

Commentary

SUMMER 2012

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argues that same
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marks the end of
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**Oak Hill
College**

Living faith in a secular society

Mike Ovey, Principal of Oak Hill, introduces the underlying theme of this edition of Commentary: the distinctive challenges Christians face today from secularism



Disorientation comes in all shapes and sizes. It might be the blow to the head in a minor car collision which leaves you ok on the outside but reeling inside. Sometimes it comes in more subtle but perhaps equally disturbing forms.

One such experience, for me, is looking at the night sky in Australia. When I first moved there, so much was familiar, but I remember looking up at the night sky and finding it vaguely disturbing and dizzying. Then the penny dropped. No Plough, no North Star.

The things I had seen since childhood and which gave me a sense of my bearings, simply weren't there. I couldn't find north anymore from the night sky.

I suspect in some ways a similar disorientation has crept up on Christians in the UK. It's not just the technological change, or the global village, or the Eurozone. Yes, they are dizzying enough to make it seem as though we're in a foreign country. But it's also the sense that, almost suddenly, our culture is one that no longer has a sense of its bearings. The North Star, so to speak, has vanished from its night sky.

Very frequently, and I think rightly, we associate this with the rise of secularism, the religion that gets by by

pretending it isn't one. Like other religions it can have its attractive features, even if they are not saving features. And like other religions, it has distinctive challenges for

A disorientation has crept up on Christians in the UK. It's not just the technological change, or the global village, or the Eurozone. Yes, they are dizzying enough to make it seem as though we're in a foreign country. But it's also the sense that, almost suddenly, our culture is one that no longer has a sense of its bearings.

Christians. So our aim in this edition of *Commentary* is to explore some of those features.

Linking them together, perhaps, is the issue of emptiness. Obviously secularism tends to work on emptying the public square of God. But the thing is, if you start emptying something of God, what happens?

The articles in this edition start to pick up some of those themes. Peter Sanlon (page 10) notes the emptying of emotional depth in the 'secular city' and how Christians are called to something better. Kirsty Birkett (page 22) takes up the key theme of how secular rationalism empties human knowing of a key component, namely faith.

Nick Tucker (page 4) looks at how the redefinition of marriage has been happening for many years in our secular culture. Dan Strange and Peter Sanlon (page 19) discuss the emptying out of tolerance as they examine Don Carson's new book *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. My own article (page 16) deals with the emptying out of biblical notions of equality in our allegedly pro-rights society.

David Potter (page 13) starts to fill up what secular humanism empties as he deals with the human value of those with disabilities. Chris Green's book reviews (page 28) pick up the sad picture of a secular writer feeling a need for religion without being able to embrace one, as well as another secular writer who picks up the early career of Muhammad with quite striking courage and clear-sightedness.

That last point is vital. We are right to reject the emptying-out of life that secularism brings. Equally we have to reject false attempts to fill life in and orient ourselves. Only the Lord Jesus is the true North Star.

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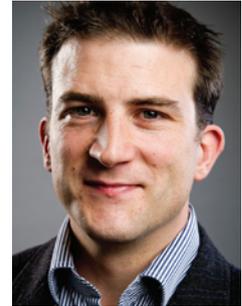
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Same sex marriage when chickens come home to roost



Nick Tucker, Research Fellow at Oak Hill, argues that same-sex marriage is not the thin but the thick end of the wedge, as the redefinition of marriage has been underway for years.

'Chickens coming home to roost' is how Malcolm X described the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy when questioned at the end of a speech. Unsurprisingly, not even his closest friends were queuing up to congratulate him, given the apparent pleasure he took at the public and violent ending of a young husband and father's life.

In his first interview after the 90 day gagging order placed on him by the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X clarified that he meant that he believed this to be the natural consequence of a climate of hate and violence: a climate to which he considered Kennedy had made a material contribution. This attempt at removing the stigma and outrage caused by his previous comment was not an unmitigated success.

Thus it is with more than a little trepidation that I set out my case on the enormously touchy subject of same sex marriage by reference to one of the great communication gaffes of the last century. But nonetheless let me suggest that Malcolm X's description of chickens coming home to roost fits our situation surprisingly well.

To put it another way, Moses told the children of Israel that their sins would find them out and Jesus told his disciples that 'those who live by the sword will die by the sword'. In God's ordering of human affairs, he frequently allows us to experience the consequences, however unexpected, of our own actions.

Let me try to explain what I mean. We have reached a point, at least in English speaking Western culture, where there is genuine surprise that anyone would raise any objection to the concept of same sex marriage. Although there may be some posturing along these lines by activists in the debate, nonetheless I believe that there is genuine bewilderment among people of my generation that anyone would stand in the way of two people who want to get married.

Right: A pro-gay marriage protester at the Minnesota state legislature. Calls for the legalisation of same-sex marriage have been seen across the world. Photo: Fibonacci Blue

A man with a grey beard and a blue baseball cap is holding a large blue banner with white text. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt and blue jeans. The banner reads "LEGAL MARRIAGE FOR GAY COUPLES NOW". The background shows a grand interior space with large, ornate columns and a doorway leading to another room. Other people are visible in the background, including a woman in a black jacket and white top on the left.

LEGAL MARRIAGE
FOR GAY COUPLES
NOW

And why would people not be bewildered? After all, who has the right, or the desire, to deny that two people have a right to express their love for each other?

In an article in *The Atlantic* on 11 May, journalist Molly Ball describes Lanae Erickson Hatalsky's research which shows that framing arguments for same sex marriage in terms of love and commitment rather than civil rights produces powerful results. Whereas normally there is only 30 per cent committed support for gay marriage in the United States, 'When you talk about gay couples wanting to make a promise of love and commitment, all of a sudden, you get 60 percent support,' Erickson Hatalsky said.

'In the focus groups, you could just watch their resistance melt. They would get this look on their face, thinking about an idealistic vision of marriage. It really softens them.'

Although it may not be instantly obvious, that 'idealistic vision of marriage' is the heart of the issue. The Christian understanding of marriage is something quite different from what people instinctively believe marriage to be. Emory University Professor John Witte Jr, one of the world's leading experts on the legal history of marriage, describes a move from sacramental to contractual views of marriage over the span of a millennium in the West: from a binding together of identities to a legal agreement that lasts only as long as it suits the parties involved.

The classical Christian view is based on the very nature of human beings as creatures. Jesus reaffirms marriage as set out in Genesis 2 by saying: 'Haven't you read... that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"?' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

God's plan for human families involves at its heart a form of marriage that fundamentally transforms the identities of those who take part in it. They become 'one' and must not be, in the words of the King James version, 'put asunder'.

In this way marriage functions as a bedrock for human society, binding people into a network of relationships

The redefinition of marriage has been underway for years, and it is only because it has become a contractual agreement like any other that same sex marriage is even on the table. Indeed it is easy to understand why many people find the Christian resistance to same sex marriage so baffling, if they understand marriage in that way.



that transcends their individual sense of need or desire. This is expressed, for example, by Augustine who describes marriage as the 'first bond of society', resulting in the 'bonding of society in its children'.

The roots of change from this view of marriage to what we see today, where marriage is simply a contract, lie in ideas developed in the 18th century. But according to Witte, writing in his book, *From Sacrament to Contract*, the real change only became apparent through the course of the 20th century:

'At the turn of the twentieth century, leading legal authorities in England and America spoke regularly of marriage as... "a public institution of universal concern" in which "each individual marriage or its dissolution affects the rights not only of husband and wife, but of all other persons." Today... marriage is viewed increasingly at law and at large today as a private bilateral contract to be formed, maintained, and dissolved as the couple sees fit.'

What Witte describes here amounts to an almost complete redefinition of marriage. Whereas marriage was formerly a public concern, bigger than its participants and with the good of others (particularly children) at its heart, in its redefined form it represents something private, accommodated to the wishes of the parties involved and with the good of others now a merely possible side benefit.

So marriage has subtly moved from a solemn and permanent institution to a lifestyle choice: configured less in terms of duties than desires. This idea of marriage simply as a contract between two parties has placed it (along with everything else) as a consumer good.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who was frequently accurate (although one would hesitate to say right), predicted this outcome, foreseeing that 'the family will be slowly ground into a random collection of individuals,' haphazardly bound together 'in the common pursuit of selfish ends'. This indeed was one of the evils that Edmund Burke saw in the French revolution. He saw innovations across the channel as fundamentally undermining the very concept of society.

'All their new institutions, (and with them everything is new) strike at the root of our social nature. Other

Legislators, knowing that marriage is the origin of all relations, and consequently the first element of all duties, have endeavoured, by every art, to make it sacred. The Christian Religion, by confining it to the pairs, and by rendering that relation indissoluble, has, by these two things, done more towards the peace, happiness, settlement, and civilization of the world, than by any other part in this whole scheme of Divine Wisdom.'

In the current controversy, on both sides of the Atlantic, many have argued that Christians must oppose same sex marriage because it represents the 'thin end of the wedge', opening the door for all sorts of other reshaping and redefinition of marriage. I think it would be much more honest to say that it represents the thick end of the wedge.

The redefinition of marriage has been underway for years, and it is only because it has become a contractual agreement like any other that same sex marriage is even on the table. Indeed it is easy to understand why many people find the Christian resistance to same sex marriage so baffling, if they understand marriage in that way.

This is why I dare to speak of chickens coming home to roost. If same-sex marriage becomes legal, it will, as far as I can see, represent a kind of terminus for marriage: marriage in the classical Christian sense at least, as same-sex marriage excludes by definition the possibility of childbearing and that child's subsequent nurture by its biological parents. Should that happen, it would represent however merely the last station on a long train journey, and a journey for that matter through which many in the Church have dozed.

Not all have been asleep, but some have been positively enjoying the ride. A group of senior clerics wrote to *The Times* newspaper on 21st April to welcome the government's same sex marriage proposals. As a letter by Gerald Bray published three days later pointed out, by reference to Sir Humphrey Appleby, the extreme breadth of the Church of England meant that this was no great surprise. One thing these senior leaders were able to do however was find mainstream support for their position in the transformation

of the Anglican marriage service. They wrote that: 'While the Prayer Book states that marriage was ordained first for "the procreation of children", the modern marriage service begins by emphasising the quality of relationship between marriage partners, "that they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind.' (The list of signatories is reproduced in various places on the internet; *The Times* itself is behind a paywall.)

While that does not decisively prove their case, it does illustrate that the Church (of England at least), has not been uninvolved in this much larger transformation of marriage. And so with a flutter of wings, the chickens return to roost as the sun apparently sets over the institution of marriage in the West. But should Christians care? And if they should, what can they do?

The first question is much more easily answered than the second. Defending the institution of marriage is not the same as preaching the gospel. No one simply by becoming married will ever be reconciled to their Creator. Helping people get their lives in order is not the way to address their most fundamental need. Of course we know that to be true, but that is not all that there is to be said.

Christians should care about marriage because God calls us to love our neighbours, and he himself demonstrates a particular love and concern for the weak and vulnerable. Marriage, in God's common grace to humanity as a whole, prevents much evil and is the most likely way for children to be born into a stable and loving environment, in which they will be nurtured.

But should we encourage people who do not know God or value his word to submit to his command to marry? Let me put it like this: as a Christian I understand human life to be sacred for a very specific reason: God insists in Genesis 9, when making his covenant with Noah, that every human life has value, precisely because human beings are made in God's image.

This basis is not nearly so widely accepted in public discourse now as it once was, but in God's grace to his fallen creatures, they have a wonderful capacity for inconsistency. Even those who reject the basic idea of the sacred largely

still accept that human life has this quality. I take that to be a good thing.

So it is with marriage. Biblically, marriage also has a sanctity; it is no more to be prematurely ended than is a human life. The two are treated in very similar ways. Do people necessarily accept that on the basis that 'God says it, I believe it, that settles it'? No. But does that mean that there is no value to encouraging a similar reverence for the estate of marriage as there is for the sanctity of human life? Certainly not.

Just as those of past generations have argued for the good of marriage as a basis for the good of society, there are plenty of witnesses available today to illustrate the harm done to society by the undermining of marriage. James Q. Wilson, who has professorial chairs at both UCLA and Harvard, points out that increasing wealth at all levels of society has not brought about social improvement and cohesion but rather decline and division.

He says: 'The reason I think is clear: it is not money but the family that is the foundation of public life. As that foundation has become weaker, every structure built upon it has become weaker... When the department of Health and Human Services (HHS) studied some thirty thousand American households, it found that for whites, blacks, and Hispanics and for every income level save the very highest, children raised in single-parent homes were more likely to be suspended from school, to have emotional problems, and to behave badly. The children of single moms are more likely than those of two-parent families, to be abused, to drop out of or be expelled from school, to become juvenile delinquents, to take drugs, and to commit adult crimes.'

John Witte Jr also presents disturbing statistics: 'In 1970, 13 percent of all households were headed by single mothers; today, the number stands at more than 30 percent, with more than half of these single-mother households below the poverty line. In the 1990's, a quarter of all children conceived are aborted. A third of all children are born to single mothers. One half of all marriages end in divorce. The number of "no parent" households doubles each year. The number of "lost children" in America – born in poverty and

How could we justify ignoring a national epidemic of suffering and deprivation among children, if that is what the dilution and dissolution of marriage represents? Surely we must do something. But what?

in broken households, and more likely than not to drop out of school, out of step and then out of society altogether – now stands at a staggering fifteen million.’

Of course, this should not be read as though single mothers are the bogeypersons of society, as though they produced children by parthenogenesis and were themselves responsible for the decline of marriage as an institution. The statistics simply demonstrate time and again that in general children demonstrate the best outcomes when raised by both of their biological parents together.

So should Christians do something? Well very few people would ever feel justified in walking past a burning building and ignoring the pleas for help coming from children trapped in an upstairs bedroom. How then could we justify ignoring a national epidemic of suffering and deprivation among children, if that is what in the end the dilution and dissolution of marriage represents? Surely we must do something. But what?

To start with, it is simply not enough to campaign against same sex marriage. Marriage is already in disarray, and while the latest attempts at redefinition would exacerbate our existing problems, fending them off would not fix them.

One thing the church can offer is an ability to address failure honestly and offer God’s grace to those who are affected by sexual and marital brokenness. That is our gospel imperative. Part of offering grace to others will be to see our own need of grace and for many of us to repent

of the various ways in which we have been complicit in the subtle reshaping of marriage even by simply ignoring those changes until now.

If we in the church, and particularly in church leadership, demonstrate a pattern of justifying past mistakes, then we have nothing to offer on this issue, or indeed on any other.

Secondly, we can take seriously the need for teaching in this area in our local churches. Just as we know that not everybody understands the same thing when they hear the word ‘God’, so we need to realise that people hear different things when they hear the word ‘marriage’. This is true of our congregations in general, but perhaps particularly true for those who come to us seeking marriage – this is particularly acute in the Anglican context, of course.

Many of those who come to us to get married have a very romanticised and individualistic understanding of marriage, because they have been offered no other. As well as the books referenced here, I would recommend, for those involved in pastoral ministry, taking out a free subscription to *Kairos Journal* (kairosjournal.org), which has some very helpful resources on these and other issues.

Thirdly, there is value in taking a wider involvement in these issues. Though there are doubtless other avenues worth pursuing, I would particularly commend the Marriage Foundation (marriagefoundation.org.uk). It is the brainchild of Sir Paul Coleridge, a judge from the family division of the High Court, who after seeing the devastating effects of family breakdown in his courts over the course of 30 years decided that he had to do what he could to reverse the decline in marriage. He is convinced, and he has convinced me, that change in this area will not come from government and must be sought in other ways.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, we can pray. There have been dramatic transformations of marriage in the past, from situations much like our own to those that though not perfect were more stable. These have tended to accompany great moves of God such as the Reformation and the Great Awakening. In the end, the one thing that can bring real renewing of life, rather than restraining of harm, is the gospel of peace.



Emotional depth in the secular city

Peter Sanlon, who lectures in doctrine and church history at Oak Hill, and who also ministers in Tottenham, reflects on the vital importance of emotional sincerity and depth in ministry and mission.



Secularism thins life out. Strips it down. The secular city is a melting pot of cultures. Variety and choice bombard, overwhelm and desensitise. Ask somebody how they are – most likely they feel ‘busy’ or ‘tired’. Always connected. Always on. It is overwhelming. Lonely. Destabilising.

Tempting though it is to criticise our secular city for all its failings (and there are many), Christians need to

Left: Peter Sanlon at work on an estate in Tottenham. He believes that ministry and mission need ‘people who display the basics of emotional depth: empathy, humility and self-awareness.’

display emotional depth. There is a popular image of Old Testament prophets haranguing pagans. As it happens, they spent far more time critiquing God’s own people. Learning to display emotional depth may involve more of what the Old Testament prophets so frequently did.

Displaying emotional depth is what we do when we are open to relationships with other people. It involves letting others see something of me as a person, rather than just the job title. Difficult though it is to summarise in words, we all know emotional depth when we encounter it. A person able to move a conversation on to the things that matter; sensitive to the other person’s

feelings; interested in the stranger. Desire to control, avoid, use or demean can be communicated in the fraction of a second, during a first encounter. People made in God’s image are sensitive enough to intuit. Desire to relate, empathise, love and know are communicated as instantly.

For at least three reasons it is imperative Christians work at developing emotional depth, while living in the secular city.

Firstly, emotional depth helps us make sense of Jesus. Jesus displayed emotional depth – people from all walks of life felt comfortable approaching him. Children, poor, rich, women and men. His disciples knew they could ask him for help. People saw

him weep at the grave of his friend. Many of his retorts to opponents were surely delivered with a laugh.

As a true human who fully engaged in earthly life, Jesus was emotional. If we are to engage with and make sense of Jesus, we must learn to display emotional depth. Augustine warned, in *City of God*, against those who depreciate emotions: 'If these emotions and feelings, that spring from love of the good and from holy charity, are to be called faults, then let us allow that real faults should be called virtues... human emotion was not illusory in Jesus.'

Secondly, emotional depth makes sense of ministry. Ministry is at its heart helping people to engage with Jesus. This cannot be done solely by proclaiming truths accurately. Neither can it be done if the minister lacks the emotional depth necessary for developing relationships with others.

The apostle Paul is our great example in this area. When the Ephesian elders realised they would never see Paul again, they cried. They did not shrug their shoulders and think, 'No worries – we have his letter.' They would miss him because he had done what he did with every church he planted – shared his life, opened his heart, rejoiced at progress and wept over weaknesses.

As Paul put it to the Thessalonian Christians: 'We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.'

It is a sobering fact that we will all reach a time sooner or later when we will move on from our current ministry roles. When that happens, if none of our colleagues or congregation feel moved to tears, our ministry has been sub-Pauline. Dare we face the possibility that since Paul urged ministers to follow his example, as he followed the 'example of Christ', that a ministry lacking emotional depth is un-Christlike?

Thirdly, emotional depth makes sense of mission in the secular world. One of the most extensive and widely cited research projects on the way secular people perceive Christians makes painful reading. Published as the book *Unchristian*, it repeatedly shows that for many secular people, 'emotional and intellectual barriers go up when around Christians'.

Commenting on the Church's response to research that nine out of ten people think Christians are judgmental, the researchers wrote, 'Many Christians get defensive even talking about the perception of being judgmental. It is a key biblical concept that pointing people to Jesus is not achieved by being popular. Yet an entire generation are questioning our motives as Christians. They believe we are more interested in proving we are right than that God is right.'

If the secular perception of Christianity is anything like close to what this research suggests, emotional depth is not an optional extra for mission. People who are suspicious of

our motives and resentful at our image will not hear our message, unless it is presented by people who display the basics of emotional depth: empathy, humility and self-awareness.

All these virtues were practised supremely by Jesus, who modelled the perfect human life. As we seek to introduce secular people to Jesus, we need to learn how to follow his example. As Jerram Barrs so memorably put it in the title of his seminal (now regrettably often overlooked) book from 1978, our mission needs 'Christianity with a human face'.

I was struck recently by a student's wife sharing with me how her friend's work colleague had disliked Christians, since she intuitively felt they sought to give the impression of being interested in knowing her, but it was always on their terms, and rapidly led to event invitations. Secular people are too suspicious for that approach. It doesn't fit with Jesus, or biblical ministry either.

How different was the experience of a person I shared the gospel with and prayed with as she took the first steps of Christian commitment. We had only known each other half a day. But sitting alongside us as we prayed was the mutual Christian friend who had been a supportive, tireless and kind friend to her for a decade.

The emotional depth that permitted that friendship to occur and last, helped Jesus, ministry and mission to make sense to all of us.

Valuing the vulnerable



David Potter MBE, the founder of Prospects, a Christian charity which supports people with learning disabilities, explores the biblical basis for valuing every human life.

When I first encountered humanism, I was fascinated. I assumed that their self-styled title implied a particular interest in people. It was years before I got round to reading what they had to say about their views and when I did I was amazed to discover that they have far more to say about religion than about humanity. It quickly became clear that when it comes to biblical Christianity, humanism just doesn't get it.

As humanist writers see it, the difference between their position and ours is one of theology: belief or disbelief in the existence of God. They see all religion and their devotees as hamstrung by their duty to obey the demands of deity out of fear of reprisal. And it has to be admitted that, for much of organised religion, they have a point. For those with a biblical mindset, however, the motivation is not fear but love, love for God first and then love for other people.

What humanists overlook is another difference which is at least as great as our divergence over the existence of God: we have a very different anthropology. King David posed the question, 'What is man?' (Psalm 8:4). The answer given will determine how we value one another as people. Humanists and Christians offer profoundly different answers which, in





A woman carrying a baby found to have Down's syndrome is recommended to have an abortion. Even late diagnosis may legally result in an abortion up to full term, well after that permitted for a child without a disability.

turn, increasingly result in different responses to the moral questions of the day.

In his book, *What is Good?*, AC Grayling, an English philosopher, puts the case for humanist morality. 'To a secular view, the notion of the intrinsic worth of others and of nature is the only true source of morality.' He then launches into an attack on a morality based on the selfish goal of rewards in some afterlife, but he ignores the need to establish any basis for his principle of 'the intrinsic worth of others'. Without that there is no basis for 'the only true source of morality'. It is a sleight of hand worthy of a magician rather than a philosopher.

Some humanists proceed on the basis that 'worth' is a figment of the imagination. Professor Peter Singer of Princeton University (and the author of *Should the Baby Live? The problem of handicapped infants*) argues that before a baby is recognised as a human being it should show evidence of faculties which are widespread in the human race. Those he calls 'mental defectives' may be used for scientific experimentation.

Closer to home, in March 2012, the website of the *British Medical Journal* published an article by Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva advocating what they called 'after-birth abortion'. It is the ultimate devaluing of personhood. It is also the inevitable logic of evolutionism.

Evolution is value neutral: human beings are the result of time and chance. We are accidents of history. The notion of intrinsic worth evaporates and with it any reasoned basis for morality. Locating or describing humanist morality is rather like trying to nail down water!

In marked contrast to the vague assertions of humanism, biblical Christianity propounds a view of human beings which immediately recognises their value and by so doing renders both valid and wise the moral framework taught in scripture. The basis for valuing people is to be found at the very point where our original creation is described.

What we find in Genesis chapter one provides the clearest and firmest basis for understanding what we are as human beings. 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." So God created man in his own image, in the

image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' It is, of course, a breathtaking assertion, but it is one that is repeated after the fall (in Genesis 9:6) and it is the remaking of that damaged image which the New Testament anticipates will follow conversion.

Centuries of theological discussion have focused on how the divine image is evident in human beings. Some identify it in our capacity for relationships, others in characteristics such as creativity and rationality. It could equally well be both. Genesis describes our creation by God-in-relationship – 'Let us make', Father, Son and Holy Spirit – so that we can be in relationship, with God, with one another, and with the world in which he sets us.

At the same time, we reflect many of God's characteristics in varying degrees from one person to another. Whatever its precise meaning, the image of God in human beings is what gives us intrinsic worth. The incarnation and the cross demonstrate God's personal commitment to our value as people.

The issue of worth comes into sharp focus when considering the place of people with learning disabilities in society – and in the church. Where a person's worth is assessed in terms of fame, wealth, celebrity, power and productivity, people with learning disabilities are inevitably devalued, as is evident in attitudes to and legislation affecting abortion.

Immersed as we are in this society, it is no wonder that Christians too struggle to reflect biblical attitudes and values towards people with learning disabilities. If we look again through the lens of scripture, we begin to see a different picture.

A woman carrying a baby found to have Down's syndrome is recommended to have an abortion. Even late diagnosis may legally result in an abortion up to full term, well after that permitted for a child without a disability. If this is how they may be 'welcomed' into the world, it is not surprising to learn that a survey in 2011 found that over 50 per cent of people with learning disabilities in Britain (of whom there are 1.5million) reported suffering abuse from members of the public.

Such statistics may be an embarrassment in a society which regards itself as humane, but they are consistent with secularism's failure to provide any basis for valuing people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.

Immersed as we are in this society, it is no wonder that Christians too struggle to reflect biblical attitudes and values towards people with learning disabilities. If we look again through the lens of scripture, we begin to see a different picture. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their failure to understand the preciousness of simplicity in the response of children to his love. This is exactly the same sort of simplicity that is found in people with learning disabilities.

Paul urges us to recognise as indispensable those in the body of Christ we view as weak or unimportant. 'Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,' he says in 1 Corinthians 12. The testimony of many congregations which have reached out in love and ministry to people with learning disabilities is that the church has been blessed far beyond its expectation.

The Bible's recognition of the value of every person provides us with a comprehensive and inclusive approach to everyone, without regard to their background, present situation or condition. Unqualified acceptance of a person's worth is integral to our faith and therefore must determine every aspect of our response to them.

Yes, it is different, and it is demanding, but if we take Jesus as our example then, like him, we will be committed to give expression to this dynamic truth at every opportunity. And like him, we will find ourselves drawn to those for whom the need to be valued is the greatest.

Challenging equality Britain

**Mike Ovey, the
Principal of Oak Hill,
looks at the challenges and
contradictions of equality Britain
and asks: what has broken, and
how do we begin to fix it?**



George Orwell's famous allegory, *Animal Farm*, gave us the wry phrase, 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others'. It brought out the way that you could have all the talk about equality and rights, but that it actually worked out with inequalities and with favoured groups. In *Animal Farm*, you remember, it was the pigs who ended up more equal than others.

I suspect that is how many Christians are coming to think about equality Britain. It's a Britain where comedians are feted for their 'daring' in taking on the Christian religion on national TV, while never quite having the bottle to dish out equal satire to the equally fervent Richard Dawkins. It's a Britain where major human rights abuses against Christians in countries such as North Korea or Syria are not reported as such.

It's a Britain where you pray with someone in hospital at your peril, in case some third party takes offence. It's a Britain where a prime minister appears to be under the impression that he can change what constitutes marriage. I suspect many of us find ourselves both frustrated and bewildered. How did it come to this?

It is worth spending a little while examining what has caused our bewilderment, not least because if we do not know what has broken, we do not know how to fix it.

To begin with, there is our culture's affection for equality. Now, 'equality' is a motherhood and apple pie thing. No one wants to talk down equality because of the fear of being portrayed as totalitarian. In any case, equality is deeply embedded in the Bible's teaching. Obviously this puts Christians in a real quandary over issues such as the redefinition of marriage: are we being un-Christian by denying equality?

Part of the solution (but obviously, I fear, only a part) is realising that biblical equality does not equal secularist equality, if you will excuse the play on words. When we talk about biblical equality between humans, we need to include an equality arising from the way all humans bear the image and likeness of our Creator, despite the fall marring it. It is for that reason that I am forbidden to despise the poor, or treat other humans as my prey (either literally or figuratively). I cannot treat myself or mine as better than other humans made in God's image.



This is a value that is independent of majority recognition and does not have to be earned by wealth, beauty or Twitter ratings. Biblical equality as human creatures further includes the point that a human being belongs to the God who made him or her, and is created to glorify that God. As such I am not to behave in ways which steal that human being away from God, either by violence, as in slavery, or by other means such as tempting, flattering, manipulating or seducing them.

Further, biblical equality between humans includes their equal guilt and helplessness in sin, an equal rebellion against God, even if manifested in different ways. It is not that some are less guilty than others, or less trapped in sin. By nature this is our equal plight. I am no better than others, but equally their sin is not somehow lighter because it happens to appeal more to current western tastes.

We obscure that equality at our peril, and certainly to the peril of those who are led to believe that they are not in sin. With this goes another equality in salvation, that all are saved by Christ alone, not Christ plus something coming from us. Again, I cannot elevate myself on the grounds that saving me was less hard than saving, say, the ex-slaver John Newton.

That gives three dimensions to our equality: as human creatures of God; as addicted rebels against God; and, for those with faith, as those redeemed by grace alone by God.

When it comes to ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’, Caesar is taking it on himself to work out which things belong to him and which belong to God. Not surprisingly, Caesar wants more and more.

Put this way, we can see why our account of equality looks so different to the politically correct equality of our current ruling elites. If you look at, say, section 3 of the Equality Act 2006, which sets out the general duty for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, you find some pretty noble sentiments: we're aiming for a society with 'respect for and protection of each individual's human rights' and 'each individual has an equal opportunity to participate in society'.

This is far-reaching, and the latter provision takes further than ever an old and in itself valuable idea. That idea is that before the law, a person is simply a person, not treated differently before the law in terms of class, race, religion, wealth or gender. Thus a victim of robbery is entitled to redress, no matter that he or she is poor and foreign. So far, so good. As it happens, it's very Magna Carta: 'To no one will we deny or delay justice.' And it echoes the divine judge, who shows no partiality.

So what's happened? What counts as 'before the law' has got wider and wider. Wherever the law runs, this kind of equality gets called in and the law runs into more and more areas of life. Put another way, the 'public square' gets bigger and bigger, and therefore so does 'public regulation'.

Forty years ago, who you made a contract with was a private matter (with a very few ancient exceptions). Now it's a matter of the public square, regulated by public law. In biblical terms, when it comes to 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's', Caesar is taking it on himself to work out which things belong to him and which belong to God. Not surprisingly, Caesar wants more and more. That's very different from the Bible's teaching that the state has a role delegated from God, and for which it is answerable to him. There God has defined what belongs to Caesar.

This means the big debate is not between egalitarian secularists and equality-denying Christians. The debate is between two different conceptions of equality, and what lies at the centre of that equality. Look back at the three dimensions of Christian equality. The triune creator-redeemer God is at the centre of each one, and vitally that

gives an absolute, transcendent, foundation for equality that does not depend on well-intentioned but flawed human opinion or consensus.

Ultimately, of course, you cannot have a scheme of human rights and equality without making appeals to absolutes and to something that transcends temporary human opinion. The tragedy of secular egalitarianism is that it has no God to appeal to for this absolute, and so it has to invent one: itself. I think this is normally clouded from us by the appeal to democratic majorities and what 'most people' find acceptable. And therein lies the heart of the problem at the moment: we Christians do believe profoundly in equality (it comes from the Great Commission, apart from anything else). What we don't believe is that a democratic majority can either properly or successfully play the part of God in sustaining and defining what that equality consists of. When these issues are not clear, it's no wonder we find ourselves frustrated and confused. We're being perpetually wrong-footed.

What then? It means challenging secular assumptions at two fairly fundamental levels. First, clarifying for secularists around us that we do believe in equality. At the moment, we sometimes look and sound as though we don't. Secondly, and more importantly, we need to keep on asking why secularist majorities think they have the right to tell us what equality means. That is a right that's been assumed and to be honest it sounds as though they think they're better than us poor benighted Christians. It's a bit elitist, and not exactly egalitarian.

Even more significantly, we frankly need to talk more openly and unashamedly about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and his rights. On reflection, isn't it staggering that any debate about rights can be carried on without seriously mentioning God's rights? If you systematically excluded mention of a human group's rights in a discussion on rights, you'd rightly be suspected of the worst kind of racism.

All this will, I think, lead us into long discussions over whether God exists. So it should. Because you might say that whether and who God is, is precisely the question.

Tolerance, intolerance and mission

Dan Strange and Peter Sanlon talk about how local churches can break down the culture of hostility against the Christian faith by being places of welcome, generosity and creative mission



Dan Strange thinks through the difference between Christian and secular tolerance, with the aid of a new book by Don Carson

Reading Don Carson's new book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, has caused me a fair amount of distress. Not with Carson himself, of course, but with the sad, mad and bad beast caught in his cross-hairs, a beast which desperately needs to be put out of its misery. And the identity of this monster? Tolerance, or rather the contemporary

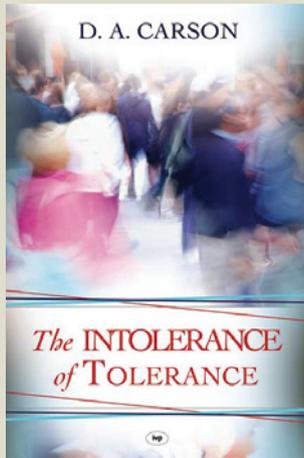
articulation of tolerance: a rabid, de-Christianized and secularized mutation of the older and distinctively Christian value of tolerance. As Carson explains:

"The old tolerance is the willingness to put up with, allow, or endure people and ideas with whom we disagree; in its purest form, the new tolerance

is the social commitment to treat all ideas and people as equally right save for those people who disagree with this view of tolerance. Advocates of the new tolerance sacrifice wisdom and principle in support of just one supreme good: upholding their view of tolerance. So those who uphold and practice the older tolerance, enmeshed as they inevitably are in some value system, are written off as intolerant. Thus banished, they no longer deserve a place at the table.'

In a sentence, this new tolerance is neither neutral nor benign but rather ideological and repressive. Worse than inconsistent, it is intolerant.

What is distressing about Carson's description is not so much the intellectual and moral incoherence



The Intolerance of Tolerance

DA Carson
IVP, 2012

of this new tolerance, which with a customary crack-shot Carson expertly nails in the forehead. Rather it is the example after example he gives of where the new tolerance beast has been allowed to run amok in all sectors of society in the West, a number of these being drawn from the UK.

Put together, these examples justify his opening claim that the new tolerance has become part of the warp and woof of the Western 'plausibility structure', that is, a deeply embedded structure of thought which Carson says is 'widely and almost unquestioningly accepted throughout a particular culture.'

The result? Men, women and children, without even thinking much about it, if at all, are, in the name of 'tolerance', already predisposed to believe that any Christian claim of truth, absolutes, and exclusivity is inherently intolerant, arrogant, proud, judgmental and imperialistic. And here's the killer: they may never have even met a Christian, let alone gone into a church.

Now before anyone else points out the irony to me, I have already realised that what I probably need right now (after a lie down), is a God-given dose of the old tolerant tolerance to help me deal with the new intolerant tolerance! And on a more constructive note, it is within the bounds of the older tolerance that Carson himself ends his book by giving us a number of ways for us to move ahead including: the need to expose the arrogance and

In a sentence, this new tolerance is neither neutral nor benign but rather ideological and repressive. Worse than inconsistent, it is intolerant... It has been allowed to run amok in all sectors of society in the West.

bankruptcy of the new tolerance; the importance of evangelism; a preparedness for Christians to face suffering; and an exhortation to delight and trust in God.

All these are profoundly right, good and helpful. Please read the book. And yet if you are anything like me, faced with the size of the tolerance beast together with the power and influence of its handlers (the media, the political world), paralysis sets in. We often feel so insignificant to be able to do anything practically, let alone affect change.

And so some of the questions buzzing around in my head concern the appropriate contexts within which we activate this 'to do list.' For the vast majority of us, where are we able to start to loosen the stranglehold that the new tolerance has on our culture?



Peter Sanlon shares from his experience how local churches can build trust and respect by practising true love and tolerance.

We believe that a central place which God has designed as the place to help humans make sense of life is the local church. There are many things that a local church can realistically begin doing, which display both a commitment to truth and a commitment to love, which is true tolerance.

A local church can be mistaken by the watching world for a group of homogenous people who hang out together, because they have the same hobbies or cultural background. Steps taken to change this perception have a powerful impact on all who witness it.

For example, my church in London has a comfortable seating area near the entrance. During many services, homeless people or patients from the mental health hospital will wander in and sit on the sofas. They may not want to stay for the whole service; they may make noise and disrupt it. That is fine. They know they are welcome to have some tea, relax and join in as they wish. Willingness to embrace this kind of mixing up of cultures and backgrounds gives the whole church,

and any visitor, a deep sense that this church is tolerant of a range of people, in a way the world struggles with.

It is a problem in the UK that many in the government feel that churches are in some way a problem to be contained. In our church we try and help with that by offering to use our resources to help local government. So our vicar met with the local police chief to discuss what we could do to help an often under-appreciated and stretched police force. Out of that grew a police chaplaincy ministry, where local officers regularly visit the church for counsel, and an annual police carol service where officers visit a church which welcomes them, and hear the gospel which explains why we do what we do.

Our part of London has many young men out of work. With our good relationship with the government and police, we have been able to venture on a mentoring and apprenticeship scheme. We pair unemployed youths with two Christian employers – one at our church, and the other from another local church. They mentor

the young person through a job which we arrange for them. All kinds of opportunities to connect with and explain the gospel grow up around the relationships which result.

Local government leaders can look at our church and know that we seek to serve, love and help people who are different to us. That builds trust and respect. It means that now, after years of doing this, the government can actually approach us for advice and help, and is willing to help us solve practical problems we are faced with in growing an urban ministry.

This sort of process is not smooth or without challenges, but we remain convinced that the local church is the best place to show the world what true tolerance is. Those who believe that will be led to make local, practical implementations which are generous. And slowly but surely those plausibility structures which are so often reinforced within the broader culture, begin to be challenged and overturned by real Christians and real Christian communities.

In lots of little ways, a local church is able to nurture true love and tolerance by seeking to serve and care for its members and those outside. When this is done, the gospel message not only makes sense, it critiques the world's misunderstandings about tolerance, and creates for itself new opportunities.

Faith and reason: good partners

Kirsty Birkett, Oak Hill's Academic Dean, takes issue with atheists who attempt to set faith and reason against each other. 'Both are part of our process of living wisely in the world,' she says



'Faith means that one considers a particular claim (for example, "God exists") to be actual knowledge, absolutely certain knowledge. This claim to certainty is held in the absence of adequate evidence, or in direct contradiction to the evidence.' So says P Wesley Edwards in an article entitled 'Understanding Reason and Faith' on the Freethought Debater website. The site has the subtitle, 'Resources for America's Atheists'.

It may be a little unfair to take a snapshot quotation from the web at random, but the above passage does seem to reflect what is a very common understanding of faith and its contrast with reason. It's not biblical, but it is common. In the public square it is very unusual to find an understanding of what the Bible means by faith.

To 'have faith' means that you have a certainty, you believe, even though there is no evidence. In fact it can seem that faith is something that happens to you or something you leap into, not something you choose rationally. Faith almost becomes a substance which you 'have' or not; and you 'have'

it, or get it, by very mysterious processes which have almost nothing, if anything, to do with rational thought.

Since faith in this sense is not open to reasoned discussion, or even perhaps under your control, then the religious person cannot really talk about faith being true or false. It simply is; and woe betide the sensible atheist who wants to talk it through. This is the sense of frustration we feel from atheist apologists, but it arises largely from ignorance of what the Bible actually says.

There are indeed religions which rely on the mystical for enlightenment; there are also strands of Christianity which do so. However it is not a biblical understanding of faith. This is perhaps where some of the confusion lies. There is a category of believers who seek an a-rational understanding, perhaps even contrary to reason; and they may use the English word 'faith' to describe their sense of certainty. However the biblical concept is not a-rational, and if we choose to use the word 'faith' to describe it, we must be clear about what the biblical concept is.



Consider the simple practice of boarding a flight. Do you have faith in the plane? If it looks rusty, dilapidated and you happen to know the pilot is a drunkard, it would be foolish to have faith that you will have a safe trip.



Biblically, both reason and faith are part of the same process. What shall we trust as our source of knowledge? Reason, an entirely appropriate use of our God-given capacity to live intelligently, has to start from somewhere. There must be initial axioms, which can come out of observation of the world, out of our own heads or from trusted authorities. God has proved himself ultimately trustworthy; his historical record demonstrates that. It is entirely reasonable to trust his pronouncements.

It is also reasonable, given our created nature and the reliability of the God who created us, to trust our observations and our heads where that is appropriate. To trust a source of information – to have faith in it – is reasonable or not, depending upon the reliability of that information.

Of course, we may trust an unreliable source. That can be done in ignorance (we did not know the source was unreliable) or foolishness (we knew, or could have known, but didn't care). There are times when trusting our own intelligence is foolish, given our limitedness as humans and our fallen nature. To trust something with no evidence at all, to have faith without evidence, is entirely foolish. To step in front of a bus having faith in your superpowers to save you is ridiculous. It is not faith that is the problem; it is the object of your faith that matters.

Our faith in God – not just that he exists, but that he loves us and will save us – is not something apart from reason. Having faith in God is entirely sensible. It is reasonable. It is not irrational. It is, in fact, the only rational thing to do.

Faith is not something that should be exercised without reason; nor is it possible to have reason without faith. However, faith is *different* from reason. It involves a commitment to the object of faith. It involves coming to a conclusion and acting upon it – a demonstration of one's confidence in the conclusion that goes beyond simple apprehension of knowledge. It is not against reason, but it involves a step beyond it.

Consider the simple practice of boarding a flight. Do you have faith in the plane? If it looks rusty, dilapidated and you happen to know the pilot is a drunkard, it would be foolish to have faith that you will have a safe trip. These are good reasons for a lack of faith. Having that lack of faith, you do not board the plane.

If, on the other hand, the plane is sound, the pilot qualified and capable, with a perfect safety record, your faith in the capacity of the plane to carry you safely to your destination is entirely justified. Having come to that conclusion that the plane is safe, would you therefore enter the plane? If not, then you are demonstrating that you do not really have faith in the plane. Just coming to the conclusion is not enough. Acting on your conclusion is an integral part of your faith.

What is the relationship between faith and reason? They are not alternative, contrary methods of gaining certainty. They are both part of our process of living wisely in the world. Faith is an action of trust. Reason is careful thought involving such things as making deductions from given premises, weighing up evidence and coming to conclusions.

When both are used properly, they can only be inextricably intertwined. We can follow a logical argument, for instance, having faith in the capacity of our brains to do so, given the God who created us and who designed us to be able to live in this world. We can trust the word of that God, knowing that he has given us ample reason to do so.

Sometimes, all we can do is trust God's word. There are some things that we simply cannot find out for ourselves, no matter how much we exercise our powers of observation or deduction. God's plan for the future, for instance. No amount of investigation or reasoning will tell us when Jesus

When faith and reason are used properly, they can only be inextricably intertwined. We can follow a logical argument, for instance, having faith in the capacity of our brains to do so, given the God who designed us to live in this world.

will return; only God knows that. God's nature is another thing; without him having told us, we would not have known he is three-in-one.

We trust him when he speaks to us, because he has demonstrated himself to be faithful. He keeps his promises and he tells the truth. These are good reasons to trust him. Our faith in God – not just that he exists, but that he loves us and will save us – is not something apart from reason. Having faith in God is entirely sensible. It is reasonable. It is not irrational. It is, in fact, the only rational thing to do.

What is not rational is to be blind to God, to reject his message, to persecute those who love him, and to ignore his Son. However, that is what most people do. In relation to God above all other matters, we can expect people to be profoundly irrational. Sin, God tells us, makes people unreasonable. In fact, we see in Romans 1 that it may be part of God's very judgment on us that he lets people follow their own irrational impulses to their natural conclusions. Sin blinds people to the truth, to the point that it takes a miracle to get them to see straight.

God does perform that miracle; in fact, he does it all the time, as his people faithfully tell others about him and the salvation he offers. It is truly a miracle when listeners see through their irrationality and start to see God rightly. It is a miracle we must pray for. Have faith; he answers prayers. It's a very reasonable thing to do.

A nice, tidy overseas adventure



Charles Anderson, who has taught New Testament and Biblical Hebrew at Oak Hill for the past five years, reflects on what he has learned about faith and culture as he prepares to return home to the United States

'It'll just be three years. We'll move there, I'll finish, and we'll come back.'

Such were my words to my wife Erin and our plans when we moved to England for PhD study in September 2004. A nice, tidy overseas adventure for three years, after which we would return to the States with that craziness out of our system.

Here we are, eight years later, four kids in tow, finally returning. We are excited to move back to the US, where I will help with leadership training at a church in Missouri, and we can be closer to family, yet we leave with palpable sadness. Our season in England has meant so much to us.

These five years of ministry at Oak Hill have proved rewarding and formational. We have learned tea should always be drunk with milk, and that everyone is surprised at

Americans who don't drink coffee. When someone says, 'Thank you for that interesting paper', they aren't actually appreciative, and they didn't really like it. And although an English accent makes you sound 25% smarter in the States, sadly, here, an American accent probably pulls me down 25%.

Yet some of the most important lessons I will take back revolve precisely around the theme in this edition of *Commentary* of faith in a secular society. The church in Britain has recognised soberly it now inhabits a post-Christian world; accordingly, the great need is evangelism. Churches, and the individual Christians in them, have a welcome focus on sharing the gospel with non-believers.

The need is pressing precisely because there are so many out there who do not know the Lord Jesus. More

than we experienced in the States, in the UK, evangelism is a recurrent focus and seen as central to mission and overall maturity. Services are constructed with an eye on being intelligible to the outsider. Christianity Explored courses regularly offer a safe place to engage with Jesus.

Oak Hill sends faculty and students on missions each year across the country to develop as evangelists. In the States, with its more widespread religiosity and cultural Christianity, that need can become dulled. We hope to take back with us not just that passion for evangelism, but even more, the clear sense of its mandate.

In line with the priority of evangelism comes a realistic expectation about what cultural change is possible. In the States, the seemingly widespread public allegiance

to Christianity contributes to a notion that change comes from electing the right officials who enact God-fearing laws. To hear some American Christians speak, the mandate is not for evangelism but legislation. If gay marriage were abolished, or prayer in schools restored, then the secular tide may be reversed and the nation's initial Christian promise restored.

In contrast, perhaps because secularism is more established in the UK (whether despite or because of an established church), British Christians have different aspirations. Unchristian policies should be resisted, and recent headlines offer many examples, but such manoeuvres typically are not elevated to the same level of importance, as they seemingly have in the States.

I want to be careful not to paint with brush strokes that are too broad for either side of the ocean. Countless American Christians rightly prioritise evangelism. Most of those who place great faith in politics would recoil at the charge they have elevated it over outreach. It may be that the better approach in the UK simply reflects the church's weakness, and with greater numbers, the approach would be similar here.

Moreover, there is something important in public theology, in contending for better, more just, more righteous government. Yet, on the whole, a lesson for us as we return to the States is to exhort and encourage ourselves and others to focus on

evangelism and not seek change primarily through the ballot box.

A second lesson for us as we move comes, if I may, from a different angle. I have often heard British people speak of the need for more Bible teachers. Theological college is for training people to teach the Bible. Teaching implies a more cerebral approach, that if the right information is communicated and received, then a minister's job is done. Biblical exposition consists in faithfully, even creatively, setting out what a passage means and then largely leaving it to the hearers to relate it to their lives.

What is minimised is biblical preaching. I am only sketching out the matter roughly, but good preaching includes nearly everything from Bible teaching yet goes further. It works hard to apply the truths explicitly and concretely to peoples' lives. That starts with our very first words in preaching. Not enough of our sermons work hard in the introduction to expose why our hearts need to hear the grace of the passage. Such need is more assumed than uncovered.

Opening illustrations tend to make an analogy for the main point of the sermon rather than prick us to realise how we are fallen and need God to work in us. To take it a step further, I wonder if this is an area where British reserve is an impediment, and we need more preachers who will open up and share from their lives.

Then, at the tail end, our sermons fail to explore at much length how

specifically people might work out biblical truth in their own lives.

There has been a tendency to tuck on application at the end in a rather cursory fashion. And usually it remains somewhat abstract, at the general level of how we should think differently, yet not delving down to our affections, nor how to put that thinking into practice.

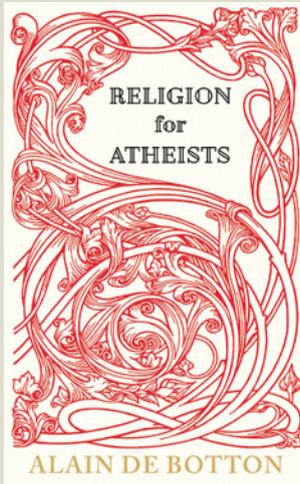
Doubtless what I have painted is a caricature. More importantly, the trajectory on this issue is a positive one. The importance of reaching the heart in our preaching is increasingly on the radar. Witness the rise of interest in biblical counselling and the work of the Christian Counselling and Education Foundation, or the increased preaching training we offer. Nonetheless, we need far more Bible preaching in the UK, and my convictions in this have been strengthened by our time here.

We move home, I trust, different people, better people, with more than just amusing stories about those crazy Brits. By living outside the States, paradoxically we have gained a clearer view on what it means to live faithfully for Christ in the States. We are better equipped to appreciate the strengths and discern and bear with the weaknesses than before.

And on this side, God has cultivated our hearts for our British brothers and sisters who have patiently cared for us, taught us, corrected us, in short, loved us, in a way that has made our sacrifices to serve here seem light and momentary.

Books

Chris Green, Vice Principal of Oak Hill, has been reading two books recently, 'one almost unbearably trivial, the other deeply serious', which relate to faith in the modern world



Religion for Atheists

Alain de Botton
Hamish Hamilton, 2012

In the Shadow of the Sword

Tom Holland
Little, Brown, 2012

Here are two wildly contrasting books. One is the most hilarious I have read in an extremely long while, and the fact that it is unintentionally so makes it even funnier. The other is one of the most significant books, and probably the bravest, I have come across since I first read Solzhenitsyn. I realise that you might think I am exaggerating, but I will explain why. Taken together they provide a fascinating window on 21st century Britain.

Take the funny one first. Alain de Botton is a prolific author whose field is pop-philosophy. He writes at a high cultural level (one previous book was called *How Proust Can Change Your Life*), but always with the aim of encouraging his readers to mine the depths of Western culture for themselves.

In *Religion for Atheists* he turns his eyes to the specifically religious elements of culture – mostly, but not completely, European. He is a secular, atheist Jew, but he is haunted by the

question that the great world religions have provided critical elements of human culture, which atheism is in danger of losing.

Religions are all false, of course, but they have provided sacred spaces, meanings, relationships, meals and art that have provided the necessary social

If you remember the Just William stories, you will be familiar with the serious, self-improving intellectuals and artists, often wearing tweed, that William encounters. Alain de Botton would be right at home.

cohesion to keep society functioning and its members content.

His problem is how to maintain those benefits when the carriers of those benefits are fading. So he suggests, with a nod to Auguste Comte, setting up a secular religion, a church for non-believers, equipped with all the benefits that religions provide but without the awkward God bit.

This is where it becomes unintentionally funny, because de Botton is so frightfully earnest. If you remember the *Just William* stories, you will be familiar with the serious, self-improving intellectuals and artists, often wearing tweed, that William encounters. They are hardly aware of William's mayhem, so caught up are they in their own Plans To Improve Humanity.

Alain de Botton would be right at home. His Agape restaurants with intense conversations, his concern for nurturing art and reminders of our finitude displayed in Piccadilly Circus are almost beyond parody – yet he is completely serious. If you doubt me, head for theschooloflife.com and drink your fill.

Nevertheless, three proper thoughts emerged for me. First, fallen human beings long for the Creator God and all the good things he brings. God has put eternity in the heart of Alain de Botton, and so de Botton longs for the relationships, truth, love and guidance that a proper church should provide.

Repeatedly I thought that even if de Botton's programme delivered

everything he hopes for, it would be a pale imitation of what Christ brings. Our churches should be occasions where de Botton's dreams find their proper expression.

Second, I discovered that I am not very religious. At least, I sit quite lightly to many of the artefacts that de Botton thinks are central to faith. If you take a schools RE approach to religion and talk about 'holy places, holy seasons, holy people, holy meals' and so forth (which is pretty much de Botton's approach) then they are not particularly valuable spiritually to someone like me.

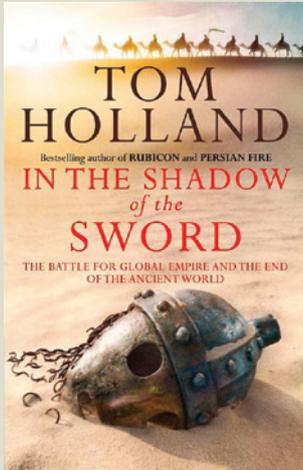
I love Mozart and Rembrandt, but they do not move me any closer to knowing God. Having discovered the reality of knowing God in Christ, even fabulous architecture is so much tinsel. By contrast, de Botton is in that familiar place where love of God's gifts blind one to God.

Third, and this is where I would start if I was reading this in a book group with non-Christians, de Botton has completely sold out to the values of materialism and marketing. His new religion, designed by Armani and sold by Procter and Gamble, is astonishingly compromised. He compares the sale of poetry books to the sale of Pringles, admires McDonalds and the Catholic Church for their passion for identical products around the world, and proposes a branded high-street chain of psychotherapists with a coherent retail identity.

He compares the sale of poetry books to the sale of Pringles, admires McDonalds and the Catholic Church for their passion for identical products around the world, and proposes a branded high-street chain of psychotherapists with a coherent retail identity.

At this point, I started to wonder if de Botton is really on our side after all, because I cannot think where else the hollowness of materialistic atheism has ever been so devastatingly displayed.

By contrast, meet Tom Holland. Holland is the successful author of several books of ancient history, two of which (*Persian Fire* and *Rubicon*) are ones I frequently recommend. *In the Shadow of the Sword* is his dauntingly vast account of the religious realities of the first 500 years of Christianity. If you dimly recall the feuds around the council of Nicea, this book will put flesh and blood on them, in gruesome and well-documented detail.



He gives the religious background to a variety of religious groupings, with a bewildering cast and endless battles, but never loses his sure footing in the detail. This is a quite brilliant piece of history writing, and deserves the highest recognition.

But that is not why it is significant or courageous. This is: buried in the back third, for the first time, an author has taken what scholars of the history of Islam have been quietly whispering and put it on public display for the rest of us.

The existence of Muhammad, the archaeology of Mecca, the textual history of the Qur'an, the credibility of the sources, the internal inconsistency of the data are all examined with a forensic eye and a judicious conclusion. Other scholars will now have to join

the debate in public. This is a hugely important book.

We are familiar with this debate for the Bible, of course, but we have had 150 years to think it through. It is commonplace for us to be confident that archaeology gives plausibility to the Bible, and that it speaks from and to its world. But mainstream critical scholarship is reaching far more radical conclusions for the historicity of Islamic claims than it ever reached for Christianity.

Holland deserves widespread support, because when the nature and content of this book becomes more widely known (which it will when it goes into paperback) he will face a firestorm of criticism, and some of it may come in an intimidating and unsafe way.

There have been other books which have done exposés of Mao, Stalin, Hitler or Pol Pot, and they have frequently been eye-opening. But my comparison of Holland with Solzhenitsyn holds, because of the physical courage that sometimes has to be displayed to make truth known.

It is commonplace for us to be confident that archaeology gives plausibility to the Bible, and that it speaks from and to its world. But mainstream critical scholarship is reaching far more radical conclusions for the historicity of Islamic claims than it ever reached for Christianity.

We Christians often wonder if the time will come when we will have to pay a price for speaking truly in public. Tom Holland, who I don't think is a Christian, has led the way.

What does placing these two books side by side, one almost unbearably trivial, the other deeply serious, have to tell us?

Tom Holland writes about the past, but he makes it clear that he is, in a coded way, writing about the present. There are, he concludes, billions of people on the planet today who believe passionately, but with massive differences, in One God. For them, for us, it is the central value of life which makes sense of others.

By contrast, de Botton's attempted raid on the tomb goods of religion looks arrogant, shallow and (even to a non-Christian) just plain wrong. To prove that, if you have Muslim friends take care as you introduce them to Holland. It will make some of our friends deeply troubled, but I suspect it may not be long before the book is put out of reach for many of them. This is not a secular age at all.



Oak Hill College

Oak Hill College is a theological college in North London, training men and women for ministry in the Church of England and other spheres of Christian service.

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**“I want to help people see
the entirety of their lives
through gospel lenses.”**