

Le Chéile - 'together' -

an occasional newsletter
of hope for Christianity in Ireland

issued by the Open Christianity Network

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Editorial

*A chairde – friends –
Meetings, and book reviews, make up this issue. The
next issue, with much more, will follow quickly.
Hilary*

A space for exploration

A safe space for all those who wished to explore religious faith from within the Christian tradition as well as in relation to other Faiths and non-faith perspectives – that was what the Northern group of OCN agreed at their August 14 meeting that they were to be. The freedom of members to express doubt was stressed, and the dignity of the person was to be a priority. This was felt to be particularly important in light of the religious antagonism prevalent in Northern Ireland

Sectarianism, and religious and cultural diversity, were themes that were not being discussed at local church level, and there was a lack of serious and informed discussion. There was considerable inter-church dialogue and activity but this was not filtering down to local churches. The 'Alpha' course was perceived to be mainly dealing with prescribed outcomes, a closed form of discussion providing answers to questions that people were not asking. This led to questions of clergy control, and reference was made to Jack Good's book 'The Dishonest Church'. It was suggested that clergy can seriously underestimate the capacity of the pew.

The use of 'journey' as a metaphor for spirituality was discussed - asking questions and receiving ambiguous answers that lead to more searching questions. It was suggested that admitting to uncertainty is when real thinking and personal/communal journeys begin. By definition, we cannot think God in totality nor get our heads around God definitively. There is always the risk of faith in God. Reference was made to the secular spirituality of ecology and TV nature programmes and the obvious interest in the TV programme 'The Monastery' and the reading of Mark's Gospel at the

Edinburgh Festival. Secular spirituality may be a useful discussion topic for a future meeting.

The issue of the role and function of religious education was raised. Do religious studies teachers provide answers that are built into the curriculum? Was any creativity required or desired by educationalists? Again this may be a topic for future in-depth attention.

It was agreed that biblical (Christian and Islamic) fundamentalism was of concern for all present. It was suggested that fundamentalists tended to avoid the Sermon on the Mount. The Bible was not addressed in context. Perhaps fear and repression lay at the heart of fundamentalism – take one card out and the whole pack falls apart? A bridge to fundamentalism may be via dealing with ethical issues. Clearly this is another topic for a future meeting.

The Northern group also met on Monday 23 October, from 4 to 6pm, in Belfast. A report of that meeting will be carried in the next issue of this newsletter.

Dublin group

The Dublin group met on Saturday October 28. News of that in the next issue of Le Chéile.

A meeting in Cork -

The Cork group of Open Christianity met on Saturday October 21, from 2 to 4pm, at St Anne's, Shandon, in Cork. Perhaps because of fierce bad weather, the turnout was small.

The group discussed Richard Holloway's four perceived approaches to religion in the twenty-first century. It also considered which current book members might read and discuss. Suggestions included Peter Rollins' 'How (Not) to Speak of God', Adrian B. Smith's 'Tomorrow's Christian', Marcus Borg's 'Heart of Christianity', Jack Good's 'Dishonest Church', and Brian C. Taylor's 'Setting the Gospel Free'.

The next meeting of OCN-Cork will be in Kinsale on Wednesday December 6, from 3 to 5pm. For directions, please contact Hilary on 028 28263 or hilary.wakeman@googlemail.com.

- and perhaps one in Limerick?

Discussions are underway about the possibility of a Limerick group of the Open Christianity Network. Anyone who receives this newsletter and is within travelling distance of Limerick is asked to get in touch with the editor as soon as possible.

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Book reviews

Chaos Theory by Sjoerd L. Bonting (Novalis, 14.50 euro)

'IN the beginning, when God created the heaven and the earth ...'. The opening chapters of Genesis are often portrayed nowadays as a battleground in some ongoing war between religion and science, seen at its most unedifying in the recent attempts in the US to block the teaching of evolutionary biology in schools and colleges. But for those of us who think the engagement should be less of a battle and more of a mutually enriching debate, Genesis is fertile territory indeed.

Can evolution, the Big Bang and the Christian doctrine of a Creator God exist happily side by side? Many scientist-theologians, from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin through Wolfhart Pannenberg to John Polkinghorne, have insisted that they can – and Sjoerd L. Bonting, a former professor of biochemistry turned Anglican clergyman, has developed his own take on Creation theology which he calls 'chaos theology'.

In the beginning, according to Bonting, there was a 'formless void'. Rather than God pulling the universe out of a hat in six days flat, we should think of God beginning a process of ordering the chaos – a process which continues right up to the present day.

Bonting's suggestion has several appealing aspects. It offers a new way of thinking about evolution and cosmology. It's happy to accept the mystery of Creation that Genesis celebrates with such panache. (Science, as Bonting points out, also accepts an initial mystery: Big Bang theories begin, not at the moment of the bang itself, but one ten million trillion trillion trillionths of a second afterwards.) Chaos theology also offers an intriguing take on a problem that has bedevilled theologians for centuries – namely, if God created everything, why did He create the bad stuff? Because, Bonting answers, God didn't create it. It was always there, and it erupts every now and again in the form of disease, natural disaster and so forth.

Chaos Theology is a short book, and a lively one. Because it's so short, however, scientific concepts are occasionally left wriggling around in a sort of critical quantum vacuum – chaos theory and entropy, to take just two examples, aren't properly pinned down. At times Bonting ventures perilously close to the old heresies of Gnosticism and Manicheanism; and while his commentary on the Genesis texts is engaging and informed, it's nothing like as impressive as the work of the Genesis expert Claus Westermann.

Nevertheless he has some intriguing new things to say on a perennially interesting topic, and a healthy respect for both religion and science. And for those of us who believe Creation theology is too valuable to be left to extremists and Creationists, that's not a bad place to begin.

Arminia Wallace

How (Not) to Speak of God, by Peter Rollins (SPCK, 2006, 16.90 euro)

Marx and Freud and Nietzsche changed the way the world thought about itself in the twentieth century. Christianity, at least in its Western form, reacted in two different ways, Peter Rollins says. The majority shut their ears and ran back to primitive understandings of religion. Others, fewer but deeply influential, decided they must bite the bullet and forge a new Christianity, based simply on the ethical teachings of Jesus and discarding the idea of 'God'. Both ways, in effect, give up on a meaningful faith.

If the Western Church is to prosper in the twenty-first century, Rollins is saying, it needs to re-engage with the ancient language of the mystical approach to God. This lost language is 'among the most stunning, sophisticated and simple ways of approaching faith'. Faith cannot be reduced to a regular visit to a religious building or the mechanical recitation of prayers. The real experience of faith is of being engulfed by a luminous transcendence. In it we move from speaking *of* God to 'being the place where God speaks'.

Christianity is not to be described but experienced. This path goes beyond individual religious traditions, replacing 'my truth' with a sense of being seduced and transformed by truth. And so it is truly ecumenical. The churches should not be attempting to give people food but the aroma which will draw them to food; not answers but a sacred space for exploration. Religious doubt is not a threatening darkness but an intimate darkness.

Peter Rollins is a lecturer in philosophy and the founder and leader of the Belfast faith community known as Ikon. The second half of this important book contains descriptions of several worship sessions organised by Ikon and usually held in a 'dilapidated, nondescript' Belfast bar.

Hilary Wakeman

Quote

What I love about the Talmud is that, when it comes to ideas, it is full of fancies and contradictions and alternatives and no one thought to say, 'You gotta believe this.' They just set out their wares for different humans of different levels of intelligence and understanding to pick. Sure there were certain ideas they regarded as absolutely essential to the religious experience, the idea of a Divine Force, the idea of spirit and soul and continuity and, of course, Revelation. But they did leave the actual way you came to understand these ideas, the actual thought process, up to you, without feeling the need to specify.

Jeremy Rosen

(From a weekly mailing sent out by Rabbi Jeremy Rosen, available from jeremy@jeremyrosen.com)
