

B r i e f i n g

Free to Believe



**Conference 2024
Swanwick**

An occasional magazine for Free to Believe

Winter/Spring 2024

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Welcome to *Briefing: Wnter/Spring 2024*

You might not expect to find many words of profound wisdom within J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* canon, but I do from time to time find myself in situations where I am reminded of Albus Dumbledore's words in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: 'Dark times lie ahead of us and there will be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right.'

We might see dark tmes ahead for our local churches, our denominations, and the Church itself, and we may be faced with a choice.

Do we maintain our beloved traditions and practices – with a liberal slant of course – in the hope that revival will come in God's good time? That would be easy.

Or do we assert ever more strongly that the old doctrines have led us , as many of us believe, down a blind alley, and seek a path that leads to the fulfillment of Jesus' mission to recognise and celebrate the Kingdom of God (however we may define that) in our world today? That, we believe, would be *right*.

If there is an overall theme to this issue of *Briefing*, it is about choosing this hard path: recognising the true place of the human family in creation, delighting in the sacred, walking in the Way of service and sacrifice for the common good, recognising that we are free to believe in any way that is meaningful to us, but acknowledging that what we *believe* is far less significant than what we *do*.

As well as words of insight and challenge, in this issue of *Briefing* you will find information about the 2024 conference, to be held at Swanwick in September – an opportunity to gather and come to our senses as we travel together on what is a hard road – but surely the right one.

Ken Forbes (Editor)

Free to Believe Conference 2024

The Hayes Conference Centre

Wednesday 4th to Friday 6th September 2024

Cost £275 (Booking Form on page 27)

Coming to our Senses

'The Word made flesh is here made word again' (Edwin Muir, The Incarnate One). A focus on embodiment, a continuing challenge for churches, and worldwide.

Speakers:

Kathy Galloway

Former Leader of the Iona Community, and former Head of Christian Aid Scotland.

Victoria Turner

Author – 'Young, Woke and Christian'

Worship Leaders:

Fiona Bennett

Minister of Augustine URC, Edinburgh

Kathy Galloway

Conference Theme: Coming to our Senses – Kathy Galloway

In the miracle and mystery of birth, we are reminded of some fundamental truths. We are first of all created, and when we forget that, we undermine our very existence. We are co-created, a species among species, with a responsibility to respect other forms, for we are interdependent, and they are also part of the divine creation. We are embodied, whole persons, and the human body is to be cherished, not starved, beaten and killed, because it is holy. We are located, we have a time and a place, we are part of a history and geography in which God acts through us. We are co-creators—we can create nothing out of nothing, but only in relationship and exchange with the earth, with other people, with God, who is always drawing us on to regeneration, to bringing forth God's life.

The failure to acknowledge our creatureliness has been a big problem for human beings – and an ever bigger one for the other life forms we share the earth with. Our tendency to assume that the universe is at our disposal has made us careless to the point of extreme culpability. Perhaps that's because there's so much of it; so many people being born, living, dying, in their billions now, across the world. So many species, animals, plants, so much inconvenient life; getting in the way of other people's ambitions, greed, beliefs.

But this is not a biblical perspective, or indeed a truly religious one. Nor is it ultimately a healthy one for anybody or anything. Ultimately, we are all inconvenient, useless. Life is not a possession to be accumulated, but a gift to be appreciated and cherished. The value of life is intrinsic, in the living of it.

What does it really mean to us to be embodied, to be creature?
Perhaps to answer this, we need to come back to our senses.

Kathy Galloway is an activist and writer. A member and former Leader of the Iona Community, and former Head of Christian Aid Scotland, the major focus of her work has always been peace-making and social justice issues, especially relating to poverty, ecology, and gender. She has also worked for Church Action on Poverty as their Link worker for Scotland, and with a charity established to support women who experienced abuse in a religious context, and she was one of the originators of 'A Woman's Claim of Right for Scotland'. She is the author of a dozen books on justice issues, spirituality and poetry, and her writing has been widely anthologised. She lives in Glasgow.

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Free to Believe is served by a small Committee, under the acting Chair, Liz Byrne, and is fortunate to have recently recruited three new members: Helen Mee, Kevin Skippon and Nick Jones (whose article on the hymnody of Alan Gaunt appears on page 8). Helen and Kevin introduce themselves

HELEN MEE



Helen (she/her) is a retired URC minister active within the Synod of Scotland. She moved into ministry from a long career in human services managing staff teams providing support to adults with a learning disability within the context of the Housing Association Movement. Most of her ministry was spent in HealthCare Chaplaincy where she focused on End of Life Care and Suicide Postvention.

If she had to choose a label then she would describe herself as a Progressive Christian but all that truly matters to her is that without exception we are all welcome.



KEVIN SKIPPON

I'm old (ish) - 70 next year but I like to think that some of my brain is still 25.

Born and brought up in Norfolk, I have returned to my rural roots and now live in a very rural part of Shropshire. We have a wonderful view up in the hills above the delightfully bohemian town of Bishop's Castle (complete with eco-warriors, aged hippies, witches and a whole assortment of wacky & wonderful people).

I'm an Anglican priest - 90% disillusioned with and by the Church, but with a new (post-Covid) vocation free of doctrine and dogma. I'm on a very different spiritual journey paddling a very different canoe in a very different direction. And how liberating it is!

A significant 16 years of my ministry has been in healthcare chaplaincy in Derby in which I managed a team of 8 chaplains and 40 lay volunteers.

Particular interests – painting (arty-farty not home decoration), music, jaunting around the UK, death and dying (I'm a paid up member of Dignity in Dying), ethical issues, pastoral care & spiritual accompaniment with some comedy thrown in to maintain sanity.

I am gay. Lived with late (civil) partner for 22 years until he died 2007. Married my present partner in Quaker ceremony 2017. So recent events in the C of E have contributed to my disengagement. However, I love going to meetings of our local Explorers - a group of 20 or so rebels, renegades and mavericks from the local parish church and Quaker community.

I am a trustee of Progressive Christianity Network Britain and have started a local PCN group.

I very much enjoyed and valued the FTB conference last year and also the inspiring reading party in Cambridge this year.

I believe FTB has a vital role to play within and on the edges of the churches and I hope to be able to contribute to its work and witness.

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**‘How one is constantly surprised’: The hymnody and poetry of Alan Gaunt.
- Nick Jones**

When I first arrived as minister of Heswall URC I saw for the first time a series of photographs of my predecessors, going back to 1895, which take up a large part of a wall in the vestry. The earliest ministers look very stern and serious. Sometimes I think they stare at me disapprovingly. But among the photos was a name I recognised, though at that time I did not know the face to go with it. A friendly face, but looking a little amused, or bemused, by having his photograph taken. A name I knew mostly from having seen it in hymn books. The name was Alan Gaunt, minister of Heswall URC between 1974 and 1985, who sadly died in 2023. Alan wrote extensively in two genres; hymnody and poetry. What follows is partial and selective response to some of his work.

So what can we say about hymnody and poetry? They are related, of course, but they are different fields, different disciplines. Related because of course they are about the use of language, often

heightened and compact language, to convey emotion and ideas, yet different because they have, or can have, very different purposes. A good poet is not necessarily a good hymn writer, and vice versa, although of course there are those who have excelled as both. A hymn is functional; it is to be used in worship, to praise or to reflect, to give thanks, to celebrate. It cannot exist just for its own sake – as perhaps a work of art can do. A hymn is intended to be sung, usually collectively by a congregation of amateurs rather than performed by professionals. It needs an immediacy and directness, and perhaps a clear message without excessive ambiguity (on which, of course, poetry often thrives.)

In a hymn, rhythm and meter are key, and fitting with the tune, either existing or specially written music, can be the difference between a piece being singable or unsingable, profound or incomprehensible. A hymn is generally not the time for formal experimentation, or the congregation may not be able to keep up. A hymn needs rather to be immediate enough that someone singing it and reading the words for the first time can take a message away from it. But that's not to say there should not be sufficient depth that it can be repeated and the congregation gain something new from it each time; the very best hymns are sung again and again and do not become stale.

In writing hymns Alan of course grappled with the age-old question of what is the right style of language to talk about God, how can we use words to reflect on the sacred? Sometimes the church likes language which is heightened, deliberately archaic, very much removed from how anyone has ever talked in real life, let alone how people talk now, a style specially constructed for spiritual purposes. Today, the move is towards plainer, more informal language, closer to ordinary spoken English. This is of course a process which has been happening in

literature for centuries. Back in 1800 Wordsworth, in his manifesto like introduction to the collection *Lyrical Ballads*, wrote that he had ‘endeavoured to bring my language near to the real language of men’ – that is, language as used and spoken by ordinary people, as opposed to a self-consciously poetic or literary register. Now whether Wordsworth and Coleridge ever really did this is open to question, but others after them have gone much further.

In Alan’s hymns we see this change in language most clearly in a translation. Think of Easter Sunday and singing ‘Thine be the glory, risen conquering son / endless is the victory thou o’er death hast won.’ The original text was by the Swiss writer Edmond Budry in French, and the English version we know best was translated by Richard Birch Hoyle in 1923. This is of course deliberately archaic, using the language of an earlier century. Do we need such language to celebrate the resurrection? Alan clearly thought not, and so when Alan came to translate the same text he did it differently: ‘Yours is the glory, resurrected one; / yours the final victory, God’s eternal Son.’

No ‘thees’ or ‘thys’ to be seen! As a translation it’s different both in tone and in sense, perhaps closer to the original but still far from a literal translation. Here it is a clear aesthetic decision, but also a decision about the need for the words to be understood. It is not that Alan’s language is ever particularly informal or simple, and certainly not deliberately trendy or fashionable, but simply of a different register. The books of prayers he published may have struck worshippers in the 1970s as fresh and modern, while today they seem surprisingly formal and dated. This is not a criticism; times change. In 1800 Wordsworth could use ‘men’ to mean ‘people’ in a way we would not today, but also the deliberately inclusive language of *Rejoice and Sing* in the 1990s

– men and women, brothers and sisters – is today problematic as it excludes those sitting outside a rigid gender binary.

We see this concern for language in many of Alan’s hymns. One begins ‘We pray for peace, but not the easy peace built on complacency. / We pray for peace, and not the evil peace defending unjust laws and nursing prejudice.’ This captures something of Alan’s writing, as well as his theology; not settling for what is easy, but seeking out what is hard; because it is through that we learn, we grow, and where we encounter the sense of the divine. Peace which does not tackle underlying injustice is not real peace.

He translated Albert Schweitzer and also notably Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

People draw near to God in their distress
pleading for help and begging peace and bread.
Rescue from guilt and sickness, nearly dead
Christian or not, all come in helplessness.

Everything goes in cycles, into and out of fashion; but maybe in these times, of conflict around the world, ongoing economic instability, fake news and populist politicians, require a voice like Alan’s – unafraid to proclaim what he views as the truth but open linguistically and theologically, not pandering to but challenging prejudice, a voice which is both austere and yet welcoming. His hymns are not generally straightforward hymns of praise, or thanksgiving; they are more complex and thoughtful than that, which means they might not work immediately with all congregations. They are not songs to be sung triumphantly with hands in the air – but rather more contemplative, more like poetry, intended to provoke and challenge.

Turning to poetry, if hymn-writing is marked by restrictions – the need to maintain rhythm and rhyme – poetry can be much freer, and even when following set form the poet is free to follow or ignore the rules. Most of Alan’s work consists of short pieces in a direct but lyrical style, often written from the viewpoint of a character (sometimes Biblical), rather than from an omniscient narrative voice. There is often a sense of compassion and a concern for human suffering. The best join together the personal and the theological, as in this poem which could be about Jesus, but also draws on the birth of his own children:

*How one is constantly surprised
the littleness of the new-born!
Fragile, tough, lying on my arm,
appearing to be deep in thought,
as if, through pain of coming here,
made wise to all earth’s grief and joy.
Nothing less than this immense,
this light creating innocence,
could make the heart’s deep darkness sing.*

To make the heart’s deep darkness sing; to rejoice despite the darkness and troubles of human life. This is a theme that recurs, in hymns and poems, never ignoring suffering, but often considering it in pieces which are sometimes both downbeat and joyful simultaneously. To do this his poetry is accessible, in simple forms, not experimental or unusual for the sake of it. It’s poetry, like the hymns, for a purpose and an audience, not just for its connecting the two disciplines together.

His 2009 collection *The Space Between* ends with a poem told in the third person, but with the ring of the autobiographical. If so it is self-deprecating and modest, as the narrator, who claims to have 'limited talents' seeks a place in the world:

*Made without choice,
there was nothing to do
but be this purveyor
of Holy Love; lacking it,
but having words for it.*

*But the love he spoke of,
having its effect, he met
coming back; and with some,
perhaps more than he knew
he claims to have shared
the sharp clear water
of indestructible joy.*

This seems to work as both a poetic manifesto and as a reflection on vocation and the nature of ministry. How is it possible to talk of spiritual and religious experience, of emotion and how it feels to be human? Worship, faith, and literature can all involve trying to find an answer to that eternal question. To lack Holy Love, which we cannot have, but to find words to speak and write about it anyway.

Finally, to return to the image of the minister in his place in the wall, this poem is how the job can feel on a good day; to find the words to talk about God, and feel that sense of love, of the sacred, being reflected back - even to feel the sharp clear water of indestructible joy.

Not all the time, not every day; but sometimes, enough to make it worthwhile, and those moments, those epiphanies, are to be remembered and treasured and held onto. And that is reflected in the best of Alan's poems and hymns, which act to store that knowledge and emotion for when it is needed most.

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I was a stranger and you welcomed me in – No room in the Inn ?

David Austin (Vicar – Coldhurst /Oldham)

During the run up to Christmas, there are many homeless charities appealing for funds – showing, not nostalgic Dickensian scenes of merriment & feasting, but modern day examples of Oliver Twist and Amy Dorrit living on the streets of Britain. Another current feature in the News is the revived plan by the British government to send asylum seekers to Rwanda – as a deterrent to those seeking to come here by boat. In the world today there are over 110 million forcibly displaced people according to the UN Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) – and that figure was taken before the current genocide in Gaza. People fleeing their homes or countries due to persecution, conflict, violence or widespread human rights violations. It is the highest number of refugees recorded by the United Nations since 1951 – with the crises in Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan & Ukraine helping to boost numbers. However it is not the statistics but individual life stories that help us to see the consequences of displacement – dependent upon the good will of others and the need for human resilience in the face of poverty and prejudice. It is only a small minority that reach our shores or are admitted by immigration officers, such as recent arrivals from Ukraine

or Hong Kong. Most are living in squatter camps or overcrowded rooms in neighbouring countries. One young couple were told to move city by the occupying forces and the woman, in heavy labour, was forced to give birth in the most unhygienic of surroundings. They were then forced to flee at night to the neighbouring country of Egypt as they had heard that the local ruler was planning infanticide in their region, to eradicate any threat to his rule. Sound familiar ? Jesus, a refugee in a strange land with a foreign language and an alien culture.

This year I have been working closely with refugees both here & overseas – accepting Bangladeshi and Kurdish asylum seekers into my home. Many are traumatised, suffering PTSD and have ongoing mental health needs preventing their integration into their host country whilst they wait for many years to be assessed or rejected by this Government. Tareq Islam was a qualified doctor in Bangladesh until his wife ‘outed’ him at their wedding reception as a gay man. He was forced to flee after death threats from his own family – managing to get a student visa to the UK before registering as an asylum seeker. Despite high anxiety, he has managed to pass the NHS registration



exam to be a doctor here and so his future is promising but still not certain. Others are less fortunate – I am supporting one young man living in hiding in Afghanistan, hunted by the Taliban due to his opposition to their rule who can not afford to leave the country despite having a passport. His aged parents are also in hiding after receiving death threats. He is an atheist & part of the persecuted Hazara minority in that nation.

I am also supporting LGBT refugees from Uganda who have fled to neighbouring Kenya due to the passing of the Anti-Gay bill by the Ugandan Parliament – promising long term imprisonment & the death penalty for those discovered to be ‘promoting homosexuality’ (similar to S.28 in our own Country 1988-2003, but with heavier penalties). Many are homeless & rejected by employers, faith leaders & family – unable to afford health care or basic necessities; many have seen their friends murdered and their homes destroyed. The situation in the UNHCR refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya is not much better with scant food and the risk of violence from other displaced inhabitants. The poverty, the pain, the sense of desperation and the lack of hope are all major killers for this community.

What can you do in the face of overwhelming need ? What practical provision can you put in place? Firstly get to know asylum seekers in your area – the places where they stay, the centres that they use : local libraries, Red Cross drop-ins, food banks and English language classes. Secondly, volunteer or support financially those local or national charities such as Refugee Council, Freedom from Torture, Amnesty International and Refugee Action. Thirdly, write to your MPs and local papers about Government plans to shut down the hotels and place asylum seekers in disused army camps or floating barges and combat local scapegoating of refugees - blame shifting for all the wrongs in our Society. Fourthly pray to the One who was homeless & a refugee, who was persecuted, tortured and killed by oppressive forces – that light may shine in darkness, hope in place of despair, healing instead of death and sanctuary instead of imprisonment (Isaiah 61:1-2).

Refugees (written by Brian Bilston)

They have no need of our help

so do not tell me

these haggard faces could belong to you or me

should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for what they really are
Chancers and scroungers
layabouts and lodgers
with bombs up their sleeves
cut-throats and thieves
they are not
welcome here
We should make them
Go back where they came from
they cannot
share our food
share our countries
instead let us
build a wall to keep them out
it is not okay to say
These people are like us
A place should only belong to those who were born here
Do not be so stupid to think that
The World could be looked at another way.
Now look back; read the poem from the bottom line to the top.

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NOTHING TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT – John Churcher

There is nothing for which liberal / progressive Christians should feel guilty or embarrassed about in trying to help save the Church from itself in our part of the post-modern, mix and match, multi choice world [and that is the context in which I write this article]. As liberal / progressive Christians I suggest that we need to renew our confidence

to keep working for the present and the future, often in the face of opposition from within our own congregations and denominations.

As a liberal / progressive thinker, I approach much of what is called religious 'truth' as little more than explanatory fiction that has, all too often, become literalised and inappropriately treated as the actual words spoken by the Christian God, and then made into doctrine and dogma that, regrettably, separate rather than unite humanity. To have a realistic chance of long term survival, both Christianity and the Church need more than ever, liberal / progressive approaches that will take us away from the old “we tell you what you need” traditional blood sacrifice “are you saved” Pauline world. Readers of “Briefing” will probably agree that the old paradigm of certainty must eventually give way to the 20th century liberal paradigm of being on a journey of continual discovery and change that really does accept and foster unity in diversity [e.g. within the Father, Son and Holy Spirit metaphor].

What is desperately needed is a Church and a leadership that no longer pulls back in the face of numeric decline into some “golden age” that probably never existed. Leadership needs to encourage more individual glimpses of Karl Rahner's “Infinite Mystery,” leading us to share these insights together; to help explore and to explain our contemporary culture and sacred experiences; to create new contemporary myths that further develop the sense of the liberal Gaia Principle in which we are “all in this together.” Leadership should help individuals to discover their own truths and to create the Jesus that makes sense to them; to help them to be at peace with themselves, with one another, and with the environment, regardless of the labels by which they describe themselves. However, the creation of new contemporary myths should not be used to establish new doctrinal standards, especially within a renewed, reformed and revived Church .

I still dream the dreams of 50 or more years ago that the survival of Christianity will be built upon both our open and exciting liberal theology, and our Matthew 25:35-36 orthopraxis, creating a new “kingdom” [not “Kingdom”] of sacred communal life in which, for example, all who are hungry are given the help and the means to feed themselves and, in the meantime the assistance to ensure that they are fed. Perhaps this will help us to create ever new relevant myths packed with sacred but provisional experiential truth for our time and place?

This may not be for every one, but when considering how individuals and churches could go forward into the unknown future, I try to actively team with and learn from those who do not describe themselves as “Christian.” I try to engage with others where they are, to find out what matters to them, and what helps them get through one day and then through the next and so on. I try to learn from my Jew, Muslim, Buddhist and other religious neighbours and friends. And my engaging with others is not to evangelise them in the hope that they will become Christians but to find new and relevant ways together of sharing the welcome and the good news that God, by whatever name that God is known, loves and cares for us all.

That same commitment to learning and sharing equally applies to my humanist, secular and atheist friends and neighbours. It is in such exploring of the relationships between the faith communities, the secularists, and the humanists that I am finding more of what we have in common rather than those things that separate us, to the benefit of all regardless of the faith or non-faith labels by which we define ourselves.

To have any meaningful future the need for the Church, as I understand it, is to continue the practical development and application of the liberal / progressive passion for the vision of Matthew 25:35-36. This

can no longer be an enthusiast's additional commitment to the traditional creeds and doctrines of the Church but it has to be central to the faith and / or life journey. As Rabbi Hillel is reputed to have said, "Love God. Love your neighbour. All the rest is commentary." I am convinced that it is the commentary that is killing the Church in our contemporary world..

In her recent Advent study book, "Disturbing Complacency [2023, Iona], Lisa Bodenheim wrote, "What if it was not Jesus's crucifixion that saves us? What if it was the way he lived his life that saves us? He told parables. He hung out with the socially unacceptable and the impure, healed people, and taught that the Community of God is at hand. Is it possible that Jesus would want us to focus on his lifestyle because that is what gives meaning to his crucifixion? It is not his crucifixion that saves us from our sins. It is his lifestyle, which led to his crucifixion, that saves us...Through his lifestyle, Jesus showed us that God forgives us, that God's Community is near."

Surely, to survive, the Church needs to actively listen and respond to voices such as Bodenheim who, yet again as generations of liberal voices have said before, makes the life of Jesus and not his death the real salvific theme that is central rather than peripheral to its *raison d'etre*. And the statement attributed to Jesus in Matthew 25:35-36, along with Hillel's comment, is hugely political. And in many congregations there will be those who reject any relationship between politics and pulpit. However, to appoint liberal / progressive ministers who will preach and live in such ways is nothing for which we should feel guilty. Such ministers may lose yet more Church members, but as Brian McLaren asks, "What good does it do to save the church budget and lose our souls?"

Holy Anarchy – Graham Adams



In a recent discussion where I was presenting ideas from the book 'Holy Anarchy', someone challenged me that 'this isn't really Christianity, because it sidelines Jesus' death and resurrection'. To be fair, at that point, I hadn't referenced his death and resurrection, but here's just a brief explanation of how they are indeed critical to the overall story - and what this means for my relationship with orthodoxy.

Holy Anarchy is the alternative horizon - God's kingdom coming on earth. It is in stark contrast to systems and patterns of domination, epitomised by what we can call Empire. So when Jesus proclaims 'the kingdom of God', he is also denouncing the kingdom/empire of Rome. The parables of the kingdom show us that this alternative realm is certainly starkly different to Empire: it is a reality identified with smallness (yeast, seeds, children) not with grandeur; it disrupts the status quo; it includes outsiders; it envisages the toppling of the Temple-State, denouncing corruption within the religio-political establishment (the Jerusalem Temple being entangled in power dynamics with Roman colonisation of Palestine). There are also particular moments where confrontation with Empire is sharper, such as in Jesus' encounter with 'Legion', the sign that Roman military imperialism has colonised, oppressed and damaged human life, which Jesus casts out. And then - he is arrested and is executed according to a Roman means (crucifixion being kept for slaves and bandits, so he's clearly seen as a threat to business-as-usual). But the Empire's silencing of his expansive love does not win; it is not the end of the story - he rises to new life.

Holy Anarchy cannot be contained, not even by the violence of Empire.

Death turns to resurrection. Imperial power turns to the quiet greeting of an unrecognised friend, one who says, 'peace', unlike the Pax Romana - the peace of empire achieved through military prowess. Violence, fear, division, control, domination, exclusion - they are all subverted.

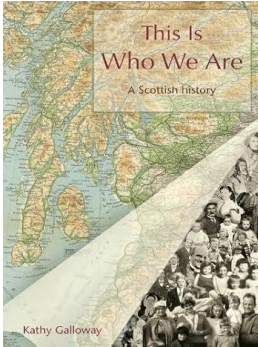
This is the point - to read the gospel according to the lens of Holy Anarchy is to illuminate the historical context and the implications for us today: we are in a religio-political struggle; what kind of world does God desire? One where the alternative kingdom of justice and peace comes on earth.

This is orthodox, but also subversively orthodox - because it involves seeing our own tradition and its obstruction of the alternative horizon. It is orthodox, because it is absolutely rooted in the gospel(s), but subversively orthodox, because it challenges us, too, to see how death turns to resurrection even within our religious assumptions, the parameters of our discussions, the horizon we envisage.

Faith is subversive precisely because the God witnessed in the gospel, is a God doing a new thing - new creation, the transformation of our minds and our cosmos; making possible the kiss between justice and peace, where wolves and lambs feed together, water flows in the wilderness, the hungry are fed, the humble are lifted, the proud are removed from their thrones, debts are cancelled - and children show us the way.

['Holy Anarchy' (SCM Press 2022) by Graham Adams is available from good bookshops and Amazon, and will be the subject of a future Free to Believe conference]

Book Review – Helen Mee



THIS IS WHO WE ARE: A Scottish History **Kathy Galloway**

(Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow 2003)

Kathy Galloway, one of the Keynote Speakers at our September conference is a well known activist in Scottish circles. She is a minister of the Church of Scotland, a former head of Christian Aid

Scotland and a former leader of the Iona Community.

Kathy has published a number of books with Wild Goose Publications (which is the publishing house of the Iona Community), often editing anthologies of prayers and liturgies as well as books of reflections and poetry.

Some of the formational influences on Kathy's life have been her upbringing as a daughter and granddaughter of the manse, her childhood and schooling in Edinburgh and her ongoing membership of the Iona Community.

This is who we are, at first sight, appears to be a new direction for Kathy – a narrative of her family possibly growing out of her own (and with a deep reliance on the research and skills of her siblings) genealogical research – however it is much more significant. Through the lens of ten generations of her own family's story she is able to approach a perspective on the major social justice issues which have affected Scotland and its people over the last four to five hundred years. She describes the book as 'an eccentric Scottish history'.

There are chapters exploring the everyday lives of men and women in her family tree which allow us to see the effects of changing work patterns especially the move away from an agricultural society,

the migration patterns following employment opportunities and poverty.

One chapter explores the influence of the church with stories of Covenanting; dissent and social action; sectarianism; a place of both leadership and purient discipline; the providers of education and social care. Kathy is not uncritical of the Kirk and the central role it played in people's lives – in fact she suggests that we should look back with shame.

Instead of embodying the rubric of the priesthood of all believers and freedom of conscience saying:

'('all' never extended to all) (only the freedom to believe the same as us)'

she goes on to say:

'And for women in particular, the mechanisms of control and power stretched from the intensely patriarchal, in which male authority was complete and women were entirely subject, to the profoundly misogynistic and punitive, and ultimately to the murderous holocaust of the with trials.'

Kathy also points out the huge impact trans-Atlantic slavery has had and continues to have on everyday life in Scotland. Many people may be unaware of just how much of our current infrastructure has been built upon the profits of colonial and plantation ventures. Many of the iconic buildings in our city centres (often having been repurposed into popular dining venues), the financial sector, the train networks and communication links are built on the legacy of slavery.

Her formation within both her family and wider family, holidaying in Iona and being part of the wider Iona family before taking up membership, and a childhood in Oxbgangs in Edinburgh where there was a sense of community and a joint ownership of responsibility for the civic good and its improvement. As Kathy was growing up, the

patish church (where her father was minister) was integral to this. Later she has travelled extensively as part of her work and seen the effects of poverty, social deprivation, war and injustice on the peoples of our world.

Writing the book has allowed Kathy to look at her identity through the prism of her family's tale. She makes two comments about this which I feel are core:

'I am, and always will be, proud to call myself a feminist. I am of course a woman of my time and culture, and formed in part by the society I grew up and have lived in.'

'what have been transmitted to my siblings and myself are shared and strongly-held beliefs in justice, education and the common good, translated into public service, social activism and love of country.'

THIS IS WHO WE ARE is a highly accessible book offering well researched insights into Scottish history and identity (particularly in the Lowlands of the country). Kathy has willingly shared her own life and story and in so doing, I believe, exposed exactly where her gifts of inspiring reflection were planted and nurtured.

I was going to add one health warning in that I am a baby boomer (or maybe a year or two older, but close enough), born, bred and brought up in Edinburgh with my family home circa 400 yards from Burghmuirhead (the head of the Borough Moor) and half a mile from Kathy's high school. Maybe that was giving me a bias towards this book that others would not discern, however as I read I realised that the issues raised (although expressed through one particular family's story) were not inly her story but my story and I dare to suggest our story (with a wee sprinkling of his story too!).

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Conference 2024 Change of Date and Venue

Unfortunately due to rising costs the venue of the Free to Believe Conference 2024 has had to be changed from Augustine URC, Edinburgh to the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick. As this decision was taken late in 2023, and very little information had been publicised about the 2024 Conference, the FtB committee made the decision to postpone the date of the conference to later in 2024. Fortunately, our planned speakers and worship leader are all available for the new date. Apologies if the change of date has prevented anyone from attending the conference.

Free to Believe National Conference 2024

The Hayes Conference Centre – Wednesday 4th to Friday 6th September 2024

The cost is £275 (deposit - £50). Full fee to be paid by Wednesday 4th July.

Payment can be by bank transfer to

Account Name: **Free to Believe**

Sort Code: **60-13-37**

Account Number: **53754867**

or by cheque made payable to **Free to Believe** and sent to:

Free to Believe, c/o 7 Springs Crescent, Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0JT

I wish to book place(s) at the Free to Believe National Conference 2024.

NAMES (in block capitals). If booking for more than one person, please indicate if you require a single room or a double room, and which people will be sharing.

1 Single/Double

2 Single/Double

3 Single/Double

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Address:

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I am paying by bank transfer

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Please return form by email to: d.parkin123@btinternet.com

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