

Le Chéile - 'together' -

an occasional newsletter
of hope for Christianity in Ireland

Now issued by the Open Christianity Network

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Issue no. 29
20. Sept. 06

Editorial

A chairde – friends –

This is an unusually brief issue of the Le Chéile newsletter, but it seemed good to get it out while Richard Holloway's excellent talk is still fresh in our minds, and before the regional groups – three, so far – have their next meetings.

One of the things that the steering group discussed after the bishop's talk was who should be invited to speak next. One or two internationally-known writers were mentioned, but we also felt we should be hearing from people here in Ireland too. And that they should be from a range of different Christian traditions and denominations. Who would *you* like to hear? We would be very grateful for suggestions and recommendations.

Shalom, Salaam, Peace.

Hilary

A meeting in Cork -

The Cork group of Open Christianity will be meeting next on Saturday October 21, from 2.00 to 4.00pm, at St Anne's, Shandon (home of the famous Shandon bells!). People on the OCN-Cork mailing list will get full details nearer the time. To put your name on that mailing list, please contact the editor of this newsletter.

- and a meeting in Belfast

The next meeting of the Northern Group of the Open Christianity Network will be on Monday 23 October, from 4.00 to 6.00 pm. It will be held at Grosvenor House, 5 Glengall Street, Belfast (beside the Great Victoria Street train and bus station).

Other places?

We are beginning to gather names of people in Galway, and Limerick, and also Wexford/Waterford. So groups in those places should soon be possible.

'Shaking the Kaleidoscope': Richard Holloway speaks in Dublin

Nearly one hundred people found their way out to Dundrum in Dublin to hear Richard Holloway talk about where he thinks religion is at in the twenty-first century. The Open Christianity Network, which organised the meeting, was very grateful for the use of Taney Parish Centre, an excellent meeting place, and for the fact that September 16 was a beautiful sunny day.

Richard Holloway, as well as being the former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and writer and broadcaster and chair of many influential committees, is a first rate communicator. His lecture defining the current state of Christianity was lively, humane and amusing, and seriously thought-expanding.

Unlike scientific understanding, he said, religious understanding continues to use layers of different ways, old ways, of looking at reality. So a 'traditionalist' is a person living now, who chooses to live – as far as their religion is concerned – in the past. What he calls 'strong' religion, which some call fundamentalism, asserts vigorously the old ways of belief. On the other hand there is the sort of religion which tries to blend the best of tradition with the best of today's thinking. It is 'listening to two tunes.' So he calls it 'weak' religion, in the sense that it cannot give a firm Yes or No. Its future is therefore threatened.

As well as 'weak' and 'strong', he identified a third strand, that of post-Christian Christianity. These are the people who are 'practising but unbelieving Christians'. For them Christianity is an art form, 'a glorious thing', and artists are the priests of their generation. This group, the bishop said, should not be put off by the Church.

The fourth strand was the truly secular people, those with apparently not a single 'religious gene' in their bodies.

How are we to respond to the reality of these groups? Dr Holloway gave three suggestions. The first was magnanimity. Not mere tolerance of other ways, but an 'ecumenics of magnanimity', actually celebrating our differences. Secondly, he said, we need to be radically honest with ourselves, not pretending to things we no longer believe, but befriending the uncertainty within. And thirdly we need the thing that nearly all religions claim: love.

A lively discussion session followed the lecture, and many waited to talk with the speaker afterwards.

A further account of Richard Holloway's thinking can be found in the article below, which was published in the Irish Times a few days before the meeting. But the best way now of engaging with the bishop's very creative mind would be to read one or more of the twenty-plus books he has written.

What Next for Christianity in Ireland?

Rite & Reason column, Irish Times, 11 September 2006

What is going on in the churches in Ireland? What is happening in the parishes? Does anyone really know? Is Christianity slowly dwindling away, or is it

moving into recovery mode after a few bad years? Or are the numbers of churchgoers actually increasing, as some have claimed?

We don't do much in the way of surveys in Ireland, so it is difficult to know the answer. A young boy from Dublin came into a Church of Ireland service in the rural West recently and asked 'Is it usually this empty?' His home church is so full every Sunday that the number of services have had to be doubled. But which church gives the truer picture of the state of Irish Anglicanism in the twenty-first century?

A year or two ago we were hearing that the abuse scandals in the Catholic Church in Ireland were causing thousands to drop away from the faith. In a rare survey, conducted last year by Milltown Brown IMS, we learnt that almost two-thirds of Catholics had lost their trust in the clergy. The Archbishop of Dublin has said that in many city congregations there were no young people at all between the ages of sixteen and thirty-six. And with almost half of the 16,000 Catholic clergy now aged between fifty and seventy, and only nineteen ordinations last year, dioceses are beginning to think of amalgamating parishes.

Richard Holloway, former Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh, says he has given up trying to prophesy what will happen to Christianity. He sees religion currently as being in four strands. The first is what some people call fundamentalism, but he prefers to call 'strong' religion: the sort of faith that insulates itself from the world and goes on asserting the old ways and beliefs. It is easy to see its attractiveness in an insecure world. The second he calls, without being derogatory, 'weak' religion, perhaps typified by the Anglican Church, which has tried to adapt its theology and spirituality to be sensitive to what is happening in society. It wants to be loyal to its religious tradition while taking account of current thinking about such things as equality, structures, science. The third group is the people who have moved from 'weak' religion to post-religion. Unable to buy the whole doctrinal package, they hold to the best of the religious tradition, in music and art and worship. They are practising but non-believing Christians. And finally there are those who find all talk of God bewilderingly absurd: these are the truly secular.

'Strong' religion will probably continue to flourish, he thinks, letting Christianity in for a difficult time. What will become of the second and third groups he doesn't know. The Pope, who he thinks is a wise man, talks of battening down the hatches and weathering the storm. Holloway, who is the former Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, disagrees.

'I would rather enter into dialogue with the world – because we are all in the world. Personally I welcome the excitement of all this. If humanity survives, religion could be the means of us all living in peace with one another – even though it isn't doing that at present.'

The Open Christianity Network, which has invited Richard Holloway to speak, is made up mostly of people from the second and third groups. The purpose of its meetings in Dublin, Cork, and the North is to provide spaces where ideas about faith and tradition and about

church structures can be freely and confidentially explored with others, without leadership.

What Richard Holloway finds most worrying about the current state of Christianity is its leaders. 'They get into a kind of institutional ethic. There are people who like institutions. They set them up, they run them. But what happens to the main vision? The people in charge of the institutions are mechanics. They lose sight of what the journey is for, and all they care about is preserving the vehicle. The world-wide Anglican Church, in its difficulties over homosexuality, is obsessed with preserving the vehicle. But it would no longer pass the NCT. Maybe we need a new method of transportation.'

'The biggest joy in the present state of things is the appetite in good human beings for non-institutional spirituality – they have been called "devout sceptics".' He is currently doing a television programme about art and religion, and is fascinated by the effect on the very secular crew of great works of art. 'I am not talking religion at them, but they are picking up a sense of Otherness.' Institutional religion, he adds, has no monopoly on human beings.

Hilary Wakeman

'Becoming Divine in the Feminine'

A special seminar, led by Luce Irigaray, Director of Research in Philosophy, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris.

Sponsored by the Institute for Feminism and Religion

'How to pursue our human becoming? How, in particular, to take into account the feminine journey towards the divine? What changes, in the wording and the interpretation of the doctrine, are necessary? And what changes in the practices? How to reach such a new stage without destroying our past tradition or stopping with criticism?'

- Luce Irigaray

Professor Luce Irigaray is probably the most important feminist philosopher of religion in the world, and the Institute for Feminism and Religion has been extremely honoured by her willingness to offer a seminar in Trinity College on October 8th. Places will be limited, so book yours now if you wish to come.

Sunday, October 8, 2-6pm, at the Dance Studio, Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College Dublin

Fee: €25; Concessions €15.

Advance registration advisable. Contact the Institute for Feminism and Religion, c/o Kitty Stafford, Donard Cottage, Donard, Co. Wicklow.

Book recommendation:

How (Not) to Speak of God, by Peter Rollins. SPCK, 2006
Belfast philosopher talks about the 'emerging church', and his own experience of it in the North. Gripping. Full review in next issue of this newsletter.

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