



MBA Pearl Jubilee Journal

Editorial

Dear Friends,

In this special edition of the journal of the Margaret Beaufort Association, we look back at a year packed with events commemorating the 30th ('Pearl') anniversary of the foundation of the Margaret Beaufort Institute in Cambridge [MBI]. We are greatly honoured to have received a tribute from Cherie Blair, OBE, KC. We are grateful to the *Tablet* and Cambridge University Press for acting as sponsors, to those individuals who have privately sponsored some of our anniversary events including our talk on Lady Margaret Beaufort by Nicola Tallis and a special print edition of this newsletter, to those who acted as proof-readers, Sally Livesley and Mari Shullaw & to the wonderful team at MBI including Beth Stevens, Adele Angel & with very special thanks to Natalie Despot who worked tirelessly throughout the anniversary year.

Anna Abram, Principal of the MBI, asks 'What is the Point of Studying Theology?' amid an increasingly secularised culture which has, in recent years, questioned the survival of a subject that historically occupied a pre-eminent position as 'Queen' of all academic disciplines. Elsewhere, Sean Ryan, Vice Principal and Acting Director of Studies, delves into the relatively unsung Hebrew prophet, Habakkuk whom he names a prophet for 'troubled times'. Contributions to these pages also include alumna Jackie Tevlin's reflection on the Pearl Anniversary Silent Retreat to which she contributed along with Dr Sue Price (Director of Outreach at MBI) & Fr Bob Eccles OP.

Dr Helen Glanville, an art conservator based in Italy, presents a fascinating and beautifully illustrated case study of two major works by Nicholas Poussin which are housed at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. One of these, *Extreme Unction* – the final work in Poussin's cycle of paintings depicting the sacraments - was purchased for the nation following a successful campaign mounted by Art Fund UK.

The Pearl Anniversary has been an especially pivotal year for the MBI as it coincided with the sale of its home for over 20 years at Grange Road and a move to its current temporary quarters at Wesley House (where, ironically, it opened its doors to its first cohort of theology students). On the 10th June, a formal 'Farewell to Grange Road' was held in the institute's gardens. Later that afternoon, a full house assembled in the beautiful chapel at Fitzwilliam College for a gala concert performed by renowned cellist Hannah Roberts and pianist Simon Parkin with funds raised for a bursary in memory of alumna Susanna Roberts and bursaries for student places at MBI. A sponsored drinks reception outside on the lawn set the seal on a wonderful afternoon aided by perfect summer weather. In these pages, Hannah Roberts reflects on the day.

Further elucidations on our Patron, Lady Margaret Beaufort – foundress of Christ's and St John's in Cambridge and an educationalist, philanthropist and a Tudor doyenne by virtue of having been the mother of King Henry VII (and grandmother to Henry VIII who ascended to the throne in 1509, the year of her death) were also highlighted in this anniversary year. In February, Dr Adam Crothers gave a talk followed by a tour of the Old Library at St John's where a number of important and rare manuscripts and artefacts relevant to Lady Margaret Beaufort were featured in a display specially curated for the MBA. Then, in the late Spring, Dr Nicola Tallis, historian and best-selling biographer, gave an excellent and richly illustrated talk on her book on LMB

(*Uncrowned Queen*). Lady Margaret is further celebrated in a follow up article to my interview with the Senior Conservator at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Christine Slottved Kimbriel. While the interview had focused on the lengthy and painstaking restoration process of a rare full-length portrait of Lady Margaret Beaufort, the piece in this issue traces the completion of the project which culminated in its unveiling at the refurbished and recently reopened National Portrait Gallery in June 2023.

Dr Gemma Simmonds, CJ presents an excellent and compelling updated version of her 2009 lecture on *The Rehabilitation of Mary Ward*. The bi-annual Mary Ward Lectures were endowed by the late Hilary Clay, a great friend and benefactor of the MBI and have over the years featured stellar speakers including Cecily Boulding OP, Ellen van Wolde, Janet Soskice, Roger Scruton and Luce Irigaray.

Dr Ann Swales, OP, Assistant Chaplain at the University's Catholic chaplaincy, led a day-long pilgrimage in honour of Julian of Norwich which coincided with the 650th anniversary of *Revelations of Divine Love*. The day included visits to Norwich Cathedral, St Peter Mancroft Church and Julian's Shrine. Included in this edition are three reflective texts from the day by Sr Ann.

In November, the Lightfoot Room at the Faculty of Divinity was the setting for a panel discussion entitled, *Thirty Years of Dialogue among the Abrahamic Religions*. Chaired by Anna Abulafia, Professor Emerita of the Abrahamic Religions at the University of Oxford, the three faiths were represented by Dr Edward Kessler (Woolf Institute), Professor Michael Barnes, SJ (Roehampton University) and Dr Tim Winter (Cambridge Muslim College). We're delighted to be able to include a summary of Professor Abulafia's introduction followed by the papers given by each of the speakers at a time of increasing tension in the Middle East.

The Dominican community at Blackfriars opened its doors to the MBI on two memorable occasions over 2023. First, for a lavish tea party held in its beautiful gardens which marked the first time in its history that the institute has featured in the programme of the annual Cambridge Alumni Festival Weekend. This event was attended by c. 45 Cambridge alumni and served to highlight the work of the institute to attendees. In late November, the Bishop of East Anglia, the Rt Revd Peter Collins celebrated Mass for the institute's deceased alumnae, former staff and supporters in the Priory's chapel. Taizé chants were beautifully sung by Sr Marie Pavlina Kasparova OP (my co-organiser for the Pearl Anniversary events) & Sr Stepanka OP and were accompanied on the organ by gifted musicologist Fr Dominic White OP (Acting Director of Research at MBI). Mass was followed by a buffet with friends, old and new, in the book-lined and relaxed setting of the Priory's Old Library.

Also included in this edition are pieces by Ian Randall and Melanie-Prejean Sullivan, each of whom relay the history and the ethos of the institute. The anniversary year was crowned by a keynote lecture at St Edmund's College that was given by Baroness Julie Smith and was entitled 'Faith in Politics'. The year's celebrations were brought to a close in the College Chapel with the Office of Compline which was led by Fr Dominic. The final page of this journal is graced by a sonnet entitled *The Pearl* by Dame Laurentia Johns OSB of Stanbrook Abbey which was first written in 1993 and added to in 2023.

From its beginnings in Cambridge as a 'pioneering institute for Catholic laywomen', the Margaret Beaufort Institute has accrued a rich and fascinating history. It has been expertly

steered by four dedicated and visionary principals (Sr Bridget Tighe, FMDM, Dr Susan O'Brien, Dr Oonagh O'Brien & current principal, Dr Anna Abram). Alert to the signs of the times, the MBI has, during the past 30 years of its history, been a source of excellent and inspirational scholarship (as evidenced in the recent events at the Faculty of Divinity: *Women and Diakonia: the ministry of women and diaconal ordination in the Catholic Church* conference which drew excellent speakers from Europe/the UK & North America and *30 Years of Dialogue Among the Abrahamic Religions* consisting of a Chair and panel of distinguished speakers, all of whom have made significant contributions to the furtherance of interfaith dialogue). The Margaret Beaufort Institute has also been a beacon of community and hospitality whereby theological discussion has flourished and where lasting friendships have been forged. I feel privileged to have been a part of the institute for so much of its history. Now, with my 3-year term as President of the Margaret Beaufort Association at a close, the stage is set for a newly reconfigured MBA, one which will build on the past while recognising that growth can only occur when change is present.

With warmest regards,

Susanne & Editorial Team

Susanne Jennings,

President of the Margaret Beaufort Association (2020-2023)

A Message on the 30th Anniversary of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology

It is truly a pleasure to reflect on the remarkable journey of the Margaret Beaufort Institute, a beacon of theological education and a haven for lay Catholic women seeking to deepen their knowledge and contribute to the Church in meaningful ways.

I was lucky enough to become aware of the Institute when I was living in Downing Street, where I had the privilege of meeting with Sr Bridget Tighe, its then Principal. It was a meeting filled with intellectual vigour and a shared commitment to empowering Catholic women to assume greater roles within the Church through theological expertise and spiritual maturity.

The original vision of the Institute, to provide a high standard of theological education remains as relevant today as it was when the institution was founded. The Institute has been instrumental in nurturing countless women, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and spiritual foundation to contribute meaningfully to the Church at all levels.

What sets the Margaret Beaufort Institute apart is its ability to adapt intellectually and creatively to the changing landscape of the Church over the past three Papacies. It has embraced the challenges and opportunities presented by shifting paradigms, ensuring that its teachings remain relevant and impactful. This adaptability is a testament to the Institute's visionary leadership and its unwavering dedication to its mission.

Among the Institute's strengths is its unwavering focus on ethics, which encompasses ethical leadership in both the secular and ecclesial spheres. The commitment to Catholic Social Teaching, fostered through its Centre for Ecclesial Ethics, is a shining example of how the Institute not only imparts knowledge but also instils a sense of responsibility and moral compass in its graduates. This holistic approach prepares them to navigate the complexities of the world with integrity, compassion, and wisdom.

In an era when many Catholic higher education institutions have sadly been forced to close their doors, the longevity of the Margaret Beaufort Institute becomes all the more remarkable. It stands as a testament to the resilience and determination of the Institute's founders, leaders, faculty, and students. This thirty-year milestone is a cause for celebration and a reminder of the importance of preserving and nurturing institutions that contribute so profoundly to the intellectual and spiritual development of individuals and communities.

May the Margaret Beaufort Institute continue to inspire generations of Catholic women to embrace their calling, rise to positions of leadership, and shape the future of the Church with theological expertise and unwavering faith.

Thank you.

Cherie Blair



Lady Margaret Beaufort's Stately Journey through Time

By Susanne Jennings

In June 2023, a full-length portrait of Lady Margaret Beaufort (Fig.1. cover page) was unveiled at the newly refurbished National Portrait Gallery¹ in London. Set in solitary splendour against a Hague Blue panel of wall in the Tudor Gallery, the portrait runs parallel to several likenesses of Richard III, its placement an example of curatorial cross-referencing. On loan for three years from St John's College, Cambridge, the portrait promises to awaken interest in Lady Margaret Beaufort whose life has, in recent years, been the subject of both serious and sensationalist biography². No stranger to contradiction, Lady Margaret's reputation has historically been subject to admiration bordering on the hagiographical against what today, we might call character assassination. Her piety has been depicted as religious mania and her desire to see her son, Henry Tudor take the throne from Richard III is commonly interpreted as the ruthless scheming of an ambitious villainess.

From 2018-2023, this full-length portrait³ – bearing the ravages of time and mistreatment, including having been over-painted four times - occupied an easel at the Hamilton Kerr Institute [HKI]. Hidden away in the historic village of Whittlesford and just a short train journey from Cambridge, the HKI is attached to the Fitzwilliam Museum and is home to the conservation of easel paintings on an impressive scale. Lady Margaret's portrait was commissioned soon after her death in 1509 by Bishop John Fisher⁴ who had been her close spiritual advisor, confidant, and executor of her estate. It was to be Fisher who was responsible for seeing through the completion of the foundation of St John's College and of naming Lady Margaret Beaufort as its Foundress in 1511. The portrait, not unlike its subject, was to endure a history marked by trauma and intrigue. Following Fisher's fatal refusal to recognise Henry VIII as Supreme Head of the Church [of England] and to prevent the painting from falling into the hands of men loyal to the king, the painting had been wrested from the walls of the Bishop's palace and taken away for safekeeping. Resurfacing at St John's in c. 1874 where it was discovered in a storeroom in Third Court⁵, the portrait then went on to hang in relative obscurity in the dining room of the Master's Lodge. A twist to its fate occurred when Dr Andrew

¹ During its refurbishment which is estimated to have cost c. £41 million, the NPG was closed to the public.

² Serious studies include Nicola Tallis's *Uncrowned Queen* while Philippa Gregory's *The Red Queen* falls into the sensationalist bracket and is probably the better-known account owing to its having been lavishly adapted for the screen.

³ This is one of just three such portraits of Lady Margaret Beaufort.

⁴ Bishop St John Fisher of Rochester is one of the Forty English Martyrs. His refusal to recognise Henry VIII as Supreme Head of the Church [of England] led to his execution on orders of the king.

⁵ The portrait, which had been promised by Fisher to St John's, was reportedly 'found in a bad state but not essentially injured'. Alexander Freeman, Catalogue of the Pictures belonging to St John's College, *The Eagle*, vol. 12, no. 65. C. 1881, p. 4.

Chen, an art historian and fellow of St John's, solved the 500-year-old mystery of the real identity of the portraitist, namely, the C16th Netherlander artist Meynart Wewyck who was a favourite of King Henry VII and active in his court⁶.

From this point onward, the portrait of Lady Margaret was to be the focus of an intensive conservation project (or, in art conservation parlance, a 'campaign') led by Christine Slottved Kimbriel ACR, Senior Conservator of the Hamilton Kerr Institute [HKI]⁷. Financially supported by the St John's College Annual Fund for five long years – two of which coincided with lockdowns



Fig. 2. Christine Kimbriel at work on the portrait.
©Hamilton Kerr Institute.

occasioned by the pandemic⁸ - the portrait occupied a vast studio space humming with dehumidifiers while work was carried out on returning it to as near its original state as possible. Christine stated that this process took her in excess of 2,000 working hours with the help of a team comprised of staff, students and interns at the HKI. It entailed sophisticated technical examination to determine the portrait's correct dating and most intriguingly, to discover what lay beneath the portrait's surface. Cleaning with specialist solvents revealed sections of the portrait not visible to the naked eye while small areas had to be painstakingly reintroduced (one such example was a section of once richly depicted brocade that had, with time, faded to near invisibility).

High jeopardy work such as this was to eventually reveal the 'real' Margaret Beaufort whose face had, quite literally, been in hiding thanks to historic attempts to suppress any vestiges of either youth or mirth. This artistic cover[ing] up had culminated in a repositioning of eyebrows, nose and mouth, the effect of which was that Lady Margaret was perceived as a dour, humourless subject with thin, pinched mouth whose piety – evidenced by prayer book,

prie-dieu and hands poised heavenwards in prayer - was unquestionable, as was her regal

⁶ For further information on this, see: <https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/painting-lady-margaret-beaufort-smuggled-cambridge-protect-it-king-henry-viiiis-henchmen-unveiled>

⁷ An interview with Christine Slottved Kimbriel re the conservation of the portrait of Lady Margaret Beaufort appeared in the Lent 2022 edition of the Margaret Beaufort Association Newsletter.

⁸ Lady Margaret was no stranger to pandemics. In her lifetime, Cambridge, on account of its lying in damp fenland, was especially vulnerable to the plague.



Fig. 3. A member of Christine Kimbriel's team reintroduces a small section of the portrait that had been compromised by time. ©Hamilton Kerr Institute

status owing to the inclusion of the insignia (including Lancastrian ceiling rose and portcullis) by which she is surrounded.

When, in the summer of 2023, the conservation of the painting was finally complete, arrangements were finalised for its removal from the Hamilton Kerr Institute. Experts carefully took the portrait down from the easel that had supported it throughout five winters and packed it securely against strong wooden supports in readiness for the journey to London. Now, with the fanfare of its unveiling having subsided, its presence in the Tudor Gallery is an imposing one owing to three factors: its size (it measures L180 cm x W122 cm), its solitary position and, above all, its subject. Dressed in luxuriously cut black robes, her head crowned by a widow's coif with a prayer book resting on a prie dieu draped in rich brocade, Lady Margaret Beaufort looks away into the distance, as if to a vanishing point. Her expression unfathomable, she escapes our gaze. No prisoner to history, she exists both within, and outside, of time.



June 2023: Expert preparation for the removal of the portrait and onward journey to the NPG. © Hamilton Kerr Institute.

Nicola Tallis Talk & Book Signing



Dr Anna Abram with Dr Nicola Tallis with an image of LMB

On a perfect Spring afternoon in May, historian Nicola Tallis travelled to the Institute on Grange Road to give a talk about her meticulously researched best-selling biography of Lady Margaret Beaufort, *Uncrowned Queen*. Dr Tallis's talk corrected various misconceptions about Lady Margaret and provided a nuanced and balanced portrait. Afterwards, Dr Tallis signed copies of the book for members of a very appreciative audience, many of whom were newcomers to both the Institute and to the vast legacy of its namesake. The event was generously sponsored by Dr Melanie-Prejean Sullivan.

<https://www.waterstones.com/book/uncrowned-queen/nicola-tallis/9781789292589>

Reflections on the Pearl Anniversary Silent Retreat Day

By Jackie Tevlin

“Let me live this day as a witness to your grace, your truth, your love ...” asks Stephen Cherry to the God of Words and Silence. Twenty-Five of us set aside the 11th March 2023, to do just this, in the hospitable and still space at the Margaret Beaufort Institute. This Retreat was to offer us precious time out from busy lives to still the worries of our minds and to put the burdens that we carry to one side. We would be invited to accept the stillness and quiet of the day as a gift which would move us into God’s presence where we would feel held, loved and protected throughout the day.



Photo by Martin Tulard

We were asked to ponder the following questions:

- In the silence what do you notice?
- Where do you feel closest to God?
- Where do you feel most challenged?
- Where do you feel yourself to be fully the person God created you to be ?

Dr Sue Price, Director of Pastoral Outreach at the MBI, led us in a prayerful and playful exercise known as Godly Play based on seeking, finding and using your treasure. The simplicity and beauty of Godly Play had us all entranced.

The Spring sun shone warmly and most of us were able to ponder the mysteries of the ‘pearl of great price’ in the splendid setting of the Institute’s gardens at Grange Road. We searched, we abandoned the baggage that bowed us down and, to a lesser or greater extent, found the gift of peace in our hearts.

Midday Mass was led by Fr Bob Eccles OP, a great friend to the MBI. His homily, a highlight of the retreat, focused on God’s searching love and the power of transformation.

I led the afternoon session on Praying with Poetry. Essentially an Ignatian exercise, it called on each of us to use our imagination and power of creativity. We enjoyed the shared experience of listening to the words of poetry - words with the power to open up the ‘oyster shell’ of our soul, and so, deepen and transform our relationship with God. Poems included Life Unfolds by Marina Weiderkehr, The Bright Field by R.S. Thomas, This is My Prayer by E.Gately and When Jessie Died which is one of my own poems.

Fr Bob stayed throughout the afternoon to be available for spiritual conversation. The day was pervaded by deep silence providing room for a spiritual and creative response. It was a truly lovely prayerful day, enjoyed as a gift by us all.

“Per visibilia ad invisibilia”

Nicolas Poussin’s “*Extreme Unction*” and “*Eliezer and Rebekah at the well*” in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

By Helen Glanville

In Cambridge, in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, are two great paintings by Nicolas Poussin painted at different moments in his life -*Extreme Unction* (Fig.1) and *Eliezer and Rebekah at the well* (Fig.2), both on sacred subjects from the New and Old Testaments. The recently acquired *Extreme Unction* is part of his ‘first’ series of *Sacraments* painted for Cassiano dal Pozzo, his friend and patron, in the latter part of the 1630s, while the *Eliezer and Rebekah at the Well* dates from the last years of his life, and is thought by several scholars to have been painted for Cassiano’s brother, Antonio dal Pozzo (pozzo = well in Italian), also a close friend of the artist, whom he made an executor of his will.



Fig.1 Nicolas Poussin *Extreme Unction* c.1636-38 (first series, painted for Cassiano dal Pozzo), Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge (© Chris Titmus, Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge)



Fig.2 Nicolas Poussin *Eliezer and Rebekah at the well* (c.1660s) Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge (© Chris Titmus, Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge)

Both paintings underwent technical analysis and imaging in order to better understand how and with what materials they were painted⁹; this in itself is nothing new, the technical analysis of paintings and the ‘discoveries’ made using these techniques are now part of the art historical repertoire, but the approach used here to study Poussin’s paintings is novel in that the results of the analyses were interpreted in the context of the culture of the times and of the circles in

⁹ A full discussion of the results can be found in my PhD thesis, and different aspects are discussed in a variety of articles that can be found under my name on the site of Academia.edu.

which Poussin moved in Rome¹⁰, and in relation to what fed the artist's reflections and beliefs, and the philosophies that they embraced.

Unlike his contemporaries Rubens and Van Dyck for instance, or Rembrandt, Poussin's painting technique has not benefited from a wealth of study perhaps because the 'materiality' of his paint does not leap to the eye as does the more evident brushwork of the former artists, but mostly because of the image we have inherited of him as a 'Classicist', an intellectual painter for whom the material aspects of his art were of little importance (in contrast to the 'colourists' of whom Rubens was seen as the *chef d'école*). Intellect in opposition to the hand - the Cartesian divorce is still with us. It is, however, anachronistic when dealing with the works of Poussin who belongs to an earlier generation, that of the humanists who were his friends and patrons for whom, as in Antiquity, theory and practice, mind and hand were indissolubly wedded together. Writing to one of these, Paul Fréart de Chantelou, he tells him that in order to be able to judge painting as one should, what was needed was « *Grande Théorie et Pratique jointes ensemble* »¹¹

Reading the Summer 2022 Margaret Beaufort Newsletter, I was struck by a quotation from John of Damascus¹², « When you see the Bodiless become man for your sake, then you may depict the figure of a human form; when the Invisible becomes visible in the flesh, then you may depict the likeness of something seen. ... [J]ust as [through] words perceived by the senses we hear with bodily ears, and understand what is spiritual, so through bodily vision we arrive at spiritual contemplation. » This seemed to me to articulate exactly what it was that Nicolas Poussin was trying to achieve in his works: to express the divine with and through the materials available to the painter so as to lead the person contemplating the painting - 'reading' it, to use Poussin's own words¹³- through the visible to the divine – *per visibilia ad invisibilia*.¹⁴

The context - "*Luce non altera, sed aliter illustrante*"

Poussin was a humanist to the tip of his fingers. He conversed with the painters and writers of Antiquity who were his models, to paraphrase Reynolds¹⁵. Not a 'Classicist' but a 'Classical' painter, he fed on the philosophy and thought of Antiquity for whom theory and practice were indissolubly linked. As his compatriot and fellow painter Dufresnoy (also part of Cassiano dal Pozzo's humanist circle in Rome) wrote in his poem *De Artegraphica*– citing Quintilian who was

¹⁰ He lived and worked there with only a short Parisian interruption (1640-1642) from his arrival in 1624 at the age of 30, to his death in 1665.

¹¹ Nicolas Poussin to Paul Fréart de Chantelou, 24 November 1647 Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin (Ed. Charles Jouanny, Société de l'Art Français, Paris 1911) p.272)

¹² John of Damascus In Defense of Icons 1.16, 3.12), cited by Prof. Ben Quash in the Summer 2022 Newsletter.

¹³ Same letter as note 3

¹⁴ Richard of Saint Victor ; see also (Saint Paul, Romans 1,20), in the *Vulgate* « Invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur »

¹⁵ REYNOLDS *Discourse V* p.137 "...he studied the ancients so much that he acquired the habit of thinking in their way...".

himself 'citing' Pythagoras - « ...*non linguâ pinxit Apelles*"¹⁶. Galileo similarly, rather more acidly, remarked that the world was full of painters who could recite all of Leonardo's precepts on painting, but were unable to paint even a three-legged stool¹⁷.

His world-view too was humanist, increasingly reflecting the syncretic ideas of the circle in which he moved from the time of his arrival in Rome from Paris in 1624 until his death there in 1665. Cassiano dal Pozzo, secretary to Cardinal Francesco Barberini, had gathered around himself an erudite circle which included antiquaries and scientists, philosophers, philologists and translators, musicians and artists, all of whom, in emulation of the Renaissance humanists they so admired, shared a desire to reconcile the apparently disparate world views of pagan antiquity, Judaism and Christianity - "*Luce non altera, seda liter illustrante*"¹⁸. It was into this circle that Poussin, Cassiano's lifelong friend, was introduced.

Remembered mostly as a passionate antiquary and patron of the arts¹⁹, Cassiano dal Pozzo also had a profound interest in the natural sciences and numbered among his correspondents and friends such figures as Galileo (whose *Il Saggiatore* he edited for publication²⁰) and Kepler and scores of the scientific and intellectual elite of Europe. Not only was Cassiano one of Poussin's greatest patrons, he also gave Poussin access to the great Barberini library, which contained copies of all the major classical texts and later formed one of the cores of the Vatican Library, and directed his reading; Poussin described himself as Cassiano's '*creatura*', that is his 'pupil'²¹.

We do not know precisely when Cassiano dal Pozzo commissioned Poussin to paint what was to be the first of his two series of paintings on the seven *Sacraments*, except that it followed the painting of the series of *Triumphs* (also known as Bacchanals) for Cardinal Richelieu²², executed in the mid 1630s. Anthony Blunt, in his indispensable 1967 monograph on the artist, has highlighted the parallel between the 'mysteries' of the Greek religion and the 'sacraments' of the Christian religion, the Latin word *sacramentum* being the equivalent of the Greek word *mysterion*, exemplified in the Dionysian mystery rites of the bacchanalia (the subject of the series that Poussin had just finished painting for the Cardinal).

¹⁶ Du Fresnoy, *De Arte Graphica* 1.59 "On voit dans Quintilien que Pythagore disoit, que la Théorie n'estoit rien sans la Pratique, & que la Pratique n'estoit rien sans la Théorie."

¹⁷ Galileo Galilei *Dialogo sopra I due massimi sistemi del mondo* [1632] Opere ((Ed. Naz. Favaro), Vol. VII p.60 "*si come ci son molti che sanno per lo senno a mente tutta la poetica, e poi sono infelici nel compor Quattro versi solamente; altri posseggono tutti i precetti del Vinci, e non saprebber poi dipignere uno sgabello*", " Galileo's early training as a painter is often overlooked.

¹⁸ "*The light is not different, but it illuminates [the object/subject] in a different way, from a different perspective.*" Petrarch, in *Sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, in Opera, II, 1042-1044 (cfr. Prose, edited by G. Martellou ecc., Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, 1955, pp. 724-25). Cited by Garin, E. *Il ritorno dei filosofi antichi*, Naples, 1994, pp.25 & 27.

¹⁹ Responsible for the 'Paper museum, commissioning artists to draw and record all the finds of antiquity.

²⁰ *Il Saggiatore* (*The Assayer*), Rome 1623

²¹ In the same sense as Melzi was referred to as the '*creato*' of Leonardo

²² Two of which hang in the National Gallery in London, the so-called *Triumph of Pan* and the *Triumph of Silenus*, both part of the recent exhibition at the National Gallery, *Poussin and the Dance* (2021)

In the *Triumph of Bacchus* (Fig.3 below) , in all likelihood painted just before *Extreme Unction* , we see the “procession” of the gods - Pan, Hercules, Silenus (who is painted with the features of Socrates)²³ (Fig.4a & b) – leading up to the hieratic figure of Bacchus, the earthly embodiment of the Sun-god Apollo, who in turn adumbrates the coming of Christ, earthly manifestation and embodiment of God, the true revelation.



Fig.3 Nicolas Poussin *The Triumph of Bacchus* (.c.1635-36) Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (Open access Google Art Project)



Figs.4a Nicolas Poussin, detail of the Fig.3, *Triumph of Bacchus* , figure of Silenus (with the features of Socrates)

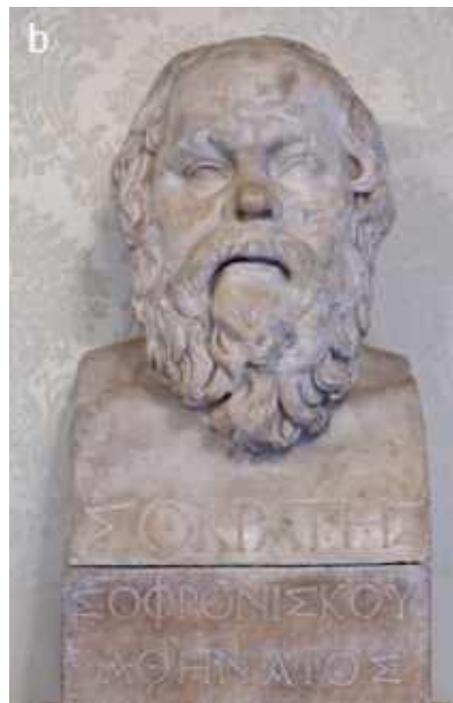


Fig.4b *Bust of Socrates*, part of the Borghese Collection well known to Poussin, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (Inv.1236)

²³Plato, the most ‘divine’ of the ancient philosophers. For further discussion see my article on *The triumph of Silenus* in *Artibus et Historiae*, 2016, No. 74 (XXXVII), Essays in Honour of Paul Joannides, pp.241-254

Extreme Unction

The painting depicts the last sacrament, interpreted in the context of early Christianity, as first described by Giovan Battista Bellori (who knew the artist)²⁴.

A great deal has been written by a scholars on Poussin's setting of both series of *Sacraments*²⁵ in the early days of the Christian church in Rome, but I think it is important to stress that what we see in the works of Poussin in general, and in the Dal Pozzo *Extreme Unction* in particular, is not so much evidence of an 'antiquarian' interest in the Early Church and its fathers, but a material expression of the syncretism of his world-view - the continuity that he and the circle of Cassiano dal Pozzo saw between the theology of Antiquity and that of the Early Christian Church and its fathers.

It seems fitting the overtly 'Christian' subject matter of the *Sacraments*- man's rite of passage from life into death - so dear also to the authors of Antiquity, should have followed the 'pagan' subject-matter and theology of the *Triumphs*.

In extreme unction, the last sacrament to be administered, the consecrated oil (symbol of the spirit that is light) is placed on the parts of the body that denote the senses that are no longer active. Poussin has represented the moment of the final anointing, that of the organ of sight, vision; the most 'noble' of our senses because it allows us to see the world and discern the divine order behind it. Our vision does not enable us to see clearly because the senses are material, but "*The mind's eye' begins to see clearly when the outer eye grows dim*"²⁶ as Socrates says in the *Symposium*, the Socratic statement effortlessly flowing into St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians "*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known*"²⁷.

Conferring divine grace and illumination, the rite is depicted in the painting and its essence incorporated - literally - in the light of the Sun ("*simulacrum*"²⁸ of God, and in antiquity Apollo) which floods the entire composition from the window in the top left-hand of the painting. Critics are unanimous in recognising in this painting not only the ambience of the early Christians, but also the almost physical presence of light which bathes the whole composition., in which all the figures are immersed.

Light, enlightenment and the Sun: the foundations

This light is present in the work right from its beginning. In a painting, the ground, the priming layer is the foundation on which the painting is constructed and its colour, absorbency, nature will influence the overall effect. This preparatory work was usually entrusted to assistants,

²⁴Bellori, G.P. *Vita di Nicolò Pussino*, p. 431. "*Rappresentate le figure medesime ne gli abiti apostolici della primitiva Chiesa*".

²⁵ The second series painted in the 1640s for his friend and patron Chantelou, now hanging in Edinburgh, on permanent loan from the Duke of Sutherland

²⁶ Plato *Symposium* , 219 a

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12, (King James Version)

²⁸ Marino, G.B. *Dicerie sacre- Pittura*, (Turin, 1614)p. 14v "*O Sole... per fine simulacro immortale & incorrottile dello stesso Iddio*". Marino also cites, in parallel, Psalm 18:6 «*Posuit in Sole tabernaculum suum*».

oralready in 17th century Rome, canvases could be bought – as now – already ‘primed’. However, analysis of many works by Poussin, because of the variety in the nature and colour of the ground layers, seems to indicate that Poussin took an exceptional interest in what is traditionally considered the lowliest aspect of the painting. Physically, of course, it is the lowest , although not the lowliest section of the painting, as its nature and physical make-up is essential to the desired effect and meaning of the final edifice. Generally, the ground in 17th century paintings on canvas consists of two layers, which can vary in colour, ranging from a pale brownish hue to an almost black colour. Often, the uppermost layer contains more lead white which makes it a less absorbent surface to paint on. The ground layer in *Extreme Unction* differs from that in the other canvases in the series of *Sacraments*²⁹ painted for Cassiano dal Pozzo in colour - it is what Armenini in his 1584 treatise on painting described as “*fiammeggiante*” , that is fiery, luminous³⁰. It differs also from the others in the series in that it is applied in three rather than the habitual two layers. As a result, the texture of the twill canvas of the support has been completely masked thus creating a smooth, reflectant, almost mirror-like surface on which to paint the composition (see Fig.5a below).

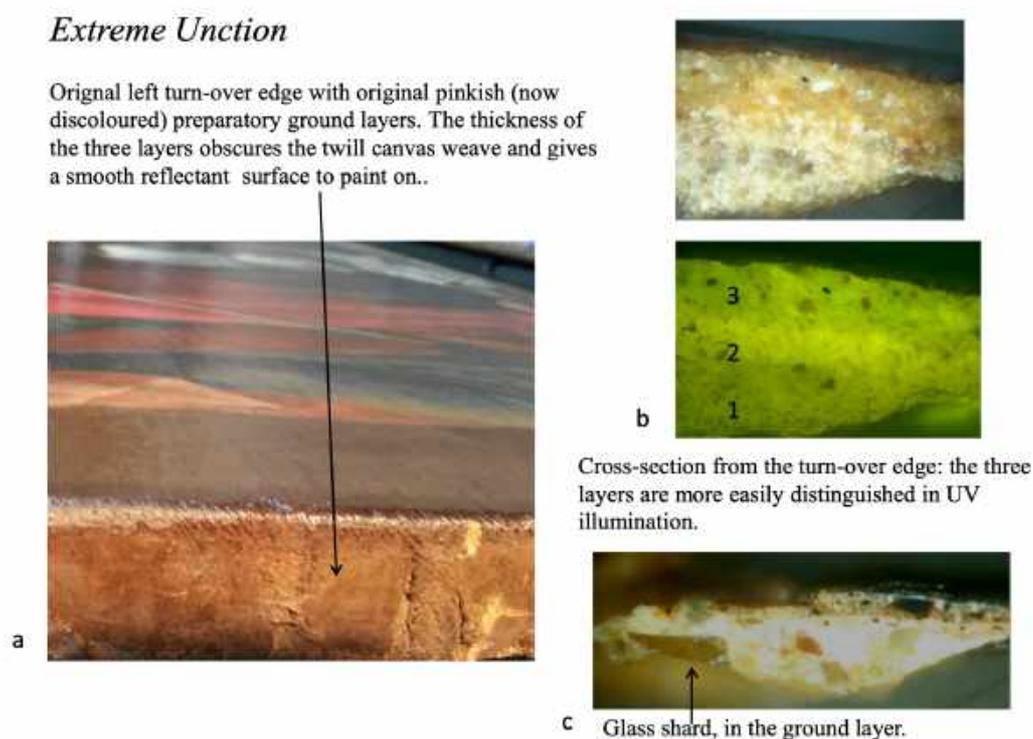


Fig.5 The ground in *Extreme Unction*

²⁹ In fact they are all different, unlike the paintings in the second series of *Sacrament* painted for his friend and patron Chantelou, now belonging to the Duke of Sutherland, on permanent loan to the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh; these are all painted on a deep-red/brown ground .

³⁰The original, warm luminous hue of the ground (it is discoloured where not protected by paint along the tacking edges) can be better seen in the cross section taken from the painting (Fig. 5b).

Not only the luminous colour, therefore, but also the finish of the ground is aimed at the desired effect: that of a physical representation of incorporeal light. The totally unexpected discovery of the presence of shards of ground glass in the ground (Fig.5c) further indicates Poussin's desire for luminosity, to incorporate light in the opaque materiality of pigments and their binders, which is all the painter has with which to work to evoke the immaterial and the invisible – *per visibilia invisibilia*.

Shards of glass were also found in the ground layer of the *Triumph of Bacchus* referred to above (Fig.3), and in the luminous flesh of the seated figure of Bacchus. Bacchus was understood in antiquity as the earthly form of Apollo the Sun-God, and the Early Church saw him - twice-born, and resurrected. - as a prefiguration of Christ. Blaise de Vigenère in his commentary to the *Images* of Philostratus - ' again one of the sources most used by Poussin - describes the *Cristo-Sole* of the Early Church as:

"he [the Sun] who is the eye, the heart of the world, the visible son of the great invisible God, as Plato says: to which same he has set up his sacred Throne, and Tabernacle according to the Psalmist."³¹.

With the presence of shards of glass, we have a material/tangible continuity between the bacchanal of the theology of antiquity in the *Triumph of Bacchus*, and the sacrament taking place in the Early Christian church, in *Extreme Unction*. The common link is the light that permeates the entire universe, whether it be the *Anima mundi* of Stoic philosophy, so often cited in relation to Poussin, or the true light of the revelation as in Saint John's Gospel ("*Erat lux vera quae illuminat omnem hominem venientem in mundum*")³².

Light and the Soul: Composition

The horizontal axis of the bed on which the dying man lies reflects the linear direction of human life³³ – from birth to fulfillment. Death breaks the bond between the body (opaque) and the soul, the spirit (light), and the soul then returns to the celestial sphere where 'she'³⁴ originated, and the whole cycle begins again. So, there is no death, just change. This is the cornerstone of Stoic cosmology, and philosophy.

³¹de Vigenère, B. *Les Images, ou Tableaux de platte peinture de Philostrate Lemnien*, Paris [1588], Ed. Paris, 1597 *Images*, p. 171. «" luy qui est l'œil le coeur du monde, le fils visible du grand Dieu invisible, comme dit Platon : auquelmesme il a establi son saintThrone, & Tabernacle, selon le Psalmiste"

³² John I.9 (Vulgate)

³³ Apuleius *De Mundo*, p.409 (cited by Franciscus Junius the Younger, *The Painting of the Ancients in three Bookes*, London 1638, Bk.III, 2. Franciscus Junius is also a favoured source for Poussin.

"...All these things are no other than God, as the great Plato tells us: "God, as the ancient story says, holding the beginning and the end and the middle of all things that are, moves by a straight path in the course of nature, bringing them to fulfilment;"

³⁴ The soul is feminine in Plato, that is Psyche (soul) in Greek mythology. p.65 The Cambridge translation has the soul as an 'it' rather than 'she', as in TThomas Taylor and older translations. The Cambridge translation also reduces Plato's « covering with a veil » which is so suggestive, simply with the word « covering », so you lose the allusion to « fabula » which, 'as covered with a veil', which is how it was presented in humanist times.

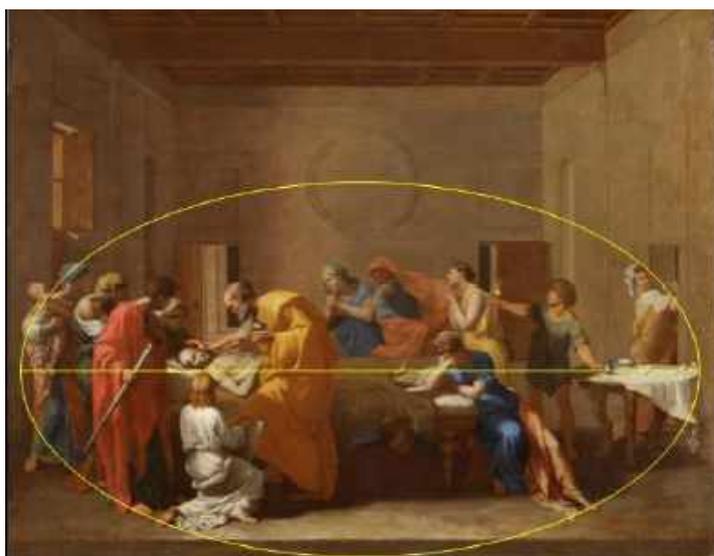


Fig.6 *Extreme Unction* Man's "straight path", within the perpetual cycle of birth, dissolution and renewal of the cosmos.



Fig.7a



Fig.7b

Fig. 7a and b details from *Extreme Unction*, (© Chris Titmus, Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge)

The circular movement of the universe (cosmos) is mirrored in the life of man (microcosm), that is the soul: the journey of the soul is circular, she enters, abides and returns..... From birth, when the spirit (the anima mundi) enters into the matter that is the body and animates it (into the newborn child, the first figure on the left in the painting to be infused with light, Fig.7a), to death, when the soul, the figure of the maiden - clothed in white and yellow, the colours of light , joyfully exits, crossing the threshold of the door to the right to return from whence she came (Fig 7b).

If we accept – or once we accept – that colour is meaningful in Poussin, - then the smiling girl who trips out to the right, clothed in the colours of light and the spirit, and the only figure in motion in the composition, no longer appears 'anecdotal'³⁵ but an essential part of the meaning of the painting.

Plato wrote of the impossibility of speaking of divine things without giving them figurative form³⁶, and this is what Poussin has done in *Extreme Unction*. He has taken a divine subject and created with all the means at the disposal of a poet in paint, a visual metaphor, an object of spiritual contemplation.

³⁵ Blunt describes the "maid that flutters out of the door" as a "distracting detail".(Blunt 1967, I, p.252)

³⁶ Plato *Timaeus* 40c "Vain would be the attempt to tell all the figures of them circling as in dance, and their juxtapositions and the return of them in their revolutions upon themselves, and their approximations, and to say which of these deities in their conjunctions meet,.....to attempt to tell of all this without a visible representation of the heavenly system would be labour in vain." Ovid *Metamorphoses* Bk.XV, 185 (pp.375/376). Also Lucretius *Nature of the universe*, Bk II , l.573-580 (p.77) "With the voice of mourning mingles the cry that infants raise when their eyes open on the sunlit world. Never has day given place to night or night to dawn that has not heard, blent with these infant wailings, the lamentation that attends on death and sombre obsequies."

In 1664, in Paris, Gianlorenzo Bernini in the company of Chantelou, visited his unparalleled collection of paintings by Poussin, including the second series of *Sacraments* that he had commissioned from the artist³⁷. Bernini studied the *Extreme Unction* at length, from every angle, without uttering a word. "Finally, he got up [he had been on his knees, to see it better] and said that it [the painting] had the same effect as a good sermon that one listens to with the greatest attention, at the end departing without saying anything....but its effect is felt within...."³⁸

Eliezer and Rebekah at the well



(Fig.2 repeated)



Fig.8 *Eliezer and Rebekah at the well* (1648), Musée du Louvre, Paris (Open access, Google Art Project)

The Fitzwilliam representation of the story of *Eliezer and Rebekah*, (Fig.2) depicts a different and earlier moment in the Old Testament story to that represented in the painting in the Louvre (Fig.8), painted earlier, in 1648, which was the subject of one of the most well-known of the *Conférences* of the *Académie*, in which Poussin was criticized by certain of his fellow Academicians for not having been true to the Scriptures, or at least to the 'letter' of the Scriptures, not having represented the camels present in the biblical account. Charles Le Brun, the first director of the *Académie royale de peinture et sculpture*, who had known Poussin well

³⁷and copies of the first series painted for Cassiano dal Pozzo.

³⁸Chantelou, Paul Fréart de *Journal de voyage du Cavalier Bernin en France* [1665] (Ed.MilovanStanić, Paris 2001) p.89 «"j'ai fait descendre L'Extrême Onction, et l'ai fait mettre près de la lumière, afin que le Cavalier la pût mieux voir. Il l'a [regardé] debout quelque temps, puis il s'est mis à genoux, pour la mieux voir, changeant de fois à autres de lunettes et montrant son étonnement sans rien dire. A la fin il s'est relevé et a dit que cela faisait le même [effet] qu'une belle prédication qu'on écoute avec attention fort grande et dont on sort après sans rien dire..mais que l'effet s'en ressent au-dedans..." Bernini studied Poussin's painting, as the artist would have wished. Chantelou, on the other hand, although great friend and patron of Poussin, on several occasions was taken to task in letters from the artist, for not spending enough time contemplating the painting, and therefore not fully understanding it.

in Rome³⁹, sprang to his defence: it is one thing to be true to the letter, he proffered, and another to be true to the spirit of the Bible. The inclusion of the camels in the painting would have been distracting – and detracting, not part of the ‘meaning’ and therefore superfluous. Again Le Brun, this time intervening after another lecture, reinforces the point, and the ‘unity’ in Poussin’s paintings, every element contributing to the whole creation, its effect and its meaning: “It is an observation worthy of consideration that one needs to make on all of Monsieur Poussin’s works, that he expresses so much of the general character of that which he wishes to figuratively express in the details, that when he decides to treat a painful and sorrowful subject, even the most inanimate objects seem to feel sorrow and pain. And if he represents fury and ire, it is as though the Skies themselves threaten the earth, and in the air we feel the same emotion as he imprints on the faces of his figures.”⁴⁰.

In the later treatment of the subject in the Fitzwilliam painting, an earlier moment of the episode is depicted, when Rebekah offers Eliezer, Abraham’s servant as well as the camels, water to drink, thus fulfilling the ‘prophecy’ as the God-chosen bride for Isaac; and in this version two camels are present, to the left of the central event, loaded with gifts.

In this version of the subject, the camels play a definite and meaningful role: man shares his earthly essence with the animal (the camel⁴¹), just as his soul shares her spiritual essence with the divine (Rebekah). The action moves from left to right, and if one “reads” the painting with care and attention, following the example of Bernini as we have seen above, one is able to glean all the different levels at which the work can be understood, in the same way as the stories related by the Scriptures (literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical). The patrons and public for whom Poussin painted would have been able to pick up all (or at least some) of the allusions and symbolic meanings embedded in every aspect of the painting, both in the composition and in the materials used to create it. Brute (in the sense of not being endowed with reason) animals are led in from the left loaded with their material gifts; one crosses the threshold represented by the well-head that divides the painting and the action, as does Eliezer who bends across to drink of the water of ‘spiritual’ wealth⁴² (in contrast to the material wealth that he brings with him, with the camels). This is the water offered by the flower among maidens⁴³, Rebekah, in the centre of the painting. As the ‘chosen’ bride she was seen as a prefiguration of Mary in the New Testament, as well as assimilating the figure of the Egyptian

³⁹ *"Mais comme il a eü l'avantage de converser souvent avec ce grand home dont il entreprend de parler..."*

⁴⁰ Le Brun's comment after Sébastien Bourdon's *Conférence* (Bourdon Aveugles, p.187) "...c'est une remarque digne de consideration, & que l'on doit faire dans tous les Ouvrages de M.Poussin, qu'il y donne tellement ce caractere general de ce qu'il veut figurer en particulier, , que quand il entreprend de traiter un sujet triste & douloureux, il n'est pas jusqu'aux choses insensibles qui ne semblent ressentir de la douleur & de la tristesse; Et s'il represente de la fureur & de la colère, on diroit que le Ciel menace la terre, & qu'il y a dans l'air une emotion semblable à celle qu'il imprime sur le visage de ses figures."

⁴¹ Embodying also the biblical allusion to material riches, that here it bears as gifts...

⁴² Corinthians, II, 4,7. " But we have this treasure in earthen vessels"

⁴³ Not for nothing is she clad in rose and green.

Goddess Isis⁴⁴ (her head – Fig.8b- echoes that of a Roman bust of Isis, who was also lauded as *regina coeli*, *Stella Maris*, now in the Musei Capitolini in Rome (Fig.9a).



Fig 9a Detail of the figure of Rebekah



Figure 9b Detail of a Roman bust of the goddess Isis
(The statue is of Vibia Sabina as the goddess Isis in Villa Adriana in Tivoli, which Poussin knew well)

The use of lapis lazuli in *Eliezer and Rebekah*, and its 'meaning'

Technical analysis showed that natural ultramarine – lapis lazuli - is the only blue pigment employed in *Eliezer and Rebecca*⁴⁵, and that its use is not confined to the blue drapery and sky, but is present in all the blues and greys whatever their tonality, as well as in the greens of the drapery of the kneeling woman, the foliage and the landscape, where it is mixed with a little lead antimony yellow and perhaps some glauconite (one of the two types of green earth).

Not only does the use of ultramarine throughout the composition bring harmonic unity to the work, but it also underlines in material terms, the 'unity' of all creation; like light, it permeates and mingles, at times unseen, drawing together all elements of creation. That lapis lazuli should be used in such a way, in mixtures to paint landscape and foliage, and in neutral hues, when it is such an expensive pigment, even when not of the highest quality, indicates that there are other thought processes at play in its choice, rather than simply its material value. Poussin's use

⁴⁴ See Dempsey, C.G. *Poussin and Egypt* The Art Bulletin, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Jun., 1963), pp. 109-119

⁴⁵ This is the case in all but the very earliest of Poussin's paintings, when smalt is used as the blue pigment, and very occasionally azurite.

of lapis lazuli strongly suggests that for him it had a spiritual value, and that he – as so many before him, as also so many in his circle -considered it a material embodiment of the divine.

The analysis also gives information as to the probable source of the pigment used, through the proportions of the elements present. The results add weight to the argument for the spiritual value of the pigment. Only a few sources of lapis lazuli exist in the world and the finest lapis was usually considered to be that which came from Afghanistan. Recent studies have shown that this source can be characterised by a higher concentration in potassium relative to silicon plus aluminium. In medieval maps Afghanistan was "the doorstep to Paradise"⁴⁶, the location of the garden of Eden. The association of lapis lazuli with the divine in the Christian tradition goes back to the Old Testament and the early exegeses.

In the Old Testament, in Exodus 24:10 for instance, the floor beneath God's throne is described as azure - "lapidissapphirini" of a colour compared to that of a clear blue sky. "caelum cum serenum est"⁴⁷. Lapis lazuli - almost the precise equivalent of "lapidissapphirini" - which is indeed the precious stone that most scholarship equates it with: metaphor for the heavenly vault, the house of the Lord, the colour of divine glory, the foundation of the city of God in the heavenly Jerusalem.

To interpret Poussin's use of the pigment symbolically is not anachronistic; contemporary sources show that there is indeed a 'golden chain' through the ages and that the medieval exegesis of the divine as associated with the colour of the heavenly vault was just as present in 17th century Rome. We can cite two contemporary sources here - the writings of Father Matteo Zaccolini, a Theatine lay brother, who was also a painter and mathematician and whose writings on light, colour and perspective we know had a huge influence on the artist⁴⁸, and the treatise on painting (*L'arte maestra*⁴⁹) written by the Jesuit father Lana (who belonged to the same Barberini circle in the 1650s).

Blue is the most excellent of colours. Having something of the divine, it was therefore placed by Nature in the heavens, Zaccolini tells us;⁵⁰in Bk.I of his treatise, he discusses colours in their 'material' forms - dealing with their earthly 'natures' which vie with their heavenly equivalents. He speaks of lapis lazuli in 'celestial' terms. It is as though the heavens, he writes, the Sun (gold)

⁴⁶ Bucklow 2009, p.46

⁴⁷*Vulgate, Exodus 24 :10 " et viderunt Deum Israël : et sub pedibusejus quasi opus lapidissapphirini, et quasi caelum, cum serenum est."*

The manuscript treatise is in four volumes the Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence (Ashburnham 1212.1 - Ashburnham 1212.4): Bk. I - De Colori diviso in tredici trattati composti da Matteo Zaccolini da Cesena, Bk.II, Prospettiva del Colore, Bk.III Prospettiva Lineale, Bk.IV Della Descrizione dell'Ombre Prodotte da Corpi Opachi Rettilinei. See Jans Bell's numerous publications on this important figure, and her upcoming critical edition and translation of Bk.II.

⁴⁹Lana(de Terzi), Francesco (1631 - 1687) *L'ARTE MAESTRA* discorre sopra l'Arte della Pittura, mostrando il modo di perfezionarla con varie inventioni, e regole, pratiche appartenenti a questa materia. Brescia, 1670

⁵⁰Zaccolini Bk. I, 119v "...per esser questo color Turchino il più eccellente di tutti, fu anche dalla Natura posto nel più eminente luogo di tutti gli altri fra l'altezze delle Sfere celesti, come cosa che per la varietà sua, pare che habbia più del divino"

the Moon (silver) and the sky itself (lapis lazuli) had descended into the bowels of the earth⁵¹ (Fig.10):

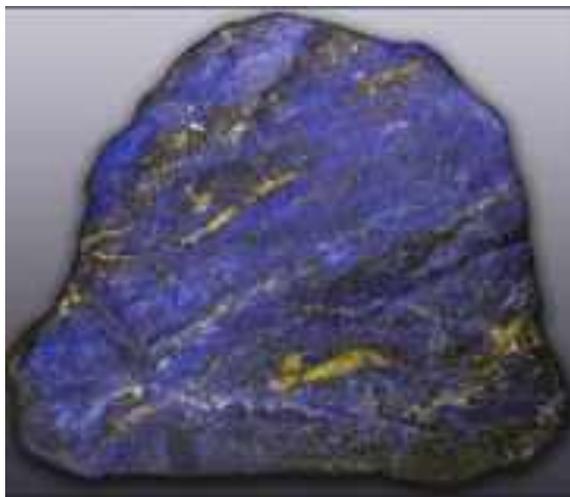


Fig 10 Lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, veined with pyrites resembling veins of gold

'Padre' Lana, in his treatise on painting *L'Arte Maestra* calls lapis lazuli "*lume celeste*" (celestial/heavenly light), equating the addition of a little lapis lazuli to all his mixtures of pigments to the addition of light/spirit to the inert and dark matter made up of the four elements :

"First I make a mix of ultramarine blue (using not the best quality) with a little lead white, and I use this to add to almost all the other mixtures [of pigments]. And in others I will add ultramarine blue which has the most wonderful effect. In all colours, and in particular if used in moderation in the flesh, it gives a certain air, a heavenly

light which makes it sweet and beautiful. Also because in each material body over and above the four elements of which it is composed there is light, and where this is missing, the body remains dark, without light..."⁵².



Helen Glanville was initially a modern linguist with a degree from Somerville College, Oxford; she then trained as a conservator of paintings at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, and practiced as a conservator for over thirty years (Dulwich Picture Gallery, Royal Academy of Arts, London ; Musée des Beaux Arts, Agen). She taught technical art history and the philosophy of conservation at BA and MA levels at the Courtauld, UCL, Warwick, Cambridge, Sorbonne, and Tbilisi. Between 2014-2019, she was a researcher with the LAMS (Laboratoire d'Archéologie Moléculaire et Structurale) - CNRS, Sorbonne Universités, Paris. She has published widely on what is loosely known as 'Technical Art History' specializing in the links between perception, material science, philosophy and the practice of painting in the 16th and 17th centuries in Italy. In 2021 she was awarded a Grand Prix by the Académie de France, and received her PhD from La Sapienza University, Rome in 2022 on the philosophy, materials and practice of Nicolas Poussin.

⁵¹Zaccolini Bk. I 51r/v "ed il lapis lazuli quasi che quaggiù basso fra le Viscere della terra volesse formare un'altro cielo di color azzurro...".

⁵² Lana *Artemaestra*, pp.151-152 (The possible presence of lapis lazuli in the flesh - referred to by Padre Lana above – proved impossible to confirm

A Julian of Norwich Pilgrimage

By Ann Swailes, OP

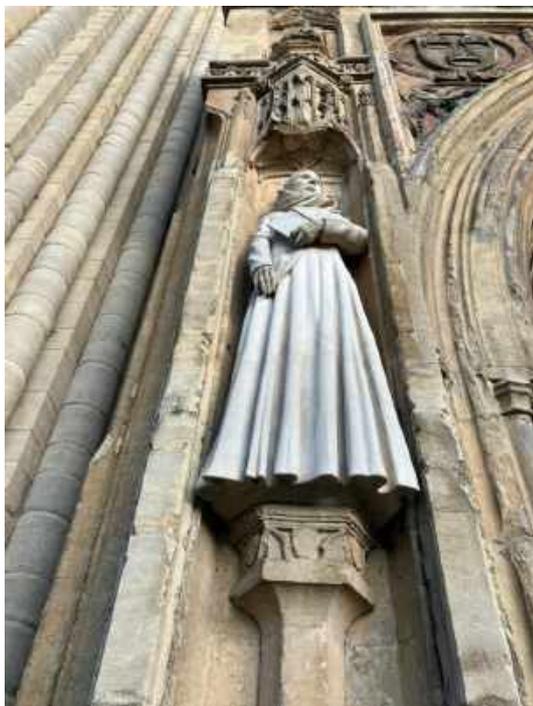


Photo: ©Susanne Jennings

I.

When it was first proposed to me to go *walking* in honour of Julian, I must confess I was a little perplexed, both because of what we know about her and because of what we do *not* know. Pilgrimages in the footsteps of St Paul or St Catherine of Siena, tours of the Oxford of St John Henry Newman or the Assisi of St Francis make immediate sense: it would be easy to draw up an itinerary of locations to visit which formed the backdrop to various significant scenes in the well-travelled and well-documented lives of all these saints. We know far less of Julian's biography: indeed, we cannot even be certain where she came from. Nor do we know at what point she became an anchoress, or what she was doing before that moment. We can't therefore identify particular places in the cityscape of Norwich as the backdrop for particular scenes in her life. Meanwhile, what we do know suggests that, for much of her adult life at least, the trajectory of her footsteps was a rather limited one; bounded by the narrow dimensions of the cell whose site we will visit this afternoon.

So what can it mean to walk in Julian's footsteps? In an important sense, I think that to answer that question is to answer an invitation from Julian herself. The book of her revelations begins with the adamant conviction that her shewings were not meant for her alone, but for all her

“even-christens”, her fellow Christians, in other words, fellow members of the body of Christ. Deeply personal, she believed that they were in no sense private. She means them for all of us.

She develops the implications of this point at the very end of the work, in a quite striking way. There, she mentions that although “this book was begun by God’s gift and his grace”, it “is not yet completed, as I see it”. At least, that’s what most – not quite all – modern versions of the text have her say. Actually, in the original Middle English, the word is “performed”, which makes it sound rather as though she is envisaging someone at some point in the future adapting her work for the stage, making a play of it (which would, in fact, be a wonderful project). That verb, performed, at this point in the history of the English language probably does mean, in the first place, something more like finished, or completed, literally “through-formed”: she’s talking here about the process of textual revision; decades after her experiences in May 1373, she is still mulling over their significance and trying to articulate this ever more clearly. But I think we’re also right to detect here something more like our contemporary sense of “performance”: Julian’s revelations are for all of us, but we are not invited to be passive recipients of her message, but rather to make it our own, act it out on the stage of our relationships with each other, ourselves and God. And I’d like to hope that what we are doing today is just one small step in that “performance”. We’ll be walking through Norwich but also walking beside Julian just a little more deeply, perhaps, into the drama of our own lives.

In a little while, I’m going to invite you to come into the cathedral. It’s an obviously appropriate place for us to begin our day with Julian – whose statue at the west front has already greeted us, and for several reasons, I think.

First, having said that we cannot know with certainty which if any places in Norwich were particularly significant to Julian other than the four walls of her own cell, I think we probably can make an exception for this magnificent church, whose spire would have dominated the skyline of this city of churches for Julian and her contemporaries as it still does today. It was, after all, the *mother* church - and we’ll see this afternoon how the ideas of church and mother belong together for Julian in a way that is particularly intriguing and fruitful.

Secondly, I think it’s appropriate to begin here because, coming as we all do from busy lives in which we perhaps less often than we would like have the opportunity simply to stand and stare, this is a place that urges us to do just that, and I think it’s not too fanciful or presumptuous to imagine that this is something of which Julian would deeply approve, a way of walking in her footsteps, if you will. Just as Julian was invited to gaze on the crucifix brought to her in her sickness, and in turn, encourages us to gaze with her on what the Lord is showing her, this building, with its rich array of images in stone and glass and wood, painted and carved and moulded makes a similar plea, a plea to leave our busy-ness to one side and look. When we go inside, there are a few images to which I’d like to draw your attention. Each of these, it seems to me, has something to say about some of the themes in Julian’s writing that we’ll be exploring this afternoon, so I’ll be saying a little bit about them, but above all, I’d encourage you to let them make their own impression on you, and also to give yourself permission to focus on other artefacts, other vistas, within the cathedral that speak to you. I also urge you to

continue to do this when we leave the cathedral and walk through the streets, because here too, I think, we are walking in the footsteps of Julian. Julian, after all, is someone who *observes*, observes intensely and intimately. She – famously – offers us the most mundane and everyday of imagery to describe her – and our – relationship with God, imagery which she believes God in his homely courtesy has given her, but on which she herself goes on to reflect. She uses the smallest unit of Medieval culinary measurement – the hazel nut – to reflect on the paradoxically miniscule stature of creation in comparison to the creator. She likens the scars from the crown of thorns to the scales of the herring that featured so largely in the contemporary East Anglian diet. And – perhaps something of a consolation to us this summer – when she meditates on the blood streaming from her crucified Lord, she is reminded of nothing so much as torrential rain plashing down from East Anglian eaves.

But there's yet another reason to begin here, at the Cathedral of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, to give it its full title. Walking into this cathedral, we may feel that we are entering a space that will enfold us in peace, as Julian tells us the Trinity wraps us around in love.

It's very striking that for Julian, there is nothing abstract or intimidating about thinking of God as Trinity. And in this, she is not unique. English popular devotion to the Trinity was lively, especially here in Norwich. There are records of bequest from wills written in Julian's lifetime for candles to be left burning in front of the Cathedral's great image of the Trinity – which did not survive the Reformation, but which would probably have been a sculpted depiction of the Father, represented as an elderly man, supporting in his lap the Crucified Son, with the Holy Spirit as a dove suspended between them. There are also accounts of rich jewelled garments that were placed on the figure of Christ both on Trinity Sunday and on the feast of Corpus Christi – a suggestion that some of her contemporaries at least would have agreed with Julian that where Jesus is mentioned, the Trinity is meant.

It is not then, as is sometimes assumed, that the doctrine of the Trinity was, for our Medieval ancestors, a bit of obscure elitist theological wordplay for those who like that kind of thing, with no relevance or resonance for the lives of most Christians. But what Julian does with this is particularly profound. The Trinity, she tells us, is our Maker, our Redeemer, our Lover. If we think too, again, of that characteristic conviction of hers that, "when Jesus is mentioned, the Trinity is meant", again we can think of this Cathedral of the Holy Trinity allowing us to be enfolded in the love of Christ, that costly and blissful love of which Julian speaks so exquisitely. Later today, we will be thinking a little about some of the perhaps more challenging – though also, I believe, deeply consoling – implications of that love, but for now, at the beginning of our pilgrimage, let's just allow ourselves to step aside and *be enclosed*, and to find, just for a moment, in our enclosure a moment of freedom, as assuredly Julian did in hers.



Julian's cells Photo: ©Susanne Jennings

II.

Julian received her vision as she lies on what appears to be her deathbed – and this apparently mortal sickness was something she'd *asked* to experience. What do we make of this? Why on earth would anyone *want* to be so ill that she nearly died? How can this not be perverse, masochistic? And what happens next - *how* her prayer is answered, how she describes it being answered - doesn't help Julian's case here.

The very first thing Julian is shown in her 16 visions is a revelation of Christ's bleeding head, which she describes in vividly realistic terms. She says she saw "the red blood trickling down from under the crown of thorns", she speaks of seeing his face "dry and bloodless with the pallor of death, and then more deathly pale in anguish, and then turning blue as death advanced and afterwards darker blue as death took more hold on his flesh". To dwell on such sights is not at least obviously evidence of a healthy attitude to suffering, morally, psychologically or spiritually. In fact, though, I want to suggest that, although Julian does say things about suffering that are hard to hear – unsurprisingly, given that she is shown things about suffering that she tells us quite candidly she finds hard to look at – ultimately her vision is a hopeful and deeply consoling one. This is perhaps counter-intuitive, and it is territory into which we should tread very delicately, but I think it would be a failure to take Julian seriously if

we simply took the more obviously “up beat” aspects of her teaching out of context, and we would miss out on a very rich source of comfort in our own pain. And, in fact, this is what we should expect if we are open to the possibility that Julian’s prayer was answered: she asked, after all, not only for suffering, but for compassion with the suffering of others.

So, what does Julian teach about suffering?

The *Revelations of Divine Love* has been described as one long “commentary on the problem of pain”, which is true enough, I suppose, provided we don’t imagine that Julian is going to do anything to solve that problem as it has generally been conceived in more recent times. That is to say, she doesn’t provide a neat and tidy explanation of how it can be the case that an almighty and all-loving God exists, given that there is so much (or indeed any) suffering and evil in the world, and, personally, I think we should be grateful for that, because most attempts to do so are embarrassing at best. Julian herself is deeply disturbed by a version of the problem of pain; wondering how it can be both that hell exists, and that, in perhaps her most quoted line, all shall be well. And it’s really important to see, I think, that she never provides an answer to this question. She tells us that she is sure it must be so, but she doesn’t know how. Instead, she offers, I think, an extraordinarily rich set of resources with which to confront suffering, our own and that of those we care about.

So, first of all, she tells us pain is something we share with Christ and which Christ shares with us. When he is in pain, Julian tells us, we are in pain, and, indeed, not only us, but the whole of creation: Julian is following an ancient poetic convention here, rooted ultimately in the references in the gospels to an earthquake and an eclipse of the sun at the time of the crucifixion, that sees all the natural world in grief-stricken chaos at the death of God. Though as has been pointed out, there is nothing in the gospels about the roaring wind Julian senses howling around the Cross, whereas it was, perhaps a feature of many East Anglian Easters, another example, then of the way in which for Julian there is no division, no separation, between the everyday and what we might, with our typically less holistic mindset think of as the spiritual. So we, and all creation, suffer in solidarity with Christ.

But she also turns this round and says that when we suffer Jesus suffers with us. Whilst that might sound obvious, and obviously consoling, there is, in fact a logical problem with it, of which Julian is quite aware, of which she and her contemporaries are in general more aware than we are, perhaps. Jesus is in heaven, beyond pain and suffering. How, then, can he suffer with us?

Ultimately, for Julian, the answer to this question, the answer that resolves the apparent contradiction, is a matter of ecclesiology, a matter of what, or rather who, we think the Church is. For Julian, Christ is so closely identified with us, the members of his body the Church, that he continues to suffer insofar as we do: our suffering quite simply *is* his suffering. Julian is herself well aware of the paradox of saying this: as she puts it “For as long as he was liable to suffer, he suffered *for* us and sorrowed for us, and now he is risen again and no longer liable to suffer, he still suffers *with* us”. This isn’t something Julian invents: ultimately, it goes back to St

Paul. If you remember the dramatic story of his experience on the Road to Damascus, what Saul hears the voice from heaven telling him is not “Saul, why are you damaging the outfit I set up”, not even “Saul, why are you hurting my friends”, but “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me” and, lest Saul fail to get the point “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”. This insight seems to have stayed with Paul; we see echoes of it in all the imagery of the Church as the body of Christ that we find in his letters, and it’s not too much of a stretch, I sometimes think, to say that all ecclesiology, all Christian reflection on the nature of the Church is, one way or another, a kind of footnote to Acts 9. And, while sometimes today we refer to the Church as the body of Christ somewhat unreflectively, using a dead metaphor just as we do when we talk about the “governing body” of a school or a sports federation, for Julian and her contemporaries this language is still vividly, viscerally alive.

And there’s profound consolation here: after all, if the suffering of Christians really *is* in this sense the suffering of Christ, then it’s reasonable to expect it will have the same outcome: the bliss of heaven. Julian thinks so too: “we, through our own pains and passion are now dying with him on his cross, and, that as we deliberately abide on that cross, helped by his grace, to the very end, we shall be with him in heaven”.

It’s striking, too, that she describes the parlous state of the contemporary Church in imagery exactly parallel to that she uses of Christ on the Cross, and it is imagery of utterly dehumanising degradation: the sagging body of Christ on Calvary is like a cloth hung out to dry in the piercing east wind; the Church of Julian’s 14th century, ravaged by the Black Death and the Western Schism is like a cloth being “shaken in the wind”. The Church herself, on Julian’s understanding, is undergoing the Passion, but the head of the Church has preceded the body into the Resurrection. We might, to say the least, think that this is not an insight whose relevance – or power to console – is restricted to the Middle Ages.

It is also important to recognise that, if Julian doesn’t think we can solve the “problem of pain”, nor does she attempt to airbrush it away. She doesn’t pretend pain isn’t painful, that evil is not evil, that sin is not sin. Sin, she says, is “a scourge which lashes men and women and utterly shatters them and damages them so much in their own eyes that sometimes they think themselves unworthy of anything except to sink into hell”. I think there are two things that are particularly striking here: first, this is a kind of backhanded compliment to human goodness and dignity: Julian prefaces this description of sin by saying that we are made in the “fair image” of God, and destined for eternal bliss with him. Sin hurts us so radically because it prevents us from being fully what we are created to be, and what we are created to be is beautiful beyond belief. Secondly, it’s hugely important that for Julian, it is in “their own eyes” of human beings that sin is so destructive; not in the eyes of God. We may think that we are “unworthy of anything except to sink into hell”, but that is our estimation, not God’s. So far so good.

But then she says something that brings us up short. At a certain point, Julian tells us that though “only the Maiden Son Suffered” – only Jesus in the human nature he takes from Mary, in other words, because like all Medieval theologians Julian is convinced that God in Godself is

beyond suffering - all the Blessed Trinity "enjoys" the Passion, and at first sight that sounds terrible: Jesus humanly suffers, God looks on with masochistic relish.

And that's a truly terrifying idea. If even the suffering of his own Son gives him pleasure, what is there to stop God from torturing *us* for his own amusement? Maybe the Duke of Gloucester is right in *King Lear* when having been savagely blinded by his enemies, he exclaims: "as flies to wanton boys, so are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport." Maybe Thomas Hardy hit the nail on the head at the end of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, when, after her execution, he speaks of the "President of the Immortals" having finished his "sport" with the novel's heroine.

Of course, that's not what it means to speak of the Christian God, the God whose "meaning" Julian tells us, is love, and nothing but love, "enjoying" the Passion of Jesus. It's worth, though, grappling a bit with what it does mean, because, I think, this is where Julian is actually most interesting – and helpful – about suffering.

For one thing, of course many of our contemporaries do subscribe to what we might call the Thomas Hardy/Duke of Gloucester view of things: unable to reconcile belief in God with the existence of so much pain and sorrow, except, perhaps by concluding that God must be some kind of sadistic tyrant. And human head and heart alike rightly revolts against giving allegiance to such a god. So, if we ever want, or find ourselves required, to have something to say to those among our friends and family who would, perhaps, love to believe but cannot, precisely because of suffering, it would be good to know that we might be able to turn to Julian for help.

What's more, we may, if we are honest, have been tempted by something like this stance ourselves at least in the wee small hours. It *can* be hard to not to give into this kind of despairing logic in the face of the suffering of the world, of our loved ones, of ourselves: it does at least seem to make sense of the evidence. If God enjoys our suffering, it would make – diabolical – sense for him to have created a world in which there was as much pain as possible, and in the face of this, there's not much to do except despair. As we've seen, Julian does not in fact offer an alternative explanatory account: she is sure – because she is sure that she has been told – that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well, but she never tells us *how* it will be that all shall be well. On the contrary she acknowledges repeatedly that this will remain unknown until the end of time. But she does, I think, in her rather more subtle usage of the language of enjoyment, and as we'll see, related ideas like bliss, and loveliness, actually signpost things that we can do with our suffering, ways that we can find meaning in suffering and glimpse our own dignity at moments when suffering seems to have taken it from us. And this, I think, is one of the most important aspects of how we might "perform" her book, how we might allow her message to take flesh in our lives. Important, not least because This, then, is another way in which we can walk in her footsteps, not just today in Norwich but ongoingly.

So, what *does* Julian mean when she speaks of the Blessed Trinity "enjoying" the Passion?

First of all, let's look at the context. Julian is still at this point beholding the figure of Jesus on the Cross. It seems as though his death must be imminent, and Julian watches for it intently,

“ I...expected to see his body quite dead, but I did not see him so. And just at the very moment when, to all appearances, it seemed life could last no longer...suddenly his blessed countenance changed”. This change brings about a change in Julian too: “the change in his blessed expression changed mine, and I was as glad and happy as it was possible to be”. It is in this context that Julian first hears Jesus tell her how happy he is to have suffered for her, and that she subsequently reflects on these words.

Then our good Lord Jesus Christ spoke, saying, are you well pleased that I suffered for you?

I said yes, good Lord, thank you. Yes, good Lord, blessed may you be.

Then Jesus, our kind Lord said, if you are pleased, I am pleased. It is a joy, a bliss, an endless delight to me that I ever suffered my Passion for you, and if I could suffer more, I would suffer more.

And it is in this context that she reflects:

All the Trinity was at work in the Passion of Christ ministering abundance of virtues and plenitude of grace to us through him, but only the Virgin's son suffered; and *at this* the whole blessed Trinity rejoices eternally. And this was shown in these words “are you well pleased” and by the other words that Christ said, “if you are pleased then I am pleased” as if he said, it is my joy and delight enough to die, and I ask nothing else from you for my suffering but that I may please you”.

It is not, then, that Julian imagines God relishing the suffering of his Son, or indeed that Jesus wants, masochistically to suffer. Rather, the joy comes from suffering *with and for* us.

This, I think, is why, in Julian's haunting phrase, the cross which forms the backdrop for all her visions, is not only “hideous and dreadful”, but also “lovely and sweet”. It is a haunting phrase, I think, but maybe, when we come to think about it, it's rather an odd one. And I'd like to spend a little time reflecting on it, because its hauntingness and its oddity point, I think, to its importance. If we really reflect on how, for Julian and for her contemporaries, the cross was lovely and sweet as well as hideous and dreadful, we may find, not an answer to the problem of pain but certainly resources to confront the mystery of suffering.

To do that, I'd like us to take a bit of a step back from Julian herself and think about something we probably take for granted, because it's such a pervasive feature of the Christian artistic tradition, but which is also really odd, too, when we think about it, namely, that it's possible to produce a work of art, that describes or portrays a singularly brutal form of judicial murder, like crucifixion, as beautiful. And yet— whilst it would certainly also be possible to have a picture or a piece of music or a poem depicting Calvary that was twee, or kitsch, or indeed horribly voyeuristic, and therefore not beautiful at all, I think most of us would agree that not all representations of the Passion of Jesus are like that. Think of some of the art we saw this morning in the cathedral: the makers of the Despenser Retable for instance, made something beautiful, and they were surely not lying when they did so.

Rather often in depictions of the Passion, that beauty takes the form of *luminousness*: the Despenser Retable is in fact an example of this, with the golden background not only in the scenes of the Resurrection and ascension, where it might seem appropriate, but also in that of the Crucifixion itself. We see – and hear – something similar in many other works of art: the ancient English poem the *Dream of the Rood* would be one example, where the Cross which is drenched in blood is also wound round with light and garnished with glittering gemstones; the last choruses of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in which grief is evoked with transfiguring radiance. In my PhD work, I invented – I think! – a rather pretentious term for this phenomenon. I called it *paschal simultaneity*: all of the Easter mystery of Jesus' dying and rising experienced together. In one way or another, it is quite common in all the arts in which the Christian story has been expressed over the centuries. But it's also true to something that is found in the gospel itself: Christ, after all, reigns in glory on the Cross, but he rises from the dead with his scars still visible.

I think it's also possible to see two versions of *Paschal simultaneity*, and I think they're both important. In the first case we can look at Good Friday through the lens, as it were, of Easter Day. We can paint the crucifixion against a gold background, like the master of the Despenser Retable. I think that perhaps this is what Julian herself is getting at, when, as she explains at the very beginning of her book, in her account of the context in which she receives her vision, she tells us that, as she looks at the crucifix her parish priest brings to her bedside, everything *except* the Cross is ugly, while the cross itself is luminously beautiful. And perhaps what is going on here can indeed be summed up in Julian's most famous dictum: all shall indeed be well. The radiance of Easter Day is thrown back onto the horrors of Good Friday to assure us that the devastation and the pain of whatever cross we may currently be undergoing will not be the last word for us, any more than it was for Jesus.

But it's also possible to look at Easter Day, so to speak, through the lens of Good Friday, and this is certainly something with which Julian would have been very familiar from her own liturgical life. We are used to venerating the cross on Good Friday in the liturgy of the Lord's Passion. In Julian's 14th century England, this ceremony was reprised before Mass on Easter Sunday: I think this is rather too easily read as a refusal to let go of suffering; just what you might expect of those miserable Medieval types, after all, who couldn't straightforwardly enjoy themselves even on Easter Sunday. I suspect, in fact, there is rather more going on here. In the first place, this would have been for our ancestors in the Middle Ages unmistakably a celebration of the Resurrection. The Cross that was venerated on Easter Sunday would have been buried in the Easter Sepulchre at the end of the Liturgy of the Passion on Good Friday, and then brought triumphantly forth to rest in a place of honour in the Church: it would itself have been raised, exalted. We saw earlier the location of the Cathedral's own Easter Sepulchre beneath what is now the Treasury – and in fact some interpreters have seen echoes of the architecture of that structure in the depiction of the sepulchre in the Resurrection panel of the Despenser Retable. Moreover, often though not universally, the cross that was entombed would actually have been a monstrance: it would have contained a consecrated host. We know, for instance, that this was the case at St Peter Mancroft here in Norwich. It reminded Medieval

worshippers, among whom Julian would have stood, prior to her enclosure, and with whom she would have been joined from her vantage point in the anchorhold afterwards, of the *costliness* of the Easter Eucharist in which they were participating: Jesus had died in order to pass through death and give us his risen body to be our food. But it also assured them that the one who was with them in the Easter Mass knew what it was to suffer as they suffered, to endure crucifying pain and misery. As Julian puts it, we through our own pains and passion, do share his Cross. Here, then, the memory of what happened on Good Friday is not obliterated by the joy of Easter, but “sent forward” to remain a continued source of consolation to those whose suffering does not obediently disappear in line with the liturgical calendar.

Keeping hold of both these perspectives is, I suggest, important for crafting a response to suffering, because they each counter a particularly damaging *understanding* of suffering: the first simply because it does forbid seeing Good Friday, and therefore seeing suffering, as either the end of the story, or an end in itself; the second because it forbids us seeing Good Friday as just a reversible blip on Jesus’ otherwise upward trajectory, and therefore, amongst other things, suggesting that the best thing to do with suffering is simply to grin and bear it; after all, you’re going to rise from the dead in three days’ time, how bad can it be?

And I want to suggest that this quality of paschal simultaneity, in both its forms, which Medieval writers and artists like Julian in particular celebrated, and which is in fact often tacitly there in later and earlier works of art, and in liturgy and devotion too, is to be found in all these places because it actually coheres with something that is a commonplace experience in all of our lives. The relationship between suffering and joy is maybe not as simply contradictory as perhaps we sometimes imagine it to be. There are, of course, times when we laugh so hard that we cry, and there are certainly times when we force a laugh in order not to cry. But there is also the phenomenon that a friend of mine calls simply laugh-crying, in which laughter and tears are inextricably entwined. Any of us, who have ever experienced grief at the loss of a friend or loved one, will perhaps know what I mean: we are recalling our friend who has left us, and a memory of an in-joke, or a shared meal makes us smile; we are attending for the first time an annual family celebration without someone we have lost, and, amid the festivity there is the stab of pain. Good Friday and Easter Day experienced not sequentially but simultaneously. But more than this, the experience of *accompanying each other* in pain is also less binary than we might sometimes dare to admit. There is joy in the suffering, there is suffering in the joy. This doesn’t mean that we are either masochistically in love with suffering or puritanically afraid of joy.

And this perhaps is why Julian tells us that the Cross is lovely and sweet. We are indeed rightfully horrified by this at first sight, because it does sound pathological and masochistic to a degree. But she also tells us that it is hideous and dreadful, that she cannot bear to look at it, or at the extraordinarily graphic picture the Lord gives her of his dying. She is not attracted to the Cross in any straightforward way, and so when she tells us that she hears Jesus telling her from the Cross that it is a joy and an endless bliss to suffer for her, that if he could suffer more he would, her account of the experience does perhaps have a certain moral authority: she is not

in love with suffering for its own sake, and she's not accusing the Lord of such a pathology either. Rather, I think, Julian's Christ is speaking here of something that we too know from our own experience as members of his body. Both when we ourselves are suffering, and when we are called to minister compassion to others in their pain, there *is* I think often enough a kind of *chiaroscuro* quality, as the art historians put it, a kind of interplay of light and dark, shadow and brightness in our encounters like that of a baroque painting. Those of us with pastoral responsibilities sometimes speak, and I really don't think it's just empty rhetoric, of the *privilege* of accompanying those who come to us in their suffering; when we ourselves find ourselves apologising to friends for bothering them with our troubles, and they assure us that they wouldn't have it any other way, we should probably pay them the compliment of believing that they mean what they say. No one is happy that those they care for are suffering, but there can be joy, real, healthy and sometimes overwhelming joy, in being present with those we care for in their suffering, and then, within the paradoxical luminosity of the Cross, we glimpse the healthy, overwhelming joy of love, the joy of resurrection.

III.

Jesus our Mother

I said this morning that we know rather little about the "historical Julian", however well we may feel we come to know her by reading her book, and that is perhaps one reason why she rather frequently gets made in the image of those who comment on her – or, sometimes, on the contrary, in the image most diametrically opposed to that of those who comment on her. People either recruit her for causes they approve of in the life of the contemporary Church or they project onto her their *disapproval* of the causes dear to others. Nowhere is this more true than in discussion surrounding her use of maternal, as well as paternal imagery for God.

Julian is famous – or, in some people's minds notorious – for calling God mother, and she does it in some contexts which are, admittedly, especially startling at first sight. We might all fairly readily concede, after all, that God in Godself – to use the rather cumbersome circumlocution invented by contemporary theologians to make this very point, is beyond gender in anything like the sense in which we know it in ourselves: so that whatever we mean by calling God Father, it should not be taken to imply that God is literally a super-*man* as opposed to a super-*woman*. It is basic Christian doctrine, after all, that we are made in God's image, not the other way around, and God certainly isn't to be thought of as made in the image of only *half* the human race, nor indeed, does only half the human race image God. Some of us may not be used to or feel drawn to, speaking about God in this way, but it's not in itself especially controversial. But Julian doesn't simply say that "God rejoices" to be our Mother as well as our Father. She also says, specifically, that *Jesus*, is our Mother. And, though of course in Christian theology Jesus is fully God as well as fully human, he is God *incarnate*, God made flesh as a human being, and, fairly unequivocally, surely, as a male human being. But Julian is

convinced that it makes sense to say that Jesus is indeed our Mother. What are we to make of this?.

The first thing to note, I think, is that when Julian calls God our Mother, she rarely does so in isolation from naming God in other ways. Thus, for example, she repeatedly stresses, “*as much as God is our Father, so God is our Mother*”. Similarly, she says, that the Second Person of the Trinity is, in one breath, “*Our Mother, Brother and Saviour*”. And, as a matter of fact, she never uses any other than masculine pronouns to refer to God, even in contexts where this makes us catch our breath at the resulting incongruity: God rejoices that *he* is our mother she says. And the same goes for God incarnate, for Jesus: even when she invokes Jesus under the title of our mother, *he* is always *him*. This I think signals quite precisely what Julian is and is not doing: she is not introducing a fourth person into the blessed Trinity, or a Mother-God alongside a Father-God, and certainly not suggesting that we should call God Mother *rather* than Father.

Rather, what I think she is doing, above all, is reminding us that human language is pushed to, and indeed beyond, the limits of its capacity *whenever* we talk about God. This is, of course, a basic truth of Christian theology and of our lives of prayer: if God was *not* bigger than any of our images of the divine, and indeed all of those images combined, God would not be God, after all. One way of acknowledging this in the Christian tradition has always been to try to impose as near as possible a moratorium on such images: on this understanding, since whatever we say about God will be inadequate to the reality, the less we say the better. This was quite a prevalent approach in Julian’s own time. Many of her contemporaries, notably the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, speak insistently of the hiddenness of God, the way he escapes from all our attempts to describe him. But another approach is quite deliberately to set image against image, allowing them to contrast, and sometimes indeed to clash, and this is the policy that Julian adopts. It is as though she is saying that whatever we say about God will not be adequate to the reality, and therefore the *more* we say the better, the less *inadequate*. These two approaches are really complementary rather than contradictory, gesturing from different vantage points towards the incomprehensibility, indescribability, of God. What is more, it is entirely of a piece with Julian’s conviction of the goodness of all that is, to draw her images of God kaleidoscopically from every facet of human experience, including that of maternity.

The second preliminary point to note is that Julian is by no means eccentric amongst Medieval – and indeed older – theologians in her use of feminine and specifically maternal imagery for God, and indeed God incarnate as the man Jesus. Nor is the phenomenon confined to or even predominantly found in the writings of women: this is not, as is sometimes understandably, but I think wrongly assumed, a kind of “alternative spirituality” exclusively for those on the margins. On the contrary it is particularly prevalent among men, including writers of such unimpeachable orthodoxy as St Anselm, 11th century archbishop of Canterbury, originator of the so-called ontological proof of the existence of God, and doctor of the Church, an establishment figure than whom no-one more established could be thought.

The fact that Julian refers to God, and indeed to Jesus as “our mother”, then, not once in passing, but repeatedly and emphatically, does not make her a “feminist” in any modern or post-modern sense of that word, Nor, however, can we pigeonhole her as whatever we might imagine the opposite of a modern or postmodern feminist to be. To try to fit her into any such categories is to commit a category *error*: we will distort her meaning if we attempt to enlist her to fight our battles. But that doesn’t mean she has nothing to say to our context and our concerns. Julian doesn’t deserve any of us recruiting her to our own side in some 21st century culture war. But she does, I believe, provide profoundly valuable resources for saying as much as one can say about the unspeakable mystery of God’s love.

What then, *does* Julian say about Jesus our Mother?

Well, basically she uses this language in at least three clearly related but distinct ways, and, as perhaps by now we’d expect, they focus on some very earthy and down to earth aspects of motherhood.

So, first of all, in imagery beloved also of the Fathers of the Church, Jesus is maternal in that most basic sense of being the one who gives birth: she explicitly compares his anguish on the Cross to labour pains, noting only the difference between Jesus and literal mothers, that while all of our births set us on the trajectory towards death, in Jesus we are born to eternal life, and, far from being a process of separation from the mother, this birth, uniquely, is an ever deeper journey into the maternal love of God.

Secondly, Jesus is maternal in the way that he cares for and educates his spiritual children, allowing us, as a good mother sometimes will, to make mistakes, even to stumble but always stretching out to protect and rescue us when we are in danger of falling and damaging ourselves.

Thirdly – and here we might be reminded of that very striking lectern we saw this morning in the Cathedral – Jesus is like a mother in that he *feeds* us, feeds us with his very self. As mothers feed their children with milk, Jesus, in the Eucharist, feeds us with his blood.

Finally, there’s one more passage where, though she doesn’t here explicitly invoke the language of Jesus as mother, she certainly, I think, suggests it – and with some rather profoundly provocative implications if we read it in the context of Julian’s vision as a whole.

In one of the most beautiful of all Julian’s visionary images, she speaks of the wound in the side of Christ – the wound from which flows the blood which feeds us as a mother feeds her child with milk - as being the entrance into a “feyer and delectable place”, which is, Julian says, “large enough for all who will be saved to rest there in peace and in love”. Here, then, we have a vision of ourselves as being *within* Jesus, clothed in his flesh like a child in her mother’s womb.

But – as we saw earlier– for Julian we are not merely related to Jesus – even as child to parent. More than this, in a profoundly mysterious but true sense, we are identified *with* Jesus. The Church is his body, we are the members of that body. And so, this image, the image of Jesus as

our mother who sustains, protects and surrounds us, is not only a consoling reminder of his love for us.

If the Church is indeed the body of Christ, then this image says something too about the hospitality required of the members of that body, about how the Church should be a homely and welcoming place for all, and how this is the common vocation of all of us, to be a fair and delectable place in which others can find rest. It also suggests, perhaps, that it is precisely through our wounds, our suffering, that we may learn to feel and empathise with those who do seek their home with us. And that might be a good place to finish for today.



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Photo by Pavlina Marie Kasparova

Seventh Mary Ward Lecture (2009)

Breaking the Silence: the rehabilitation of Mary Ward (updated version)

By Gemma Simmonds, CJ



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In 1631 Pope Urban VIII's Bull *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis* was published, speaking in violent and dramatic terms of the offence done to the Church and civil society by a threat perhaps even more dangerous than the heresies of the Protestant Reformation because it had grown up insidiously within the very bosom of the Catholic faith. The threat was posed by the Englishwoman Mary Ward and her 'Jesuitesses' who dared to lay claim to an autonomy and authority, a public voice and a mobility for women in the Church that was unimaginable in their day. The Bull sees their insistence on having received a vocation to apostolic ministry within the Church as a sign of heterodox disobedience. It attempts to save the Church from the spreading poison of women's aspiration to uncloistered ministry by its utter destruction: 'We have decreed that [...] the poisonous growths in the Church of God must be torn up from the roots lest they spread themselves further [...] We totally and

completely suppress and extinguish them, subject them to perpetual abolition and remove them entirely from the Holy Church of God'.⁵³

Silence was imposed on Mary Ward and on her memory long after her death by a Church that failed to understand the specific and universal value of that vocation. It stems from a more general silence imposed historically on women both in the Church and in society as a whole. The vocation of her surviving companions was silenced by law in Catholic Europe as much as in Protestant England. Early generations of followers subverted the silence, but later generations colluded with it for the sake of survival, repudiating her memory and attempting to destroy evidence of her radical vision or colluding unwittingly by misinterpreting or losing sight of what she had suffered to maintain. In each generation the silence was broken by the devotion to Mary Ward of some through the subversive force of story and memory, keeping something of her unique vision alive until its time had come.

⁵³ Margaret Mary Littlehales, *Mary Ward: Pilgrim and Mystic*, (Burns & Oates, London, 1988), pp. 253-257.

Mary Ward's rehabilitation belongs primarily to some remarkable nineteenth-century figures who fell under the spell of the one whom Pope Pius XII called, 'that incomparable woman, given to the church by Catholic England in her darkest and bloodiest hour'.⁵⁴

She herself broke women's silence but was subsequently buried in silence by a Church unable to hear and accept the voice of God speaking through her. She was born at a time of severe state persecution of English Catholics which left their Church marked by the absence of structure, hierarchy, religious life or regular sacramental practice and served sporadically by itinerant priests. This provided an unexpected opening for the collaborative work of laity, especially women, whose ministry more easily went undetected. Mary twice attempted monastic life overseas, only to receive God's revelation that she was called to 'some other thing', though its nature remained a mystery. Her return home to the Catholic underground in London gave her direct experience of apostolic ministry and companions attracted to sharing this with her. They sailed overseas to discern their future life and ministry as religious, understanding, after a further revelation to Mary in 1611, that they were to live a religious life of apostolic activity, without enclosure, organized centrally by a general superior on the recently approved Jesuit model. These were unthinkable innovations for women, in contravention both of the Council of Trent, and of the St. Ignatius' own veto against there ever being a female branch of his order.⁵⁵ Mary and her companions founded communities across Europe, arousing bitter opposition culminating in the complete suppression of her order and Mary's own imprisonment on a charge of heresy in 1631. After her death in 1645 the remnant of her once extensive congregation lived precariously for fifty years until 1680, when they gained recognition for a modified form of religious life under Mary Ward's charism. Nonetheless the Bull of Suppression remained in force, they were forbidden to claim the suspect Mary Ward as foundress and subsequent biographies naming her as such were placed on the Index of Forbidden Books.⁵⁶

Like St. Ignatius Loyola before her, Mary imposed silence on herself regarding God's working in her life but, under obedience to her spiritual director, she broke it so that her story might serve as instruction for her followers, revealing in her autobiography the dominance of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* as a guiding dynamic in her life.⁵⁷ In her book *Keeping God's Silence* Rachel Muers speaks of the 'dumb silencing' of women, in which they are ignored in public discourse dominated by men. The construction of the universal subject as male tends to lead to the exclusion of concerns specific to women whose experience is not thought to count.⁵⁸ Mary Ward most notably broke the dumb silencing of women in this respect in an instruction given to her sisters in 1617.

⁵⁴ 1951, first World Congress of the Lay Apostolate.

⁵⁵ Gemma Simmonds, 'Women Jesuits?' in Thomas Worcester, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 120-135.

⁵⁶ Christina Kenworthy Browne, ed., *Mary Ward 1585-1645, A Briefe Relation: with Autobiographical Fragments and a Selection of Letters* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), p.xiv.

⁵⁷ Kenworthy Browne, *A Briefe Relation*, pp.103-5.

⁵⁸ Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2004), pp. 32-3.

'There was a father that lately came into England whom I heard say, that he would not for a 10,000 of worlds be a woman, because he thought a woman could not apprehend God: I answered nothing but only smiled, although I could have answered him by the experience I have of the contrary: I could have been sorry for his want of judgement, I mean not want of judgment, nor to condemn his judgement, for he is a man of a very good judgment; his want is in experience'.⁵⁹

The marginalization of women's experience within the church, based on the conviction that their access to God was inferior to that of men, led to a high degree of invisibility and inaudibility in spiritual and ecclesial matters. Reports flowing into the papal and Jesuit Curias accuse Mary Ward and her followers of scandalizing Catholics & rendering themselves ridiculous to heretics by aspiring to preach and teach, also teaching their pupils to act in plays so that later on they might preach from the pulpit.⁶⁰ Mary is reported as being a *Vergine d'animo virile*, preaching in front of the altar and giving instructions on the Our Father'.⁶¹ Women's participation in speech denotes not merely recognition of women as equivalent speaking subjects but also the articulation of the distinctive realm of 'womens' experience' and their 'different voice'.⁶² Mary's comment about the Jesuit's lack of the experience needed to understand the equality before God of both genders is reinforced in her response to a remark made by another Jesuit that while the Jesuitesses' fervour was impressive, 'when all is done they are but women'.

'I would know what you all think he meant by [...] 'but women' and what fervour is. Fervour is a will to do well [...] which women may have as well as men. There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great matters'.⁶³

She herself had travelled far from her adolescence, when she thought that women could do good to none but themselves. 'I confess wives are to be subject to their husbands, men are head of the church, women are not to administer sacraments, nor to preach in public churches, but in all other things wherein are we so inferior to other creatures, that they should term us but women [...] as if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man, which I dare be bold to say is a lie, and with respect to the good father may say it is an error.'⁶⁴

Pope Urban VII's Bull remained absolute, speaking in violent terms of the offence done to the Church and Christian civilization by Mary and her 'Jesuitesses': 'under the guise of promoting the salvation of souls [they] have been accustomed to attempt and to employ themselves at [...] works which are most unsuited to maidenly reserve [...] to the grave disadvantage of their

⁵⁹ Ursula Dirmeier, *Mary Ward und ihre Gründung: die Quellentexte bis 1645* (Münster, Aschendorf, 2007), 1, *Mary Ward*, p.359 [spelling modernized].

⁶⁰ Dirmeier, 1, pp.664-6 and Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women*, p.132.

⁶¹ Dirmeier 2, p.325

⁶² Muers, 36-7.

⁶³ Emmanuel Gillian Orchard ed., *Till God Will: Mary Ward through her Writings* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), pp.56-57.

⁶⁴ Dirmeier, 1, *Mary Ward*, pp.364-5 [spelling modernized]

own souls and the disgust of all good people, [...] not ashamed [...] to utter many things contrary to sound teaching. We have decreed that [...] the poisonous growths in the Church of God must be torn up from the roots lest they spread themselves further [...] We totally and completely suppress and extinguish them, subject them to perpetual abolition and remove them entirely from the Holy church of God'.⁶⁵

What was unpalatable to both her enemies was:

- the refusal to accept enclosure
- the nature of the apostolates to which she aspired
- the idea of apostolic mobility together with the structures of self-governance

Strict enclosure was imposed on all nuns in the Western Church from the end of the thirteenth century. Full approbation was not given to women attempting to live an apostolic life without formal enclosure for nearly three centuries, and repeated petitions to obtain papal approval for Mary Ward's Institute and its Constitutions failed, despite support from episcopal and secular authorities.

A second and more insidious silencing of Mary Ward came when a short text of Rules was drawn up for presentation to the Holy See, very similar to the Jesuits' Summary of the Constitutions, with their *Rules of Modesty* and sections of the rest of the Ignatian Constitutions, but without the vital Part VII with its apostolic thrust. Although these Rules were approved by Pope Clement XI in 1703, the community that lived by them were not considered religious but 'ecclesiastical persons'.⁶⁶ Silence had fallen on the sisters' status as religious, on Ignatian mobility, mission, apostolate and on the question of governance. This led to severe limitations in terms of ministry without a trace of the apostolic ministry of Mary Ward's time, or her desire to take the Jesuit fourth vow of obedience to the Pope for the sake of universal mission.

Despite these unpromising elements, houses and schools multiplied and the silence about Mary Ward was broken by biographies written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by various admiring clerics. But a number of these books found their way onto the Index. Subsequent juridical disputes resulted in Pope Benedict XIV's Bull *Quamvis Justo*, which recognized the Institute's right to exist and the office of General Superior. But to emphasize that he was upholding Urban VIII's Bull of Suppression, Benedict XIV issued a ban on naming Mary Ward as the foundress of this 'second Institute', apparently to forestall her enthusiastic followers from venerating her as an uncanonized saint. This prohibition lasted until 1909. In Germany the *Painted Life* of Mary Ward was banned, rolled up and stored in an attic. Hymns and prayers in honour of Mary Ward were forbidden, but biographies, even those on the Index, were hidden away in large numbers. Portraits were saved and in 1773 the *Painted Life* was restored to the walls. News of the ban reached York only in the early nineteenth century, but in an orgy of zealous obedience members destroyed anything relating to Mary Ward, cutting out her very name from the pages of books, while visits to her grave were discontinued for fifty years. The congregational name 'Institute of Mary' was replaced by 'Institute of the Blessed

⁶⁵ Margaret Mary Littlehales, *Mary Ward: Pilgrim and Mystic*, (Burns & Oates, London, 1988), pp. 253-257.

⁶⁶ Mary Wright, *Mary Ward's Institute: the Struggle for Identity*, (Crossing, Sydney, 1997), pp.53-57.

Virgin Mary' to ensure no implied reference to Mary Ward, while the York community was placed under full episcopal jurisdiction, which led to it becoming enclosed.

During this period Frances, later Mother Teresa Ball, was sent to York by Archbishop Murray of Dublin to make her novitiate with a view to founding the Institute in Ireland. That foundation was from its inception juridically separate, and became the origin of the flourishing worldwide Institute known as Loreto – now the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mother Teresa returned to Rathfarnham with the 1707 Constitutions, which retained much of the spirit of Ignatius. This gave the early generations a missionary freedom of spirit that in Ireland, Canada and Australia produced women of astounding courage and energy in the direct mould of Mary Ward.

It would fall to three Anglican converts and a fighting Irishwoman living in England to break the silence definitively. Fr Henry Coleridge, a great-nephew of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, had been one of the founders of the *Guardian* newspaper and as a Jesuit took on the editorship of *The Month*.⁶⁷ He wrote a twelve-part series on Mary Ward's early life, published in *The Month* 1880-1881. He then handed the work on to Catherine Chambers (1821-1886), possibly realising that it was far too risky a topic for a Jesuit author or publication to bring out. Catherine was a founder member of the Anglican Sisters of Mercy who distinguished themselves nursing with Florence Nightingale in the Crimea. She was part of a missionary expedition to Hawaii in 1864 and nursed cholera victims in the East End of London. She was received into the Catholic Church in 1876 and professed in the Institute of Mary at sixty years old in 1881.⁶⁸ In her short life in the Institute she would become the single most effective voice that broke the silence about Mary Ward. Revising Fr. Coleridge's series, she brought it out as Volume I of her biography in 1882, travelling Europe's archives in search of material and publishing Volume II in 1885, a year before her death.

Convert Jesuit Fr John Morris was the postulator for the cause of canon-ization of the English Catholic Martyrs whose research at the Bar Convent led to friendship with the nuns and interest in their history. His arguments to press ahead with a petition for final approbation of the Institute in view of changes in the discipline of the church and the proliferation of congregations of simple vows won the day and Mary Ward's Institute was finally approved on 15th February 1877.⁶⁹ Mother Mary Joseph Edwards, a dynamic and pugnacious Irishwoman, founded an Institute house in London in 1872. Her correspondence with Fr. Morris from the 1870s until their deaths centres on the rehabilitation of the foundress. Edwards wanted nothing less than total victory while Morris, captivated though he was by Mary Ward herself, feared danger to the whole congregation in bringing up the spectre of the suppressed foundress again, writing in 1878,

'I am sure that Rome will never let you identify yourselves with the Jesuitesses whom Mary Ward founded and Urban VIII suppressed [...] My own belief is, that if Mary Ward

⁶⁷ See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04097c.htm>.

⁶⁸ See Thomas Jay Williams, *Priscilla Lydia Sellon: the Restorer after Three Centuries of the Religious Life in the English Church*, (London SPCK, 1950)

⁶⁹ See M. Gregory Kirkus, *Fr. John Morris SJ. His Relationship with and Work for the Mary Ward Institute*, (printed by the Bar Convent).

had given up the power of roaming over England, and had taken such an enclosure as the Institute has, her Jesuitesses would have not been suppressed, but approved though not under that name.⁷⁰

He was an admirer of Mary Ward, but the reasons for her insistence on taking the Jesuit fourth vow of universal mission and her desire to roam the entire world for the sake of the kingdom of God had eluded him. It derived from the zeal for apostolic service that comes from someone who has internalized the Ignatian *Exercises* to a high degree. Edwards had an acerbic temper which allowed her to pass remarks about narrow-mindedness that offended Fr. Morris, who recognized Catherine Chambers' talents but feared that her *Life* would end up on the Index as had previous ones. In obedience to his superiors he fell silent as had Mary Ward's previous Jesuit admirer John Gerard, who wrote in 1629,

'Though I have kept silence [...], as it was needful I should [...] yet I have pleaded their cause where only I can avail them [...] Other help I cannot afford [...] my hands being tied'.⁷¹

The campaign for rehabilitation became not only about breaking the silence but about uniting the fragmented branches of Mary Ward's Institute into one congregation. Catherine Chambers's work to break the silence had exhausted her and she was dead within a year of finishing. Mother Joseph Edwards resented the lack of Jesuit support and expressed bitter regret that Mary Ward had ever entangled herself with them. This shows that even she, the foundress' most ardent partisan, did not fully understand her distinctive genius. Despite his continuing to think the insistence on freedom from enclosure a fatal delusion that brought about Mary Ward's ruin, Morris's response shows a better insight.

'It is a big blunder on your part to be sorry that your Rules are taken from those of the Society. It is just the thing for which Mary Ward is most remarkable, that like St. Ignatius she should have foreseen what was best suited to our times [...] Your wishes therefore are not only ungracious when addressed to a Jesuit, but they undermine Mary Ward and take away her greatest honour'.⁷²

Despite these misunderstandings, the signatures of most of the major IBVM Superiors, twenty-one of the twenty-three bishops of England and Wales headed by Cardinal Manning, the Archbishops of Dublin and Munich, the Bishops of Mainz, Fulda and Passau, and several Canadian bishops, were gathered in a petition presented to the Propaganda in Rome to have *Quamvis Iusto* and its ban on naming Mary Ward foundress revisited. But on March 15th 1893 the Holy Office responded '*Omnino negative*' to the request for a new examination of the cause of 'Maria Warth', a misspelling copied from *Quamvis Iusto* that suggests little had been done in Rome by way of new research, despite all the work of Coleridge, Chambers, Morris and others. In April Morris wrote to the superior of York, 'All hope for Mary Ward is gone'.⁷³ Catherine Chambers was already dead, John Morris died seven months after the 'heavy blow'

⁷⁰ Jesuit Archives, Farm Street, London [SJA], 1878.

⁷¹ Kirkus, *Fr. John Morris*, p.12.

⁷² SJA, November 8, 1891.

⁷³ CJ Archives, Rome, II/0533.

from Rome fell. Mother Joseph Edwards, died in 1901, their ambition to break the silence surrounding Mary Ward only partially fulfilled.

Others took up the task of the rehabilitation of Mary Ward once more. On April 6th, 1909, a papal decree permitting Mary Ward to be known as foundress of the Institute was signed three hundred years after the founding of the first house in St Omer.⁷⁴ Five 'actions' were proposed in response to the rehabilitation of Mary Ward: her beatification, the unification of the whole Institute, its organization under common Constitutions, its renovation by a renewal of fervour and finally her canonization.⁷⁵ These hopes are under way, Mary Ward's cause gathering momentum after she was declared Venerable in 2009, the two branches of her Institute petitioning for canonical union in 2022-3 and work on common Constitutions in progress.

Attempts were made by state repression in England, by church repression in Rome and by her own followers to silence the name of Mary Ward, making a fiction of the story of her founding vision. In the breaking of that silence lies another story, whose unlikely heroes died with their goal unfulfilled, but with a hope and cheerfulness reminiscent of 'that incomparable woman' they persisted. In his last letter to Mother Joseph Edwards in response to her suggestion that he must be getting tired of the struggle to break the silence about Mary Ward, Fr. John Morris wrote, 'Do not say that I must be quite tired of the whole story. I shall never be tired of Mary Ward, and I hope she will not be tired of me'.⁷⁶



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⁷⁴ CJ Archives, Rome, II/0708

⁷⁵ I am indebted for this & the story of the Memorandum to unpublished research by Sr. Frances Orchard CJ.

⁷⁶ BCA Sept 26, 1893, B28.

Studying Scripture in Troubled Times: Lessons from the prophet Habakkuk

By Sean Michael Ryan

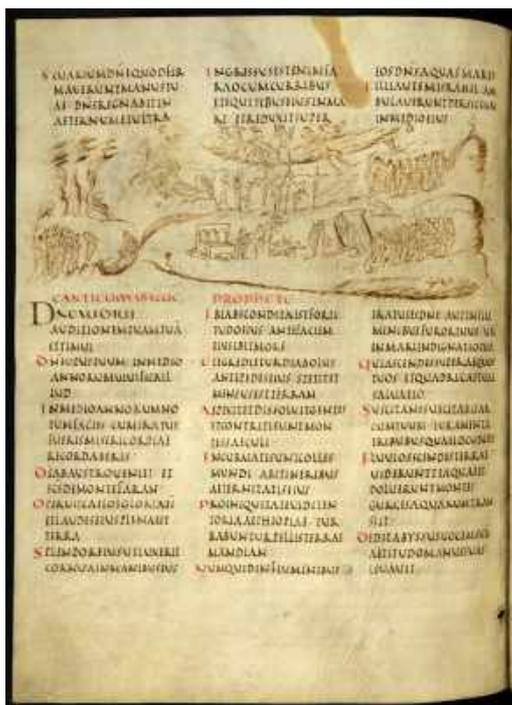


Image: The annotated Utrecht Psalter
Canticum Abacuc prophetae (Habakkuk 3, 2-19), f. 85v.
<https://psalter.library.uu.nl/page/178>

The Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology has always been sustained by a deep engagement with Scripture: through retreats and liturgies, short courses and study days, academic programmes and research degrees. An excellent illustration of this rich tradition is provided by the short-course that was taught this Michaelmas term: *Exploring Biblical Voices* (October-December 2023). This was a team-taught course, running each Tuesday for ten weeks, with each session led by a leading biblical scholar in the fields of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, Second Temple Judaism, and the New Testament.

In celebration of MBIT's Pearl Anniversary, and its founding principles of women-led theological education, each of the ten invited scholars was a woman, and some of the topics chosen particularly focused on issues of gender, masculinity, and the characterization of women in specific Biblical texts (eg. Genesis, Deuteronomy, Pauline epistles, Gospels of Luke and John). We were privileged to have sessions led by some of MBIT's own council members, alumnae,

and research associates (Dr Jennifer Dines, Dr Rosalie Moloney, Dr Ela Łazarewicz-Wyrzykowska, Prof. Susan Docherty), academic friends and colleagues of the institute from across the UK (Prof. Catrin Williams, Dr Ann Jeffers, Dr Karalina Matskevich, Dr Grace Emmett, Dr Olabisi Obamakin), with the course culminating in a session centred on the personification of Wisdom, in Sirach 24, led by Prof. Nuria Calduch Benages, the Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and Professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome.

The course was a great success, with thirty-five students signing-up and attending online, and engaging in the lively discussions with the speakers, following each presentation. The course spanned a breadth of scriptural texts and interpretive approaches, considering issues of translation, source-criticism and historical context; sensitivity to characterization and literary devices of poetic-parallelism and 'othering', as well as probing issues of contemporary reception and theological depth.

There is a felt need, expressed by many of the attendees of the *Exploring Biblical Voices* course, for intelligent, intellectually honest, theologically enriching study of Scripture in the context of the hard times we are living through. In the face of the fears and epochal uncertainties of our day, how might we turn to Scripture for insight and comfort, in an intellectually honest way, that approaches these inspired texts, respectful of their layers and depths of meaning?

By way of illustration, we will turn to the book of Habakkuk. This is a tiny text, a mere three chapters in length, tucked-away somewhere in the middle of the Book of the Twelve (sometimes unfairly labelled 'The Minor Prophets'), which has had a disproportionate influence on Jewish and Christian theology, and similarly arose in troubled times. Once you engage with such a text in its own historical and literary context, and you are sensitive to some of the ways this prophetic text has been interpreted, theologically over the last two and a half millennia (liturgically and by patristic, medieval and modern commentators), it will start to become apparent how every biblical text can afford deep theological insights for us to reflect upon in our own day.

The first layer of meaning to engage with is the Scriptural texts own *historical and literary context*. So what do we know about the prophet Habakkuk and the historical context in which this book was written? (Cf. Francis I. Andersen, *Habakkuk*, Anchor Bible Commentary, Yale, 2001; Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, Vol 2*, Liturgical Press, 2000) In truth, not very much, or at least not very much in terms of biographical and historical information within the text of the book of Habakkuk itself. The prefaces within the book (Hab 1:1 and 3:1) state that he is a prophet (*nabi*), but do not provide any details of his ancestors' names, the name of the king during whose reign he prophesied, or his hometown. Historically, the prophecies seem to have been written during the last decades of the kingdom of Judah (c. 610s-580s BC), in the era in which the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar besieged and eventually destroyed Jerusalem, and sent a substantial portion of its inhabitants into exile in Babylon (cf. Hab 1:6, referring to Chaldeans = Babylonians), consistent, chronologically with its eighth place position in the Book of the Twelve, tucked-in between Nahum and Zephaniah. Structurally, the book of Habakkuk, can be divided into three major sections: 1) Hab 1:1-2:4 a dialogue between the prophet and God on the subject of God's justice; 2) Hab 2:5-20 a series of five woe oracles; and 3) Hab 3:1-19 a prayer/psalm of Habakkuk.

A second layer of meaning is then afforded by a sensitive engagement with the *literary forms* in which the theological ideas are presented in this prophetic text. We will focus here on the three prayers of Habakkuk, which follow literary forms familiar from the Book of Psalms. The first two prayers of Habakkuk are *psalms of lament* (Hab 1:2-4 & 1:12-17), essentially *communal psalms*, voiced by the prophet on behalf of the worshipping community of Judah (cf. Psalms 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 137). In the first prayer (Hab 1:2-4), the prophet's complaint to God exclaims that the wicked are oppressing the righteous, so that justice (*mispāt*) is being perverted in the land of Judah. Habakkuk addresses his prayer, his cry of lament on behalf of the people, to the Lord, the Just Judge, who alone can save and remedy the situation. Why is the Lord allowing such injustice? How much longer will the Lord permit this intolerable situation to go on?

As was characteristic in the case of *communal psalms of lament*, often addressed to the Lord in the public context of a "fast" in the Jerusalem Temple (cf. 2 Chronicles 20:3-19), the people now receive an answer back, from the Lord, by way of a *prophetic oracle* (Hab 1:5-11). The Lord communicates a shocking response, however, to the prophet's prayer of lament ('be astonished! Be astounded!', Hab 1:5). The communal lament had petitioned the Lord to end the current situation of endemic injustice towards the righteous, internally within the kingdom of Judah. The divine response emphasizes that the current situation of injustice is only going to deteriorate: the divine oracle details how the internal injustice and violence will be succeeded by violence and injustice on an unprecedented scale, delivered by the fearsome, terrifying military machine of the Babylonians. (Hab 1:8 'Their horses are swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk; their horsemen ... fly like an eagle, swift to devour). The Lord will indeed act, but by raising up the Chaldeans (= Babylonians) to wage war on the earth, including Judah.

Habakkuk does not stay silent in response to this divine oracle of judgment (Hab 1:5-11). Instead, he prays to the Lord again, on behalf of his people, once again raising a *communal psalm of lament* (Hab 1:12-17). On this occasion, his prayer of lament includes a 'review of God's past acts', specifically centring on the very nature of God, calling upon God, the just and merciful God, to act once again towards his people to save them, as he had done in the past. ('Are you not from of old, O Lord my God, my Holy One? ... Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing.... (Hab 1:12, 13). As a consequence, how can the Lord permit the enemy to swallow-up the righteous, like fish in a net? (Hab 1:14-17).

In the complex (and textually difficult) passage which follows (Hab 2:1-5), two aspects are especially worth highlighting. First, having uttered this second prayer, this second communal lament (Hab 1:12-17), the prophet returns to his post, expectant of another *prophetic oracle* in response to this complaint. ('I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint', Hab 2:1). The term 'watchpost' (*mishmereth*), as well as denoting a place on the city walls, was also used to refer to a place within the Jerusalem temple where priests, levites and prophets are known to have gone to receive oracles (cf. Neh 12:9; 2 Chr 7:6, 8:14, 35:2). Second, in Hab 2:2-3, the prophet does receive another divine oracle, but one which points forward to a future vision (*hazon*) that the prophet will subsequently receive, and which he is to be prepared for, and which he should write down on tablets as a record for its eventual fulfilment (Hab 2:3 'For there is still a vision for the appointed time...'). In the meantime, during these dark days of injustice and violence, during this time of waiting, it is stated that: the

righteous person (*tsadiq*) will live by his/her faith (Hab 2:4). In the context of the book of Habakkuk, this relates to an individual's continuing faithful observance of the *torah*, the way of maintaining a righteous relationship with the Lord, in response to God's covenant with his people.

Habakkuk chapter 3 is explicitly identified as a *prayer* (*tevilla*, Hab 3:1), with clear indications that it was a sung prayer, in view of various indications of musical arrangement (*Shigionoth*, *Selah* vv 1, 3, 9, 13). Whereas the earlier prayers of Habakkuk could be categorized as *communal psalms of lament* (Hab 1:2-4 & 1:12-17) followed by a divine oracle in response (Hab 2:1-5), this final prayer is closest to a *communal psalm of thanksgiving*. It begins with an invocation of the Lord and the statement of the prophet's complaint (v 2). The prophet then reports the vision he experienced as the divine oracular response to that request (vv 3-15). Finally, in light of that positive divine oracle/vision, Habakkuk ends his prayer with a vow and a statement of confidence (vv 16-19).

The prophet begins his invocation to the Lord by declaring that he has been filled with fear/awe when he has heard of the Lord's deeds in the past, and he uses this recollection of past deeds to call upon God to act in a similar way again in the present (Hab 3:2). What follows in Hab 3:3-15 are descriptions of theophanies of the Lord, divine appearances of the Creator in the created realm that manifest the glory and power of God such that the earth quakes and mountains shake, which appear to function as the promised vision (*hazon*) referred to in Habakkuk 2:1-5. Habakkuk 3:3-7 draws upon ancient theophany traditions which depict the appearance of God, as a divine warrior, coming forth from the desert regions to the south of Judah (Teman and Paran). Rather than describing God as coming forth from the Jerusalem temple, these more ancient traditions have closer affinities with the appearance of the Lord on Mount Sinai (cf. Exodus 19-31) (consistent with later Jewish liturgical interpretation of Habakkuk 3, as the *Haftarah* (portion of the prophets) read on the second day of the feast of *Shavuot* (Weeks), a harvest festival that celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai).

In the third prayer (Hab 3:1-19) the prophet Habakkuk sings a heartfelt song of thanksgiving. The concrete circumstances have not altered, if anything they have deteriorated, and he anticipates that far worse may yet lie in store for the people of God (famine following invasion). Yet, he is now moved to express an extraordinary vow, that no matter what – even if he should be on the point of starvation – he will rejoice and give thanks to God (cf. Donald E. Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk*, John Knox Press, 1976, pp. 83-84).

Hab 3:17-19

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
 I will exult in the God of my salvation.
 19 GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
 he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
 and makes me tread upon the heights.

What has changed? How does the prophet move from lament to praise? The significant shift results from the divine response that he receives to his prayer (cf. Hab 2:1-5; 3:1-19). He is privileged to receive a divine vision, a glimpse of a divine theophany, that assures him that God's promise is sure, and on this basis he can 'settle down quietly', (3:16) like a bird in its nest and await the divine deliverance, no matter if that is delayed.

God does not change in the book of Habakkuk – his merciful nature remains eternally the same (Hab 3:3) – it is Habakkuk who changes. The divine answer to his prayer, even though it was not the answer he originally prayed for (cf. Hab 1:5-11), moves him to remain steadfast in faithfully holding on to the divine promise, knowing, beyond all else, that the Lord is faithful, and that a righteous person will live, go on living no matter what the external circumstances, by remaining faithful to God in return (Hab 2:4).

A third layer of meaning is afforded by the *reception-history* of the book of the prophet Habakkuk – and especially two key passages - Hab 2:4 and the prayer/psalm of Habakkuk (Hab 3:1-19) - in the millennia of Jewish and Christian theological reflection in Scripture, Commentaries and Liturgy. In Jewish rabbinic tradition (see Babylonian Talmud, Bavli Makkot 23b-24a) Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted as a text in which the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) of the Torah are established upon the one commandment: 'the righteous person shall live by his faith.' This same text, in a modified version of its Greek form (LXX) (often combined with Gen 15:6), was appealed to in the 1st century CE by the apostle Paul as a foundational proof-text for the gospel of Christ that he preached (cf. Gal 3:11; Rom 1:16-17). 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation for all who believe, Jew first and also Greek, for in it [ie. the gospel] the righteousness of God is being revealed, from faith to faith, just as it is written: 'the righteous person will live by faith.' For the apostle Paul, the 'faith/faithfulness' prophesied by Habakkuk is identified with 'faith' in the gospel of Christ.

Another crucial aspect of the reception-history of Hab 2:4 within the New Testament occurs in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb 10:35-11:1). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews equates the fulfilment of the promised vision of Hab 2:3 (LXX) with the coming of the Lord, described in the theophany in Habakkuk ch 3, in the sense of the coming/*parousia* of Christ, the Lord, 'the coming one' (*ho erchomenos*). Faith, in the sense of steadfast fidelity to and trust in God's promises (the refrain of Hebrews chapter 11) is grounded, in part, on the eschatological hope of the coming of Christ, understood to be envisioned in Habakkuk 3. This Christological interpretation of the vision of the Lord in Habakkuk 3, informs the subsequent reception-history of this text by patristic and medieval Christian commentators. Jerome wrote a sustained Christological interpretation of Habakkuk 3 in his *Commentary on the Book of the Twelve* (c.

392 CE), as did Augustine in Book XVIII, chapter 32 of the *City of God* (c. 426 CE) ('As for Habakkuk, we can scarcely understand him to be speaking of anything else but the coming of Christ...'). Subsequently, in the early 8th century, Bede of Northumbria wrote a commentary on the *Canticle of Habakkuk* (Hab 3:2-19) for a religious sister who had asked him to explain its Christological meaning. By this point, early Christian interpretation of Habakkuk 3 held that the passage contained a spiritual interpretation of the Passion of the Lord, and so was associated with Good Friday in the liturgy, and read every Friday at lauds (morning prayer) in the Divine Office in the Anglo-Saxon Church (following the Roman Office). In Bede's extended commentary on the passage (based on an *Old Latin* version translating from the Greek Septuagint, familiar from the liturgy, rather than Jerome's *Vulgate*) he expanded its spiritual meaning beyond the Passion of Christ to identify aspects that recounted also the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of Christ (cf. Benedicta Ward, *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993), pp. 189-193). A portion of the canticle of Habakkuk, namely Hab 3:2-4, 13a, 15-19, omitting the violent scenes of military battle by the divine warrior, is retained in the Roman Catholic Divine Office, read as part of Morning Prayer on the Friday of Week 2 in the Psalter Cycle.

Hopefully, this brief discussion of layers of meaning unfurling from the threefold-prayers of the prophet Habakkuk illustrate ways in which thoughtful, multi-approach biblical studies can provide theological riches for us in our own troubled times. Through Habakkuk's prayers the righteous are advised how to 'live' during troubled times (Hab 2:4). They are to remain steadfastly faithful to the promises of God, grounded on the very nature of God, and encouraged by visions of the coming of the Lord (interpreted Christologically in Christian tradition) (Hab 2:1-5, 3:1-19), no matter how bleak the external circumstances. In so doing, the righteous are enabled to sing hymns of thanksgiving, rather than lament, to God as they come together in worship down the millennia. Sensitive engagement with Scripture, through academic courses, retreat-days and liturgies, which is a hallmark of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, provide resources to underpin our own theological questioning, striving to deepen our understanding and our relationships, with God, the world, and others.



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Thirty Years of Dialogue Among the Abrahamic Religions

Chaired by Anna Abulafia

Thirty Years of Dialogue Among the Abrahamic Religions was held at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge on the 15th November 2023. Some 140 people booked to attend the event either in person or online. **Professor Anna Sapir Abulafia, Professor Emerita of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at the University of Oxford**, acted as Chair of the panel discussion. In her introduction, Professor Abulafia spoke about the complexities of the umbrella-term 'Abrahamic religions' and of there being no single Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. She also referred to the French Islamicist, Louis Massignon who had played a pivotal role in the eventual recognition by the Roman Catholic Church of Islam, as a co-inheritor of the Abrahamic tradition. This growing acceptance of a tri-partite Abrahamic inheritance was not, however, without problems; there were questions over the interpretation of shared sacred texts and an inevitable tendency towards 'othering'. So, while the recognition of three Abrahamic religions could be viewed as a means of widening horizons and cause for greater unification, it could also spark division. As a theological historian, Professor Abulafia observed how humankind had an innate tendency to try to simplify the past from individual perspectives. We needed, she reflected, also to be more inclusive and outward looking towards other religions outside the Abrahamic fold. She then went on to introduce the three panellists – Dr Edward Kessler (Wolf Institute), Professor Michael Barnes, SJ (University of Roehampton) and Dr Timothy Winter (Cambridge Muslim College & University of Cambridge) - and to outline the 'shape' of the evening whereby each panellist was tasked with addressing two questions: (1) What, for you, represents the best result of the past 30 years of dialogue among the Abrahamic religions? & (2) What, for you, are the most pressing issues for dialogue today? The three texts that follow represent a response by the individual panellists to those two questions.

Faith as Covenant

By Edward Kessler

Mazal tov! Congratulations to my friends at Margaret Beaufort Institute. When the CJCR started, Sister Bridget was running MBIT and was arranging to move from Wesley House to Grange Road. We followed her 14 years later and spent 4 happy years enjoying the hospitality of Margaret Beaufort, before constructing our new home, housed in the grounds of our friends at Westminster College.

My reflections this afternoon will bring together the two topics under consideration and I will suggest that the **most pressing issue** facing us today can be tackled by the **best results of recent Abrahamic dialogue**. I start with the most pressing issue:

Imagine a critic, or even a child of yours or mine, asking: “How do you solve the problem that has led people to kill one another in the name of God since the birth of human civilisation? At the end of the day, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all claim to be true. They conflict. Therefore they cannot all be true. At most, one is. If Christianity is true, Judaism is false. If Islam is true, both Christianity and Judaism are false. It follows that these religions are bound to conflict whenever their followers take their truth claims seriously.”

“I, for my part,” my critic continues, “take this as sufficient evidence that all three are false. For how could the God of all humanity command his followers to deny the full and equal humanity of those who conceive Him differently? I would rather live with the uncertainty of doubt than the certainty of faith, for it is that very certainty that leads people, convinced of their righteousness, to commit unspeakable crimes.” On this interfaith celebration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Margaret Beaufort Institute, during a time of war in the Middle East and of protest and counter-protest on our streets, I’d like to reflect on how can we live peaceably together while at the same time honouring the commitments of our respective faiths. Whilst I may be convinced of the truth of Judaism, Christians and Muslims believe with equal fervour that their faith, not mine, is true.

As a Jewish theologian, I turn to the covenant as one approach to this **most pressing of challenges**.

When the Bible describes God as saying to Moses: *Anochi koret berit*, “I make a covenant”, (Exodus 34:10), morality becomes relational. Whilst the Bible records God as *seeing* (for example, at the episode of the Golden Calf, God told Moses that “I have seen this people and they are a stiff-necked people”, (Exodus 32:9)), the covenant is *not* seen. It is spoken, affirmed, declared, heard, heeded, assented to. It belongs to a culture of the ear, not the eye. Words can be used, not just to *describe* the world, but also to create relationships, make promises, undertake obligations. Thus when I say, seriously and sincerely, “I promise to do better. . .” I am not merely describing something but doing something, namely *making* a promise. When a Jewish groom under the wedding canopy, called a *chupa*, gives his bride a ring and says, “Behold you are betrothed to me by this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel,” he is not speaking about a marriage but creating one.

The covenant informs us what are *called on to do* and refrain from doing. The language of covenant shifts from description to prescription, from what “is” to what “ought” to be; from what human beings *are*, to an ethical statement about what we *may or may not do*. It is a move from things seen to things heard; from the visual to the practical construction of a flourishing pluralist society.

The Jewish world is defined by things heard. Our key practices are study and prayer, the word addressed by human beings to God, and the word addressed by God to humanity. This stands in contrast to a language saturated with visual metaphors for knowledge. We speak of *insight*, *hindsight*, *foresight*; of a *view*, a *perspective*, a *vision*. We call people *perceptive*. When we understand something, we say, “I see.” In Judaism, however, the key metaphors are all auditory. In the Talmud, phrases referring to knowledge, understanding, or tradition, are often variants of the verb *shema*, meaning “to hear.” The key biblical command is “Hear, O Israel...” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Nor is this accidental. The God of the Hebrew Bible is invisible. All visual representations are forbidden, some idolatrous. Even the texture of biblical narrative is non-

visual. We have no idea of what Abraham or Moses looked like. There is little or no description of landscapes. Biblical prose does not capture the play of light on surfaces. Instead it focuses our attention on the sound and resonance, inflections and innuendos, of the heard word. God showed himself to Moses and to the Israelites not in the image but in the call. When Elijah perceived God, he heard only a still small voice (1 Kings 19:11-13).

When I gaze at a painting or sculpture, watch a drama on the stage, I am in a different dimension of reality from that which I observe. I am observing the world but am not part of the landscape, or the play. I am like Zeus looking down on the human drama from the top of Mount Olympus, interested, but detached. In contrast, in the covenantal drama, I am involved, part of the action, seeing events as they unfold, first from this perspective, then from that, hearing a multiplicity of voices and struggling to discern meaning, plot, sense, purpose, trying to separate the music from the noise.

The Jewish Scriptures – but I think this is also true of Christian and Muslim Scripture - are not *history* – what happened sometime else to someone else – but *memory*. They present the story of Judaism but also of Christianity and Islam, they tell what happened to our ancestors and therefore, insofar as we carry on their story, to us. Our Scriptures speak not of moral truths in the abstract, but of commands, which is to say, truths *addressed to us*, calling for our response.

Sometimes, my philosophical and scientific minded colleagues and friends tease me, saying **they** seek to answer the **big** questions: what is knowledge? What is truth? What is really there? They tell me that a statement and its opposite cannot both be true. Either there is or is not a table in this room. Either Napoleon was or was not forced to retreat from Moscow. Either the universe did or did not have a beginning in time. This works well for facts and descriptions. It does not work at all well for what Viktor Frankl called “humanity’s search for meaning.” Meaning is not to be found in scientific facts, pure reason or physical description. Even Richard Dawkins notes in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), that scientific facts entail nothing about how we should or should not act ‘We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators’, he wrote.

Meaning is found not in systems but in stories; not in nature but in narrative – the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, where we came from, what is our place in the universe, and what, therefore, we are called on to do. That is why the Bible, the supreme example of our search for meaning, is written in the form of narrative. Unlike philosophy, narrative celebrates the concrete, not the abstract; the particular, not the universal; the open future made by human choice, not the closed, predictable future of scientific law and historical inevitability.

Narrative truth is not like scientific or logical truth. It does not operate on the either/or of truth and falsity. Narratives contain multiple points of view. They are open – essentially, not accidentally – to more than one interpretation, more than one *level* of interpretation. Nor does the validity of one story exclude another. Stories, including historical narratives, do more than reflect facts about the world. They offer interpretations and, as Anna just said using the words of Pope Francis, a multiplicity of interpretations.

⁷⁷What is true of texts is true of relationships. Relationships are multi-faceted in a way physical facts are not. I either am or am not (slightly) grey-haired, short-sighted, and bespectacled. But I am, simultaneously, a child of my parents, the father of my children, the husband of my wife. I have friends, colleagues, neighbours and co-religionists. I am a citizen of England, the United Kingdom and Europe as well as belonging to humanity as a whole. Each of these relationships is covenantal in the sense that it involves reciprocal obligations. These obligations can conflict. Should I accept a speaking invitation or spend the evening with my family? I am torn between my responsibilities as a leader in interfaith dialogue and my duties as a father and husband. But there is no principled incompatibility between these loyalties. The truth of one does not entail the falsity of others.

Objective facts about a person are one thing; the relationships that make each of us who we are, are another. Here there is no either/or, instead there is a series of narratives – those we tell about ourselves or others tell about us. Multiple narratives do not exclude one another. On the contrary, they help build a composite picture. They are part of what makes us human, hence different, unique, unreplaceable. This is what led Jews and later, Muslims, to say that “a single life is like a universe.”

Hence the profound difference between thinking if my faith is true and conflicts with yours, then yours is false. *Faith as covenant* means if I and my fellow believers have a relationship with God, that does not imply you do not have this same relationship. I have my stories, rituals, memories, prayers, celebrations, laws and customs; you have yours. That is what makes me, me and you, you. It is what differentiates cultures, heritages, civilisations. The truth of one does not entail the falsity of the other. Indeed the very words “true” and “false” seem out of place here, as if we were using words from one domain to describe phenomena belonging to another. Covenantal language speaks not of brute facts but institutional ones; not of physical descriptions but of systems of meaning, modes of belonging, ways in which groups relate themselves to the universe, its Author, and to one another.

The scientific question is: What can I know about the world? The covenantal question is: How shall I act and expect others to act if we are to achieve together what none of us can do alone? The former generates narratives of displacement. Truth cannot coexist with falsehood. If I am convinced that I possess the truth while you are sunk in error, I may try to persuade you, but if you refuse to be persuaded, I may conquer or convert you, imposing my view by force in the name of truth. This thinking leads to the mindset of, “I’m right; you’re wrong; go to hell.”

Covenantal thinking, however, with its acknowledgement of the multiplicity of relationships and interpretations is fundamentally opposed to displacement narratives. One of the great successes of interfaith dialogue is the recognition that we must learn to live together by making space for one another. It is opposed to partisan self-assurance which affects the ability to take seriously alternative opinions and engage in dialogue and makes the search for mutual understanding much more difficult. It requires taking the ‘Other’ as seriously as one demands to be taken oneself, as the Vatican Guidelines to *Nostra Aetate* stated. For example, when one side is wholly depicted as responsible for a conflict, the ears of the ‘Other’ close. Too often, advocating commitment for the wellbeing of one equates to a blanket condemnation of the

'Other'. Nowhere is this more evident than in discussions today about Israel and Palestine - whether they take place in synagogues, churches and mosques, or during marches and demonstrations. Speakers tend to be advocates of one side or another, pursuing a strictly partisan agenda. The atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel on 7th October and the extreme severity

of the Israeli military response have brought huge pressures on the Jewish and Muslims communities today, with a 12-fold increase in antisemitism and 4-fold increase in Islamophobia in the UK alone.

This can lead not only to mutual incomprehension, and sometimes to antipathy, but also reluctance to engage in different narratives. For example, Muslim sympathy with Palestinians is seen by some Jews as threatening the Jewish community and feeding the rising antisemitism in the UK and elsewhere. Likewise, some Muslims (and others) see Jews as homogeneous in their support and defence of Israel, unwilling to accept any criticism of the Jewish state. There is also a deep reluctance to acknowledge prejudice against the 'other' within each community.

In response to the present grim situation, I have been facilitating quiet meetings between Muslims and Jews which have provided an opportunity for everyone to share with one another how events in Israel and Gaza are affecting them and their communities here in the UK. It was clear that both desire to keep the channels of dialogue open and to be in touch with one another. It was also striking how many emotions (eg., worry, fear, anger) and themes (eg., influence of social media, importance of friendship, worries about personal security and the younger generations as well as the negative impact of taking binary positions) are present in the views of both Muslims and Jews.

Beyond the practical challenges that define the human situation as such, interfaith dialogue is a reminder that relationships between God and humanity are covenantal. None excludes others. God may be with us but also with those who are not like us; with friends but also with strangers. That is why the Torah tells us on 36 separate occasions to love the stranger. Today's interfaith dialogue reminds us of a sense of meaning and purpose in history, and the concepts of human responsibility and dignity. Greece (and Cambridge) may have produced philosophers, but our Scriptures produced prophets. Greece gave us tragedy, the Abrahamic faiths its opposite: hope. In other words, Abrahamic dialogue can help us overwhelm the shrill screams of advocacy and overcome those who generate noise but not hope.

If this is difficult, which it is, it can be said another way. My wife, Trisha, and I have three children. We love them equally and unconditionally. They are very different from one another. They have different strengths, skills, interests, temperaments and emotional needs. If we favoured one at the cost of the others, we would have failed as parents. Still more would we have failed if, having loved our firstborn, we then withdrew that affection on the birth of our subsequent children, transferring it each time to the youngest. Such behaviour would have damaged them all deeply, creating rivalries, insecurities and a sense of rejection.

If that is true of human parents, how much more is it true of God. Can I really believe that God, having set his love on, and made a covenant with, the children of Israel, then rejected them when they continued to honour that covenant, choosing not to follow the new faith, Christianity? Can I believe that the God of love, in loving Christians, thereby abandoned Jews?

Can I make sense of the idea that, six centuries after the birth of Christianity and twenty-six after the journey of Abraham, God revealed that Jews and Christians had been mistaken all along and that their religious destiny was other than they had believed it to be? I can perfectly well understand that first Ptolemy, then Copernicus, then Newton – perhaps even Einstein - were shown to be wrong in their scientific beliefs and that if religion is like science, it is open to such refutations.

But to think of religion on the model of science is to think that God is a concept. The Bible and the Qur'an remind us that God is a parent. Today, on our celebration of the 30th anniversary of Margaret Beaufort, I suggest the Abrahamic covenant, based not on a concept but on a relationship, not on a theoretical exercise but on a two-way conversation, can bring hope to our human story so that we can sustain a flourishing society which serves the needs of all.

Christians in Dialogue with Jews and Muslims

By Michael Barnes, SJ

We meet in far more sombre and painful circumstances than was ever considered likely when this seminar was first mooted. Not that long before those dreadful events of October 7th I responded to an invitation to join the local Jewish community for Sukkot. It was a lovely occasion. An elderly lady told me how consoled she was to sit and listen to the Hebrew words of Torah ringing round the synagogue. Her gentle face came back to me when I got the news of the massacre. A week later, October 14th, I joined the community a second time for Shabbat. Their grief was palpable, the pain beyond words. So forgive me if I do not attempt an overview of where Christians, Jews and Muslims have been over the last thirty years and where we should be going. My response is more personal than prescriptive.

Thirty years ago I was teaching religious studies at Heythrop. My expertise was in Buddhism and I was interested in the different forms of yogic practice which filtered into that tradition. I saw it as part of my task to introduce students of philosophy and theology to the religious worlds that impinged on their everyday lives in our capital city. I pursued that goal by getting them to reflect on the experience of crossing a threshold into another place of worship – synagogue, mosque, mandir, gurdwara. I would get them to ask themselves three questions. First, once you have had a chance to settle in the space, what points of continuity do you notice between what is familiar and what is strange? Second, what do you make of the discontinuity and strangeness? Thirdly, what echoes of the known continue to resonate in the unknown, and vice-versa?

Three questions, three 'levels' of learning and understanding, where faith becomes '*inter-faith*': gradually we find ourselves drawn away from familiar convictions and encouraged to explore difference and diversity, not in order to construct some interreligious hybrid but, in the terms of my study of Buddhist yoga, to learn a discerning mindfulness about how human beings touch into matters of ultimate truth and value. Thirty years on and I think I am doing much the same, but without the emphasis on actual movement around places of worship and from one place to

another. The same guiding questions can be applied to an intellectual journey through texts, written and oral traditions, and to the conversations they provoke.

What has changed for me in thirty years? Well, to continue the personal angle, I blame Cambridge. Thanks in no small measure to the time I spent here on my 'geriatric PhD', I have become sensitised to the 'otherness' which goes on *haunting* (I remember making a great deal of that image) what we like to think of as a familiar and homogeneous religious culture. 'The other' is not over there, on the edges of *our* world; if I am doing my job as a responsible theologian, I am on the edges of *their* world, learning about what it means to be Us by listening attentively to what they say about what it means to be Them. In that thesis I focussed on what *Nostra Aetate* has to say about the identity of the Christian Church being bound up with, and in an important sense dependent upon, the revelation of God to the Jewish people. I wrote about Christianity emerging from within a 'Jewish matrix' and about Judaism as always prior to, and never superseded by, a Christian sense of self: sometimes same, sometimes other, always provoking a deeper learning.

Three rather dense books later, I feel I may be a lot closer to getting that principle right. Christians exist *in relation* with the other; what the Church offers in terms of witness to Christ acts in a sort of dialectical tension with what it receives of the grace of God already permeating the entire scope of everyday human experience, including the religious. To put the same point another way, Christianity only comes properly alive when it is communicated - or *translated* - into the terms it learns from other cultures and religious worlds. Such a move is not without its risks; the wisdom of other religious traditions can be pillaged for useful ideas which are then 'fulfilled' in the all-powerful Christian systematic overview. There is, however, more to dialogue than an attenuated form of monological proclamation, more even than respectful speaking coupled with a little listening. Dialogue is more like a form of hospitable welcome in which the roles of host and guest alternate and attention is paid less to what is said than to the manner of the inter-personal relationship itself.

Such external dialogue feeds back into an inner self-reflection. Thirty years ago, the primary 'idiom' within which I tried to tease out my incipient theology of religions was Buddhist. When I lived and worked in the 'little Panjab' of Southall I became more and more at home in the world of Sikhi, 'discipleship', while at the same time trying to make sense of the proliferating religious world of Hinduism, from Vedas and yoga to bhakti and modern revival movements. I was also privileged to teach Catholic Christianity at the Muslim College in Ealing. Although in many ways a daunting experience, I always came away intrigued and consoled by the energy with which students engaged with serious theological questions. I shall never forget, as the war in Iraq was getting under way, a sharp but deeply moving discussion on just war theory. I am no Islamicist; what I know about Islam comes from knowing Muslims. Persons of faith have taught me that it is precisely in the inter-personal relationship that those echoes of the known continue to resonate in the unknown. But what do they tell me about *my* faith? How to return to myself, finding an integrity of faith, while bringing coherence and consistency into these different voices ever competing for my attention?

About ten years ago I started teaching Jewish-Christian relations with a rabbi at Heythrop. It gave me the opportunity to catch up with some important developments in the understanding of Christian origins and to re-read Jewish traditions, this time in company of Levinas, Buber,

Rosenzweig and Heschel. In attending to my own inner dialogue, I have found the Old Testament prophets come alive, reminding me of a God who calls a people for himself and speaks through the suffering of those who cry out for justice. To pick up on the question raised for our seminar this evening, the most important result of the dialogue of religions is not that an intra-Christian consensus has emerged about the systematic ordering of theological claims; it is rather that a number of ethical and political questions, from the ecological catastrophe to the scourge of religiously inspired violence, have shifted the *moral* climate within which faith is practised. A wise friend once said that the first concern of the theologian must be to watch your language in the presence of God. Maybe we should add – *and in the presence of a suffering humanity*.

We read our great texts in particular contexts; the two speak to each other. In multicultural Southall I quickly became aware that the exotic smells, sounds and sights hid a more prosaic and contested reality. Two weeks ago I went back as a very part-time acting parish priest at St Anselm's Catholic Church. I admired the glitzy railway station on the brand-new Elizabeth line and was less impressed by the soulless blocks of flats looming over the wet and dirty streets. Otherwise, nothing much seemed to have changed. The places of worship I had visited with my students were much the same – as indeed was the welcome I was given. In such places, *faith matters* – in all its beauty and glorious confusion. Yes, there is a great deal of suspicion and anxiety about threats from 'the other,' strangers and outsiders who sometimes awake memories of trauma and even persecution. And yes again, the management of diversity and difference is never straightforward, whether in a multicultural 'melting pot' like Southall or in much more dangerously fractured parts of our world, as we have witnessed in Israel and Gaza. But care needs to be taken not to polarise the 'theological' and the 'political' but to find ways of exploring the space between. If religion is sometimes the problem, it is not naïve to suggest that religion can often provide the solution.

For all three Abrahamic traditions, God's revelation – whether through Torah or Qur'an or in the person of Jesus Christ – is a divine act of loving generosity which we human beings are asked to recognise and welcome. That we struggle to do this, and fail, cannot take away from something all of us share, the sheer wonder that God has created this world of ours – and asks us to be responsible for maintaining its integrity. That wonder is often reflected in the patience and kindness human beings continue to exercise towards each other – virtues that grow from ways of life that support and motivate persons of *faith*.

Let me begin to sum up with a word about what has been achieved in the dialogue between religions and then return briefly to that tricky question of the relationship between religion and politics. The most powerful statement of *Nostra Aetate* is the threefold imperative: 'acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians'. That was 1965 and happily the language which describes people by what they are not has shifted towards the titles they themselves use. We have moved on from textbook stereotypes about 'World Religions' to the lived reality of persons of faith, from a model of religion as 'system' to one based in practice, tradition and community. We have begun to value what others teach about themselves and, in so doing, we are learning to appreciate the importance of 'religious literacy'; religions are not the esoteric beliefs of those the New Atheists dismiss as 'faith-heads' but the deep sedimentations of the spirit of a culture which any society neglects at its peril.

At the same time Catholic Christians in particular have become more sensitive to how the primary sources of theological thinking, scripture and tradition, are to be brought into dialogue with the wisdom of pastoral practice and the experience of everyday life. The Vatican Council did not produce canons and condemnations; it worked with scripturally based meditations on certain key themes, most obviously reconciliation and unity, the dignity of the human person and the call to holiness. The first section of *Nostra Aetate* seems rather bland and obvious in its reference to the questions people ask about the meaning of things. But this is the first time the discourse of History of Religions has been used in a conciliar document; it provides not just an introduction to the main (original) section on relations with the Jewish people but subtly shifts attention away from the familiar (at least, to Catholics) question of the salvation of the non-Christian by hinting at something broader and more open-ended – the ‘meaning’ of religious pluralism itself. *Nostra Aetate* has become something of a charter for interreligious relations which has inspired a number of responses. Two stand out. *Dabru Emet*, written by Jewish rabbis and intellectuals, was first published in the New York Times in September 2000. *A Common Word*, addressed by Muslim to Christian leaders in October 2007, emerged in the wake of Pope Benedict’s Regensburg lecture of September 2006. More could and should be noted. They are all part of a public discourse about the place of religion in a multi-cultural, secular world, in which all people of faith are exhorted to ‘acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths’ found in our sacred texts and funds of wisdom.

Let me conclude with one thought about where all this may be leading. What holds the rich diversity of religions together is precisely *faith*. And at issue for so many communities is how the integrity of faith, commitment to visions of truth, can be maintained in a sometimes strange and hostile world. That persons of faith have different ways of configuring faith is obvious. But the guarding of difference, that specificity of faith which confers a particular identity, is not in itself a problem. The problem arises when religion goes toxic, as it were, when the naturally inward-looking and conservative mind-set of any traditional creed is turned outward, demonising some threatening ‘other’. The root of all conflicts is not difference as such but *competition*, a rivalry often rooted in the traumas of history, which if it is not acknowledged leads to binary and increasingly hard-edged oppositions. Suppress or ignore the cry of the suffering other, as Michel de Certeau warns us, and it will simply come back in another way. That perhaps is the instinct of ‘bad religion’. And what of ‘good religion’?

The primary insight of the Abrahamic traditions is that, before we speak, we are addressed, *spoken to* by God’s own Word. Whether the Divine Imperative is understood as ‘Hear’ or ‘Follow’ or ‘Recite’, the differences of idiom to which they give rise are rooted in a culture of hospitality to the other – whether another person, other texts, other symbols and images. Treated with generosity and respect, this often gives rise to a fairly common experience: the more one learns about another tradition the more one learns about one’s own. The question for all of us is whether we are content just to consume what we have learned, adding it to the sum-total of material possessions with which we surround and console ourselves - or whether we allow its very otherness to shift our sense of self-sufficiency, not just to open up other perspectives but to be shaped by them, changed by them, and to build in us qualities of empathy, forgiveness and reconciliation.

30 Years of Dialogue among the Abrahamic Religions: Islam

by Dr Tim Winter

It's a joy to take part in the thirtieth-anniversary celebrations of the Lady Margaret Beaufort Institute, particularly since the Cambridge Muslim College, the small institution of which I am the dean, was a tenant of the Institute for the first three years of our college's life. Our abiding gratitude goes to Susan O'Brien and her team for their forbearance during that time.

Abrahamic dialogue, or 'trialogue' in the barbarous neologism favoured by some, stirs the insoluble issue of what, if anything, constitutes the shared Abrahamic. The patriarch, like the land of his covenants, has been competitively loved and appropriated. The difference has been one of sacred history, of doctrinal entailment, and of passionate affect, so that even the quieter and very inclusive word 'monotheism' seems to unite us more credibly than does his name. Islam, to whose theology, or a version thereof, I owe my allegiance, has perhaps been most acutely aware of this, given its traditional claims to an Abrahamic filiation that is deemed corrective and even reparative: not a supersession in the usual sense, but a vocation of repair, a reformation, possibly, or a restoration. Its late advent in history makes this constitutive: the earlier versions of monotheism are explicitly referenced in its scripture, as are their adherents, who are called People of the Book, and who are alternately chastised and commended. This gifts Muslims with rich historical and scriptural resources for our conversations, but also with the burden of aligning the classical Muslim descriptions of two Abrahamic forebears with present-day real adherents, heirs to centuries of reflection and change.

The conversations began early in our history, with John of Damascus, the Church Father who so strangely worked as an accountant in the Umayyad caliphal chancery. His verdict that Islam was a Christian heresy and not simply an aberrant heathenism earned him the epithet of 'cursed favourer of Saracens' by some of his co-religionists,⁷⁸ less inclined as they were to collaborate with the Arab invaders. Later, in 781, the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi held a discourse with the Nestorian catholicos Timothy, and our sources recall a firm yet courteous encounter which perhaps suggests that against the backdrop of the titanic clash of religiously-defined civilisations, the scriptural instruction 'to dispute with the People of the Book in the most beautiful way' (29:46), was sometimes taken very seriously.⁷⁹

The themes and clichés of this dialogue, and that which in a more minor key engaged Muslims with Jews, remained remarkably constant, and even tediously reiterative, for many centuries. The paradigm was finally broken in the nineteenth century when Muslims grew alert to the decline of Christian motivations in Western visitors and invaders, and to their replacement with

⁷⁸ In J.H. Lupton, *St John of Damascus* (London: SPCK, 1882), 61.

⁷⁹ Wafik Nasry (tr.) and Samir Khalil (ed.), *The Patriarch and the Caliph: An Eighth-Century Dialogue between Timothy I and al-Mahdi* (New York: Wiley, 2017).

strange secular and scientific imperial visions. Abdel Kader al-Jaza'iri (d.1883), who resisted the French invasion of Algeria, was one of the first to realise this in his *Letter to the French*.⁸⁰

After centuries of this drift in identities and epistemes, Christendom and the Abode of Islam may hardly be themselves any longer, but against glib atheistic expectations religion continues to thrive in a world which David Ford has described as 'complexly religious and secular'. Outside the secular exception of the West, Christianity, including Catholicism, is thriving. Recent surveys suggest that the Arab world also is currently re-religionising, having lost faith in nationalist and socialist ideologies. Michael Robbins of the Arab Barometer reports that 'youth aged 18-29 have led the return to religion across the Middle East and North Africa,' over the past ten years.⁸¹ Recruitment for Islamist movements is likely also to be ongoing, with negative implications for already embattled Christian minorities. Our conversation is hardly diminishing in importance.

With *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II brought about a sea-change in the Catholic Church's expression of its deposit of faith, so that 'upon the Muslims too, the Church looks with favour.' Christian theologians such as Hans Küng and Louis Massignon were able to acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet of God, and Islam as in some mysterious sense one of the 'three ways of the One.' This has eased the exploration of the terrain on which the monotheisms might stand, not quite shoulder to shoulder, but in a rough and still inadequately theorised solidarity against a common atheistical and reductionist challenge. Today we all flinch under the Medusa gaze of the profane culture which governs the careering path of modernity. There is little choice but to converse: we are threatened not so much by each other, but by unprecedented spiritual and existential risks against which we evidently need to forge a kind of *alliance sacrée*.

Relatedly, the scholarship has proliferated, as showcased in the remarkable twenty-one volume *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (Leiden: Brill, 2009-). New and more appreciative Muslim theologies of Christianity and Judaism have appeared, pushing against the *ressentiment* of so many non-Western reflexes against the ongoing Occidental military, economic and cultural hegemon.⁸² Against the need to perceive Islam as the estranged and despised Ishmael, the colonial subject, the South's paradigm victim of Western hubris, there is also a new and venturesome reaching out to the persistent religious segments of post-Christendom, to see what solidarities might be built, despite the deep misgivings of fundamentalists and also of many liberals, the latter insisting that our conversation must be predicated on late modern or postmodern beliefs concerning politics, the body, and relationships.

In this environment, positive conversations sourced in more conservative theologies, not really attempted before apart from the unusual and very contested efforts of Louis Massignon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, showed their potential with the promulgation of the Muslim document

⁸⁰ Abd el-Kader, tr. René Khawam, *Lettre aux Français* (Paris: Phébus, 1977).

⁸¹ <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2023/05/a-new-dawn-for-political-islam>

⁸² For instance the essays in Mohammed Hassan Khalil, *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

known as *A Common Word* on November 13, 2007.⁸³ Popping like a champagne cork into a startled world, this immediately became the most widely-reported interfaith initiative of recent times.

The document presented itself as an act of obedience to a Qur'anic verse:

Say: O People of the Book! Come to a common word (*kalima sawa*) between us and you; that we shall worship none save God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered unto Him. (3:64)

Islam's late appearance in the *historia monotheistica* enabled this referencing of the two earlier sacred communities, although the *Common Word* in fact directed itself only to Christians, an observation which occasionally became a complaint. The characteristic Qur'anic ellipsis allowed the interpretation of the verse not as a critique of a supposed trinitarian or christological compromise with monotheism, but as an invitation to create a shared platform, a basis for work in solidarity, since 'our God and your God is one God.' (29:46)

An often-noticed feature of the document is its deployment of a novel means of speaking on behalf of a religion which has no intrinsic hierarchy, but exists as an archipelago of exegetic traditions and of famed sages. Without a central authority, how was 'Islam' to speak? Modern communications came to the rescue, by permitting the circulation of drafts by the original author, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, to global leaders of Muslim communities, so that the document was quickly negotiated and endorsed by 138 signatories, a number which, through the miracle of the internet, continued to grow organically.

The document essentially comprised an open letter directed to Christian leaders worldwide. Western and Muslim media reports interpreted it more specifically as a challenge or corrective to Pope Benedict XVI, whose lecture in Regensburg on 12 September 2006 entitled 'Faith, Reason and the University' had made a case for the natural cohabitation of Christianity, Europe and rationality, and seemed to imply that Islamic theology is less receptive to the blessing of reason. This actual or imagined dichotomising, with its implications for the due belongingness of Muslim minorities in Europe, triggered fierce reactions from all sides, with cynical secularists pointing to darker and allegedly irrationalist episodes of Catholic history, while some Muslims assumed that the Pope was critiquing Islam, with some more conservative Catholics in agreement.⁸⁴

The Regensburg Address, and the provocation which in fact seemed unintentional, and may simply have been the outcome of an unclear choice of words, did serve as the initial catalyst for the letter. But its ultimately Jordanian authorship appears to have had further and larger ends in view. Compressed between the results of Western interventions to its West and East, the refugee-packed desert kingdom in the early 2000s was highly sensitive to the religionising of Western assertion in both directions. A steadily right-leaning Israel seemed increasingly popular

⁸³ www.acommonword.com

⁸⁴ <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2016/09/12/is-dialogue-with-islam-possible-some-reflections-on-benedict-xvis-address-at-the-university-of-regensburg/>

among American evangelicals, who also typically backed the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Despite the Western self-perception as an enlightened post-religious force for good which intervenes in Muslim places where coercive theocracy is normative, the Jordanians, echoing concerned Islamic opinion globally, watched as 'Bush Christianised the war in Iraq',⁸⁵ as he deployed colourful Biblical tropes accompanied by the explicit discourse of crusade. The leader of the hunt for Usama bin Laden, General William Boykin, insisted that America would only win against Islamic enemies 'if we come against them in the name of Jesus,' while attorney-general John Ashcroft anointed himself with holy oil when he took office.

The religious monsterring of Muslims and the steady exaggeration of their Ishmaelite alterity was registered across the Arab world through translations of studies such as Kimberly Blaker's *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America*.⁸⁶ In Pakistan, thousands consumed Abid Jan's book *Afghanistan: The Genesis of the Final Crusade*,⁸⁷ while Coptic sociologist Samir Murqus wrote a bestselling *American Imperialism: The Triad of Wealth, Faith and Power*.⁸⁸

This sense that an Arab world whose rulers were largely secular was being subjected to a religiously-motivated onslaught by a White House in the grip of dispensationalist neocons and theocons was the real enabler of the *Common Word*, and its concerns and tropes can only be fully understood as a series of rebuttals of American evangelical discourse about Ishmaelite and Hagarene otherness as the epitome of an un-American, un-White folk devil. The letter's strategy, given the theological diversity of its global readership, was the deployment of Muslim and Christian scripture to undermine that dichotomy.

Assuming that letter-spirit binaries informed evangelical Islamophobia, *A Common Word* recurrently visits the theme of 'love of God and love of neighbour' as the affective ground which Muslims and Christians are called to share. Against notions of Islam as a 'semitic legalism' opposed to Gospel grace and love, the document pointedly recalls the centrality of love in Islamic scriptures and devout writing.⁸⁹ Al-Ghazali (d.1111) had called love 'the utmost goal among the stages.'⁹⁰ Love figured largely in the prayers of the Prophet, whose traditional epithet is 'God's Beloved,' for instance: 'O Lord God, grant me love of Thee, and love of those

⁸⁵ Paul Valley, 'The fifth crusade: George Bush and the Christianisation of the war in Iraq,' *Borderlands: A Journal of Theology and Education* 4 (Summer 2005), 7-11.

⁸⁶ Kimberly Blaker, *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (Boston: New Boston Books, 2003).

⁸⁷ Abid Jan, *Afghanistan: The Genesis of the Final Crusade* (Lahore: Pragmatic Publishers, 2006).

⁸⁸ Samir Murqus, *al-Imbaraturiyya al-Amrikiyya: thulathiyyat al-tharwa, al-din, al-quwwa* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shuruq al-Dawliyya, 2003).

⁸⁹ For the 'semitic legalism' trope applied to Islam see Ilan Halevi, *Islamophobie et judeophobie: L'effet miroir* (Paris: Syllepse, 2015).

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⁹⁰ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, tr. Eric Ormsby, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011), p.2.

that love Thee, and love of that which brings me near to Thy love; make Thy love more beloved to me than cool water.⁹¹ This is a twin to the love of neighbour in the Hadith's version of the Golden Rule: 'not one of you has faith until he loves for his neighbour what he loves for himself,'⁹² the commentaries adding that the 'neighbour' here could be an adherent of a pre-Islamic religion.

Naturally the expression of God's love in history diverges in Muslim and Christian soteriologies, and the *Common Word* did not seek to diminish this. Multiple perfectly-saving interventions in history reveal divine love for Muslims, while God's sending of His own son shows it for Christians. The soteriology and anthropology are quite different. Here, as the commentators appreciatively noted, the document is not reductionist or concordist, but is able frankly to acknowledge indicative disparities wherever these exist. Again, the traditionalism of the approach, in a document which made no reference at all to modern theologies on either side, proved unexpectedly effective.

The tone of the document seems also to have been pitched for conservative American ears, and the scriptural versions deployed were the King James Bible and Pickthall's archaising translation of the Qur'an, which permitted an overall de-exoticising of the Ishmaelite voice. Here was 'Islam', speaking collectively to Christian leaders, in a language whose unsettling strangeness, to some, was now mitigated by a familiar Englishness.

The *Common Word* 'went viral' across the Christian world immediately, speaking as it did to more mainstream Christian worries about an East-West confrontation whose religious language was used with an apparently escalating energy that did not only frighten Jordanians. The *Common Word* website soon gathered responses from the Russian Patriarch, the Mennonite Church, Tony Blair, Ian Torrance, and many others.

Recognising no single authority, some evangelicals emulated the open letter approach by publishing a *Yale Response*, a full-page statement in the *New York Times* (18 November 2007) signed by over three hundred evangelical and reformed pastors. This was followed by a conference at Yale and another at Jesus College in Cambridge, which included probably the largest ever gathering of senior Muslim leaders in the United Kingdom. The keynote by Rowan Williams pointed to five areas for dialogue which the *Common Word* had opened up: the love of God, the love of neighbour, the integrity and authority of scripture, the life of faith, and the abiding reality of difference.⁹³

Pope Benedict then welcomed a first Catholic-Muslim Forum at the Vatican, accepting the initiative, and confirming that Islam and Christianity both honour the principles of love of God and love of neighbour. This affirmation was then explored more academically in a stream of later publications, which tended to focus on two contested themes. Firstly, there was the question of whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God, which was answered

⁹¹ Tirmidhi, *Da'awat*, 72.

⁹² Bukhari, *Iman*, 7.

⁹³ Rowan Williams, 'A Common Word for the Common Good,' 61-89 of Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri (eds.), *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

affirmatively in an important book by Yale Lutheran theologian Miroslav Volf.⁹⁴ Secondly, Muslim experts wrote to explain the centrality of love in Islam, and monographs here included the Bosnian thinker Rusmir Mahmutcehajic's *On Love in the Muslim Tradition*,⁹⁵ and Prince Ghazi's *Love in the Holy Qur'an*.⁹⁶ The most detailed response of all came from William Chittick in his *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*, which observed that 'if any single word can sum up Islamic spirituality – by which I mean the very heart of the Qur'anic message – it should surely be *love*.'⁹⁷

Despite the important acknowledgement of these two points, which contributed saliently to the 'de-antisemitising' of outsider perceptions of Islamic faith, the discussions tended to add or discern further complexity in the search for the 'shared Abrahamic', the category which resonates so directly with Muslims, given the Qur'an's insistent claims to Abrahamic filiation and the Muslim belief in a specifically Ishmaelite charism. This has more recently been explored and deepened in a series of Christian-Muslim conferences in Cambridge and Tübingen, recorded in proceedings published by Mohr Siebeck.⁹⁸

As this aftermath continues to be fruitful, in Cambridge and elsewhere, many share the present writer's sense that despite the dissonances between the Abrahamic traditions, such encounters tend to convince participants of at least two truths. Firstly: dialogue, which must be based on deep listening, is most successful when carried out by practitioners who profoundly inhabit their own liturgical traditions of self-naughting, which facilitates humility and an absence of defensive triumphalism.⁹⁹ Secondly: while leaving the grand mystery of God's complex work in history publicly unresolved, the fact of conviviality and burgeoning mutual trust permits significant and healing collaborations on ethical issues of shared concern, with compassion for refugees, defence of unborn life, and climate change surely heading the list.¹⁰⁰ Whatever else it may represent, it is clear that the Abrahamic stands for a willingness to migrate from the community of one's familiar selves, in order to confront the hegemonic and the colonial, venturing expectantly into unknown spaces of alterity, seeking there the grace of God.

⁹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

⁹⁵ Rusmir Mahmutcehajic, *On Love in the Muslim Tradition* (Ashland OH: Fordham University Press, 2007).

⁹⁶ Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, *Love in the Holy Qur'an* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2010).

⁹⁷ William Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p.xi.

⁹⁸ For example, Lejla Demiri, Mujadad Zaman, Tim Winter, Christoph Schwöbel and Alexei Bodrov (eds.), *Theological Anthropology in Interreligious Perspective* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

⁹⁹ For the vital importance of liturgical practices that draw attention away from the celebrant see for instance Bishop Joseph E. Strickland, *Light and Leaven: The Challenge of the Laity in the Twenty-First Century* (El Cajon: Catholic Answers Press, 2020), 59-61.

¹⁰⁰ See for instance the proceedings of yet another Cambridge conference: Lejla Demiri, Mujadad Zaman, and Tim Winter, *Green Theology: Emerging 21st Century Muslim and Christian Discourses on Ecology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024).

Gala Fundraising Concert at Fitzwilliam College

By Hannah Roberts



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On a sunny Saturday in June 2023, we were honoured and delighted to have the opportunity to collaborate with the wonderful team at MBIT on a joint 'venture' that drew together many spiritual and artistic strands in memory of former MBIT student Susanna Roberts.

The idea to approach Susanne Jennings and the MBIT community initially arose after we were forced to postpone a proper celebration of my mother's life due to Covid restrictions when she passed away in February 2021. At the time I (and I'm sure many others in the same situation) felt great anguish and guilt at not having been able to gather family, friends and those who had played wonderful roles in the life of a dearly loved parent. But upon reflection, it was this delay that allowed for ideas to develop and I suddenly realised that there might be value in reaching out to MBIT to see if we could create an event that might serve jointly as a memorial celebration and a way of contributing to the ongoing study opportunities for both of our respective disciplines.

Since my mother had been a professional musician (indeed, my first cello teacher!) before, later in life, studying at MBIT, it seemed that this idea was at least worth exploring. However, I could

not have imagined the overwhelmingly positive, proactive and enthusiastic response I received from Susanne, Anna and the MBIT team.

Once we had identified a date, plans were soon underway for a recital at Fitzwilliam College's beautiful chapel; this was arranged very generously with MBIT, along with beautifully designed programmes, and with proceeds being divided between the MBIT student bursary fund and a newly established bursary fund for gifted cellists attending my annual cello summer school.

My pianist husband, Simon Parkin, and I felt extremely moved to have the opportunity to perform for a wonderfully attentive and appreciative audience in the excellent acoustic at Fitzwilliam chapel and experienced great warmth both during the recital and in conversation with those who shared lovely anecdotes and memories of my mother at the generously gifted reception after the recital.

We were delighted to learn afterwards that due to the generosity of those attending, not only had there been a wonderful and moving memorial occasion, but also funds raised to support a new generation of students both at MBIT and for the young cellists attending the summer course. I feel certain that my mother, Susanna, would have been delighted by this and extremely touched by the commitment and energy generously given by everyone at MBIT and Fitzwilliam - thank you all!



Hannah Roberts is Principal Cellist Manchester Camerata, Jacqueline du Pré Professor of Cello, RAM London Professor of cello RNCM Manchester, and Visiting Artist in cello RBC.

Women's Rights are Equal Rights

**A Reflection by Melanie-Préjean Sullivan, DMin
Visiting Lecturer**

As the celebratory events for the Pearl Anniversary of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology were announced, I reflected upon my experience with MBIT and the importance of this unique Catholic women's gathering place. It is recognized for academic accomplishments of all sorts through the Cambridge Theological Federation, the University of Cambridge, and Anglia-Ruskin University. This makes those of us interested in intellectual pursuits, justifiably proud.

For me, there is an additional benefit to the academics; it is the way in which this women's institute has served uniquely as a home for us to ask deep, challenging questions while mingling comfortably with pastoral concerns, giving us a place to grow spiritually and collectively. Since my time as the Cardinal Hume Scholar in 2017, my association with MBIT has been nothing short of sacred.

Before Covid, our Thursdays at MBIT were amazing times for feeding the mind and the spirit. Our classes met in the afternoon, with a lovely tea break between sessions, followed by Mass and dinner in the expanded living/dining room. The warm ambiance of sofas and chairs moved circularly around the fireplace inviting friendships to form. We would discuss what we'd learned, look ahead to the next class, catch-up on news of one another's discernment, and form intercontinental relationships that endure. Occasional guests would learn more about us; some decided to enroll in the next course, knowing they would be welcomed. Some were there to pursue advanced academic degrees; some were there for enrichment. All were welcome.

When Hillary Clinton wrote her tribute to Madeleine Albright, she explained how Albright had encouraged her to sharpen her speech before the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Human Rights in Beijing. Clinton acknowledged Albright's suggestion that national security depended upon human rights, and that it was essential to understand the theme of this essay, "Women's rights are human rights."ⁱ Albright's family had fled the Nazis from Czechoslovakia. She was an immigrant woman of strength and valor who rose to one of the highest offices any woman had in the U.S., Secretary of State. She was a voice for the voiceless, a social justice champion. Today, we still need such a voice in the US, because disparities continue. Because of racism and salary disparity between genders, 35 percent of single women with children live and raise their families in poverty.ⁱⁱ

The women's rights quote is profound in its simplicity. It resounds in our hearts, rattling the bones of the rib cage as we hear our very spirits shouting, "Of course. Yes!" We might even read it and move on quickly because to many of us, it is so obvious. Alas, some have argued against its truth and persist in fighting against what it conveys. That is why MBIT's founding mission for women in the church is so important to me as I enter my eighth decade on the earth and look to future generations of women of faith.

Personal background

I came of age in the 1960's, a time when single-gender education was valued. St. Charles Academy in Lake Charles, Louisiana was where I spent five years of middle and secondary school. It was the school where my mother, my aunt, and their closest friends attended. It was a "girls' academy" where our intellects were respected, and our opinions mattered.

I did not fully appreciate this atmosphere until my senior (12th grade) year when our school was consolidated with a boys' school. Suddenly the notion of "second-class citizenship" became a reality. There was nothing blatantly awful about it, but there were subtle changes that took me decades to analyze fully. ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of those who had been outspoken in our "all-girls" school were now silent. They were conflicted, equally interested in the subjects being discussed, but self-conscious about how they were perceived by others. I was appointed to be the editor of our school newspaper, but very few boys joined the staff. At the time, I was not fully aware of what might be happening, but as the next decades unfolded, it became clear that the value that my parents had placed on my single-gender education was to be among the most treasured legacies they could have given me.

A bit of historical background

Let us pause to remember what we know of the history of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, the rioting and prison terms of those who fought to extend voting rights beyond Christian English men of property to include the Jews, the Irish, and eventually women in the UK. Universal suffrage was a very gradual, slow process in history. Derogatory terms were shouted from the opposition. Women who felt compelled to violence in their impatience were demeaned as “suffragettes” instead of “suffragists,” and soon the entire movement left everyone in the campaign for voting rights of women labeled as *little and insignificant*.^{iv}

In the United States, women’s higher education began to shift in the midnineteenth century with the first college founded to grant degrees to women at Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia.^v There was surely bravery and broad-mindedness in these parents who sent their 15 and 16-year-old daughters to college. Today, we recognize that these parents were challenged by the current thinking of many of their peers who believed that there was a direct ratio between the functioning of the brain and the health of the uterus.

It was a common myth that if women were educated, the energy for study would deplete the energy needed to sustain viable pregnancies. “Women were not encouraged to have academic aspirations in case it undermined their attachment to the home, and it was believed that academic study was against women’s nature and that too much knowledge could affect women’s fertility. Church leaders were often against the higher education of women because they said it went against the teachings of the Bible.”^{vi} The nineteenth century was also a time of measuring brains to prove women were inferior thinkers. Such notions are still investigated by scholars.^{vii}

I entered university in the 1970’s when the women’s movement in the

United States included the campaign for the *Equal Rights Amendment* (ERA) to the US Constitution (which was never passed). One clever bumper sticker echoed the theme of this essay as it proclaimed, “Feminism is the radical idea that women are people, too.” After all, for millennia “people” meant only men.

But the political arena was not the only place that women were coming forward. Because of Vatican II, I was blessed to witness a similar kind of recognition that women might be “people, too” as my generation moved into lay roles within the liturgy. My mother and my grandmothers’ church roles were within the Altar Society, filled with the fragrance of furniture polish on each pew, the sound of the vacuum cleaners on every Saturday, and the privileged work of washing and ironing the sacred linens, purificators, and cassocks.

After the Council, we were in the sanctuary during Mass as readers, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, and acolytes (and for a very brief period, preaching). We could use our “time and talent” doing more than cleaning or organizing bake sales. Some of us went on for advanced degrees in theology and became known as ecclesial lay ministers (ELM).^{viii} And into this time of realizing the blessings of Vatican II and the gifts of women in the church, enter the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology.

Thirty years ago, the founding vision of MBIT joined the Cambridge Theological Federation in recognizing the “place at the desk” for women. Though many Protestant churches also moved toward a “place at the altar,” still MBIT was a significant Catholic step in the right direction.

Women’s sacred spaces

I share here some anecdotal evidence from over sixty years of being in classrooms, meetings, and board rooms with both women and men. What I have observed is that when men are in the room, especially in multigenerational meetings, women are not as likely to join in healthy debate. Even those of us reared within the affirming activity of the late 20th century’s women’s movement sometimes fight our inner voices to “be quiet.” After a recent meeting on Zoom, one of my younger colleagues remarked that she felt that since more men had been added to our group, the men spoke about 75% of the time and the women only 25%. It reminded me of my experience in high school of “moving into the boys’ school” rather than recognizing that a consolidated school belonged to both genders equally.

MBIT’s women-only courses create an atmosphere where our opinions, even those that are controversial or profoundly personal are heard. Some of my very favorite people on the planet are men, and their opinions are also valuable, but there is a necessity for continuing to create academic circles for women.

When I served as the Cardinal Hume Scholar, I attended several Cambridge University lectures by scholars in many disciplines. On one such occasion there was a paper presented by a woman who was engaged in research on a collection of rare bound books in France. I learned so much that afternoon that I had never known; I was delighted to have had the chance to listen to and learn from this scholar.

After her fascinating presentation, she opened the room to questions. There were less than 20 people crammed into the small conference room space, but the only comments were from two men who proceeded to pretend to ask questions, but who were in fact posturing, putting forth their own ideas and theories about what she “should” have been researching. It was appalling behavior, but one I have heard is rampant in “the academy.”^{ix} Certainly, I am not asserting that this cannot happen in women-only situations, but I can assert with great conviction that I have never witnessed it in any of the women-only circles of learning at MBIT.

In our recent Exodus course, we were encouraged to ask, “Where would Moses have been without the women who bravely defied the law?” That is what I feel called to celebrate during this Pearl Anniversary and in this essay— the joyous uplifting of women and their place within our faith history.

In closing

Lady Margaret Beaufort herself would never have used the term *feminist* as it did not exist, but I firmly believe that she is smiling upon this institute named for her. Her spirit of perseverance is an inspiration to us. Her behind-the-scenes efforts were a bravery that is within the same spirit of the institute named for her. (My words are inadequate to convey the depth of information about her that is inspiring as illustrated in *Uncrowned Queen* by Nicola Tallis. Do please join us for the author’s presentation in May.)

It has been a privilege to have been asked to continue by relationship with MBIT since my sabbatical in 2017 and to serve today as a *Visiting Lecturer*. It has been a grace to have met and come to know outstanding scholars of international repute, to have studied with women of spirit and dedication to the ideals of the Gospel, and to join in celebrating thirty years of women's theological education with MBIT, first in the UK and now, throughout the world. As I stated in the beginning, to me this is sacred. Thank you for believing that the *rights of women of the church are human rights, too*.

i Hillary Clinton. *Madeleine Albright Warned Us and She was Right*. Guest column in the New York Times, in memory of Albright.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/opinion/madeleine-albright-secretary-of-state.html>

ii Haley Swenson and Rebecca Gale. *The State of US Mothers in 2022*. 3 May 2022. Based upon research of Legal Momentum, the women's legal defense education fund.

<https://www.newamerica.org/better-life-lab/blog/the-state-of-us-mothers-in-2022/>

iii My former high school has a much more level set of male and female accomplishments. Studies throughout the US indicate that the women in high schools are achieving significantly higher academic awards than the men. The same trend is in higher education where women outnumber men in US colleges and university by nearly 2:1. <https://www.pewresearch.org/facttank/2021/11/08/whats-behind-the-growing-gap-between-men-and-women-in-college-completion/>

iv. The French suffix, "ette" means little.

v. Genevieve Carlton. *A History of Women in Higher Education*, revised 20 March 2023. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/analysis/2021/03/21/history-women-highereducation/> vi Newnham College, Cambridge. *Women's Education*.

<https://newn.cam.ac.uk/about/history/womens-education/> vii Gina Rippon. *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience That Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain* (2020) New York. Vintage.

viii In 2001, Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly, OP told me that the US Conference of Catholic Bishops spent several meetings debating whether lay people could be allowed to use the term "minister" or "chaplain" because it might "confuse the faithful" about the role of ordination. ix This has been called "mansplaining" meaning a condescending man's effort to explain what he assumes women cannot understand. It was coined after a man tried to lecture Rebecca Solnit using reference to a book on the topic of her presentation. He failed to realize that the authoritative book to which he referred was written by her. See "Men Explain Things to Me." <https://tomdispatch.com/rebecca-solnit-the-archipelago-of-arrogance/>

Why bother with theology?

Reflections on the state and purpose of theological education today

By Anna Abram



Photo: ©Susanne Jennings

The Greek word *theologia* (θεολογία), a combination of *theos* (Θεός) meaning 'god' and *logia* (λογία) 'utterances' suggests that theology is an utterance about God or a discourse on God. It seems that this discourse is diminishing, especially in the area of academic theology. Several old and reputable Catholic (and other) theological institutions in the UK had to either close (Heythrop College, University of London, in 2019, after its 403 years of existence; St Benet's Hall, Oxford in 2022), merge, downsize or change the academic profile of their offer. Elsewhere the situation isn't hunky-dory, either. Without a doubt, there is a crisis in theological education. What is the cause of this crisis? There are many causes and they are complex. Though analysing them in detail is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth naming some of the external and internal reasons for the current state of affairs in theological education.

Recruitment to theology degrees (both in the UK and other western countries) is low. In the UK, this is partly because of the decrease in the number of students taking GSSE or A-levels in theology and religious studies (though all schools must offer religious studies at GCSE level, students are under no obligation to study it). Philosophy and ethics have replaced theology in secondary education (in the past, these three areas were part of the same inquiry). Theological

qualifications don't translate easily into exciting careers and high salaries. Theological education is expensive. Theology is often studied for personal fulfilment or to underpin ecclesial, ministerial, vocational or voluntary service. There is a view that a study (of any subject) for its own sake is a luxury or a sign of self-indulgence. Our society doesn't value study for its own sake. For Thomas Aquinas, studiosity was a virtue, an excellence that led to living a flourishing life and was part of the common good. Today, a course of study makes sense if it is sellable, measurable and translatable into skills and prospects of employment. There is also a view that 'theology and its related disciplines are essentially naive, delusional and atavistic' (John Cornwell, *Ethics and Neuroscience*). In November 2023, Professor Marek Migalski from a leading university in Poland (University of Silesia) suggested that theology should be removed from higher education as it is not a proper science. The rector of the university, Professor Ryszard Koziółek in his response to Prof. Migalski defended theology as an unremovable element of humanistic tradition and part of its continuous evolution. In an increasingly marketized and polarised higher education system, with fewer scholarships and bursaries available for theology students, theological education is bound to struggle.

The points outlined above are amongst the most significant external reasons for the current crisis in theological education. There are also internal reasons. Theology is a large field. Even if for centuries, it was the 'queen of the sciences' (the term was introduced in the Middle Ages), the majority of contemporary courses in theology are far removed from what leading world universities offered under 'theology'. Traditionally, any theology programme first offered a solid grounding in philosophy, but this made a theology degree lengthy. Moreover, theology these days is diverse and divided. For example, in the area with which I am most familiar, moral theology, there is a variety of sub-areas such as Catholic ethics, theological ethics, fundamental moral theology, applied moral theology, Catholic Social Ethics, and so on. These are not simply different specialisms, they are often different theological schools. There are other divisions in theology, frequently along the denominational, ideological, and what I call 'preferential' lines. The latter depend on institutional profiles (seminary, higher education college, lay ministry course, etc) or preferences and needs of those in charge of theological training (for example, requirements for ordination or for teachers of religious education).

Another internal reason for this crisis is a creeping anti-intellectualism and related to it, reductionism. Anti-intellectualism expresses itself, for example, in a view that academic theology is not relevant to pastoral ministry. Only a minimal exposure to systematic, dogmatic or moral theology is required. Even religious orders, known for being trailblazers in the market of theological (higher) education, no longer have the same intellectual commitment to and passion for it. Some providers of theological education reduce it to a 'pick and mix' approach or a bite size training which ignores large chunks of theological scholarship and contributes to fragmentation and even antagonization within theology.

The disillusionment with theology is sometimes linked to dissatisfaction with the content of theological education. I need to come clean at this point and admit that my own experience of theological education has been mixed. As an undergraduate student of theology over 35 years ago (in Poland), I found theology difficult and some of the courses too abstract or even boring. It might well be that theology was lost on the 19-year-old me and the six years' programme too long (I managed to complete it in five years). I found philosophy and ethics easier and more exciting (this could be because I had brilliant scholars teaching these subjects). My attitude to

theology changed when I encountered Heythrop College and got immersed in theological thinking that was deeper and less abstract yet without losing the intellectual rigour. I learnt that theology that reduces God to a thing to be grasped is a poor theology. If God is really God, then our inability to grasp God must be at the core of any theological system and method.

So, why bother with theology in the climate in which theological education is no longer a priority and academic theology is considered a soft or weak science or no-science at all? Before addressing this question, let me turn briefly to some of my favourite theologians to see how they view theology. Sarah Coakley suggests that theology is a way of 'learning to speak rightly about God' (<https://youtu.be/DoBqBXHOQs8>). Coakley implies that there are right and wrong ways of speaking about God, inferring that there are good and bad theologies. Nicholas Lash helpfully explains what makes theology bad: 'what is wrong with so much that passes for theology, ancient and modern, is its fundamental irreverence; its habit of using the term God as if it were a pawn, with a clearly defined conceptual content, in a game of intellectual chess' (*His Presence in the World*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005). Rowan Williams speaks of theology as a way of life ('Theology as a way of life' in Laird, M. and Hidden, S.T., *The Practice of the Presence of God: Theology as a Way of Life*, Taylor & Francis, 2016). He expands the standard definition of theology – *faith seeking understanding* – by adding a behavioural dimension. For him, theology is 'faith seeking understanding of the behaviours of faith'. For Williams, theology is a communal activity, done in dialogue and with patience (with oneself as well as others). For John McDade, the behavioural aspect of theology is also important. In his valedictory lecture at Heythrop College, McDade offered the following message: 'I've come to see that the truth of God cannot be thought – it can only be lived'. He went on to explain that it is 'the person and life of Jesus Christ that conveys the truth about God. Jesus does not conceptualise God – he would have made a useless modern German theologian – but he lives out a life so completely dedicated to God and those who need God that he actualises God with us and for us. He is the performative utterance by which the divine irrupts savingly within our time'. The divine irruption in the lives of God's creatures is what Philip Endean SJ emphasises in his paper 'Theology and what matters most: Distinctions, Connections and Confusions' (*New Blackfriars*, 97(2016)). He suggests that what matters most is 'the gracious action of God'. For Endean, both theology and spiritual practice 'in various ways dispose us for the reality that God's grace alone accomplishes'. Endean insists, as does Lash, on the need to 'respect the transcendence of God, the ontological difference between creator and creature'. He explains that we 'may truly say that God acts and creatures act, but the usage here is not univocal, and the relationship between the two is not something we can comprehend'. Janet Soskice in her book *Naming God* (CUP, 2023) makes a similar point about the ontological difference between creator and creature while at the same time emphasising the possibility of intimate relationship between them.

Let me now return to the question, why bother with theology. It is because theology gives space for God. Without such a space we will be doomed to fall even further into a reductionist, technocratic and narcissistic view of the world. Good theology can put us in touch with ultimate meaning and what brings healing and hope to our polarised and bleeding world. Theology can be a platform for addressing what distracts, divides and makes us violent towards each other and pointing to what brings life. It can be a bridge builder. This is what Pope Francis wants from theological education. In his *Motu Proprio* letter 'Ad theologiam promovendam', he is

calling for a paradigm shift in theological education. The shift involves paying proper attention to experience which is always embodied, and it is a source of theological understanding. It involves a serious commitment to building a culture of dialogue (within the Church, with society, ecumenical and interreligious, with those who don't see the world in a theistic way, and with other disciplines). Francis, typically, wants discernment to be part of theological education. In this context, he means discerning reality without running away from controversial and difficult issues. He also wants theological education that carries healing as a response to the 'open wounds of humanity and of creation'. He no longer sees theology as simply an academic pursuit. He wants to link it with the rest of life and other studies. The Margaret Beaufort Institute already does this kind of theology. Pope Francis' statement was received as music to our ears and a heart-warming confirmation that we are on the right track.

So, what is the purpose of theological education today? First, its purpose is to give space to God as *God*. It is to foster fundamental openness to the transcendent (God) by providing space for learning to think rightly and speak reverently about God. It is to connect with the conversation that has been taking place for millennia but to do so in a new dialogical and inclusive way, without the avoidance of disagreements and difficult questions. I increasingly find that people are open to the transcendent but are embarrassed or afraid to talk about it. Sometimes they say that they lack the language, or they find the old-fashioned theology off-putting. Dialogical theological education is meant to accompany people and meet them when they are in their search for ultimate meaning and truth. Secondly, the purpose of theological education today is to foster a way of life that is transformative in every sense (cognitively, affectively, practically) and recognise that any transformation that comes through the process is from God alone. A theology course can plant a seed, but it is God alone who gives the growth. Thirdly, theological education needs to be open to the common good. Christians believe that God is the source of all goodness, beauty and truth. God's character is love. We respond to God by imitating God's character. I agree with Emmanuel Levinas that we relate to God by being moral. Good theological education is moral education, committed to the unrestricted good of humanity and the rest of creation.

The quality of theological education is conditioned by the quality of our openness to the points highlighted above: space for God, sensitivity to the other, fostering of inclusive dialogue, behavioural implications which lead to personal transformation and contribute to the common good. Good theological education is communal (whether it is done in person or online). It creates opportunities for diving deeper, testing our views, refining our positions, conducting self-scrutiny in the light of something greater that we have not created but to which we are called to respond. With this view in mind, an intellectual exploration of the fundamental convictions of the faith, doctrine, history, philosophy, language, human experience and behaviour can be most fulfilling as well as difficult (but then, we have never been promised an easy life). It is unlikely that theology will ever be the queen of the sciences in the way she was but her queenship can be realised differently. She can be a quiet yet confident depolariser or serve as a window. Pope Francis wants theology to be a 'transdisciplinary activity', linking all knowledge in order to become wisdom inspired by God. A huge and exciting task for the next thirty years of the Margaret Beaufort Institute.

The Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology & The Cambridge Theological Federation

By Ian Randall



Photo: ©Susanne Jennings

The Cambridge Theological Education (CTE) began in 1972 with three members – Westcott House and Ridley Hall (both Anglican), and Wesley House (Methodist), to be joined four years later by Westminster College (United Reformed Church). It was in the 1990s that the membership broadened. In the early 1990s, the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology (MBIT) and the East Anglian Ministerial Training Course (EAMTC) both joined, and in the late 1990s, three further members: the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations (later the Woolf Institute), the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies, and the Henry Martyn Centre (later the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide). Only one of these new members – EAMTC, later Eastern Region Ministry Course - was focussed on training ordinands.

Discussions had been taking place for some time about a Roman Catholic presence in the Federation. Sister Pia Buxton, IBVM paved the way to the Conference of Major Superiors (the body of those leading religious orders and congregations of men and women), at that time chaired by Timothy Radcliffe, OP, then Provincial of the Dominicans. He was supportive of what he called 'an improbable idea'. In November 1991, Pia Buxton, Geraldine Hall and Janet Soskice attended the Conference of Superiors and spoke about the proposed new Institute. There was a warm reception. A donation came from the Sisters of Charity of St Paul the Apostle, whose Superior General, Sister Rosa O'Sullivan, became a supporter.

Patrick Moore, as a Roman Catholic on the Westcott House staff, and Chris Moss, Dean of St Edmund's College, Cambridge, met with many General Superiors of international women's religious congregations and orders. A Steering Group was set up comprising Sister Pia, Geraldine Hall, Patrick Moore (Chair), Janet Soskice, Rupert Hoare, Martin Cressey and Amiel Osmaston. In 1992, they recommended the founding of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology for women to take theology courses in the CTE and the University of Cambridge.

These recommendations were approved by the CTF. Chris Moss worked tirelessly to achieve incorporation and charitable registration, with the help of Rosemary Boyle, a lawyer in Cambridge and a Roman Catholic supporter of the project. Much work was done from Lady Margaret House, on Grange Road (the convent of the Canonesses of St Augustine), especially by Deborah Jones.

Susan O'Brien, Head of History at the (then) Anglia Polytechnic University (which became Anglia Ruskin University), and later a Principal of MBIT, was drawn into the Institute's life. Among MBIT Board members were 11 senior members of international women's congregations. A formal launch took place in October 1993 at a packed CTF service at Wesley Church. Janet Soskice preached and Susan O'Brien gave an address. The first 'student', Sister Naomi Turner from Australia, came for a postdoctoral sabbatical.

A major step in 1994 was the appointment of the first Principal, Sister Bridget Tighe, FMDM who was housed in a flat in Wesley House. Sr Bridget had previously managed the establishment of a large health clinic in Jordan and had then, as a mature student, taken the Tripos in Theology at Cambridge followed by an MA in Management at the London School of Tropical Medicine. While MBIT was welcomed warmly by the CTF, some Roman Catholics were suspicious and some even hostile to the idea of a women-only theological enterprise run by lay people but were gradually won over as the Institute's fruits became recognised. A number of highly committed students from the UK and abroad came to MBIT.

There was a focus on raising funds for a permanent home and Janet Lash proved to be a highly effective Chair of Appeal. She and Sister Bridget found a range of supporters. In 1998, from a gift of £25,000, a Development Office was set up. A fund-raising event was hosted at Westminster Cathedral by Cardinal Basil Hume. His support was invaluable. He spoke of MBIT as 'a pioneering enterprise in this country', and said: 'We need the contribution of women with theological formation – we need you and therefore you have all my support.'

MBIT had a significant impact on the life of the Federation. It had a female Principal: thus, the situation changed from four Colleges, each with a male Principal, to there being six, with two Principals being women – the other being the Principal of EAMTC. The Westcott-Wesley 'hub' within the Federation was strengthened: EAMTC was housed in Westcott and MBIT outgrew its initial space in Lady Margaret House and moved to Wesley. This embedded MBIT staff and students in the life of the Federation and gave a reality to ecumenical aspirations.

Those involved in the two new 'Houses' contributed to the wider Federation work. Andrew Todd, Director of Studies and Vice-Principal of EAMTC, served as Federation President. Susan O'Brien became Chair of MBIT and having become Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Anglia University she was important for the development of CTF's academic life. With Cardinal Hume's support, and that of Peter Smith, Bishop of East Anglia, the MBIT leaders took the risk of moving back into Lady Margaret House in 2000, initially as tenants of the Canonesses but with the aim of purchasing the property. They faced the seemingly impossible task of raising the £1.3 million, but this was ultimately achieved. After two decades at Grange Road, MBIT took the decision in 2023 to move again and sold the property to Queen's College. They are currently housed in temporary accommodation at Wesley House where their tradition of hospitality, worship and study continues.

Throughout the two decades at Grange Road, MBIT had several full-time international students in its community. There was co-operation in various ways with other Houses, for example when MBIT hosted the Woolf Institute while the Woolf Institute's new building was being constructed. During this period the integrated work of the pastoral studies team across the Federation, involving (*inter alia*) Jane Leach, Michael Paterson, Mike Booker of Ridley, Anna Rowlands of Westcott, Lance Stone and then Neil Thorogood of Westminster and Oonagh O'Brien of Margaret Beaufort, resulted in innovative work in Practical Theology.

One event in 2009, which was significant for the Federation as well as much more widely, was the celebration of 800 years of the University of Cambridge. A grand Service of Thanksgiving was held in Great St Mary's, at which the preacher was Timothy Radcliffe, OP, an early supporter of MBIT and someone who continued to be supportive of its role within CTF.

In 2018, discussions began between MBIT and Lyn's House, a L'Arche-inspired ministry with friends with learning disabilities, and this led to the Lyn's House community moving to the Lodge in the MBIT grounds. This arrangement has continued under Queens' College. Another partnership on the site was with the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology (KLC). Craig Bartholomew, previously a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Religion and Theology of the University of Gloucestershire, oversaw KLICE becoming the KLC, which, in 2021, became independent of Tyndale House, Cambridge, and moved to the second floor of the Margaret Beaufort Institute. Later KLC moved to another location, Cambridge Mill.

For 50 years, Federation worship has been central to the life of the Federation. The experience of worship offers those from one tradition the experience of other traditions. In worship, each tradition has the opportunity to bring its gifts. In these gifts being received, it is possible to think of an 'exchange' of gifts. This is characteristic of the emphasis on receptive ecumenism in more recent ecumenical thinking. Federation worship is now often led by two Institutions together. The Eastertide Service in 2019 was shared by the Margaret Beaufort Institute and Westfield House and the Week of Prayer Service in 2020 by Margaret Beaufort and The Faraday Institute.

In 2021, six of the twelve CTF Institutions were led by female Principals or Directors. Samantha White, previously the Director of Pastoral Studies at Westminster College, was Westminster Principal, Helen Dawes, whose experience included parish ministry and Social and Public Affairs Adviser to Archbishop Justin Welby, was appointed as Principal of Westcott House in 2020. At the Woolf Institute, Esther-Miriam Wagner became Executive Director in 2021, as well as being a Fellow of St Edmund's College. She took over the Woolf directorship from Ed Kessler, who became Founder President. At Wesley House, Jane Leach remained Principal, as did Cynthia Lumley at Westfield House. Anna Abram, at MBIT, was joined by Sue Price, Director of Pastoral Outreach, for a time as co-principal.

Reflecting on the rich diversity brought together in the Cambridge Theological Federation, Anna Abram wrote about her own sense of gifts being given and received. What she wrote sums up well the important combination of affirmation of particular traditions and openness to the insights of others. It is a combination that has marked the Federation since its beginning. She wrote: 'Our theology, while Roman Catholic, is done in the ecumenical and inter-religious

spirit of the Cambridge Theological Federation and in dialogue with other disciplines. It is this kind of theology that has a future.'



Dr Ian Randall comes originally from the north of Scotland. Following some years working in industry, in human resources, he trained at Regent's Park College in Oxford for Baptist ministry and has had three local church pastorates. For twenty years Ian was a lecturer at Spurgeon's College, London, and at an International Theological Seminary in Prague, teaching church history and spirituality. He has written extensively in these areas. Among his recent books are *A Christian Peace Experiment: The Broekhoff Community in Britain* (2018), *The Cambridge Theological Federation: A Journey in Ecumenical Learning*, with Mary Tanner (2022), and *Georgina Gollock (1861-1940): Pioneering Female Missiologist* (2023). He and his wife Janice live in Cambridge, where he has been a hospital chaplain and is involved in spiritual direction. Ian is a Research Associate of the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide and a Research Fellow of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge.

Faith in Politics Photogallery



Faith in Politics

Margaret Beaufort Association Pearl Anniversary Lecture

By Julie Smith

A revised version of the lecture delivered at St Edmund's College, Cambridge on Thursday 7th December 2023

It is an honour and a pleasure to have been invited to give the Pearl Anniversary Lecture to the Margaret Beaufort Association – and not a little humbling. I am not a theologian. I am not a canon lawyer. I am not an historian working on Lady Margaret. What could I say that so many in the audience would not be able to discuss far more expertly than me, I wondered. Then, as we were approaching Advent, I remembered a conversation I once had with the late, great Sir Michael Quinlan about Advent as a time of preparation. Sir Michael, of whom more later, was a 'Jesuit-educated Catholic' and an 'Oxford-educated Classicist'¹⁰¹ who advised the British government on nuclear strategy in the 1970s and '80s. Despite his deep faith, perhaps surprisingly, he advocated the nuclear deterrent, leading me to reflect on the issue that will form the theme of this lecture: faith in politics. Of course, this title can be understood in a number of ways – intentionally so. Can we have faith in our politicians? Can politicians have faith? Can people of faith be politicians? I shall predominantly focus on the second and third of these questions but will reflect in passing on trust in politicians. I shall also touch on the related but somewhat separate issue of interventions in politics by faith leaders, including Anglican Bishops, the British sovereign as 'Defender of the Faith' and His Holiness the Pope.

Faith in politics can be a sensitive issue. 'We don't do God', Alistair Campbell, former Prime Minister Tony Blair's spin doctor famously announced. Yet, Blair himself very publicly **did** do God. He accompanied his Catholic wife to Mass – and so often to Holy Communion that he had to be asked to desist given that he had not been received into the Catholic Church. Why, then, should he and his advisors have been so sensitive about references to God and faith? For centuries political leaders, just like heads of state, were expected to be people of faith. In the US it remains improbable that an avowed atheist would come to the fore in Presidential elections.

As late as the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher was entirely unafraid to discuss her faith, even if she objected to faith leaders intervening in politics, as I shall discuss later. Yet, just a decade on it appeared that faith and the public realm did not sit well together as the UK became increasingly secular. Alistair Campbell thus seemed to be articulating an emerging maxim for our times: politicians should not discuss their religious beliefs. Indeed, they should not let their (Christian) beliefs shape their political decisions. Yet how can we not? Our values are shaped by many factors, societal, cultural, religious, but to say some should be ignored or ridiculed because the person holding them is a person of faith is not to my mind liberal, tolerant or acceptable.

¹⁰¹ Beatrice Heuser and Paul O'Neill, 'Episode 9: Sir Michael Quinlan and British Nuclear Strategy', RUSI Talking Strategy Podcast, available at: <https://www.rusi.org/podcasts/talking-strategy/episode-9-sir-michael-quinlan-and-british-nuclear-strategy>, accessed on 16th January 2024.

Moreover, if we reject or deny our faith in our decision-making, is there not a danger of loss of integrity? If so, surely there is a risk that people will merely conclude that they should ‘never trust a politician’, a common enough opinion in the modern world. Faith in politicians would, rightly, sink lower than ever. Would you have faith in politicians in such circumstances? In this lecture, I shall consider some of the challenges of having faith or living by faith-based principles in a secular age. My main focus will be on the UK, an unusual polity with an established Church, where state and faith are intimately entwined in large part thanks to the grandson of our patron, Lady Margaret Beaufort.

The legacy of Lady Margaret herself is considerable. She was deeply pious. Her legacy is seen in Catholic Cambridge – she endowed Christ’s and St John’s Colleges. The name of confessor, the Bishop of Rochester John Fisher, now St John Fisher, is immortalised in our University Catholic Chaplaincy: Fisher House. She established the Lady Margaret chairs of Divinity in Cambridge and at Oxford.¹⁰² Yet she was also deeply ambitious for her son, Henry Tudor, and deeply political (Brain 2021; Jones 2011). Her role in British history and the monarchy was as the mother of King Henry VII, a king whose crown came via the sword, even if he owed his lineage to the Lancastrians of whom Margaret was a scion. She was a woman of faith who did not shy away from conflict or political intrigue.

Thanks to her grandson, King Henry VIII, who famously abandoned the Roman Catholic church in order to divorce and remarry, Church and State are interwoven in England, with the sovereign serving also as ‘Defender of the Faith’ and head of the Church of England.¹⁰³ The Archbishops of Canterbury and York, along with up to 24 other Church of England Bishops sit in the House of Lords, reflecting theocratic elements to the British Constitution. Politics and religion are thus inevitably juxtaposed in the UK in ways that would be inconceivable in a country such as France where *laïcité* (the separation of church and state) is itself almost an article of faith. Yet, this intermingling is sometimes the cause of frustration for political leaders – even avowed Christians.

Thus, while Margaret Thatcher was content to quote the words of St Francis of Assisi on the steps of Number 10 upon becoming Prime Minister in 1979, she was quick to berate faith leaders for meddling in politics as she saw it. This particularly arose following riots in my home city of Liverpool. Church leaders made a huge difference at the time – the ecumenism of Archbishop Warlock and Bishop David Sheppard walking along Hope Street with their two cathedrals at each end was powerful. The then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie commissioned a report, *Faith in the City*, which caused frustration in the Tory cabinet, with one member referring to it as ‘pure Marxist theology’ (quoted in the *Church Times* 2013).

¹⁰² The inscription on her tomb in Westminster Abbey, written by Erasmus, is rather beautifully translated as “Margaret of Richmond, mother of Henry VII, grandmother of Henry VIII, who gave a salary to three monks of this convent and founded a grammar school at Wimborne, and to a preacher throughout England, and to two interpreters of Scripture, one at Oxford, the other at Cambridge, where she likewise founded two colleges, one to Christ, and the other to St John, his disciple. Died A.D. 1509, III Kalends of July [29 June].” Source: Westminster Abbey website: <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/margaret-beaufort-countess-of-richmond>, accessed 5th January 2024.

¹⁰³ The four nations of the United Kingdom have differing Church-State relations but one notable aspect of transition of monarch was that as soon as he had been proclaimed King by the Accession Council, Charles III pledged an oath to support the Presbyterian Church of Scotland (Church of Scotland, 2022).

Thatcher herself was also frustrated by Church leaders' attitudes to welfare cuts. Her focus on self-reliance and the need for families and individuals to look after themselves and provide for their own needs sits awkwardly with many Christians' views of society, community, and duty, or indeed to the role of the state. She, rightly, did not feel that charity should be despised as 'cold charity' as she put it. Such reluctance to provide state support, preferring the voluntary sector to play its part was notable, but not unique. Her stance is reflected in the more recent utterances of high-profile Catholic MP Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg, who has talked of the voluntary support given to food banks as 'rather uplifting'.¹⁰⁴

While I pay tribute to those, including in the audience this evening, who play such an important role in Cambridge's food bank, I strongly disagree with Rees-Mogg's thinking, which has been caricatured by sub-editors as implying that it is a good thing to have food banks. Clearly it is better that food banks exist than that people go hungry, and the work of volunteers is truly remarkable. But it should not be necessary. In an affluent society, as the UK remains, people should be able to enjoy the necessities of life without relying on charity. Justice demands this. People need to live in dignity. They should not have to make choices between eating and heating. We have all heard the stories of people asking for food items that do not need to be cooked because they cannot afford the energy bills. This is unacceptable. No matter how laudable the work of the people who run them, foodbanks should be the exception, not some new norm. Society should provide for **everyone**. As Christians in politics, we need to fight for this. I don't believe this makes me a Marxist, though others may disagree.

Given Pope Francis's apparent commitment to at least one aspect of liberation theology, the injunction to 'choose for the poor', I feel I am in good company. Indeed, on many social issues, religious leaders do stray into politics and feel impelled to speak out. The present Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has frequently challenged the government over asylum policy, taking advantage of that strange tribunal: his seat in the House of Lords. His Holiness Pope Francis and the new Defender of the Faith, King Charles III have both spoken passionately about climate change, for instance. This was seen most recently at the United Nations' Conference on Climate Change COP28 meeting in Dubai where both intervened to urge leaders to take action on climate change. Pope Francis's words to COP28¹⁰⁵, as delivered by Cardinal Secretary of State, Pietro Parolin, owing to His Holiness's poor health, were:

'Choose life; choose the future!'

'With God's help, let us emerge from the dark night of wars and environmental devastation.... The future of us all depends on the present that we now choose.'

'The destruction of the environment is an offence against God, a sin that is not only personal but also structural...'

'Are we working for a culture of life or a culture of death?'

¹⁰⁴ 'Jacob Rees-Mogg: Food banks "Rather uplifting"', BBC News, 14th September 2017, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41264965>, accessed 14th January 2024.

¹⁰⁵ 'Pope Francis to COP28: "Choose life, choose the future!"', available at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-12/pope-address-cop28-climate-change-appeal.html>, accessed 3rd December 2023.

The recent change of monarch in the UK has also brought faith into the public realm. Queen Elizabeth II's faith was an integral part of her life but it centred on the private and personal and most of us had no real sense of how her faith may have shaped her world view. King Charles has already shown himself to be committed to the inclusion of all faiths; seen early in his reign in his sensitivity in changing the time of a reception to ensure that the Chief Rabbi could attend prior to Shabbat. He has also been willing to speak of faith in a more direct and, one might say, a more political way. Thus, in his speech to COP28, King Charles III said, 'I pray with all my heart that COP28 will be another critical turning point towards genuine transformational action at a time when, already, as scientists have been warning for so long, we are seeing alarming tipping points being reached.' 'The world is on fire', as Greta Thunberg so passionately told us while still a child, leading a movement committed to fighting climate change.

Are **we** acting appropriately to preserve God's planet and protect future generations? Is that not our duty? These are questions for politicians, for people of faith and, indeed, for all concerned citizens. We may not always have the answers and we may choose not to answer them. Indeed, as politicians, we may even find it difficult publicly to express our faith and be actively discouraged from letting our faith shape our politics. Yet surely that is precisely what motivates us in the first place; the desire to change the world for the better in accordance with our values. However, this often proves harder to achieve in practice.

Perhaps the best way of considering some of the challenges of faith in politics is via the Sixth Commandment: thou shalt not kill.

Such a simple commandment. So apparently unambiguous. After all, there is a general presumption enshrined in law that killing people is wrong. Murder of a human being is illegal in all circumstances. Yet killing someone in self-defence may be legal. And there are numerous other types of case, some apparently resolved in most Western (liberal) democracies, for example the abolition of the death penalty. It would not have been abolished if there had been a referendum, given public opinion at the time, but politicians were willing to take an unpopular decision, to do what they felt was right. There are three other types of killing that I shall consider here: abortion; assisted dying; and war.

Each of these areas related to killing have traditionally been viewed in rather black and white terms. Yet they are viewed differently by society, by the Church and by each of us as individuals. The first two are considered 'issues of conscience' by political parties, meaning that individual representatives, MPs and peers in the British context, can expect to have a free vote on legislation on these matters in parliament. They are deeply complex, necessitating both deep reflection and sound decision-making. The right to life is a fundamental one, yet in recent years questions about the legislation surrounding abortion are often closed down by a blanket argument of a woman's 'right to choose'. The legislation that was brought in by David Steel's 1967 Private Member's Bill was tightly drawn; it was intended to end the horrors of backstreet abortions. When it was introduced, the viability of a foetus was much less than in the 2020s. Thus, there is an argument to look again at term limits, reflecting the realities of modern science, regardless of any more fundamental views on the topic. How can we simultaneously seek to keep alive a much-wanted pre-term baby, yet allow a viable unborn child of the same gestation to be aborted? There is an organisation called 'both lives matter' – perhaps we should be saying 'all three lives' matter. These are ethical questions that need to be addressed

regardless of one's faith. Yet if a politician is known to be a person of faith, perhaps especially a Catholic, there is often a sense that their voice counts less. Some of our fellow parliamentarians or party members seem to assume that we cannot speak objectively, that somehow we are merely rehearsing papal dogma rather than using our own critical faculties. If we want the law to reflect the miracles of modern science, therefore, it is sometimes necessary to look to those who do not have faith – or at least are not known to be religious – to make the case.

There are many parallels with the debates on assisted dying/assisted suicide/euthanasia, three different but inter-related concepts. Here the political debate has not progressed so far; many politicians remain reluctant to legislate in favour of 'assisted dying' and euthanasia is scarcely on the agenda. Here again, there is a sense that the views of politicians of faith should carry less weight. And here again there are some incredibly difficult moral issues to consider. There is a profound danger that modern society treats human life as a commodity. A brief look at the website of the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland shows just how clinical the whole process of death can be made. There are myriad questions to be asked and a danger that a highly emotive debate will lead to unwelcome changes in the law that could have profound impacts for the most vulnerable in society. Inadequate pain relief and insufficient funding for palliative care should not be allowed to fuel the case for assisting dying. Ensuring that someone has access to morphine to relieve their pain is essential – it may also give them the peace they need to pass away, whereas the adrenaline caused by pain may prevent them from dying. Such decisions will always be finely calibrated but they should be medical decisions, informed by years of training, not decisions made by politicians, whose duty it is to look after the most vulnerable.

Turning finally to my political portfolio of defence. Can it ever be right to kill? Can it be right to support our armed forces? Can we justify possessing weapons that cause mass devastation such as nuclear warheads? Pacifists would say not. In an ideal world we would all give up our weapons. Yet in our imperfect world there are causes for which we still need to fight and that may, in extreme cases, mean military conflict. Nuclear weapons fall into a slightly different category, however. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, it was a devout Catholic named Michael Quinlan who advised the Government on nuclear strategy in the late-1970s and '80s. In those days there was a logical argument in favour of retaining nuclear weapons: mutually assured destruction (MAD). This was predicated on that idea that if one state used nuclear weapons, they would face an instant and lethal response. Rational leaders would not be willing to inflict the price of retaliation on their citizens and so would never engage in a first strike. The very presence of nuclear capability was thus believed to have a stabilising effect. When just five states had such weapons and we believed our leaders were rational, perhaps it worked. With proliferation and with questions about the rationality of various leaders, there are renewed questions. In the end, Michael Quinlan revised some of his views on deterrence. At all times, however, he was open to full and frank debate. Such openness and toleration are essential for effective decision-making, but somehow harder to bring about in the 2020s.

These are not idle questions or mere philosophical or ethical puzzles to consider in a vacuum. They are real questions facing politicians in some cases on a daily basis, as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East demonstrate. And they are questions where faith and the secular world can come into conflict.

In conclusion, what does all this have to do with the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology and the Margaret Beaufort Association at the time of its pearl anniversary (and one might add at a time of transition from one physical space to another)? I would suggest that the Institute provides:

- A place for faith
- A space for reflection
- A chance for women especially, though not exclusively, to consider their vocations, their spiritual lives and the possibility of ministry.

Traditional ideas of priesthood and the religious life have altered in the thirty years since the MBIT was established. Lay ministry is now more important than ever.

We need everyone to play their part in helping us all to live a 'good life' in all the myriad meanings that phrase can entail and which would necessitate another lecture series to explore fully. We cannot act in isolation as politicians and the opportunity to engage in reflection is vital for us as it is for all individuals. So, too, is the role of women involved in lay ministry, a key aspect of the foundation of the Institute. Cambridge seems fortunate in having multiple priests in each parish and at the Chaplaincy, not to mention a Catholic Chaplain here at St Edmund's. This is so different, and very blessed, compared with many local parishes and deaneries where churches are closing. With a lack of traditional vocations, (female) lay ministry is vital. And wider engagement with faith and religious education is also crucial. The shared language and norms stemming from a knowledge of the Bible can no longer be assumed in our increasingly secular society. Cultural references drawing on faith may easily now be missed. Yet this is scarcely new. As I was preparing this lecture, I thought I should look again at the *raison d'être* of the MBIT. I turned to the Articles of Association and discovered with interest that first in the list of Founding Patrons, ahead even of the Canonesses of St Augustine to whom we owe so much, were the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. These sisters were founded by St Julie, whose miraculous recovery took place on 1 June 1804 (my birthday is 1st June) and who was canonised on 22 June 1969, the day of my own baptism. Naturally, I looked again at the history of my namesake. It seems that in her work *Mother Julie*, as she was known, recognised the need to educate young French women about the Church, even then, 200 years ago.¹⁰⁶

How much more of a religious and faith vacuum there is today. The cultural and religious norms even of my childhood are now far distant. How important then that Margaret Beaufort's work continues to flourish. Here's to the next thirty years, when we can move from celebrating the miraculous pearl to that hardest of all stones – the diamond.

¹⁰⁶ I have not got my geography wrong, the original foundation was in Amiens, France, where they were known as the Sisters of Notre Dame.

Readings

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Photo by Stepanka Daniela Senkerikova

The Pearl

What precious gems of beauty tell
Through translucent capacity
The pearl proclaims – and no less well –
With lustrous, round opacity.
As in a mirror dark we see
All things beneath the sun,
E'en so, we shall with clarity
Shine forth when heav'n is won.
Yet 'twixt this world and that are set,
In walls bejewel-decked,
Twelve piercèd pearls to show us yet
How earth and heaven are one.

Wisdom's own symbol; gate of delight,
Lead all to kingdoms of peace beyond night.

Laurentia Johns, OSB
1993 and 2023



Thank you!



Photo by Stepanka Daniela Senkerikova