

MY FAVOURITE



HERETIC

**Free to
Believe**

BRIEFING

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*The PDF version of Briefing can be downloaded
from the Free To Believe website
<http://www.freetobelieve.org.uk>*

Also on the website:

*Free to Believe responds to the imminent threat of closure
to the Windermere Centre*

*The URC's response to the ecumenical statement on Justification
thoroughly trashed by Free to Believe Chair Martin Camroux*

MY FAVOURITE



Most of the opinions expressed in Briefing over the years would probably have been considered heresy at some time in the past. Reacting to heresies is one of the important ways religious thinking develops. We invited people to submit short pieces on their favourite heretic — here are five.

Ebion, the fictional heretic

Steve Tomkins

My favourite heretic in Christian history is a man called Ebion. He never existed, but had interesting and revealing reasons for not doing so.

The movement he founded, the Ebionites, did exist. It was one of the earliest Christian heresies – necessarily so because it involved staying closer and truer to the Jewish roots of Christianity, in many ways, than the mainstream church did.

The Ebionites were largely Jewish and remained attached to Jerusalem while the mainstream church spread throughout the Roman Empire. St Irenaeus, the exiled bishop of Lyons and leading polemicist against heresies in the second century, wrote about them that they understood the scriptures “in a peculiar way: they practice circumcision, continue to observe the customs commanded by the law, and in their Jewish way of life even venerate Jerusalem as the house of God”.

In other words they were so wilfully misguided as to practice the faith of Jesus and the first Christians, even after the church had reworked it to adapt to the non-Jewish world.

They had what looks to modern eyes like a more common sense idea of who Jesus was. They denied the virgin birth and the deity of Christ. Instead, Jesus was the messiah sent by God, and a prophet who had the spirit of God, but he was the human son of Mary and Joseph, not God himself in human form.



Epiphanius of Salamis' book the Panarion is the main source of information regarding the Gospel of the Ebionites.

The Ebionites were vegetarians, and believed that Jesus was too. In one of the very few fragments of their gospel to have survived, John the Baptist, instead of eating locusts and wild honey, eats cakes and honey. A subtle difference in Greek (locust akris, cake enkris), but quite a shift in the image of the wild man of the desert.

The Ebionite gospel seems to have been a modified compilation of the familiar gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, ignoring the later John, with its more elevated and mystical ideas of who Jesus was. They also rejected all the writings of Paul from their New Testament, a stance that more than a few Christians today would have some sneaking sympathy for.

So what about Ebion? His non-existence is the perfect illustration of how the mainstream church failed to understand the Ebionites, and with them their own roots.

Writers dismissing the Ebionites started around 200 CE to assume that if there were Ebionites there must have been an Ebion, and they countered his errors. Within a century he had acquired a birthplace and rudimentary life story, and eventually even quotations from this heretical writings turned up.

The fact is that “the Ebionites” simply meant “the poor”, it’s the Hebrew word *evyonim*. It’s how Jesus described his disciples, how the first church in Jerusalem described itself, and how St Paul described it too.

The misunderstanding shows how over a few centuries the early church lost touch with its Jewish roots. It was already, by 200, failing to understand the language and the traditions of the people into which it was born. A hundred years later, while the church was imagining Ebion being born in Jordan and taking missionary journeys across Asia Minor to Rome, it also started imagining it was a reasonable idea to forbid Christians to eat with Jews. It increasingly reinterpreted its own teachings to make them fit into a Platonic rather than Hebrew worldview.

Christianity began as a heretical Jewish sect, went on to move heaven and perhaps even earth to allow non-Jews to join, and was then taken over by non-Jews determined to turn Jewish tradition into a sub-Christian sectarian heresy.

Ebion’s version of Christianity probably never had what it takes to become the world faith that the mainstream version became. It was more exclusive and legalistic, and lacked the mind-boggling Christological metaphysics that the ancient world seemed to find so compelling. (Though that said it sounds not unlike Islam in all those respects.) But if Ebion had beat Irenaeus in the contest to become the religion of the Roman world, we would at least presumably have been spared the relentless savage abuse of the Jewish people which has characterised most of church history, which seems like a fair exchange.

*Steve Tomkins is Editor of Reform
This article previously appeared in the Guardian*

William Sloane Coffin

Martin Camroux

I remember the first time I went to Riverside. I knew it as the Church built for Harry Emerson Fosdick. But I wasn't expecting the vast Gothic building or the seemingly endless procession of choir and clergy which marked the beginning of the service. And I knew nothing about William Sloane Coffin.

Coffin's background was extraordinary. He was born into the old New England elite. There was the Penthouse apartment on the Upper East Side, the Swiss Governess, the chauffeur, the housemaids. Later it was a boarding school modelled on an English public school where he played a comic lead in the school production of Gilbert and Sullivan. In the Second World War he served in the army and then in the CIA where he trained agents to go and work behind the Iron Curtain.

What happened next was unlikely. Something was going on in Coffin – he was asking questions to which, it seemed to him, only religion was capable of giving answers. He went to Union Theological Seminary, became a Presbyterian minister and chaplain to Yale University. When the Civil Rights Movement began it seemed to him a moment for decisive action. He organised coach-loads of students, freedom riders, to go south to be part of the sit-in and marches. In Montgomery he was arrested and put in gaol.

Then came the Vietnam War. When students at Yale burnt their draft cards Coffin supported and spoke for them. As a result, along with Dr Spock the baby expert, he was arrested and put on trial for “conspiracy to counsel, aid and abet draft resistance.” He was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison but the verdict was overturned on appeal.

After Yale Coffin was called to be minister of Riverside Church in New York, which he made once more the most important mainstream Church in America. Coffin started a strong nuclear disarmament program at Riverside. Broadening his reach to an international audience, he met with numerous world leaders and travelled abroad. His visits included going to Iran to perform Christmas services for hostages being held in the U.S.

embassy during the Iran hostage crisis in 1979 and to Nicaragua to protest U.S. military intervention there. Meanwhile, week by week at Riverside he preached stirring and powerful sermons to large congregations. For Coffin, there was no separation of things, no realm where one's deepest beliefs could or should be set aside or "managed" in some other way than openly, and honestly, and with the highest integrity. In the pulpit, on the street, in conversation, in every action, an important consistency played through, and I believe its core was captured in this simple quote by Coffin: "Many of us are eager to respond to injustice, as long as we can do so without having to confront the causes of it."

The source of Coffin's strength rose from the bedrock of his liberal Christian faith. Coffin preached that reason and tolerance were critical elements of an authentic and vibrant spiritual life, but more than that, at the very root of the true Christian spirit was always and forever a fundamental belief in the transforming power of love and the absolute necessity of forgiveness and humility. For example, he said, "Intolerance in theology leads to intolerance in behaviour... Love is the hitching post. If we get that wrong, we're in real trouble". He was absolutely never afraid to speak his mind.



Lots of hope!
Bill Coffin

"In contrast to many a preacher today, Jesus knew that "Love your enemies" didn't mean "Don't make any".

"Most Church boats don't want to be rocked; they prefer to lie at anchor rather than go places in stormy seas"

"For Christians, the problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that condemn it, but how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ."

"President Bush rightly spoke of an "axis of evil," but it is not Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Here is a more likely trio calling for Herculean efforts to defeat: environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world

awash with weapons”.

Behind the social activism was a deep personal faith. When his son Alex died after an accident in Boston Harbour his sermon at Riverside was one of the most powerful I have ever heard. “So I shall - so let us all - seek consolation in that love which never dies, and find peace in the dazzling grace that always is”. We need more Bill Coffins.

Martin Camroux is Chair of Free to Believe

George Fox

Lindsey Ilsley

Three radical separatist brothers, Walter, Thomas and Bartholomew Legate, preached and died during the first decade of the seventeenth century. James I, an enthusiast of theological debate, was intrigued by the notion of faith without ordinances, that needed no steeple house and was expressed through unorthodox worship. James requested audience with Bartholomew but the anti-trinitarian views Legate espoused in his conversations with the King forged a deep dispute between them and Bartholomew was, in 1612, tried and burned for his heretical beliefs. Thomas is thought to have died in Newgate, serving penance for the preaching of his convictions.

Legatine-Arians, followers of the ideals preached by the brothers three, did not diminish but persisted, riding a wave of non-calvinistic puritanism largely imported from Holland and Germany, where religious dissent was tolerated and flourished. Non denominational and clustered into localities this band of informal believers existed without clergy and creed and became known among themselves as ‘Seekers’.

Forty years later, on the rocky pulpit of Firbank Fell, Cumbria, a man named George Fox addressed a sizeable assembly of Seekers. Fox had lately come from the summit of Pendle Hill where he’d experienced a vision of many souls coming to God. Enthused by the word of the Lord, Fox stood brave and inspired before the crowd at Firbank Fell and spoke the truth of his heart “I declared the everlasting truth of the Lord and the word of life for several hours... Christ Jesus was come to teach his

people himself and to bring them off all the world's ways and teachers to Christ their way to God... to bring them off the temples made with hands that they might know they were the temples of God: and never a priest had power to open his mouth..."

The fervour of Fox's preaching turned many radicals into followers of his Religious Society of Friends, 'Quakers' but the price for heresy was high, "one priest... Camelford was in such a rage and such a fret...he had no patience to hear but stirred up the rude multitude and they ... hauled me out and struck me and punched me... threw me headlong over a stone wall" . Threats upon his life were not uncommon "there comes a man with a pistol...he called for me... he snapped his pistol at me but it would not go off..."

Fox, James Nayler and other early Friends were regularly subjected to whippings and 'rough musicking' - being dragged through the streets as an act of cruelty and humiliation .

The latter half of the c.17th saw Quakerism become synonymous with popular beliefs of dangerous radicalism and erroneously affiliated, through nothing more than fear of heterodoxy, with dreaded Popery. Laws limited and prevented Quaker activity and assizes summarily

exiled any Quaker who refused to pay tithes. Fox's Quakers, undaunted, grew stronger, organising for practical redress, holding 'Meeting for Sufferings' to aid imprisoned Quakers and to reduce tithable burden .

It was an insecure period of puritanical rule that admitted the fallibility of the Church, yet insisted it was to be ministered solely by God's chosen persons .

Fox preached on, asking that Friends minister directly, as "children of the Light... with the spirit of Truth" flowing from that of God within,



“...do that which is Just, Equal and Righteous... and speak and do that which is True, Just and Right in all things; that so your Conversations, Lives, Practices and Tongues, may preach to all People, and answer the Good, Just and Righteous Principle of God in them all.”

Fox was a prominent heretic of his time and, building upon the legacy of the Legatine-Arians, emboldened others to join him in his heresy. Unity and Truth were their radical acts in a time of division and deception. As England's King and Parliament battled for sovereignty Fox sought to bring the people back to God, their supreme ruler. Fox and his followers met great hardship but acknowledged a higher truth, that it is through such trials the human spirit can be brought closer still to God

“...the Lord answered that it was needful I should have a sense of all conditions, how else should I speak to all conditions; and in this I saw the infinite love of God. I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that also I saw the infinite love of God.”

*Lindsey Ilsley is a member of the Religious Society of Friends,
Britain Yearly Meeting*

Origen Of Alexandria

Marian Tomlinson

Origen who? If that's your reaction on seeing this title it just shows what an excellent job the western Catholic Church has done in obliterating the memory of this 'heretic'. The irony of this condemnation is that he was not anathematized in his lifetime (c.185 – c.251). That did not happen until the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 553. He was condemned then for being a 'Subordinationist', which most people had been in his lifetime. Jesus himself seems to have been one too, i.e. he did not believe that the Father was co-equal with the Son. To have condemned him 300 years after his death was about as unjust as would be damning John Milton for not believing in Darwin's theory of evolution. So Origen's other great works had to be suppressed and forgotten because of this reinterpretation of history.

Why should a 21st century granny admire a man of whom she can have no human knowledge, who famously made himself a eunuch for the 'sake of the

kingdom of heaven, an heroic, but in her view entirely misguided, act of asceticism? He would have had no time for her, first as a woman, then as a Christian who had not given herself fully to the holy life, scholarship or martyrdom. He was a totally committed religious enthusiast. I can admire that in other people but not aspire to it.



Whilst Origen was highly esteemed by his contemporaries, he was not without his critics for his views in his own lifetime. Most notably he fell out with the Bishop of Alexandria, Demetrius. It is likely that the efficient administrator was jealous of Origen for his superior intellect and his ability to get on with the pagan intellectuals of Alexandria. One of Origen's aims had been to show that Christianity was intellectually respectable and did not merely appeal to women, the lower classes and the stupid. There must have been many a heretic who was hated by the Church establishment for being 'too clever by half'.

Hostility from his bishop caused Origen to move away from Alexandria and he spent a considerable time in Caesarea, where he met Jewish scholars. There he produced a massive body of biblical work, most notably the six column Hexapla which set out different versions of the Old Testament in six parallel columns. Although scribes would have done the donkey-work of writing, this was still a huge undertaking. Origen did not rate highly the literal interpretation of a text. While it might yield a surface meaning, the deeper meaning was to be found at another level. He looked for its mystical meaning. Whilst we might find his interpretation convoluted and unconvincing, it shows that a challenge to literalism came much earlier than the 19th century. At Caesarea Origen found a much more supportive bishop, Theoctistus, who allowed him to preach and expound scripture. Later he ordained Origen to the presbyterate, which met with disapproval because of Origen's physical mutilation.

I admire him for his scholarship, his eschewing of literalism, his commitment to biblical study and his determination to accommodate Christianity to the

philosophical views of his time. I like his typically eastern view that God is unknowable and cannot be pinned down by human definitions, whether they be cold creeds or jejune claims that God is one's best friend. I am humbled by his courage; he had been prepared to rush out and die as a martyr in the Severan persecution and was only stopped by his mother hiding his clothes. He eventually lost his life in the Decian persecution in about 251.

The belief of Origen's I most admire is his view that even the devil himself might one day be saved. This was not a frivolous joke on his part, (I imagine he didn't go in for jokes) but arose from a serious contemplation of what it might mean for a soul to be damned everlastingly. The doctrine of eternal damnation has been the most damaging and wicked teaching of the Church, appealing to sick minds. Just imagine what might have been the subsequent history of the Church if this idea had caught on earlier, a Christianity without fear and neuroses. I'd have happily sacrificed all the great Last Judgments on church walls, even Michelangelo's, for a more humane faith.

Lloyd Geering

Adrian Skelton

My favourite heretic – now that I am a New Zealand Permanent Resident – is, of course, the Revd Professor Sir Lloyd Geering: 98 years old, still a Presbyterian Minister in Good Standing. Yet, 49 years ago, he was on trial for 'heresy' at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.

A comprehensive book by the Revd Dr. Jim Veitch on the "Geering crisis" will appear next year, in time for a colloquium to mark the anniversary, to be held at St Andrew's-on-the-Terrace in Wellington, one of the few liberal bastions of the Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa.

Eleven years ago, Lloyd appeared to a wider audience through the *Living the Questions* DVD study materials. I had no idea then that I would ever meet him, much less share with him at annual *Sea of Faith* conferences in New Zealand.

Lloyd was a reluctant heretic; like other academics (notably the late David Jenkins) he was a victim of the gulf between academic theology and the conservative beliefs of lay people in the pews. Precisely like Bishop

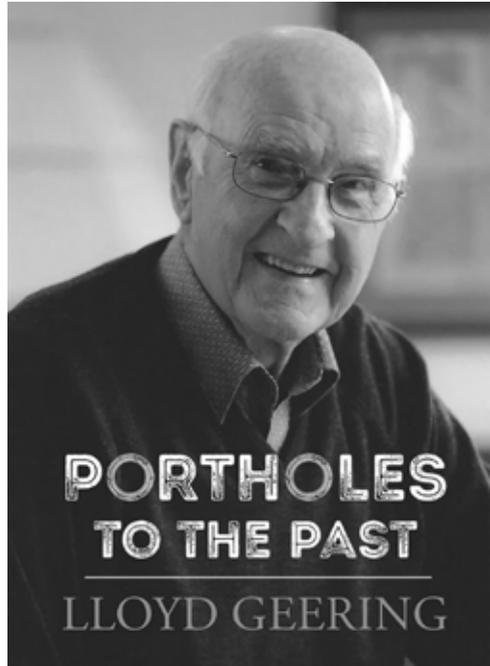
Jenkins, Professor Geering was almost tripped up by a comment on the non-physicality of Jesus' resurrection. The bodily-ness of the resurrection was the subject of debate at the 1966 General Assembly, which was only resolved by the acceptance of an ambiguous statement, couched in traditional language, to which most could assent.

In 1967, however, it was doubt cast upon the immortality of the soul that was the cause of renewed controversy. In a sermon connecting secular culture to the Book of Ecclesiastes, Lloyd stated approvingly the finding of modern science that 'Man has no immortal soul'. When this was quoted as a newspaper headline, it appeared to shock many lay people in the Church. Bob Wardlaw, of the Association of Presbyterian Laymen, called for Geering's immediate resignation or dismissal.

At that time, Lloyd was Principal of the Theological Hall in Dunedin, so there was particular concern that he might corrupt the minds of ordinands! Lloyd was charged with "doctrinal error" and "disturbing the peace and unity of the (Presbyterian) church": that is, heresy.

Doctrines as such were largely and strangely ignored in the debate. Instead, there was considerable concern to avoid a split in the church. At that time there was a significant 'liberal' majority among New Zealand Presbyterian ministers. In November 2016, the situation is much reversed: the forthcoming General Assembly in Dunedin is set to ratify such matters as forbidding Presbyterian ministers from conducting (otherwise) legal marriages between same-sex partners.

Lloyd began his academic career as a hard-working and conscientious



scholar of the Hebrew Bible. He was propelled into the limelight by the events of 1966 and 1967. He has gone on to be a world figure in progressive theology: a Westar scholar and a member of the Jesus Seminar.

His books include,

Christianity without God (2002). ISBN 0-944344-92-5

Wrestling with God: The Story of My Life (2006). ISBN 1-877242-36-5

Such Is Life!: A Close Encounter With Ecclesiastes (2010). ISBN 1-59815-023-5

From the Big Bang to God: Our Awe-Inspiring Journey of Evolution (2013). ISBN 978-1-59815-139-8. Ebook ISBN 978-1-59815-140-4

Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic (2014). ISBN 978-1-59815-156-5

We are left with the glaring paradox. Sir Lloyd Geering is rejected by many in the Church for his progressive views, but celebrated by New Zealanders more widely. This Presbyterian minister, tried for heresy in November 1967, was appointed, in 2007, a member of the Order of New Zealand – an order restricted to only 20 living New Zealanders – including Kiri te Kanawa, Helen Clark, and Richie McCaw!

The career of Lloyd Geering bears considerable comparison to his friend, Don Cupitt. Lloyd founded the *Sea of Faith* Network, mirroring that of the UK *Sea of Faith*. He is a living heretic who remains open to, supportive of, and treasured by the many New Zealanders, within and without the Church, whom he has helped to a ‘saving’, non-orthodox understanding of faith.

Adrian Skelton is Executive Officer of the Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand (adrian.skelton@gmail.com)

SAVE THE DATE!

*The next Free to Believe national conference will be held
from 8th to 10th November 2018.*

Building on the successful joint event in Birmingham in May 2016 (with CRC, Modern Church and PCN), Diana Butler Bass has agreed to join us as our main speaker. The book she is currently working on will have been published in the Spring of that year. Diana has a useful website if you want to find out more, but the titles of her books might help to whet your appetite: *'Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution'* (2016); *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (2012); *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (2009); *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (2006); *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (2004); *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship* (2004); *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community* (2002).

Helping to ground our reflections with Diana, Trevor Dennis has agreed to interlace his engaging Bible Studies through our time together. We are sure many of you will already have attended events where Trevor has led Bible Study or have read some of his books, or used/heard some of his material in worship! We have certainly made them available at our previous events, through strong recommendations.

There will be the usual time to reflect together over meals and a group session, some time to ourselves, and we promise to seek copyright on a few hymns in good time!

Venue: The Hayes, Swanwick, Derbyshire

Price: to be confirmed! (but we will, of course, be keeping that to an absolute minimum as usual – and we have asked for a small number of non-en-suite rooms to allow those who wish to help their budget)



10 days in the life...

As promised in the last edition of Briefing, an edited summary of the fourth and final speaker at this year's Cutting Edge Faith conference, Baron Griffiths of Burry Port

Leslie Griffiths treated his audience to a privileged peek into the kaleidoscopic existence of an ecclesiastical A-lister. Throwing off ideas, wit and wisdom like sparks from a firework, he took as his text 10 days in the life of a pastoral minister with a ministry which stretches far beyond Wesley's Chapel in London, where he is based.

He prefaced his remarks with some reflections on words of William Blake, whose tomb lies nearby his home. Encountering Blake as an undergraduate studying English literature he had been entranced by Blake's brief poem *The Garden of Love*, which powerfully critiques the role of religion in sucking the joy out of human life with its motto of "Thou shalt not." It was a face of religion which had been very familiar to him in the chapel-going society of his youth.

Bringing up two boys alone in the poorest of circumstances, his hard-working mother enjoyed simple pleasures that would have brought down disapproval from the chapel pulpit and, in return, she shared with her sons a rejection of the judgmentalism of chapel society. "We used to wonder," he recalled, "what happened in those churches which seemed to attract to them people going fiercely to church with the most serious of countenances you could possibly imagine.

"We wondered whether the configurations across their faces hadn't been etched in vinegar. And carrying their Bibles and wearing their gloves so *properly* as they went to worship almighty God."

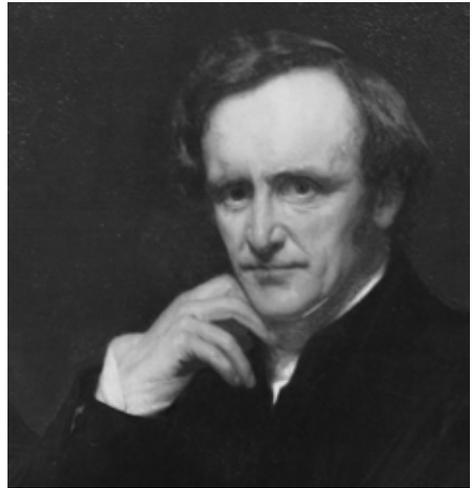
So the rejection of "Thou shalt not" immediately appealed to Leslie when he encountered the work of William Blake in the lecture halls of Cardiff University. Another deep influence was Blake's saying that 'the cistern contains, the fountain overflows' – a distinction that has always stayed with him, between "those of us



who feel that we have had sufficient of life to lord it over others, take everything that's given to us and keep it in cisterns of our own making, whereas the fountain has no shape, it just has flow, abundance; it's in constant movement."

The fighting parsons

With that foundation laid, Leslie shaped his remarks around the events of the last 10 days in his extraordinarily varied ministry, beginning with a visit to St David's College in Lampeter. A centre for clergy training, it had been here that he had come to teach medieval English immediately after graduating from Cardiff and found himself immersed in the real established religion of Wales, namely rugby. It was no accident, since the college had been the midwife of rugby in the principality in the 1850s under the influence of a new vice-principal, Professor Rowland Williams.



Rowland Williams

Williams had moved from Cambridge, where he had been Professor of Hebrew and Christian Theology at King's College, bringing with him the newly codified game. The college team came to be known as "The Fighting Parsons".

It was an appropriate expression for what could best be described as the 'muscular Christianity' the college and Williams represented. He was a broad churchman, a representative of the broad Latitudinarian perspective in the Church of England which looked with openness upon both its evangelical and Anglo-Catholic wings. But if Williams is remembered for his role in inspiring the spread of rugby to Wales he is probably more notorious in ecclesiastical circles as a contributor to the 1860 publication of a collection of theological essays under the title of *Essays and Reviews*. The

contributors, drawing on the work of recent decades in both science and textual criticism, called into question the biblical understandings of both history and pre-history. William's contribution argued for the rejection of the use of Old Testament prophecies as literal predictions. Though its contents would not rate a second glance today, the reaction at the time of publication was instant and vituperative. Williams was accused of heresy, dismissed from his post as vice principal of the college, tried in the Court of Arches and laid off without work for many years. "So 10 days ago there I was surrounded by all this history, the struggle for intelligent people to approach matters of faith intelligently. And the hounds that bay the moment you dare to say it in a different way or invite people to consider influences or streams of thought other than the traditional or approved ones."

Wisdom through meekness

Returning from Lampeter, Leslie set out to write a brief introduction to an upcoming book on the life of William Fidian Moulton – a name unlikely to be recognized except by those who have undertaken study of New Testament Greek, who will have relied on his ubiquitous Concordance. Called to Cambridge in 1875 to become head of the newly founded Leys School, which was intended to prepare Methodist boys for Oxford and Cambridge, Moulton was a prodigious scholar and contributed much to the radical revision of the Greek text of the New Testament working across denominational lines with Anglican scholars like Hort and Westcott. And like them he was often the subject of the wrath of people for whom the text of the Authorized Version was inviolable. His bust stands in Wesley's Chapel, emblazoned with the motto "The wisdom that comes through meekness".

Thoughts of Moulton led Leslie on to another of his heroes, Hugh Price Hughes, who had been a student of Moulton's. A fiery Welshman, he exercised great national influence as the editor of the weekly Methodist Times. As a preacher at the West London mission he was known as "judgement day in trousers". Hughes was one of the moving spirits, with Henry Lunn – later to be better known for his role in promoting tourism – of the pioneering ecumenical conferences held in Grindelwald in Switzerland. That more than a century had passed was a reminder, for

Leslie of the difficulty of ecumenism. “Even when the reports are enthusiastic we can’t muster much enthusiasm and it all turns out to be a *cul de sac*. And the Christian churches just display to the world their lack of ability to resolve their internal differences, simply offering a model of bad practice to the world. If we Christians can’t do it then we have no right to ask the world to.”

Jumping Jesus

Then came at the weekend, when Leslie was preoccupied with writing two scripts for the *Pause for Thought* spot on the Chris Evans show on Radio 2. When the surprise invitation came to be a regular contributor Leslie had first to learn about popular culture and popular music. One saving grace had been that some years ago he had written a small Lent book for Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, on voices of which the Church has disapproved – “usually people who have something to do with drugs or something to do with sex, the usual ingredients”.

The first chapter had dealt with what came to be known as ‘The Beat Generation’, people such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. And he had set out to re-examine them not in order to dismiss them but to understand what it was they were seeking: “Everybody is looking for something, everybody is looking to squeeze something out of life which makes it worthwhile, or bearable.” His search had led him to dip his toe in the waters of popular culture and made him an aficionado, for instance, of musicians like The Manic Street Preachers.

For his most recent offering he had decided to focus on The Rolling Stones and, in particular, the song *Jumping Jack Flash*. The song was about someone who has wasted their life going down the blind alley represented by psychedelic drugs and is trying to find the way back. For a title he had decided on *Jumping Jesus!*

And then over the last few weeks there



had been meetings in a counselling capacity with two Muslim men, one Nigerian, the other Iranian. The Nigerian sought help for his sister who had renounced her Muslim faith and become involved with a Christian group with relatively extreme views. The Iranian was struggling with the temptation to undergo a fake conversion to Christianity in order to obtain the blessing of the family of a young woman with whom he had fallen in love. Leslie had urged him not to sacrifice his integrity but to explore other ways forward.

Inter-faith in the real world

All of this had put Leslie Griffiths in mind of the issue of relations with other faiths. As chair of the trust which runs the two Central Foundation Schools in London he was brought intimately into contact with the local Muslim community whose children made up the majority of students. For the girls that meant that that they were given less opportunity to fly than boys, with fewer going to university and most of those who do taking courses in London because they were expected to live at home. In the boys' school there are serious problems with gang culture and pupils coming to school with knives. It often means trips to detention centres to rescue pupils in trouble. It was a very different view of interfaith relations than that which issues from think-tanks, focus groups or officially sanctioned bodies.

And out of it all had arisen a concern in Leslie's mind which was best expressed by his reaction to a text painted on boards at the end of the sanctuary at Wesley's Chapel: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." His problem was with what was missing from the quote, taken from Jesus' answer to the question as to the greatest commandment, namely the word "The Lord thy God is one." Contact with other faiths had made him aware of just how incomprehensible the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was to the other monotheistic faiths. In his own words: "They can't begin to understand how they should talk to us when we worship three gods. And that is a matter of fact. And I think that the formulations of Trinitarian doctrine which were done in the fourth century, trying to take a Semitic concept and find a Hellenic solution, where they were strong-armed into

finding a solution by a Latin Pope, and where Greek itself was spoken in different dialects in Alexandria and Antioch and Jerusalem and Ephesus – the brilliance of mind which came up with that formulation needs to find equally brilliant ways today in which to formulate it in a different way. Because it is incomprehensible. We might love it but it is incomprehensible. So, “the lord thy God is one”. The bit that’s missing is irking me and I’m wondering whether I have had the courage to say to the fathers and mothers of the church: “Get those boards down”.

A Christian agnostic

Continuing his hectic timetable, the Thursday had seen the end of a series of lunchtime talks to an audience of local office-workers on Leslie Weatherhead’s last book, *The Christian Agnostic*. The session examined the way, at the end of his ministry, after questioning so much of the historicity of the New Testament accounts, Weatherhead had clung so tenaciously to the resurrection. It put Leslie in mind of a series of sermons he had given on the words ‘evangelical’, ‘conservative’, ‘radical’, ‘charismatic’, and ‘liberal’. A liberal Christian, he had concluded, will be open, honest, exploratory, tolerant, risk taking, inclusive, a searcher for truth, free to follow the road of conscience, eschewing superstition and idolatry, always seeking a vocabulary that can carry faith into the arena of modern culture’ – qualities which Leslie Weatherhead’s book had exemplified.

Drawing to a close, Leslie Griffiths turned inevitably to John Wesley. Wesley had chosen two theological positions he had wanted to establish ‘contra mundum’. The first was the struggle with the Moravians on the doctrine of stillness, antinomianism, the belief that it was God who filled the spirit with his own Spirit and touched lives with his own finger and that our job was not to suppose for a moment that by resorting to any activity whatsoever we could increase, or develop, or in any way affect that influx of grace. Wesley was an activist and for him there were such things as the means of grace; that once God had touched your life and filled you with assurance of your sins forgiven, you then had a certain path you had to tread, which involves going to church, reading your Bible, saying your prayers and going to Communion.

The other crucial position which Wesley had taken up was against the concept of double predestinarianism.

But even more interesting was the fact that the minutes of the earliest Methodist Conferences show that they were genuinely concerned at what they risked losing by too cavalier a rejection of antinomianism and predestinarianism. That was an important insight for liberal Christians, lest in criticising the positions of others we found ourselves throwing babies at out with bath water. It was illiberal, as liberals, to be excluding in that sort of way. Instead, we needed to be in there working at the edges of traditions and their ways of formulating their understandings.

The temptation to bigotry

In all this, we could take our lead from Wesley's remarkable sermon on bigotry in which he urges his listeners to recognize that whenever good is being done, God is present and the work is to be celebrated, no matter whether the one concerned is someone of whom we might otherwise disapprove. We must encourage the other person, speak well of them wherever we are, we must defend their character and their mission, show them kindness in word and deed, enlarge the sphere of their action. And Wesley offers a cautionary word about our instinctive responses to things that disturb us, especially in times of great difficulty like today, when radicalised young Muslims seem so ready to become terrorists or suicide bombers. It breeds suspicion which sometimes borders on hatred. The population at large, fanned by sections of the press, find themselves becoming increasingly negative, not only to the perpetrators of the evil deeds but to Islam in general. When this happens there's a real danger that racist and xenophobic anxieties will spill over into society at large. For Wesley, when there is a clearly identifiable voice that insists on returning evil for evil, giving back medicine of the same kind, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – that voice which simply wants revenge has to be recognized and challenged in all of us.

Those of us who take such pride in our open attitudes, who look for flexible and creative responses to the social responsibilities facing us, should always have in mind the cautionary word with which Wesley concludes: *We must never let someone else's bigotry turn us into bigots.*

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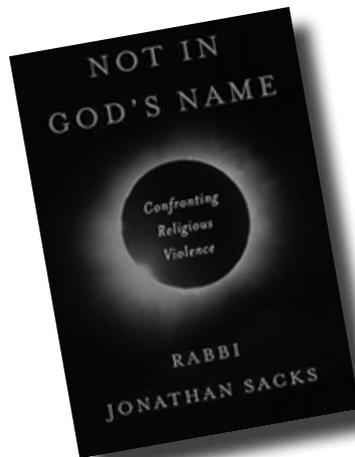
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