years, at least I do believe in redemption. This means that I can also believe in the power of God to overcome the corrupt power of human beings. I believe – but I do not know. That is the uncertainty of faith.

\* \* \*

***But how does a journal like this do its job, in today’s world?***

Should it be in print, or on screens? And who if anyone is reading, or attending? And if you are, how do we know? While ‘letters to the editor’ are always welcome, it is no surprise that we receive very few. In any case a quarterly publication can hardly compete in topicality with the instant messaging of modern media.

So perhaps that age has passed. But online forums, and ways to meet and discuss through *modern* media, may be the way to keep *Crucible* on the road. Questions like that are ones that I can gently pose, and then even more gently withdraw.

For now, I am happy that in this issue Elaine Graham has gathered our articles on **Speaking Truth to Power** and offers her own introduction to them. This could not be more timely. We are in an age when the global concentration of power is frightening, and when the *discernment* of truth can be as hard as speaking it.

This now often used phrase – *speaking truth to power* – originated with an American Quaker and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, and its use spread through the civil rights movement from the

1950s onwards. It was taken up into other great causes such as the overturning of apartheid in South Africa. It has always signified some degree of courage and resistance to injustice, often at personal cost.

We see this applied in various contexts by our writers here. I hope you will enjoy reading them, just as I have enjoyed the rich and arresting content of this journal for the last ten years.

To all my colleagues on our board, to those who have contributed to *Crucible* as writers, guest editors and supporters, and to all our readers, I offer my thanks, good wishes, and prayers for our future.

*Edward Cardale has been an Anglican priest for over 50 years. He continues his retirement ministry in the Diocese of St Albans.*

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# Introduction

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## ‘Speaking Truth to Power’

ELAINE GRAHAM

One of the perennial themes of this journal is the nature of the involvement of Christians – individually, collectively and institutionally – in public affairs. One such channel is through representatives of the churches speaking out on public issues in the belief that those in power should be held to account. One recent and much-discussed example of this comes in the shape of a sermon delivered in January 2025 by the Rt Revd Mariann Edgar Budde, Episcopal Bishop of Washington on the occasion of the inauguration of the second Donald Trump administration. She issued a passionate plea to the President to show justice and compassion towards the most marginalised or vilified in society, such as migrant workers, refugees’ children and members of the LGBTQ community.

Have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land. May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, speak the truth in love, and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world. (Budde, 2025)

Speaking later, she identified two priorities as lying at the heart of Christian public witness: *solidarity* with the marginalised and *speaking truth to power*. In *How We Learn to Be Brave* (2023), Budde considers how such a social witness requires courage and conviction, not least in the face of her own critics and detractors. The acts of resistance, truth-telling and solidarity are, she argues, not isolated events but an entire lifestyle, a ‘spiritual practice’ shaped by everyday decisions

and acute discernment.

Indeed, Budde is known for taking public stances on many social and ethical issues, including racial equity, gun violence prevention, immigration reform, LGBTQ+ inclusion and environmental concern. Nevertheless, the actions of the Trump administration have escalated to unleash the full force of State power, both at home and abroad. The confrontational approach of federal ICE agents in arresting immigrants and exercising extreme force against demonstrators suggest that Budde's appeal to the values of human dignity and shared morality exercise little or no influence on government policy and practice.

Such political polarisation and the erosion of any kind of common ground within the public square may therefore require alternative forms of social witness. Church leaders may seek to rebuke the powerful, but more effective may be forms of localised direct action which focus more on Budde's second imperative, that of more direct action in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable and stand to lose the most. These twin motifs of 'truth-telling' and 'solidarity' inform many of the articles in this issue, as contributors offer reflections on the challenges and opportunities occasioned by exercising Christian witness for justice and peace in an increasingly fractious and polarised public square.

Writing from the United States, in the thick of demonstrations against the Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency in many cities, **Katie Day** digs deeper into Mariann Budde's 'journey towards bravery', regarding it as shaped by a life of disciplined and conscious discernment: a series of 'choices to stay, to go, to start new ventures, to step up'. Yet this is a sensibility that has been steadily formed through engagement with Scripture, immersion in the rituals and sacraments of the Church and inspired by the example of earlier generations of radical witness for justice and peace. In contrast to the triumphalism and isolationism of right-wing Christian Nationalism, this style of political and religious witness is, as Budde herself remarks, 'grounded in collective faithfulness, and power born through a network of relationships.'

**Dominic Budhi-Thornton** draws on his doctoral research into the public theology of Manchester Cathedral and the apparent paradox of an institution deeply complicit with the elitist values of Establishment that is nevertheless seeking to exercise a mission of solidarity and inclusion. Is it possible, he asks, for the Church to

move from being ‘benefactors of the poor’ to ‘partners alongside’ the powerless? His solution is simple yet profound: the task of *speaking* truth to power must be displaced by the charism of *listening to the truth being spoken* by those often denied a safe space or suitable forum in which to find their voice. This is an example of a prominent civic institution with secular and ecclesiastical ‘soft power’ that has had to divest itself of its privileged position in order to listen to the powerless.

This is rooted, theologically, in an understanding of Christ’s vulnerable humanity in which the exercise of power is to be ‘used for the ends of love’. A similar emphasis on the Christological nature of public witness is to be found in **Tatjana Ljujic’s** article, which engages at length with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian discipleship in which the pastoral imperative of ‘being there for others’ – acts of solidarity and compassion – is necessarily rooted in Christ’s sacrificial ministry on the Cross in a dialectic of incarnation and crucifixion. Drawing on the witness of two Anglican priests disciplined by the Church for their environmental activism, Ljujic concludes that churches must choose between social respectability and costly, radical discipleship in the name of those who ‘hold the least power and suffer the greatest harm’.

Writing as an Anglican priest and environmental campaigner, **Helen Burnett** reflects on her involvement in various communities of protest and resistance in response to the growing climate emergency. She asks whether ‘speaking truth to power’ is still possible at a time when increasingly it appears that ‘power isn’t listening’! As political discourse and public debate become ever more fractious, it becomes harder to imagine any kind of appeal to those in power on the basis of a shared discourse of moral reason. Helen Burnett has been drawn to non-violent street protest partly out of a sense that the political classes and corporate finance (such as the fossil fuel industry) are simply indifferent to the sufferings of the less powerful. Such activism requires discipline and courage: qualities that draw from the well-spring of collective action and the bonds of community. She also relates how many of the acts of resistance are also forms of religious witness with powerful spiritual, ritual and symbolic dimensions – a reminder, perhaps, that the churches’ public theology may find expression in deed as well as word.

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# Turning a Page

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## Welcoming Our New Editor

MATT BULLIMORE

Becoming lead editor after Edward Cardale feels very fortunate. Edward has helped to produce a decade's worth of thought-provoking, timely, and wide-ranging editions of *Crucible* and the journal is in very good shape. We are immensely grateful to Edward for his vision and effort and are delighted that he is remaining a member of the editorial board.

I have been a member of the *Crucible* board for 14 years, and for the last few years have had responsibility for commissioning or finding articles for the 'Forum' section of the journal. In the time I have been on the Board I have been involved in bishop's chaplaincy, theological education, parish ministry, HE widening participation, and college chaplaincy. I now work as the Senior Provost or director of faith for the Woodard Corporation – a Christian educational charity that owns or works with about 40 Anglican schools round the UK and abroad, in the independent and state sectors.

My writing and broader interests have been in the fields of Anglicanism, political theology, social ethics, ecclesiology, and vocation. Over the years, I have edited individual issues of *Crucible* on Identity Politics, The Common Good, Biblical Social Ethics, The Politics of Food, and Postliberalism, and have written in the journal on political assembly, Radical Orthodoxy, the politics of identity, and various other occasional pieces and book reviews.

I am delighted to be working with such a dynamic and committed editorial board and with Hymns Ancient and Modern as we continue to ensure that *Crucible* is a first-rate journal offering wisdom, encouragement, and critique in a restless culture. It is the only journal on Christian social ethics alone, and it is a field that is never unnecessary, certainly never boring, and, indeed, of crucial importance as it points to signs of hope in a fast changing and often fearful world.

The roots of *Crucible* lie in the Anglican tradition, a product of the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility. It has close links with the William Temple Foundation, but has also developed the legacy of Anglican social thinking more broadly. Today, *Crucible* is for thinkers and activists, for ministers and lay people, for young and old, for a British and global audience, and for Christians of all the great communions and denominations.

# ‘Learning to be Brave’ — in the Face of Christian — Nationalism

**A review of Mariann Edgar Budde, *How we Learn to be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith* (2023)**

KATIE DAY

It is hard to describe how surrealistic it has been to be in the US in the last year. Every day brings a fresh assault on credulity, decency, and any kind of moral standards. We are in a constant state of whiplash, alternating between shock, outrage, fear, discouragement, and resolve. Some days we just want to blinker ourselves and focus on the quotidian tasks of daily life ... and some days we're in the streets. It is hard to know how to plan or predict. As I write this in the winter of 2026, a mad king-wannabe wants to acquire Greenland because he is disappointed that he did not receive the Nobel peace prize. Relationships with allies are being trampled and NATO is being threatened in service to the authoritarianism of a small group of global bullies. A campaign of revenge against critics (or those presumed to be disloyal) has been unleashed – a plethora of lawsuits are clogging courts, career public employees are leaving in droves, reputations are damaged if not ruined. Well-paid but not well-trained masked federal agents are attacking citizens and long-time residents throughout Minneapolis and communities all over the country. (I just got back from an ICE raid in my small town in Maryland.) Trump has said the only thing to stop him is his ‘own morality’, which is seemingly non-existent.

God only knows what will be happening by the time you read this.  
And where is the church in all this?

Media attention has focused on the coupling of conservative Christianity and the MAGA movement in recent years. The growth

of Christian nationalism in the US has been extensively researched and documented. A bookshelf of publications – sociological, historical, theological, and journalistic – has engaged a widening readership in understanding this phenomenon. As with expressions in other countries, its basic premise is the connection and even merger of Christian and national identities. It can be argued that its historical roots go back to the Puritan settlers who brought an understanding of *covenant* to the shores of New England in the 1600s – America was a promised land. Newly established communities were often little theocracies. At the same time, many of those who immigrated to the Americas were fleeing religious persecution.

By the time of the writing of the Constitution, crafted primarily by Deists who recognised the danger of the merger of church and state, guardrails were written in to protect their separation. The Framers intended this to be protective of both religion from the control of government, and government from religious power seeking to impose a theocracy. Hence the First Amendment which contains two phrases ensuring both the free-exercise of religion while prohibiting any laws or policies that would establish any one religion as primary. These two commitments have existed in tension, as evidenced by two and a half centuries of case law. But the social commitment to the separation of church and state largely tempered those early Puritan theocratic ambitions into a relatively benign civil religion. So, while religious language and symbology is present in culture and political discourse, it has largely functioned to give a shared language, a sense of transcendence beyond the nation, and social cohesion (Bellah, 1967).

However, Christian nationalism began to emerge in a more aggressive form in the 1960s and 1970s out of a fundamentalist ideological movement which argued that Christians (and importantly, Christians as defined by them) should take control of government and all major sectors of society. There have been various strains with different levels of radicalism, Dominionism, Christian Reconstructionism, the New Apostolic Reformation being the most well-known. Based on a belief that America was founded as a Christian nation – a misreading of history – Christian nationalists seek to 'return' to the imagined origin story to establish a comprehensive theocracy. This might have remained a fringe movement had it not been for the ascent of Trumpism (since 2015), which coopted it. Building on anxieties among large swaths of white Americans about

the economy and their demographic decline, Christian nationalism provided institutional support and a religious framework for an aggressive conservative agenda. The merger of piety and patriotism created a dynamic space in which the takeover of government, education (from local public schools to universities), media, law, arts/entertainment, family (and gender roles), and business not only are rationalised but energised with a collective sense of righteous urgency. The second term of Trump has added fuel to this fire. In 2024, the Public Religious Research Institute found that ‘three in ten Americans qualified as Christian nationalism adherents (10%) or Sympathizers (20%) (PPRI, 2025)’. But what about the majority of Americans who are not in the Christian nationalist camp?

While the MAGA Christians were growing in visibility and volume, the rest of the religious landscape has been dealing with their own perfect storm of conditions, which have conspired to tame a strong presence in the public forum. The declining trends of believing and belonging in the U.S. have been well documented (Pew Research Center, 2026; FACT, 2023). Congregations have been shrinking and closing, sacred places vanishing from communities, and the disaffiliated (the ‘nones’) increasing. With congregations that are smaller, older and facing financial challenges, clergy are reticent to speak out on social issues, lest they alienate some major donors. They cannot appear partisan, or they might attract the attention of politically right-wing Christians within or outside the congregation. Christian nationalism has had a chilling effect on mainstream religion. Until recently.

Trump’s second term is very different than his first. From the first day, when he signed a slew of executive orders which pardoned the January 6 insurgents and instituted much more aggressive policies on immigrants, it was clear that there was a new reality confronting the American people. As James Russell Lowell wrote in his 1845 poem, *The Present Crisis*, ‘new occasions teach new duties,’ that is, a changed political context calls for a stronger moral response and learning to come to voice.

At the traditional service at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., the day after the Inauguration, the diminutive Episcopal Bishop of Washington, Mariann Edgar Budde, addressed those gathered including the First Family, and those watching on television. After talking about national unity, she then turned her gaze directly at President Trump.

Let me make one final plea, Mr. President. Millions have put their trust in you. As you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are transgender children in both Republican and Democratic families who fear for their lives.

And the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labour in our poultry farms and meat-packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shift in hospitals – they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes, and are good neighbours. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogues, gurdwara, and temples.

Have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land. (Budde, 2025)

The President and his family were visibly surprised and angry. Later he criticised Bishop Budde in his characteristic language, calling her the 'so-called bishop', 'nasty', and saying that she owed him an apology. But the stunning courage of the moment struck a chord in many people of faith. Half a world away, in Wellington, New Zealand, an Anglican church displayed the homily on a large, three-panel exhibit in the narthex of the sanctuary. A member of the congregation explained how empowering the homily had been for them – a dramatic and literal example of 'speaking truth to power'.

This was not an impulsive flash of moral courage. Two years earlier, Bishop Budde had published a book, *How We Learn to be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith* (New York: Avery, Penguin, Random House, 2023). Thinking deeply about the topic of courage had been prompted by an earlier indirect clash with Trump during his first term. In June of 2020, after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis that sparked the Black Lives Matter mobilisation,

the President had a press conference threatening military force in response to demonstrations in the interest of 'law and order'. After having federal agents then dispersed protesters from D.C.'s Lafayette Park by force, he then walked to the front of the historic St. John's Episcopal Church, which had had some minor damage during protests the night before. With the church as a backdrop, he posed for a photo op, holding a Bible (upside down, it turned out) as a prop.

Budde and faith leaders, both locally and nationally, were outraged by the crass use of sacred symbols to add a patina of religious sanction to the use of state force to suppress free speech and the right of assembly, both protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution. In that moment, she writes, 'I managed to find my voice...' and she spoke out strongly condemning the action. 'It seemed to others that I was being very brave. In truth it felt more like being summoned to take my place alongside others who were being brave.' (Budde, 2023, p. xvi) This experience led her on a journey to better understand bravery. For many people of faith, *How We Learn to be Brave* landed as many people of faith were longing to bolster moral courage and come to voice in an overwhelming political context.

A central thesis of the book is that we all learn to be brave, even from childhood. At pivotal moments in our lives we face choices to stay, to go, to start new ventures, to step up – these times become the basic structure of the book. Budde argues that God is in decisive moments, often not apparent at the time but in retrospection. In each chapter, she draws on her own experiences. Her self-disclosure is disarmingly honest, vulnerable, and often not flattering. She discusses the ups and downs of her career path, with times of disappointment at positions not offered or people she let down. Her marriage, physical pain, and pastoral ministry all become sources of enlightenment on the formation of bravery.

Beyond mining her own story, Budde draws on the biblical narrative – familiar stories from the Hebrew scriptures of characters displaying courage and faith, as well as cowardice and weakness. Jesus and his friends are presented in relatable terms, rescued from heroicism but with their humanity on display. For those readers who are not biblically literate, scriptural stories are developed to provide understanding.

There is a wide array of other sources the author draws upon – historic, literary, cultural. Whether telling stories of Eleanor

Roosevelt, presenting thinking of Joseph Campbell, Malcolm Gladwell, Madeleine Albright, or Brene Brown, for example, Budde does not introduce quotes as illustrative of a point but as sources of wisdom on bravery. Secular sources such as media personae Ira Glass and Krista Tippett, or fictional characters from *The Little Prince* to Tolkien's Gandalf the Grey offer facets of courage and provide multiple points of connection to a wide range of readers. Quoting Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, 'While we cannot choose the times we live in, we can choose how to respond to the time we are given ... There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil' (Budde, 2023, p. 191). Theologically, she continues to point to the transcendent power of God often not apparent in the daily flood of assaults on democracy and human dignity.

Bishop Budde draws on multiple theological sources, from Christian theologians to those from Jewish and Muslim perspectives, including Howard Thurman, Walter Brueggemann, Henri Nouwen, Joan Chittister, Kelly Brown Douglas, Rabbi Edwin Friedman, Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Often, when presenting a theological source, she does not separate academic writing from biography. One example is her presentation of Martin Luther King in a longer profile in courage. (This is particularly helpful for readers who are not as familiar with the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.) From King she highlights the importance of redemptive suffering, of suffering with others in solidarity. As the nation of Israel was the original Suffering Servant, Jesus then took on the identity to the point of crucifixion. As Jesus's followers are also called into solidarity as a dimension of bravery, the implication is that it might involve suffering.

Bravery is not presented as individual heroics or spiritual triumphalism, in contradiction to Christian nationalism. Rather, Budde delves into the costs of being brave including payback, back lash, and letdowns that can become depression. But for her, faithfulness – constancy in witness – is inherently collective, first in relation to solidarity, but then in collective action. Hope is not a detached ideal but is grounded in collective faithfulness, and power born through a network of relationships (Budde, 2023, p. 174). Courage, it is said, is contagious.

*How We Learn to Be Brave* has become a popular book discussion in American congregations. It is useful in enabling Christians to reflect on what it means to be brave at this moment in history. In talking

with participants in several discussion groups, it was clear that the book had become a vehicle for deep reflection and sharing. Budde's candor about her own story gave permission for participants to reflect on their own lives through the lens of learning to be brave. One participant described their series of meetings as 'cathartic' as they worked through the seven chapters and shared poignant stories of struggle and courage, often not previously acknowledged at the time. 'I looked back I thought "Good for me. I was braver than I thought."' Where might this new sense of empowerment lead? 'I've been braver in speaking out (in our small town) and witnessing to what I believe.'

The public witness of people of faith has been growing in recent months. New occasions are seemingly teaching new duties. The persistent presence of Minnesotans marching in frigid cold weather and witnessing to the brutal tactics of ICE is the collective face of courage. Faith leaders are increasingly present, if not at the vanguard, certainly in solidarity with those who are being taken by ICE and those who are standing up for human rights and democracy. Obviously, in these times, this is not without risk of arrest or physical harm. As of this writing two protesters have been killed by ICE in Minneapolis – Alex Pretti, a nurse, and Renee Good, an active member of her Presbyterian congregation whose last words to the ICE agent were, "Dude, I'm not mad at you." At a vigil for her in New Hampshire, the local Episcopal Bishop Robert Hirschfeld told clergy that we are entering into a new era of bold witness and that they should have their affairs in order and their wills written, 'because it may be that now is no longer the time for statements, but for us with our bodies to stand between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable' (Smith, 2026).

The book by Bishop Mariann Budde is a well-timed resource for people of faith (or no faith) in facing recent escalating challenges. She probably could not have imagined its relevance now, three years after publication. It is not the only resource. I also recommend *For Such a Time as This: An Emergency Devotional* by Princeton Theologian Hanna Reichel (Eerdmans, 2025). There is also a plethora of writers on Substack, YouTube, and other social media who are stepping up to encourage people of faith to find their collective courage, their collective call, and their collective voice. Bishop Budde continues to encourage her wider flock through Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. She has also published other

## 'Learning to be Brave' in the Face of Christian Nationalism

versions of the book with Penguin Press including, *We Can Be Brave: How We Learn to Be Brave in Life's Decisive Moments*, for young adults. In summer of 2026 an edition for 4–8-year-olds will be released; *I Can Learn to Be Brave*. It is wise to nurture bravery in the rising generations. Their challenges are impossible for us to know, but we can nurture their courage for an uncertain future as an important part of our moral action.

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# — The Power of Listening —

DOMINIC BUDHI-THORNTON

## Introduction

On Christ the King Sunday on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2025, I attended the Eucharist at Manchester Cathedral. During the service, we sang the hymn 'Heaven shall not wait' which I had not heard at the cathedral before. The first two verses were striking in their content:

Heav'n shall not wait for the poor to lose their patience,  
the scorned to smile, the despised to find a friend:  
Jesus is Lord, he has championed the unwanted;  
in him injustice confronts its timely end.

Heav'n shall not wait for the rich to share their fortunes,  
the proud to fall,  
the élite to tend the least:  
Jesus is Lord; he has shown the masters' privilege-  
to kneel and wash servants' feet before  
they feast. (Bell Maule, 1987)

I could not help but feel a potential dissonance between these words and the setting in which they were being sung. Manchester Cathedral (MC) is not simply an historic religious building; it is a socio-political centre, located at the heart of the city of Manchester. It plays host to a number of important civic and cultural events, including visits from members of the Royal Family, leading politicians and celebrities. According to popular perception (Muskett, 2019, p. 45), cathedrals are the 'fat cats' of the Church of England, and while this can be refuted by the realities of their substantial financial difficulties (Bakshi, 2025) cathedrals at least bear the reputation of affluent, powerful institutions within an Established Church. In this article, I want to ask how MC can possibly claim solidarity with the marginalised when it appears to be aligned with the privileged elite. How can MC speak 'truth to power' when it is itself part of the establishment?

These were the questions that underpinned research I carried out on the Cathedral's work on social justice and inclusion between 2019 and 2023. I will attempt to highlight how MC seeks to engage marginalised communities, promote inclusion and join with other networks in the city to these ends. I ask how such a strategy might constitute a kind of Public Theology, before highlighting the potential pitfalls in this work. I will then offer some conclusions on how institutions and groups with significant power and privilege might seek to engage with those who are disadvantaged and marginalised without becoming benefactors of the poor, but rather partners alongside the powerless.

### **Networks on social issues**

MC operates with the conviction that in order to contribute effectively to life in the city, it must engage with a variety of individuals and organisations in the city. A key example is the Challenging Hate Forum (CHF), which was developed when the city's Chief Constable approached the Dean, Rogers Govender, to ask if he could convene a group to help develop ideas and strategies for reducing hate crimes in the city. Dean Govender then developed CHF, which is an open forum made up of people from various professional, cultural and religious backgrounds. The sessions tend to focus on one particular issue, for example rising misogyny, racial bias in stop and search practices, and social media practices. The group usually invites somebody who is either working in those areas or is a researcher in a related field to present for half an hour on the topic, and then a discussion takes place for another half an hour.

In one interview for my research in which we discussed the forum, Govender said to me:

I'm saying as a Christian leader that we are called to live at peace. If we are to live at peace and harmony with one another in a diverse community and society then all of us need to be building peace with one another. (Budhi-Thornton, 2025, p. 108).

The networks involve participants from charities in the city, Greater Manchester Police Service, social workers and support officers, other religious leaders and academic researchers and lecturers, as well as many others. Depending on the topic, the participants can vary, as this is an open forum.

This ability to collaborate with other groups is a key characteristic of Public Theology as a whole. As John Atherton, a former Canon Theologian at Manchester Cathedral, suggests:

Since the church is no longer the centre of life, particularly in Western societies, its vocation is not to respond by retreating inward-looking, congregational based churches, but it is about taking part with others in promoting better localities. That can be achieved by the church providing an open, 'no strings attached' forum for such a coming together of different perspectives and traditions: If it has a wider role, it can only be as an inter-network, providing a forum or some common ground for other networks. (Atherton, 2000, p. 107)

CHF is one of the ways in which MC embodies this vision, as it seeks to be outward looking, concerned about issues within the city and not just issues in the church. The Dean and other members of the clergy are also involved in other networks and activities that are concerned for social justice in the city, such as CAHN (Caribbean and African Health Network) which seeks to promote greater equity for ethnic minority groups and marginalised people within the healthcare system.

I have written at length elsewhere about other aspects of the cathedral's Public Theology, such as its interreligious work, its approach to LGBTQIA+ inclusion and racial justice. It is important to note here, however, that underlying all of its work is a belief that the cathedral should be a place of welcome, inclusion, healing and should contribute to the flourishing of all people (Budhi-Thornton, 2025). And the cathedral's involvement in such networks has been widely recognised for its ethos of seeking to unite diverse groups for common purposes. For example, in 2016, the cathedral was approached to organise and host an event at the city's Town Hall, which had the aim of 'bringing people together to celebrate our cultural diversity in prayer, song, poetry, chanting and dance', after a sharp rise in Islamophobia in the city (Barlow, 2016).

The cathedral has therefore explicitly pursued a kind of inclusion that centres on justice being done for those who are discriminated against, marginalised, oppressed and stripped of power. But the key question to emerge is whether a powerful institution such as MC

with its associations with Establishment exercise true solidarity with the poor, or whether the nature of its being a powerful institution means it always operates with a degree of separation from those it seeks to serve?

At this point I should be clear about my definition of the term 'poor'. Luke Bretherton rightly notes that early Latin American liberation theologians Gustavo Guitierrez and Leonardo Boff failed to entertain definitions of poverty beyond destitution (Gutiérrez, 2023; Boff, 1978). For Bretherton, poverty is not only a material lack which can be solved by economic solutions. Rather, poverty includes powerlessness and affliction. This helps us to understand that 'the poor' includes anyone on the margins whom the cathedral seeks to serve, demonstrated in the way that it has had a direct concern with those who have typically struggled to gain power in the public sphere, such as ethnic minority groups, marginalised people and LGBTQIA+ communities.

### **Power and Manchester Cathedral**

To start, we must address a more primary question, which is whether being part of the Established Church itself entails a kind of separation that cannot be overcome with good intention and political networks. For some, the Established Church is a relic of a bygone era of Christendom in England that is long gone, regarded as an affront to a society seemingly governed by the principles of secular, liberal modernity, which prizes individual morality and enlightenment rationality. In this perspective, the establishment should be revolutionised or even abandoned rather than reformed.<sup>1</sup> In this frame, cathedrals can be seen as, at best, tourist attractions, but with nothing to offer the afflicted, the suffering, the humble, the powerless in their cities. These Mother churches of the Established Church might be of more benefit to their communities if they closed their doors 'and sold all they have to the poor'.<sup>2</sup>

However, as Malcolm Brown has argued, when we assume that establishment simply means power and privilege, we miss that the purpose of the establishment and its institutions is to be of service to the wider communities. I would argue that establishment can be understood through the lens of service while recognising that these institutions that are called to serve are called to put their power and privilege to work in the name of the Common Good.

As Luke Bretherton argues:

Criticisms of the structures that produce inequality and the systemic advantages given to some and not others is vital. However, the only word to those who find themselves with power, wealth, and privilege cannot be no. The prophetic no must be premised on some sort of eschatological yes. Some redemptive account of what to do with power and wealth if critique is not to be degraded into a rhetoric of denunciation and removed from the orbit of any good news. (Bretherton, 2019, p. 60)

Moreover, there is a theological challenge to questions of power, and that is the powerlessness or weakness of God. Many Christians continue to believe in what Bonhoeffer named ‘the deus ex machina’: the God in the machine. But as Bonhoeffer writes, this is not the God revealed in Christ. Instead:

Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8: 17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 360)

As Sally Douglas argues, this image of a powerless God is especially attractive to those who have been harmed by images of an all-powerful male God, who sanctions the hierarchies of empire. The predominant image of Christ for those who emphasise God’s powerlessness is the suffering-servant.

However, there are two dangers with this reading of Christ. Even though it takes seriously Christ’s humanity, and resists Empire’s construal of power, there is a risk that such readings downplay Jesus’ divinity. Not only is this strategy disingenuous, but it runs the risk of missing the disruptive claims about divine power that reside within these texts (Douglas, 2021, p. 61). The second issue is that appeals to Christ’s powerlessness can disempower Christians and encourage them to endure abuse at the hands of their persecutors, while seeing this as an unavoidable way of participating in the life of the suffering Christ (Chung, 2018, p. 103).

Instead, it should be understood that Christ's powerlessness is only perceived as such in the eyes of empire. It does not seek to dominate, coerce and manipulate. Instead, Christ's power is revealed in seeming human weakness, yet it is a weakness involving his full agency, free will, and leads to the healing and liberation of the world. Therefore, it should not be assumed that all power is the equivalent of empire, which utilises violence for its own ends. Instead, power should be used for the ends of love.

In my view, cathedrals use the 'soft power' afforded to them by being civic and spiritual spaces to cultivate a common space between different groups who are able to explore questions of faith, humanity and public life together in a setting that is not under the authority of one political or religious organisation.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that cathedrals are neutral spaces. They are, after all, Christian buildings. But Manchester Cathedral seeks to embody a particular kind of Christian space: one that celebrates genuine diversity rather than seeking to impose uniformity.

As Simon Oliver has put it, cathedrals act as an 'enduring middle':

When bombs explode on our streets, a member of the Royal Family dies, a nation remembers its war dead, or a national charity wants to celebrate the anniversary of its founding, we default to a more substantial and enduring 'middle', the cathedral, which, because of its Christian proclamation, provides an expression of unity and hope that exceeds the chaotic pluralities of modern society. It is a genuine *via media*, lying comprehensively in the middle of public and private, sacred and secular, heaven and earth. (Oliver, 2017, p. 31)

The challenge, then, is to regard Cathedrals as institutions of service, of shared space, and places in which the cause for common human flourishing is fostered. Even so, can it resist the tendency towards simply becoming a benefactor of the poor, rather than a collaborator alongside the poor?

### **Benefaction, collaboration and prayer vigils**

The key here is that those with power and privilege might assume that it is their responsibility to 'give' to those less fortunate, in ways that separate them from the one receiving. Bretherton characterises this as an order of beneficence, which centres on doing good deeds. This is generous, but fundamentally unjust, because the one 'giving' does not need to be in communion with the one receiving. Bretherton

argues that *listening* is the first act of any move from beneficence to collaboration, ‘as it assumes the poor have something to teach the privileged and about how to live and that a common life between them is necessary to the flourishing of all’ (Bretherton, 2019, p. 78).

Therefore, the key to whether or not cathedrals in general or MC specifically can be a place of solidarity with the poor and marginalised depends entirely on whether the cathedral is acting as a generous benefactor, or creating a space for mutual blessing. It is my suggestion that the cathedral does indeed do this but needs to continually develop opportunities for those on the margins – ‘the poor’ – to be heard. In this way, the question should not simply be about the cathedral *speaking truth to power*, but rather the cathedral creating the opportunity to *hear the truth being spoken* by those who are often struggling to gain power in the public sphere.

While it is true that the Cathedral uses its power to convene different groups, much of what happens in those times is seemingly fruitless. One example of this is the Cathedral’s regular undertaking to host prayer vigils. The Cathedral in recent years has hosted such events in response to the violence in the Middle East, the war between Russia and Ukraine, the synagogue attack in Manchester, for LGBTQIA+ inclusion and following the death of Queen Elizabeth II. The vigils always take an interfaith character and draw in people from different faith and cultural backgrounds. On the surface, at least if we were measuring in purely materialist or secularist terms, these vigils are an exercise in powerlessness. They don’t seem to have any direct effect on the issue at hand. The war in Ukraine and Russia still rages on, for example.

Yet, as Judith Butler says:

...It matters that bodies assemble, and that the political meanings enacted by demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse, whether written or vocalized. Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive. In other words, forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make. Silent gatherings, including vigils or funerals, often signify in excess of any particular written or vocalized account of what they are about. (Butler, 2015, p. 8)

I would want to add a theological observation to this. It matters that bodies gather together, as powerless as they are, before the One who hears the powerless. It matters that they do so in a Holy Space, that is Christian yet welcomes people of all faiths and none, because God shows no partiality. It is in these moments when the cathedral is exercising its true power, which is really no power at all in worldly terms. It is a moment when every participant of the vigil joins in with the life of the poor, because we recognise that we have no means or ways of stopping the violence, exclusions and suffering of the world. Instead, we learn to identify with the poor, and thus pray, and recognise the life of God present in those we may not have rightly seen. And this may be the true power of a cathedral: it creates the opportunities for the poor to join in and participate in an environment where their voices are heard, not only by the powerful, but by the powerless God.

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### Notes

1. For more on the dialectic tension between revolution and reform see Arthos, 2018, pp. 3–30.
2. This paper is not a contribution to the ongoing debate about whether the Church of England should be disestablished or not. Rather, I am emphasising the Church's place of power and privilege as the Established Church. For more on the debate about disestablishment, see Brown, 2019 and Chaplin, 2022.
3. The term 'soft power' was first coined to distinguish forms of influence in international relations that don't involve military or economic action. The term has since developed to describe the influence that civil society can have on cities, national politics and international politics. I use the term here, recognising the influence that Manchester Cathedral has in the city, and therefore politics. See Lord and Blankenberg 2015, pp. 9–10.

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# Christian Witness and Lawbreaking

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TATJANA LJUJIĆ

*Being a Christian means that we sign up for persecution and walking the way of the cross [...]. Not tea parties or being popular or being on the right side of the law when the law is protecting the fossil fuel industry and therefore enabling the destruction of God's beautiful creation.*

Revd Sue Parfitt (2025)

## **Introduction**

On 30th April 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and Lutheran pastor, while imprisoned by the Nazis for misusing his position in the intelligence service (a role obtained under false pretenses) as part of a conspiracy to rescue Jews, wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge: 'What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today' (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 365). Though a founding member of the Confessing Church – a minority confederation of Protestant churches in Germany that refused to align with the Nazi-controlled Reich Church – Bonhoeffer, while in prison, critically examined the underlying motives of the Christian resistance movement to which he belonged. Was it, he wondered, a movement whose main concern was its own self-preservation as a faithful witness to the gospel (as opposed to the idolatry of the Führer- and Volk-worshipping Deutsche Christen), rather than an active participation in the being of Christ, the authentic expression of which is 'being there for others' – which, in critical moments in history, ultimately translates to 'taking risk for others'? The Confessing Church was, he concluded, essentially a 'church on the defensive'; and if Christians are to be authentically restored to their calling to follow Christ, who was 'the man for others', the church too ought to become 'the church

for others': to 'share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving' (Bonhoeffer, 2010, pp. 500–501).

Though Bonhoeffer's historical context was in many respects very different from the reality in which the Church of England operates today, the questions of who Christ is for us today, and consequently who we are as Christ's body – the Church – today, are as pressing now as they were in Bonhoeffer's time. Indeed, one of the key documents produced by the C of E's Faith and Order Commission, espousing the vision for the Church's vocation in the contemporary world, draws heavily on Bonhoeffer:

Discipleship means commitment, costly commitment, not just receiving a gift that changes nothing; it means life in community with other disciples, not just an individual relationship with Jesus; it means seeking and striving to grow in faithfulness, not just waiting for God to do something; and it means taking up the cross every day, and facing the evil of death, not holding on to every place of apparent security and safety while the flood is creeping in on us (Archbishops' Council, 2020, p. 68).

Inspired by Bonhoeffer's notion of 'costly grace', developed in his 1937 book *Discipleship*, which demands a sincere response to God's gift through sacrificial following rather than being received 'cheaply' without transformation or commitment (Bonhoeffer, 2015, pp. 3–14), the Faith and Order Commission urges the Church to heed 'Bonhoeffer's urgent pleading' and rediscover what it means to follow Jesus 'in the face of socially acceptable Christianity that fosters indifference' (Archbishops' Council, 2020, p. 68).

Yet the Church, when push comes to shove, appears time and again to choose defensive action over 'being there for others', as demonstrated by its inadequate responses to the abuse revelations (Jay, 2024; Makin, 2024). It also often seems to prioritise social respectability over costly discipleship, as seen in the case of the Revd Sue Parfitt, a Church of England priest whose environmental activism – because it involved lawbreaking – cost her permission to officiate (PTO). Parfitt's actions were deemed to have brought the Church into disrepute, and her application for PTO renewal was denied (Parfitt, 2025; Ware, 2024).

It is the latter example that prompted the ensuing theological reflection. Drawing on Bonhoeffer's notion of divine mandates, I critically explore the question of discernment: how does one discern the will of God, and when does it become legitimate for a Christian to break the law? I root my argument in a comparative discussion of Bonhoeffer's and Karl Barth's contrasting perspectives on the (im)possibility of divine revelation in the cultural (including the political), and how one might navigate this without co-opting the gospel for ideological ends. Bonhoeffer himself has been appropriated not only by liberationist theologians and activists but also by extremist ideologues to justify lawbreaking – for example, the violent action directed at 'the state' during the assault on the US Congress on 6 January 2021 (Lockley, 2025, p. 15) – which underscores the need for reflective discernment.

### **Breaking the law to expose the lawbreakers**

On 10th May 2024, Sue Parfitt and Judith Bruce filmed themselves attempting to break the protective casing of the Magna Carta held in the British Library, following a High Court ruling the previous week that the Government had failed in its legal obligation to work towards meeting its own environmental targets. Parfitt and Bruce were arrested for causing criminal damage – though the damage to the casing was 'minimal' and the Magna Carta itself 'undamaged', according to the British Library's official statement following the event (Williams, 2024). Holding a placard reading 'The Government is breaking the law', Parfitt explained the rationale behind the protest action:

The Magna Carta is rightly revered, being of great importance to our history, to our freedoms, and to our laws. But there will be no freedom, no lawfulness, no rights, if we allow climate breakdown to become the catastrophe that is now threatened (quoted in Williams, 2024).

Due to the criminal charges brought against Parfitt, the Bishop of Bristol refused to renew her permission to officiate. The Church, in Parfitt's words, appeared to be joining 'the powerful forces of opposition' to the 'truth-telling' (Ware, 2024) about the catastrophic consequences of continued inaction for 'all life on earth' – and in

particular for the most vulnerable people, predominantly in the Global South. Parfitt sees her lawbreaking as an expression of her 'obedience to the will of God', an act of following Jesus, who 'was continually in breach of the law because he was calling out the evils of his day within the civil and religious authorities' (Parfitt, 2025). Rooting her discernment in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12), she writes:

What makes us blessed is not anything like the world thinks of as bringing happiness. It's the upside-down values of the kingdom of heaven that progressively bring joy to our lives when they are lived for others, not for ourselves (2025).

The Bonhoefferian echoes in Parfitt's pronouncements are unmistakable: critique of the Church for being on the defensive rather than taking risks for others (Bonhoeffer, 2010, pp. 500–501); transgressing the law to uphold its true purpose (Bonhoeffer, 2006, pp. 297–298); emphasis on the Beatitudes as central to Kingdom-oriented living (Bonhoeffer, 2015, pp. 59–67); and a primary focus on the wellbeing of those who hold the least power and suffer the greatest harm (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 52).

Pivotal to the above postulates is Bonhoeffer's Christocentric worldview, which sees Jesus not merely as an example to be followed but as the very core of reality itself. If Christ indeed is the heart of reality, might reality then disclose something about whether, how, or where Christ is active or revealed in the world? A positive answer carries two very different implications: this kind of Christocentrism may either provide a uniquely enabling framework for discipleship or pose the danger of Christianity being co-opted for ideological purposes. This was a burning theological question in 1930s Germany, where its two most distinguished theologians opposing the Nazi appropriation of Christ – Bonhoeffer and Barth – reached two distinct conclusions. A comparative reading of their views may offer valuable lessons for today's Christians involved in political activism.

### **Christocentrism in Barth and Bonhoeffer and its respective implications for action**

The centrality of Christ, for Karl Barth, is not only a matter of epistemology – i.e. that it is in Christ, and in Christ alone, that we

can ground our understanding of who God is – but also of ontology: Christ is, therefore, the world is (John 1:1–3). ‘Jesus Christ is not merely one object of the divine good-pleasure side by side with others [...], not merely the revelation of the mystery of God [...], not merely the Reconciler between God and [human], [...] not only the Elected’; rather, as ‘the will of God in action’, Jesus Christ is himself the electing one, himself the reconciliation between God and human, himself the divine good-pleasure, and himself the mystery of God (Barth, 2012, p. 13). The ontological argument about Christ as the ground of being, however, cannot itself serve as the ground of knowing. We cannot arrive at the knowledge of God by ‘knowing’ the creation; it is only through God’s self-revelation in Christ that we can know God.

The Barmen Declaration, which Barth co-authored with other members of the Confessing Church who opposed the Nazi-supporting and -sanctioned confederation of Protestant churches in Germany in the 1930s, puts it thus:

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation’ (Barmen Declaration, 1962/1934, §8.12).

Barth’s categorical rejection of the possibility that God may be revealed through any manifestation of the divine rooted in human experience or worldly authority – apart from God’s revelation through Christ as attested by Scripture – is undoubtedly informed by the particular historical context in which Christianity was co-opted by political ideologies that would go on to inflict unspeakable suffering on millions. The specific theologies Barth took issue with were those of German liberal theologians, the majority of whom supported the First World War, and that of the *Deutsche Christen*, who backed Hitler.

The proposition that God is in fundamental discontinuity with human experience, however, when pushed to the limit of its implications for political life, might lead one towards what Bonhoeffer calls a ‘radical solution’ to the relation between the finite and the infinite (what he terms the ‘penultimate’ and the ‘ultimate’ [2006,

pp. 158–159]), where an overfocus on ‘otherworldliness’ as wholly other devalues the ‘this-worldly’ responsibility of humans to act for God, neighbour, and the world in the here and now. ‘By this-worldliness’, Bonhoeffer explains, ‘I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities’ (2010, p. 370; cf. Floyd, 2005, p. 55).

To say that the Kingdom of God is divine gift ought not to come to the detriment of humans taking it on as their task; indeed, one demands the other. God’s gift requires response (Williams, 2018, p. 196), and it is this summons to *responsible* action that makes Bonhoeffer’s Christology a much more inhabitable theology – compared to that of Barth – for the lives of the faithful in history, the present moment included. What do I mean by ‘inhabitable’ theology? Rowan Williams writes that the value of the Christological doctrine, like that of other doctrines, lies not in its being a compelling argument about the nature of reality deduced ‘from readily available evidence’, but in its capacity to offer a ‘coherent context for human living’. Doctrines ‘make sense, not first as an explanation of things but as a credible environment for action and imagination’ (2018, p. xi).

Inherent in the question of who Jesus Christ is for us today is the notion that Christ is active in the world now. The question for a Christian, then, becomes how to discern and imagine Christ in the world – and how to actively inhabit this Christ-reality. In the second half of the twentieth century, we witnessed two major liberation movements (co-)led by Christian ministers who were able to imagine and actively take responsibility for Christ-reality in the world: the civil rights movement in the US, led by Martin Luther King Jr., and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, together with the post-apartheid truth and reconciliation process, co-led by Desmond Tutu. Have these movements brought about the Kingdom of God on earth? Clearly not. It would be difficult to deny, however, that they have transformed their societal structures to be more aligned with Kingdom values.

One is still left with the question of ‘how’ when it comes to discernment. What criteria might one employ to avoid what Bonhoeffer termed ‘compromise’ and ‘radical’ solutions (2006, p. 159) – i.e., domesticating the otherness of God by positively identifying the divine with a particular ideological project, and,

conversely, categorically rejecting the possibility that the purposes of the transcendent might coincide with any human endeavour? This is the question to which I turn in the concluding section of my theological reflection.

### **The crucial task of discernment**

Bonhoeffer's ethics is rooted in the unifying conception of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection that marks his Christology. This unity is crucial for ethics, as an exclusive focus on the incarnation, the 'this-worldly' expression of Christian identity, carries the danger of co-optation by political ideologues ('compromise'; here Bonhoeffer echoes Barth's criticism of liberal theology), whereas the sole attention on the cross and the resurrection can lead to a dangerous 'otherworldliness' in Christian thought (radical detachment), which, as it has already been noted, discourages people from assuming moral responsibility for the life in the here and now (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 370). In order to understand what the inbreaking of God's reality in the creation might look like (to discern where Christ is active in the world and thereby enable our participation in Christ-reality), one must refer to the ultimate event of divine reality's inbreaking in historical time: Jesus's life, cross, and resurrection. For Bonhoeffer, the implications of the historical Christ-event for ethics are clear: God's incarnational presence is that of the suffering and humiliated Jesus. And to discern where Christ is present in the world is to view the world 'from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering' (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 52).

When taking action in the world, it appears that, for Bonhoeffer, the primary criterion for discernment is whether a Christian aligns with the interests of the powerful or with those who hold the least power and suffer the greatest harm. This does not mean that the interests of these two groups must necessarily diverge. When they do, however – as with, on one side, the fossil fuel industry and the governments of wealthy nations who profit from the status quo, and on the other, nature and the world's poorest, whose existence and livelihoods are threatened by inaction – activist Christians like Sue Parfitt have no doubt where their allegiance ought to lie.

Bonhoeffer, however – despite the popular overemphasis on his involvement in the coup plot that entailed tyrannicide (Rayson,

2020, p. 249) – was not *a priori* opposed to ‘the state’ or to the duty of upholding the secular order of governance. Quite the contrary. He did not view political life as a fundamentally ethically corrupting or spiritually opaque sphere of existence to be rendered obsolete by grace. Rather, the life of grace is made manifest in what he calls ‘mandates’ (Bonhoeffer, 2006, p. 388ff): the forms of human sociality – work, family, state, and church – each potentially a ‘vehicle of God’s own life among us’ (Williams, 2018, p. 204; cf. Kung, 2025, p. 3; Rasmussen, 1999, pp. 221–223). Civic agency is not only a legitimate site but the primary one for Christian discipleship, and the government’s mandate is ‘to protect human beings from the chaos that sin causes’ (Bonhoeffer, quoted in Kung, 2025, p. 2). When the state fails in its divine duty to protect its citizens and instead causes harm, the Christian duty becomes one of active disobedience.

In his 1933 article ‘The Church and the Jewish Question’, Bonhoeffer outlines three courses of action Christians are divinely mandated to undertake when faced with harmful state action: first, ‘questioning the state [...] and holding the state responsible for what it does’; second, engaging in the ‘service to the victims of the state’s actions’; and third, ‘not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel, but to seize the wheel itself. Such an action would be direct political action on the part of the church’ (Bonhoeffer, quoted in Rayson, 2020, pp. 248–249; cf. Williams, 2018, pp. 200–212). Seizing the wheel means throwing a spanner in the works – an act of deliberate disruption, of lawbreaking. This was the logic behind the coup that Bonhoeffer helped plan, which ultimately cost him his life. In contexts such as that faced by Christians in Nazi Germany, breaking the law becomes the means of affirming divinely mandated lawfulness.

Sue Parfitt’s rationale behind the ‘violence’ she inflicted on the Magna Carta echoes Bonhoeffer’s conviction that, in some circumstances, violating the law does not constitute lawlessness. Rather, there are contexts that compel one to break the law ‘to sanctify it’, situations in which the ‘suspension of the law [...] serves its true fulfilment’ (Bonhoeffer, 2006, pp. 297–298). Parfitt’s conviction of the legitimacy of her actions was strengthened by scriptural examples of Jesus’s lawbreaking, such as his ‘overturning the tables of the money changers and opposing the corruption and self-serving lifestyle of the rich’ (Parfitt, 2025). Bonhoeffer’s notion of a divinely

mandated disregard for the law was likewise scripturally rooted; for example, he pointed to Jesus's questioning of the obedience owed to parents and his violation of the Sabbath (Rayson, 2020, p. 257).

Bonhoeffer, however, never presumed to positively know the will of God or to be the arbiter of good and evil, which, as he points out, is the archetypal human sin (2010, p. 277). Rather, he considered the 'ultimate ignorance of one's own goodness or evil, together with dependence upon grace' to be 'an essential characteristic of responsible historical action' (p. 268). Demonstrating 'civil courage' by freely taking action on behalf of the other, along with the willingness to 'become a sinner in that venture', while relying not on the assuredness of one's own righteousness but on God's mercy and forgiveness (Bonhoeffer, 2010, pp. 11–12), is what distinguishes faith-anchored action for justice from self-assured political projects and ultimately safeguards the Gospel from being co-opted by ideology.

Although Christian life is 'always the life in the penultimate' – i.e. in the finite reality of the here and now – it is nonetheless a life both *rooted in* and *lived in anticipation of* the ultimate (Bonhoeffer, 2006, p. 170). Bonhoeffer's affirmation of the sanctity of the 'this-worldly' serves as a summons to act for justice, while his simultaneous recognition of the 'merely preparatory nature' of the penultimate liberates human agents from the hubristic belief that they can bring about God's Kingdom by their own efforts (Van den Heuvel, 2017, p. 145). For Bonhoeffer, in the words of John de Gruchy, the role of Christian formation is to 'develop a passion for that which God alone makes possible' (2024, p. 4). And to develop mature discernment is, consequently, to realise that not only can we never be self-sufficient agents of change, but also that – even while acknowledging we are only ever God-enabled – the certainty that we are positively God-led is quite another matter.

In conclusion, while I have little doubt that Sue Parfitt and other courageous Christian activists for environmental justice intentionally inhabit Christ-reality today – through their sacrificial identification with the suffering and powerless, their challenge to a defensive Church, and their reaffirmation of divinely mandated lawfulness by exposing the lawbreaking impunity of the powerful – one ought nonetheless to hold the tension inherent in the life of the penultimate with greater humility, surrendering to God's judgement without lapsing into self-righteousness. Such humility

is a necessary counterweight in discerning who Jesus Christ is for us today, enabling action for justice while avoiding, as much as any human can ever hope to, the self-justifying trappings of ideology.

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# Speaking Truth to Power: The Power of Activism

HELEN BURNETT

*'Don't worry about being effective. Just concentrate on being faithful to the truth.'*

The words of a modern-day saint, Dorothy Day – and yet climate activists *do* worry about being effective. We do want to change the world; certainly, we want to challenge a world dominated by billionaires and the power of the fossil fuel industry. As the impact of climate breakdown unfolds upon those who did least to create it, the climate movement struggles to 'speak truth to power' because power isn't listening! At the same time, I go about my life trying to be faithful to the truth I see revealed in a first century Palestinian Jew. What does this look like?

When I am in 'parish priest' mode I carry a large black handbag, when in 'protesting priest' mode I change to a red backpack. While reflecting on ten years of dog-collared, visible presence in the climate movement, I considered the changing contents of that backpack. The contents of the handbag have remained largely the same, perhaps an indication that parish life and pastoral care remain constants. By contrast, the contents of my backpack have changed to adapt to a changing world: a world whose invisible fractures are daily more visible and where those in power are exercising increasingly draconian means of suppression.

Now I always carry a 'bust card', leave all my ID at home; sometimes I use a burner phone. The pack always has water, a first aid kit and an emergency blanket, snacks and a book. As this suggests, things have changed in the activist world, not least because of the 2022 Police, Crime and Sentencing Bill.<sup>1</sup> There are however some constants, and here I hope to explore both the changes and the constants. A thread that runs throughout has to be Christ's call to stand with the vulnerable and marginalised.

We should live in such a way that our lives wouldn't make much sense if the gospel were not true. (Dorothy Day)

What that looks and feels like will change according to context, but the call remains clear. In the context of a climate and biodiversity crisis, the vulnerable are those least responsible for the damage – and the marginalised now includes those species threatened with extinction.

In 2018 the publication of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report<sup>2</sup> and its front-page coverage in *The Guardian* newspaper (Watts, 2018) catapulted my climate activism to new levels. As the emergency became increasingly urgent, so too did the need for action. I had already been involved in a small way in the anti-fracking movement in the Surrey Hills where I live and with the Syrian Resettlement Scheme, so when I found a diary entry for the Quaker Meeting Hall in Dorking, I thought it was for a Sanctuary City event. Instead, I found myself in a 'Rising Up' gathering (Commonweal, 2018). This was the beginning of Extinction Rebellion (XR) as a movement. Its roots were surprisingly, but intentionally, spiritual and so I stayed, drawn in by the emphasis on the climate crisis as both a spiritual and environmental crisis. Extinction Rebellion is now morphing into new and divergent pathways but at the time it provided me with a home. For over five years my XR family often felt more authentically Christ-like than my church family. I had found the ones who gave me life. Here we wept, struggled, organised for change, for justice. Here we dreamt of God's kingdom. Suddenly my clerical collar and my backpack were in constant use, and the liturgies of my 'workplace' found new authenticity on the streets. My prayer life evolved into something far more public than I could ever have imagined and I found treasure in the tarmac. To this day I find myself most quickly connected to deep contemplation when I sit or kneel on a pavement.

Since 2018 I have been involved in many forms of activism. I have been arrested, I have been yelled at, I have been told multiple times to 'get a job', been called a crusty, a terrorist and much worse. I have sat through the night outside the Houses of Parliament, slept on Edgware Road, celebrated Eucharist in Whitehall, Trafalgar Square and Parliament Square, washed feet on Maundy Thursday at Marble Arch, carried Noah's Ark with Chris Packham, prayed on

the pavement outside St Paul's Cathedral with Rowan Williams, prostrated myself over the secret HS2 tunnels in Euston Square, unfurled giant posters in the National Gallery, let off flares, issued Citizens' Arrests on CEO's<sup>3</sup> and been moved on multiple times by the police. The list goes on and merely mirrors the actions of millions of concerned citizens the world over.

I learnt very quickly that resistance isn't a single-tracked beast, but an ecosystem. It depends on the visible and invisible, a mycelium network of people and ideas. Extinction Rebellion had a very dramatic and colourful arrival in the public square, but it was built out of such an ecosystem, a collection of people willing to dream and think outside the box that the powerful would like to keep firmly shut. This wonderful mobilisation of love is beautifully described in two publications that followed the early rebellions: *This is Not a Drill* (2019) and *Time to Act* (2020). The fact that SPCK wanted to document the input of faith communities to these protests speaks volumes (Extinction Rebellion, 2019; Williams, 2020).

Here are just a few examples of the tactics used by the climate emergency movement over years of campaigning, protesting, marching.

### **Colourful public demonstrations and occupations:**

Symbolic actions like the Funeral Procession down the Mall to deliver a letter to Queen Elizabeth II which included faith representatives such as myself in cassock and collar, sandwiched between a goth mourner and a Buddhist monk.

### **Silence:**

This was perhaps the most unexpected, but we held something called 'The Pause'. Bells would ring, the procession would halt and for two minutes everything stopped. The power of this shared silence was extraordinary and brought me some of my most profound and prayerful protest moments.

### **Liturg (symbolic action):**

Performance and ritual remain an important aspect of climate activism and harks back to the 'Clown Army' and other similar resistance grounded in theatre. Clown Army is described as 'a new methodology of civil disobedience, merging the ancient art of

clowning with contemporary tactics of nonviolent direct action, which became an international protest phenomenon in the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup> For the faith communities it provided an opportunity to take our traditions, rituals and liturgies out onto the streets. It was in this type of action that I was most surprised by the welcome of the wider activist community. On Palm Sunday I carried Palm Crosses into Paternoster Square to add to the offerings; on Maundy Thursday I invited clergy to come to Marble Arch with me after the Chrism Service and there we washed the feet of dozens of tired and dirty rebels; on Good Friday we conducted a creation-themed 'Stations of the Cross'. All these and more attracted genuine curiosity and engagement and came to life in ways I have never experienced within the walls of a church.

### **Pilgrimage:**

I have found enormous power in the ancient tradition of pilgrimage. Banned by Thomas Cromwell in 1538, it has undergone a revival in this country and has become a vital part of my own spiritual practice. Perhaps its most notable use within the climate movement has been linked to the annual Conference of the Parties, hosted in a different country each year with a large contingent walking to Paris in 2015. In 2021 I was part of a group that set out from St James' Piccadilly to walk to COP26 in Glasgow. The impact of walking, praying, singing, sleeping, eating, laughing together over 500 miles and 56 days was, unlike the distance, unquantifiable.<sup>5</sup>

### **Vigil:**

Once in Glasgow we held a 10-day silent vigil outside the Blue Zone. Vigil has become a core part of the witness and work of Christian Climate Action but is not limited merely to the Christian community. Space is often shared with other faiths, and as with 'The Pause', is a powerful counter to the cacophony often associated with protest. Vigil, especially when held around the clock, powerfully impacts both participant and passerby.

### **Boycott:**

Economic boycotting is familiar to many from the campaign against apartheid in South Africa. Boycott and the naming and shaming of corporations and big businesses who underpin the fossil fuel industry

is vital and achievable for those who do not participate in more public forms of dissent. There are many Christian groups advocating for divestment and this is something that is accessible at a parish level.

### **Civil disobedience:**

This is perhaps the most contentious aspect of protest for those who do not believe we should be disruptive. It puts activists beyond the pale, since the changes in protest law it has put activists in prison. Civil disobedience or Non-violent Direct Action has long been part of Christian witness, most notably in the Civil Rights Movement as supported by Martin Luther King, a vast company of indigenous land defenders and the Roman Catholic priest-activists Dan and Philip Berrigan and Father John Dear. The most recent and obvious English example lies with the Suffragette Movement, now celebrated by those who legislate *against* peaceful protest. Today, we still have in our midst activists who stand on the shoulders of these figures.

Civil Disobedience is not an easy calling, but it means taking seriously the prayer of penitence many of us respond to every Sunday, 'Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith, firmly resolved to *keep God's commandments* and to live in love and peace with all'. In the face of the gross injustices of our vulture capitalist economy (Blakeley, 2024) and an erosion of our legal systems, then keeping God's commandments may well challenge us to break secular commandments. We have seen rows of clergy and others arrested as they kneel before the deportation centres of Minneapolis, putting their bodies between ICE agents and those they seek violently to deport. As climate breakdown displaces increasing numbers of people and the global superpowers go to war over resources we will, I believe, be called to levels of resistance that require a depth of courage reminiscent of the early church under persecution.

### **Song:**

I include song as a means of protest and a glimpse of joy, because on so many occasions it has been singing that has given me courage, connection with others and reminded me of those who have gone before. We have a strong tradition of protest song, and their lyrics both link us to that history and also can be reconfigured to suit our times. Billy Bragg recently shared a new song in response to the far-right attempt to reclaim Christmas Carol Concert (Bragg, 2025)

and the adaptation of a Julian of Norwich quote by Penny Stone has brought me calm and comfort on many occasions: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, for there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go” (Stone, 2025). Scripture of course references song frequently: perhaps most well-known is Psalm 31.24, and of course the efficacy of singing is mentioned in the Letters to the Ephesians (5.19) and Colossians (3.16).

The awful truth is, however, that despite all this the planet is still hurtling towards a projected three degrees above pre-industrial levels of CO<sub>2</sub>. I now visit friends who are in prison for their actions. I have walked a 26-mile pilgrimage from HMP Bronzefield to the Royal Courts of Justice, led prayers outside Woolwich Crown Court, held Ash Wednesday services outside the Department of Energy. I continue to do this as coral reefs die, as parts of the Amazon are emitting more carbon than they absorb, as we record significant weakening of the circulation of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, and scientists are becoming increasingly concerned that a climate tipping point may be close. Meanwhile, there are rich and powerful Climate Deniers controlling parts of our media; and we see an increase in Climate Denial within sections of the Christian community, the flagship being GB News, part-owned by Paul Marshall who also funds the growing Holy Trinity Brompton empire.

### **Sleepless nights, a criminal conviction, miles of walking, hours of vigil – all for nothing?**

Fast forward seven years from Rising Up in Dorking to 18 September 2025, and my diary lists a conference at Southwark Cathedral, this time though I have also noted down the topic as ‘Preaching Truth to Power’. The guest preacher and panellist was Bishop Marriann Edgar Budde whose book *How We Learn to be Brave* (2023) I had just read. On the same day Christian Climate Action were aiming to occupy cathedral towers as part of our ‘Stop Crucifying Creation’.<sup>6</sup> After twelve months of planning, small groups of activists were to take cathedral tower tours, drop banners from the top and then refuse to come down until the Dean or Bishop engaged with them. My own small part in the campaign was to stand up in front of the speakers and attendees in Southwark Cathedral and hold a ‘Stop

Crucifying Creation' banner which I pulled out of the same backpack that in the spring of 2018 had contained a copy of Pope Francis' encyclical 'Laudato Si'. On this occasion I was relieved to be greeted with applause and was even afforded a moment at the microphone.

In her autobiographical book, Bishop Budde describes the accumulated decisions of a lifetime preparing her for moments when she felt called to 'speak truth to power'. She suggests that the accumulation of experiences and the practice of small acts of courage lead to a readiness for bravery when it is needed. All our lives are a preparation for those moments when we are called to witness with a courage we did not know we had. In the Christian tradition, I think this is how we experience that invisible force of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit which like a sacrament becomes, through the actions of human bodies, the outward and visible sign of an inward and visible mystery.

When we see acts of witness, courage and resistance they can often appear spontaneous, but almost always they are the result of training, thinking, prayer and organising. In a recent essay 'What Technology takes from us – and how to take it back', Rebecca Solnit calls for a greater connection with the natural world, with physical labour and other forms of embodied activity. Immersion in the wisdom of ancient religious and therapeutic practices as well as cultivating connections with the non-human world are integral to a recovery of our true humanity, reminding us that 'there are many kinds of consciousness and that our species is itself not alone.' She continues: 'A lot of spiritual teachings are simple; the challenge is to live them. A meaning, a truth, can sink into you, get incorporated into your worldview in a way that can be transformative, or not.' (Solnit, 2026)

However, when the threat is not a concrete thing, such as an ICE agent abducting a child, a President in a pew, it feels incredibly hard to know how to intervene. I cannot hold back the flood waters in Bangladesh, or make the crops grow in a drought – but I do know that my small acts can have ripple effects. Above all, in the words of Audre Lorde, 'without community, there is no liberation'. I do know that I can do more in community, that I need to remember my own interconnectedness and my kinship with all things, that I am part of a mycelium of networks, communities, activities that are rooted in hope, and that hope is a verb. I need also to remember the foundational story that motivates me, the good news that shows us

that God is where the suffering is, that God is, in the words of Father Richard Rohr, *'in all things'*. 'Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply.' (Rohr, 2026)

I remind myself that in the gospel narratives we find accounts of Jesus' varied approach to healing and relating to the people he encountered and the fractures in the world he experienced, and that after three years of such engagement Jesus' ministry culminated in the violent overturning of the tables in the temple. The example we have in the gospels is a community of prayer, a group living under empire, walking, eating, resting, praying together, laughing. Their preparation for spreading the good news, for becoming people of 'the way' was through their hearts, minds and bodies. Their presence in the public square was one of vulnerability in a material sense but strength in a spiritual and emotional sense.

Today, the powerful may not be listening but people are listening to each other, are supporting each other, learning from each other, mobilising together in a rich and mixed ecology of activism.

As well as some notable theologians, I have taken great strength from the work of thinkers outside the church: in particular adrienne maree brown on Emergent Strategy (brown, 2017) and Joanna Macy on Active Hope.<sup>7</sup>

For successful movements, we need to develop strong, action-oriented communities that understand that their analysis and work cannot be limited to one struggle. Together we must be advancing the frontline of our vision for a sustainable, just world. (brown, 2017, p. 62)

As a climate activist I am constantly challenged as to how best to use my time and energy to raise awareness of the systemic embedded injustice of the climate collapse we see all around us. As someone who lives in one of the wealthiest most privileged societies in the world, how do I level my own behaviour with the uninvited sacrifices and harm that the lifestyle of the post-industrial nation of which I am a part is forcing those who have done least and benefitted least from the extractivism that has caused this breakdown?

Experiencing the mixed ecology of activism through the lens

of my own faith has been and continues to be an adventure from which I am constantly learning. This is nurtured by a belief ‘in the transformational power of community to change lives and the world. Only in community can justice and love be done.’<sup>8</sup> Above all else, the most powerful experience for me has been this building of solidarity and community, resulting in a shaking off of the isolation of despair that so easily pervades in a world where our sense of connection with both human and other-than-human lives is increasingly under threat.

### **Extinction Rebellion Prayer (October 2019)**

*Truth telling God,  
weave a thread of love and courage  
among those who stand for creation this week.  
May they know the sound of your voice in all they do.  
May your love echo across the streets of London  
so that the sap of change can rise in the mess of the city,  
and seep into the corridors of power  
to bring the dawning of a new day where the web of life is  
sanctified, renewed and replenished.  
Amen, Lord have Mercy.<sup>9</sup>*

### **Poem-Prayer for Horse Hill (December 2019)**

*Here we stand,  
pushed centre stage and centre road by bullies and by their greed.  
We stand in solidarity with all who have encountered  
aggression and intimidation when advocating for peaceful protest,  
for safeguarding our sacred earth,  
for all the Davids against all the Goliaths.  
So peace-making, justice-seeking, vulnerable God,  
we stand as vulnerable witnesses to a world desecrated  
and irrevocably damaged  
by a system that traps and enthrals us.  
Give us strength to stand here and pray,  
to hold this space at this time for all that is sacred here and now,  
beneath our feet, beyond this fencing, out of site.  
May your deep peace*

*not a pathetic limp peace, but a vigorous  
peace filled with justice and love  
and held deep deep in our hearts  
strengthen us in our community here,  
as we pray for change  
as we pray for an end to all  
that harms the fragile web of life.*<sup>10</sup>

*Helen Burnett vicar of St Peter and St Paul's Church in Chaldon, Surrey  
and a member of Extinction Rebellion and Christian Climate Action.*

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# Book Reviews

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## **Preserving the Penultimate: The Church and Healthcare in the Light of Bonhoeffer's and Schweitzer's Theology and Practice**

Robert Jaggs-Fowler

James Clarke & Co., 2026, 356 pp., pbk., £25.00.

Did the Church of England cede too much ground to the political sphere in its endorsement of the Attlee government's creation of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948? Is it time for the Church of England to reclaim some of that lost territory, by increasing its contribution to the provision of healthcare? Robert Jaggs-Fowler thinks that it is, and his latest book mounts a series of original, penetrating and skilfully presented theologically-based arguments in support of that position. It's a perspective that chimes with other work that has been done by writers such as Phillip Blond and James Noyes, *Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England* (London: Republica, 2013).

From the outset, it is worth reminding ourselves that the Church of England's contribution to the NHS has been, and remains, significant. Many of its hospital chaplains are from the Church of England; there are a number of Church of England representatives on its ethics committees; and some of its non-executive directors are Church of England ministers. However, Jaggs-Fowler, a qualified General Practitioner and Anglican Priest, believes that the Church of England should go further and become a healthcare provider, albeit within specific areas of physical and mental health: 'Drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, care of the elderly, dementia care and hospice care are a few example areas for consideration' (4).

To this end, he suggests, 'the successful operation of Church of England schools provides a useful comparator and precedent as a possible model to emulate' (4). Some might find this comparator as less than adequate, arguably understating the differences between the delivery of education in schools, and the provision of healthcare. For example, I have a daughter who is a senior Mental Health Nurse in the NHS working in the field of dementia care, and there are no less

than 12 professions directly involved in providing care to patients in her unit. This is just one of several, key, HR differences between the delivery of healthcare and the delivery of educational provision in schools. There are others – e.g. clinical, legal, technological, ethical, financial, managerial, cultural and practical – that I suggest would need to be explored as part of a comprehensive feasibility study, if the Church of England were ever to become a provider of dementia care. However, in fairness to Jaggs-Fowler, providing a feasibility study of this kind is not his stated purpose; rather, it is to provide a theological ‘line of reasoning for why the worldwide Christian Church should seek to have an active, substantial role in the provision of healthcare within the twenty-first century’ (3), and, in this regard, his book excels.

Jaggs-Fowler sets his theological perspective on healthcare in context, showing how, since its inception, the Christian Church has played a part in responding to poverty and the healthcare challenges stemming from it. He adduces how, in medieval times, ‘the Christian Church led the field in terms of developing hospitals and nursing care for the poor’ (55). He points to how, in modern times, there are examples in Europe of church-run hospitals in Germany and, to a lesser extent, in France (65). Drawing on the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Albert Schweitzer, including their different but overlapping perspectives on Christology, he argues that they both believed in the incarnational reality of God in the modern world. Indeed, it was this thinking that had led Schweitzer ‘to his work as a medical missionary’ (204). It is this thinking that Jaggs-Fowler argues, provides ‘the solid foundation on which today’s institutional church should be rebuilding its importance and relevance in the modern world; the platform from which it can demonstrate the spiritual force of the life of Jesus through its emulation of his work within the Church’s involvement in twenty-first century healthcare’ (224).

Jaggs-Fowler also draws on the emphasis that Bonhoeffer placed on the need for the Church, ‘to be active in its purpose and not simply the focus of a passive faith’ (304), in support of his view that the Church of England should become more *practical* in its role in the provision of healthcare. Indeed, from Jaggs-Fowler’s perspective, this would be one way of redressing the decline in its status that it has witnessed in the post-war period. He points to how Schweitzer

recognised the need in the modern age for primacy to be placed, not on ‘preaching the religion of love, but practicing it’ (304). This meant engaging actively with suffering in the world through the active provision of healthcare.

I recommend Jaggs-Fowler’s book for being an original, authoritative and stimulating study in the theology of healthcare, which should become essential reading for anyone who professes an interest in the role of the Church in the provision of healthcare in the twenty-first century. However, if the Church of England were to seek to acquire a more practical role in the delivery of healthcare, beyond that which it currently provides to the NHS, I suggest it would need more than a theological justification on which to base its case. Contrary to Jaggs-Fowler’s contention, it is my view that its well-established role in the provision of education does not demonstrate that, ‘there is no reason why the Church of England cannot do the same within healthcare’ (304). A much wider-ranging study would be required for that premise to be explored in the depth that would be needed.

*Joseph Forde*  
*Urban Theology Union, Sheffield*

### **A Theology of Migration: The Bodies of Refugees and the Body of Christ**

Daniel Groody

Orbis Books, 2022, 319pp., pbk, £25.95.

The author’s impressive academic and ecumenical credentials, the book’s small print, 300+ pages, and physical density, plus an introductory letter of personal recommendation from the Pope, might appear daunting – but don’t be put off. This wide-ranging exploration of the theology of migration draws us in on page one, with an engaging anecdote about Fr. Groody’s experience as a rookie Jesuit priest in a parish with a substantial population of recent arrivals to the USA. Summoned to rush a pregnant Mexican teenager to hospital, he presents himself as a ‘family friend’ (on the grounds that ‘Father’ might be confusing) and stays with her as labour progresses, whilst holding a whispered telephone conversation about the funeral of an

even younger suicide victim to take place next day. 'Just another day in an immigrant parish', he reassures his colleague; and (spoiler alert) he also provides the happy ending: 25 years later, in the middle of writing this book, he conducted the wedding of baby Crista.

Groody has a superb knowledge of the background and history of migration, and this is skilfully woven in to add interest rather than to bog down the text. The book is creatively organised according to stages of the Eucharistic liturgy, drawing parallels between (for example) 'Gathering Narratives: The Human Face of Migration', 'Biblical Narratives: Migration and the Christian Scriptures', 'Eucharistic Narratives: Migration and the Body of Christ', and ending with 'Go in Peace: A Sacramental Vision of Migration'. In the process, Groody explores key Bible texts (suggesting how to use all four potential readings for the daily Mass, including the responsorial psalm, and rounding off with an excursion into the Canterbury Tales) and presents a eucharistic theology which is applicable well beyond the single issue of migration.

Scholarship is worn lightly, although there are footnotes aplenty for those moved to pursue them. Journalistic interviews with border guards, aid workers, and officers in migrant detention centres are set alongside quotes from classical and modern theologians (Rowan Williams features significantly in the final chapter), papal encyclicals (there's no hiding the Catholic heritage) and politicians from both sides of the Atlantic. Facts and points are sometimes repeated, but this does make it possible to dip into the book, rather than read it all in one go. In terms of visual presentation, it's a huge pity that the maps overlaying the movement of peoples in the Bible with modern country boundaries are so small and faint.

The perspective is definitely that of an analyst from the USA, with far more examples, harrowing descriptions, and criticisms of immigration policy drawn from there than from Europe. For those of us used to considering immigration from the perspective of a former imperial or colonial power, the approach from a nation founded on drawing in and offering opportunities to immigrants, but which is also affected by the legacy of slavery, is interesting and subtly different. Groody reflects the American tendency to view Europe as an entirety – Britain, England and the UK don't even figure in the index, though I'm sure they are mentioned somewhere – but migration into the EU is not ignored. In a substantial section on hazardous

Mediterranean crossings, variously reported shipwrecks, Greek and Italian refugee camps, and an emphasis on Lampedusa in particular, there is an interview with Franco Tuccio (the carpenter inspired to make crosses from the wood of migrants' shipwrecks) and quotes from the Pope's speeches, especially on and about Lampedusa itself.

If there is an omission in this thoroughgoing analysis, it could be a lack of attention to the phenomena of people-trafficking and smuggling, extortion, slavery, and other criminal activities which both feed on and fuel the often lethally dangerous practice of 'illegal' movement between countries, and allow some influential stakeholders to present migration as a problem. In his enthusiasm to present it as a natural and inevitable part of human life, Groody sometimes seems to use 'migration' as a synonym for 'travelling' (for example, invoking Paul's missionary journeys, John the Baptist leaving home to preach on the banks of the Jordan, and Mary visiting Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea), which potentially dilutes his argument; but his recurrent motif of Jesus 'migrating' from Heaven to Earth in the incarnation is powerful and thought-provoking.

Finally, the book moves towards a 'solution' to something which, to Groody, should not be a problem at all. We need to challenge the idolatry of our materialistic and market-driven world view and focus on what it means to be human before God – which will, Groody admits, take a great deal more work.

This is an invaluable resource for understanding, thinking, praying and preaching about something which is rarely out of the headlines. Beyond this, it is an invaluable resource for understanding how incarnational theology and the sacraments can and should influence every aspect of Christian ethics and anthropology.

*Carol Wardman  
Ceredigion*

### **Do Small Groups Work? Biblical engagement and transformation**

Anna Creedon

SCM Press, 2021, pp.208, pbk, £65.

Recent sessions of the Church of England Synod have been not entirely satisfying 'live stream viewing' for those of us who care

about the public face of the Church and its commitment to truth, mutual respect, and theological wisdom.

Ongoing Church of England discussions about sexuality continue as a slow and contested movement towards accommodation of some kind of. The questions put by synod to the steering group in the Living in Love and Faith process revealed deep divisions about how far we might tolerate difference of views – a quality and charism that is (or has been) in the DNA of Anglicanism. We have seen a variety of approaches to theological and ecclesiological truth, and in particular the sheer complexity of the way we read the Bible. We approach these sacred texts so very differently. There are a multiplicity of ways in which Scripture has shaped our grasp of the gospel. We read the texts and use them through the lens of our own lives in their complex range of both seeing and unseeing, perception and incomprehension. The Bible stands at the centre of the life of the Church. So, how might we then engage with these sacred texts?

The organising question for this book – emerging out of doctoral research – is whether the context of a small group provides the necessary conditions for transformative biblical engagement to take place. We are invited into a space which explores the relationship between belief and practice. Bible study groups are an essential part of the life of many churches, but do they make any difference? How transformative are such groups and what is their impact on the people read the Bible together have?

So, the focus of this volume is this: to explore how the Bible might become a transformative text as read by ordinary Christians. What transformation means, how it happens and what might prevent it from happening set the learning journey. The focus of this work is the experience of ordinary readers, the world of ‘congregational hermeneutics’ and their encounter with Scripture as part of their life of faith.

Three small groups connected with Church of England churches form the data within which the research is conducted. Creedon carefully documents the process, defines key words, and undergirds the process with an understanding of theology and the theological tasks. The quality of reflexivity is demonstrated in the way that these processes are opened up for the reader, together with a careful set of definitions of key words. ‘Ordinary reader’ and ‘ordinary theology’ are defined as the theological beliefs and processes of believing that

find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education (5). There is also an awareness of the sheer variety of experience and knowledge possessed by a congregation (6). The reader is quickly brought into the complex and contested arena of how theology might be both defined and practised. We are reminded that in one fundamental sense that we are all theologians and practical theologians just by being active in the life of the church and by seeking to express a faithful Christian life in community and wider society.

This underlines how any context will shape interpretation, as will life experience. We are all bound up with a number of ways in which we decide what might be truthful, valid, authentic and faithful in Christian discipleship. The text and the reader have an interesting and complicated relationship! The reader can both bring the text into a clear focus as well as distort its meaning and implications for living.

Chapter 2 explores the concept of transformation from a biblical perspective and names some approaches to what transformative biblical engagement might look like. Chapter 3 discusses the nature of the small group, drawing from both social psychology and the field of education in order to understand the nature of such a group. Chapter 4 interrogates methodological assumptions and relates these to theology and other disciplines.

Creedon strongly demonstrates her ability as a practical theologian here, as she interrogates the nature of reflexivity and the limitations of the researcher's interpretive approach. This chapter is an important contribution to ethnographic research and any student wishing to examine human thought and interaction would do well to learn from the wisdom captured here. The process and methods of gathering data are carefully documented. The material is located within the wider context of the Church of England and the different church traditions that constitute the shape of Anglicanism. It is a model of how to conduct ethnographic research.

Chapter 5 includes data from the search and returns to explore the concept of transformation. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 deal with the key themes that emerge from the data. The use of the transcripts is illuminating and informative. Chapter 9 draws together the themes of the learning to highlight some of the practical and theological implications of the research. There is no clear or consistent purpose of why individuals join a group – it can often be simply for mutual

support. Power, expertise, censorship, variety, subjectivity, process become key elements of the discussion of the themes emerging from the data. As always there is more to be done and discovered.

This is a good book, carefully and astutely written. The rigorous attention to the details of the process of ethnographic research bears much fruit and offers seeds for further work. I hope Creedon continues on her journey of discovery and learning. Perhaps General Synod members might offer to be participants in future research?!

*James Woodward*

*Sarum College and The University of Winchester*

### **Vile Bodies: The Body in Christian Teaching, Faith and Practice**

Adrian Thatcher

SCM Press, 2023, pp.288, pbk, £35.

*Vile Bodies* is a well-researched, broad, yet potentially intimidating work that seeks to establish the role Christian theology and practice play in the abuse of those who have been marginalised. Adrian Thatcher looks to several areas of identity such as race, sexuality, and gender, drawing together historical and contemporary contexts to illustrate how an abusive bodily theology comes into being. To give an overview of the vast topics Thatcher illuminates in a short review would be impossible. Therefore, this review emphasises Thatcher's core argument whilst highlighting certain key chapters.

The central mast of Thatcher's argument is relatively straightforward. Christian theology has been a petri dish for attitudes that marginalise and abuse those who sit outside of the status quo. Historically speaking, it is these voices that have been absent from research on such lived experiences but have more recently been encouraged into the limelight. At best, this theological environment has silenced those whose lives run countercultural to the established theological norm; at worst, such abusive theologies have seen queer, black, female and otherwise othered bodies have been erased from the narrative. Part of their identity, as it becomes known socially, is denied legitimacy through a theological lens to ensure the control that the majority has over those bodies. Shame, guilt, and doubt shroud those who then become witnesses to their vileness; their

bodies become essentialised as different and problematic. That shame, the recognition of that vileness that Thatcher highlights so well, permeates into how Christians then theologise about their bodies. To what end, one might ask, must I change to be welcomed, to become included, to know wholeheartedly that I am loved if the form I seem to have been created into runs contrary to the normative theological voice?

Thatcher decides *not* to form an argument for the theological legitimacy of these 'vile' bodies. Consequently, this makes his work more challenging to learn from if the reader is not already starting from a place of affirmation of these identities. For example, while the role the church has played in legitimising the slave trade is almost without question re-contextualised as theologically misguided, the same cannot be so confidently said about the matters of sexuality and gender identity that Thatcher himself recognises as being a 'pressing issue' today. As a result, Thatcher is not looking to *convince* his readership that, for example, Christian ministers are to recognise same-sex marriage. Rather, the point of *Vile Bodies* is to accurately assess the role Christian theology and the Christian Church has had to play in systematic, quasi-theological, marginalisation.

Many of Thatcher's chapters are characterised by a different 'bodily' focus. Subsequently, each chapter works quite independently from the others (although, I would still encourage readers to read the full work to appreciate Thatcher's argument). Most interesting to me was the chapter on the so-called biblical picture of marriage, titled 'Some More New Testament Bodies'. Here, Thatcher looks to Paul's concept of marriage and how it runs counter-cultural to the assumed normal form of the nuclear family. Thatcher recognises Paul's argument as being one that assesses marriage to be a concession, and not the ideal Christian vocation - which is to celibacy. This is in stark contrast to a view of marriage as the healthy backbone to a family-centred church and seems to contradict Paul's later argument that husbands and wives are reflective of the headship of Christ and *his* church.

The chapter 'Pure Bodies' assesses these androcentric undertones and how the early church came to fear the female body. Sex with a woman was to be controlled and, if possible, avoided. This valorised the desire to be one with Christ through spiritual purity, in contrast with the earthly desires warned of by Paul. Virginity becomes the

mechanism for this valorisation; by the end of the second century, the Christian church left behind the uniting of heteronormative gendered differences through marriage for a firmly patriarchal form of Gnosticism that centred holiness as a rejection, and consequently *control*, of the female body.

A later chapter, titled 'Disgusting Male Bodies', continues with this control-based emphasis. Thatcher provides an overview of the sexual ethics during the Middle Ages concerning involuntary nocturnal emissions, or wet dreams, and the superstition these aroused. To summarise, monks who were committed to celibacy as an active choice to remain sexually 'pure' were troubled by this *uncontrollable* yet natural experience. Controlling sexual urges, in other words denying their sexuality, was seen to keep them pure and more Christlike. The fact that they *chose* to abstain from sexual desire was central to this purity. Consequently, these monastic communities found themselves unsure of how to manage the guilt this ethic produced when they experienced a wet dream. It is easy to find humour in such a frank discussion, yet Thatcher encourages his readers to take this seriously. The exhaustive introspection of the monk concerning involuntary sexuality arose from a theological environment that encouraged people to feel shame about their desires. In this context, the monk's guilty feelings suggest to him a lack of control over his sexuality and his body. The aim, even when unconscious, is bodily control.

In summary, Thatcher provides a frank and detailed account that spans much of Christian history concerning the way these 'vile' bodies have been controlled through guilt and shame. The aim of such practice has been the assertion that Christlike bodiliness exists as an attainable, yet costly, feat. Thatcher emphasises that Christians who do not reckon with Christianity's socio-cultural assumptions about purity will neglect how their theologies perpetuate harmful cultures of abuse.

*Harry Gibbins*  
*University of Aberdeen*

## **The Moral Life: Eight Lectures**

James Keenan

Georgetown University Press, 2023, xiv + 177pp. £9.99 (pbk).

James Keenan S.J. is a giant among Roman Catholic ethicists for three reasons, and so any new book by him comes with enormous expectations, which are magnificently fulfilled in this short volume. Keenan is, first, the most prolific Roman Catholic ethicist in the United States, and quite possibly anywhere. He has written or edited several dozen books and, now in his early seventies, has managed to write over half a dozen articles a year for decades, reading and citing ethics, or moral theology, both from Christian and secular sources, in Italian, German and Spanish, as well as English. Some of these articles are popular, designed to be read by those who know no theology, while others are dauntingly academic. His original dissertation at the Gregorian University, in Rome, was on Aquinas's distinction between what is good and what is right.

Secondly, Keenan has, with others, steered Boston College through the difficult thirty-five years of the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, during which Keenan was seen as a dangerous liberal (as a Vatican official told me personally over a decade ago). Boston College is now one of the pre-eminent centres of ethics in the Catholic world.

Thirdly, Keenan has helped founded Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC), holding conferences, teaching graduate students from every continent before they return to their home countries, and creating a website which publishes their work ([catholicethics.com](http://catholicethics.com)). There is simply nothing like this in either Anglican or Protestant ethics, as I discovered when I spoke at a conference linked to CTEWC in Vienna last year, where Kenyan, Philippino, Indian, North and South American and European graduate students and established scholars gathered to discuss 'multicultural ethics'.

All this makes Keenan one of the most influential Catholic theologians in the world, although he would reply that he is merely providing a voice for the worldwide church to speak from the grassroots, after centuries of centralisation and a top-down approach to theology. In this new book, he sets out to demonstrate how we should live the moral life. The book is made up of eight lectures, and

Keenan has deliberately preserved the style of the lecture, so the book reads vividly and directly. The lectures are the D'Arcy lectures, given at the Jesuit Campion Hall at Oxford University, and they contain both deeply Catholic references and moral philosophy from the contemporary United States and Germany.

He defines the central concept of 'vulnerability' as being open to being wounded, rather than having been wounded, and so weak and precarious (25). Keenan's great skill is in weaving feminist moral philosophy on vulnerability (Judith Butler and Erinn Gilson) with Catholic theology on divine vulnerability. Here we see Keenan's great ability to bring together secular philosophy and the Catholic tradition, much as Aquinas did centuries before him. If we can become truly open, where the experience of grief may make us truly vulnerable, we can become persons who recognise other people in their need and our conscience can direct us to act justly. That is a highly compressed account of the first four chapters, where grief, vulnerability, recognition and conscience lead us to become moral persons.

Along the way Keenan also engages with the German philosopher Alex Honneth on 'the theory of recognition', and the German feminist theologian (now a professor in Chicago) Hille Haker. The range of Keenan's thought is extraordinary, but what is admirable (and a sign of his sure touch) is that in the foundational chapters (on grief, vulnerability, recognition and conscience) he does not simply use secular arguments for the second, theological, half of the book to build on, but rather in each chapter has biblical, theological, and deeply personal accounts of each concept juxtaposed with philosophical ones. Who else could put the early modern *ars moriendi* tradition (Erasmus and Jeremy Taylor) alongside Judith Butler on grieving? The frequent citation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Richard Niebuhr shows his ecumenical range.

The second part of the book is explicitly theological, moving through discipleship, grace and sin, the virtues, and finally to the communion of saints. It is deeply biblical, and aware of the need to practice discipleship in a fallen world, especially with the United States' history of racism, and gun violence. Part of these chapters goes over familiar ground for those who know Keenan's work, including the importance of the moral theologians in the 1930s and 1940s who abandoned the sterile world of the moral manuals for confessors

and put in place a moral theology which united biblical exegesis and the virtues.

It is interesting to compare this short book (175 pages, including index and bibliography) with Timothy Sedgwick's book which appeared this year. Again, Sedgwick is in his seventies, a very distinguished lay North American Anglican ethicist, and again he addresses the question of 'why should we be moral?'. Sedgwick uses images, imagination, memories and the practices of prayer and worship in ascetical disciplines and communal worship. Again, he sees the key concept in the moral life as being awakened, or challenged, to be responsive, and he uses the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz and Martin Heidegger to fashion his account of *Saving Memory and the Body of Christ* (the book's title, and spanning only 81 pages). Like Keenan, he sees human life as potentially moral, if the self-consciousness of the person and the use of language can be put at the service of another person who puts a moral claim on us. Like Keenan, perhaps even more so, he is deeply biblical and sacramental and sees worship as the crucible of ethics. And, finally, Sedgwick is very aware of the fallen nature of the United States society they both inhabit.

These are only suggestions for a future dialogue. What gives me hope for the future of the church in the secular, and sometimes facile, world in which we now live is that both these distinguished ethicists at the end of their working life see no difficulty in making a case, valid quite irrespective of religious belief, for the truth and coherence of the moral life as being how we are most deeply human, and build on this through scripture and worship to a case for Christian discipleship. That is a very encouraging note on which to end, with profound gratitude to them both for their life and work.

*Peter Sedgwick  
Cardiff University*



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**The Direct Debit Guarantee**



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 - If you receive a refund you are not entitled to, you must pay it back when Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd asks you to
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