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Free to Believe



An occasional magazine for *Free to Believe*
Autumn 2022

Contents

Notes from the Outgoing Chair	Martin Camroux	page 3
Notes from the Incoming Chair	Anne Lewitt	page 6
Reflections on the FtB conference	Nick Straw	page 7
	Nicholas Jones	page 11
	Tony Barnes	page 12
	Maggie Hindley	page 12
The Newness of a Youth Voice?	Victoria Turner	page 13
Book Review: <i>The Idolatry of God</i>	Claire Wilson	page 17

Notes from the Outgoing Chair



I have been chairing Free to Believe for rather a long time. In a new book on the URC Kirsty Thorpe says our “inaugural meeting” was in 1995. This rather overstates the case. What happened was that Donald Hilton and I decided to organize a one-off conference on the future of liberal theology. However, those there asked if we could not have another such conference next year, so I agreed to organize it with Donald’s help. It didn’t seem too much of a commitment. After that Free to Believe just sort of happened under its own momentum.

26 years on I have decided it is long past the time that I stepped down and I am absolutely delighted that Anne Lewitt has agreed to take on the chairing of the committee. Anne is a URC minister, has just finished as convener of the URC Equalities Committee. and will bring fresh dynamism and insight to the role. I know she rightly intends to make the leadership more collegiate. Looking back at 26 years of conferences, reading parties, and surprisingly jolly committee meetings, what is clear to me is that the speakers were never the key factor. It was the interaction with others, the sense that you were free to express your belief and doubts in a totally safe and accepting atmosphere. As an informal network without any statement of belief we were quite often hard for people to understand. There was a bizarre moment (which Kirsty Thorpe also mentions) when David Thompson raised with the URC Mission Council the concern of the Doctrine and Worship committee that we might be in some way dangerous. But a caucus with a programme was always the exact opposite of what we were, rather we were simply

encouraging open honest theological thinking and supporting people. Our latest conference suggests there continues to be a need for this.

I do not intend to go quietly. As a swansong I am organizing the reading party at Westminster next year on my *Keeping Alive the Rumour of God* led by David Peel, former Principal of Northern College Manchester, and a hugely sharp minded theological thinker. There has never been theological agreement in Free to Believe – there was never intended to be. But this is what I believe.

I grew up in the *Honest to God* generation. John Robinson shared with Bonhoeffer and Tillich a recognition that there was a huge gap between Christian belief and a secularizing society. Actually, it was more than that. The God of traditional theology is culturally dead, as Tillich saw in the trenches of World War I and Bonhoeffer in Tegel prison. This is the theistic God who is like a superior version of us, only all powerful and all-knowing. That kind of God, the all-powerful male figure who comes down demanding our worship, is inherently authoritarian and in practice reinforces elitist and patriarchal power. Such a God is both unbelievable and morally unacceptable.

The question is what, if anything, comes next? For a good many people absolutely nothing comes next, it's over. For others the solution is to see God as a linguistic device, a way of describing our own values, this is the Don Cupitt option and quite a few in FTB find it attractive. For others the solution is to shut out the questions and just go on believing in the old way – essentially the fundamentalist option. Tillich offered another alternative, that when God dies there is the possibility of God above God, what Tillich calls spiritual presence. There are still moments in which our spirit relates to that beyond itself, that we can only call the experience of transcendence. And there is still the amazing story of Jesus overturning all the old preconceptions about God. What if God is not who we thought? What if God is like Jesus? What if God is

not about vengeance, or power, or ridiculous church systems of authority, but is as we see God in Jesus – sacrificial love? What if the world’s supposedly powerful are actually empty facades because the arc of history bends towards justice? John Robinson used to like to quote W. H. Auden:

“Space is the Whom our loves are needed by,
Ours is the choice of How to love and Why”.

I live in that possibility and hope.

Theologies crumble, sermons look even more ridiculous than when we first preached them, thirty volume systematic theologies turn out to say nothing at all, but the wonder of life remains and so does the possibility that what seems the death of God may not be the end of the matter. The rumour of God persists even in a secular world. The world that we once knew has gone. And we are called by God, I deeply believe, not to resist and resent and try to recapture an era that is over, but to, prayerfully and creatively, discern what God has in mind for us now. You are welcome to join in the argument.

Martin

Free to Believe

An informal network of liberally minded Christians striving for an open, inclusive and thinking church.

There is no membership, simply a mailing list and the opportunity to support running costs through occasional donations. FTB organises national conferences and reading parties intended to encourage a liberal agenda within the Church and mails out an occasional free 'Briefing' newsletter booklet.

freetobelong.org.uk

NOT to be confused with www.freetobelong.com

Notes from the Incoming Chair



Martin has led Free to Believe for more than twenty years with considerable wit and imagination, a great deal of hard work, and a strong, liberal faith. He was sure there was a need - and by filling it he proved that this was indeed the case. I, and many others, have benefitted hugely from this, and I am extremely grateful.

Thank you Martin! I've been involved with Free to Believe for a long time - long enough not to remember how long - and will have met many of you at Reading Parties and Conferences along the way. For those who don't know me, I'm a Minister in the URC, currently serving three churches in rural West Sussex; and have strong affinities with Quakers, too. The community which is Greenbelt Festival is one of the places I feel most at home, and the awesomely inclusive communities which make up the Open Table Network are one of my biggest inspirations.

The world and the church have changed, and are changing ever faster. I'm convinced that Free to Believe still has a place, as long as we continue to meet a need for people who are looking for a safe space where they can hold, explore, and discuss a liberal Christian faith. That means different things to different people, which makes our discussions and exploration worthwhile and interesting! We have never defined any set of expected beliefs - we are truly 'Free to Believe' - so that our faith can change, grow, and perhaps sometimes be re-labelled. I do think that the question of what liberal theology now looks like needs to be asked: not to (even attempt) to find a definitive answer, but to open up and broaden the space where ideas about it can change and develop. I think there are also interesting conversations to be had

about the intersection between ‘socially liberal’ and ‘theologically liberal’.

In one respect it is inevitable that Free to Believe will change as Martin steps back (and hopefully only back, not out completely). He has led from the front in a fashion unique to himself, and the new leadership will inevitably look different. I’m hoping that it will be a co-operative venture, with a small Core Group, including Liz Byrne as Vice Chair, and several others, sharing in the leadership of this unique organisation. The wider committee will continue to meet to share ideas and keep us on the right track; and we will have our ears to the ground to hear the thoughts and concerns of all of you who read this Briefing, interact on our social media, or come to our conferences. I look forward to lots of interesting conversations...

Anne Lewitt

Reflections on *Keeping Hope Alive*, the Free to Believe conference, High Leigh, July 2022

The omens did not look promising did they? Numbers were well down on previous years. Some of the speakers were not particularly well known to the FTB community. And with the threat of a more virulent strain of the Covid virus circulating, arrangements were put in place at the last minute to allow for both online and physical participation, which was a bit of a palaver. The title of the conference – Keeping Hope Alive – took on a slightly ironic flavour.

What emerged was probably the best FTB conference I have ever attended. The normal happy-making factors were present of course. What’s not to like about going away for a few days to be well fed and comfortably roomed, with good company and a cheap bar! But let’s

face it, you need good speakers if a conference is to be really successful.

As things turned out, our speakers were, without exception, outstandingly good. I flatter not. I learnt new things from them all, but I was also challenged and nudged gently to the edge of my comfort zone and perhaps a little beyond (of which, more later).

Take Karen Campbell for example. She offered extremely valuable insights into the problems black people face with self-identity and experience of prejudice. She recalled the many times she had been asked the question, 'Where do you come from?', and when she answered with a perfectly straightforward response of 'Tottenham' (Karen is very, very proud of Tottenham), the question would be repeated, '...ah yes, but where do you *come* from?' Such was Karen's sunny disposition and totally non-judgemental manner that I felt able to confess to her in one of the post talk discussion groups that I had myself put the question in that way to black people without any understanding of how offensive that is or how it can contribute to the erosion of a sense of identity or rootedness. Having listened to Karen, I think I begin to understand. I shall not be asking that question again. Not in that way.

Or take Alex Clare-Young, known to me in advance as he* and his wife contributed to a series of videos that had done the rounds on the Anglican Parish circuit last year as part of the Church of England's 'Living in Love and Faith' conversation about sex and gender issues. I had not knowingly ever met a transgender person before and simply spending time chatting to Alex & Jo over breakfast helped me to overwrite all those assumptions that lurked inside my rather suburban sheltered subconscious. This super-intelligent and articulate URC minister explained in his talk with great patience for what must be his

umpteenth time, why thinking and talking about gender solely in binary terms (male/female) is unhelpful and simply doesn't reflect the diversity of God's people, which is to be celebrated.

Alex's contribution to the conference was very personal, as was the talk by the extraordinary Iain Macdonald whose account of his struggles to realise his vocation as a minister in light of his openly gay orientation was at times, heart-breaking. Delegates at the conference collectively gasped on hearing about some of the obstacles that the church put in Iain's way and of the sheer hypocrisy of some church leaders involved. As well as being one of the speakers, Iain led our worship sessions with great grace and gentleness, and the thought that his obvious calling to the ministry could have been squashed before it had begun is frankly scandalous.

Of the two other speakers, it was unfortunate that the first speaker at the conference, Fiona Bennett had to deliver her wide-ranging and carefully crafted discourse on the return of hope after despair (named as 'respair') remotely over Zoom, with the inevitable loss of immediacy that that involves. My attention to Fiona's talk was not helped by the fact that I had just spent over an hour in a queue on the M25 on one of the hottest days of the year, as I struggled to make my way to the conference venue. Obviously, I made it, but late, hungry and unpleasantly sticky. I look forward to hearing Fiona again sometime when I might be a tad more receptive.

The last speaker, Helen Garton, told us about her ministry at the URC church in Cumnor, Oxford, with whom she has developed a defiantly inclusive ministry. Helen's talk was for me probably the most challenging of all the talks, as she revealed her rather uncompromising approach to inclusivity which left me with a question about how we

relate to those we disagree with whilst remaining faithful to our own understanding of the faith. I have in my mind a comment by Canon Paul Ostreicher in a letter to the Church Times recently about disagreements in the Church of England over same sex blessings. The Canon writes:

It is futile to try to be of one mind on all the great issues facing our world. If we cannot live and work together in love, respecting our diverse ethical convictions, our faith will not deserve to be taken seriously....to love each other conditionally is not love at all. (Church Times. 5 August 2022)

To my mind, unconditional love applies as much to the liberals as to the conservatives; should we not love even those who are not prepared to love in that way?

But how marvellous to end a conference with fresh questions as well as newly formed thoughts and notions; it really wouldn't be a FTB conference if it were any other way, would it?

I am happy to report that the spirit of enquiry and insightful, thoughtful debate is very much alive and kicking, which for me certainly does 'keep hope alive'.

Thank you to all participants, speakers and organisers for such a wonderful conference.

*Forgive me if the pronoun is not as you would choose Alex.

Nick Straw.

This was my first time at a Free to Believe conference so I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but the weekend was very enjoyable, both the formal sessions with speaker, and the informal conversations at other times.

We heard from a range of speakers, some talking more personally and others more academically with a number of themes in common, reminding us both how far we have come but how much there is still to do in building a genuinely inclusive church. We heard from Karen Campbell about her own identity and experiences of black URC members, and that there is more to do to become an anti-racist church, while both Helen Garton and Iain MacDonald spoke about their own histories as gay people called to ministry. Meanwhile other papers created a framework to help us think collectively about the way forward.

Starting the conference Fiona Bennett spoke on keeping alive, and introduced us to the concept of 'respair' – the return of hope after a period of despair, reminding us that there are many ways the gift of hope is manifested in our individual and collective lives, and a message needed as we still grapple with the long term effects of the pandemic.

Of course, there is a large grey area between hope and despair, and Alex Clare-Young invited us to think beyond binary, either/or, them and us thinking, particularly in terms of gender identity but also much more widely, giving us a tool to help us move beyond simplistic certainties, in terms of how we understand our faith and the language that we use to talk about God.

Nicholas Jones

Well written Auto/Biographies or diaries have always fascinated me, whether of saints or scoundrels. Being a slow reader, over the years I have often spent weeks journeying through door-step volumes of the genre. How much more absorbing therefore to hear from the lips of the subjects themselves the stories of call to, and persistence in changing attitudes for the better in church and society, when the cause profoundly engages with their own life experience. Karen Campbell, Iain McDonald and Helen Garton, without pretension gave frank, clear accounts of their fears, hopes, joys and pain on their own respective and continuing paths towards acceptance for BAME and LGBTQI+ people within the life, service and ordained ministry of the church. As a 'Zooming', gate-crashing Methodist there were particular resonances for me in Helen's account of her progress in and out of Methodist ordained ministry. I heard her in penitence. My gratitude to those who at the last minute made my and others' inclusion in the conference possible via Zoom. The three talks to which I refer were the only ones I could listen to, given other commitments. The technology worked. Being a nosey creature, I would have loved to get a glimpse of the 'live' audience, to which no doubt a Camroux response might be, *get your body there next time!*

Tony Barnes

To be honest, I booked to go on the Free to Believe Conference for only my second time because I thought I could make it a little post-Covid-restrictions holiday. I fancied sharing a glass of wine or two with like-minded people. And that's how it was! It was warm, it was sunny; the wine was cheap and good, the terrace at High Leigh was hospitable and the conversations were good-humoured and interesting.

The theology was practical. I quite like books and I wasn't sure about that. But of course our theology is shaped by our shifting experience of the world as it is, The talks - all of them - arose from personal experience and were riveting, and helped shift the way I think about God and people on the margins. What's stayed with me especially - perhaps because the subject matter was newish to me, and I was expecting to feel guilty and stupid and didn't - was Alex Clare Young's presentation on *Beyond Binary*. I found out that non-binary thinking is about *everything* - gender and identity and also the way we talk and interact. It's also about God, who can't be confined to he/she, good/bad, powerful/ vulnerable, but is fluid and playful, and whose omnipotence expresses itself in infinite possibilities. *That* just doesn't *Keep Hope Alive* - it sends a whole load of new plates spinning, fountains flowing, lights burning, ideas buzzing. More of that, please.
Maggie Hindley

Victoria Turner- The Newness of a Youth Voice?

The attention captured by *Young, Woke and Christian: Words From a Missing Generation* (London: SCM Press, 2022) has been amazing. The chapter contributors and I were invited to lead a week on Iona for the Iona Community, we had a session at Greenbelt Festival, at the Student Christian Movement National Gathering, at Church Action against Poverty and at some theological seminaries too. As the sales reach 1,000, I'm caught thinking about how the market for a youth voice has become so niche and such a rarity?

The book aims to argue against the rhetoric surrounding young people and their views about faith and the world as expounded by "youth experts". Even the term "missing generation" makes me feel uncomfortable. If young people are absent that means they are not there contribute to the life of the church- but are they absent? Maybe

in local URC congregations we might struggle to find younger groups, but the Youth Assembly and General Assembly is attended by a plethora of youth. Why does the church want young people anyway? Is it just to fill their quota so they can go on doing exactly the same thing as they normally do? Steve Aisthorpe in his *The Invisible Church* (2016) interviewed a young person who exclaimed, 'surely churches exist to promote the gospel and Christianity, but it seems to me like they fossilize it instead.' We take our structures that allow young people to contribute to the life of the URC for granted. As I made friends from other denominations, I realized that these mechanisms do not always exist for others. The Church of Scotland has no youth gathering and young people do not get a vote in the General Assembly, the Methodists only get 3 youth reps to their General Assembly, the Church of England similarly have youth reps who cannot vote and have to be last to speak in the General Synod. So, what would it look like, I thought, if young people had a platform to talk about their relationship with the church themselves, rather than having to be "studied" by an academic to get their voices across in a systematic way. The answer was that we think about the church a lot, but not the church divorced from the world.

Hence the word "woke." The church needs to be awake to the injustices in our world. I haven't used the word woke to put us on a pedestal and say that we have all the right answers. Instead, I'm using it in response to how the word woke is used as a derogatory label for the left-wing politics and activist mentalities many young people hold. An attendee to a webinar I went to about the economy and climate voiced that they thought young people only protested about the climate because it made them feel better. Alongside the reaction to the 'Dismantling Whiteness' Conference in Oxford on twitter who called us "woke" for unsettling white privilege in theology. Woke was used to

highlight these ideas as utopian, naive- as outside of the realm of rationality and possibility. But the church should be all these things- it should be counter-culturally striving towards the Kingdom of God- which surely will not be comfortable because the Kingdom of God will not look like our world today.

Additionally, as I researched the word woke I was amazed at its beautiful legacy. Angela Davis traces it back to the foundations of intersectionality, as black women in the States realized they had to live differently as early as 1850 to overcome their double discrimination as black women. We can also think of James Cone and James Baldwin as they argued for the beauty of black in a world designed to worship whiteness. We also have Frantz Fanon and his revealing of how black people have to hide their real selves to fit in and Allan Boesak's black consciousness written in the 1970's as a reaction against apartheid.

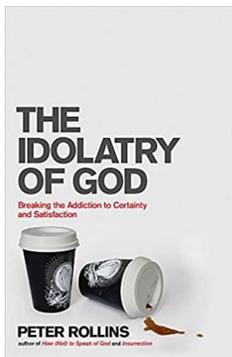
Needing to be woke, aware, or awake then is not new (and I've not even touched upon the many other streams of liberation theology). The chapters in *Young, Woke and Christian* cover climate change, interfaith, sexuality, gender, food poverty, homelessness and more. But young people pushing these issues onto the church is not new either. The Student Christian Movement had a famous saying of reading the bible in one hand with the newspaper in the other. From 1892 young people in the SCM pushed the churches firstly together as they catalyzed the start of the ecumenical movement, and secondly into the world as they pushed the need for sharing the gospel with those outside of the West (I could insert another article here about the problems of this but we'll move on today), aiding refugees in a time of war, acting against poverty, antiracism, and more recently they have been pioneering conversations about sexuality and LGBTQI+ inclusion in the churches.

As I come to reach the finish line on my PhD I am also becoming increasingly aware of the immense help and love previous generations involved in the URC and Council for World Mission have been. John Parry gifted me his incredible legacy of books, one of which named *Wounded Healers: Reflections on Training in Mission*. This was published by CWM in 1996 in memory of a URC young person Simon Bound (1973-95) who participated in the yearlong youth training program from 1994-5. Training in Mission brought together 10-15 young people from around the world to two different contexts to learn about mission collectively. Roderick Hewitt, who wrote the introduction to this volume was surprised at how the young people did not write about what they had personally learnt but instead how the program had revealed how the church needed to change to transform the world. The young authors wrote about the need to stand in solidarity with indigenous people, overcome the HIV/AIDS stigma, listen to young people, learn how to lament, stand with the poor, fight with the disabled and lift up women. It was quite amazing how my CWM scholarship for my PhD studies had allowed me to create something so similar for my own context in 2022 as the CWM TIM participants had been moved to create in 1996.

I'm hoping that by explaining how *Young, Woke and Christian* is not new, the churches might be able to listen even more carefully and realized that it is not the wokeness of Millennials or Gen Y that we'll grow out of, but we're simply carrying on our own legacy.

Victoria Turner- University of Edinburgh.

THE IDOLATRY OF GOD , by Peter Rollins (paperback £8.99 from Amazon, Kindle edition £3.99) is reviewed by Claire Wilson.



During my evangelical childhood we were constantly told via sermons, hymns and choruses that God wanted us to be free from all doubts, uncertainties and confusions. These could be replaced with the assurance that as “saved” individuals we were safely on the way to heaven.

Rollins, on the other hand, invites us to look for a form of salvation which can be experienced not beyond, but rather within, our world of confusion, embracing those aspects of our humanity which make us afraid, and finding satisfaction and joy in facing up to the difficulties all of us inevitably encounter day by day.

Rollins depicts the multitude of advertised offers and proposals we are deluged with as we go about life. We are constantly promised contentment, fulfilment and fortune if we adopt a particular lifestyle, buy a certain product and so on. And he suggests that in a sense the church, or at least many of its branches, has simply “joined the party”, marketing goods which will fill the gaps in our lives. In his words, “Luxury car, financial success, fame or Jesus---they all pretty much promise the same satisfaction.” Whether we perceive this God as reality or fiction, the potential benefits we associate with this divine being’s existence are very similar. Early in his book, (hence its title), Rollins argues that in this way many versions of the modern church effectively reduce God to an idol, on to whom we project whatever we most ardently desire.

The reality is, however, that the fulfilment of our wishes and longings, whatever form they may take, will not miraculously transform us into people who are permanently freed from all previous experiences of loss, pain or emptiness. Rollins' proposal is that we let go of our endless future-based "wish-list." By giving up our quest for the ultimate fulfilment of our hopes and dreams, we can find ourselves discovering instead a more beautiful satisfaction here and now. "Not one that promises to make us whole and remove our suffering, but one that promises joy in the midst of our brokenness and new life in the very embrace of our pain." The process comes with a cost, however: as we make this move, we can expect to experience a transitional sense of alienation and separation within ourselves: this comes with our recognition that the idol we have adhered to does not actually exist.

From where, though, we may ask, does the author derive his ideas? Rather to my surprise, he turns to the Bible. He looks, for example, at Ecclesiastes, in which life is repeatedly presented as meaningless. In this Old Testament book Rollins discerns a deeper message, namely that if we let go of God as a religious idol, we can find ourselves embracing and affirming our daily experience as it is.

And Rollins invites us in his scriptural reflections to turn our attention to Jesus and his death. These days there are two common interpretations of the crucifixion: the conservative doctrine of "penal substitution", and the more liberal view which sees the cross as the outcome of Jesus' unconditional love. For Rollins, though, what we witness in Christ's crucifixion is most powerfully embodied in his cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At that moment Jesus is experiencing the dramatic sense of separation within the self which comes to all of us through our discovery that the idol on to whom we have projected our wishes does not in fact exist.

Rollins explores his book's central theme via the scriptures, numerous films, plays and his personal experiences: too richly-stocked a collection for me to include in this brief review.

I can personally testify, though, that "The Idolatry of God" has reshaped my take on life. I recognise how much of my thinking has been focused on a list of "If only's": persuading myself that, for example, improved physical robustness, widened family-related independence, technological competence etc would take me to new and transforming places of happiness..

What, though, if I can let go of my focus on that unfulfilled future, and engage instead from this moment with the world in the company of a God who "avoids our direct gaze and invites us to be taken up by the beauty that surrounds us."? A God who is not to be approached as "an object that we must love, but as a mystery present in the very act of love itself"?

Jesus was self-forgetfully immersed moment by moment in the life of the world he inhabited. He was never fixated on presenting an image of himself to the people he spent time with. And we, if freed from idolatry, will find ourselves engaging with others at a new level, seeing ourselves through their lens as well as our own.

This is one of the most challenging books I have read for years. Where will it take me? Watch this space!

Claire Wilson

FREE TO BELIEVE READING PARTY

June 20-23 2023

At Westminster College Cambridge

KEEPING ALIVE THE RUMOUR OF GOD

by Martin Camroux

Leader David Peel

“This is an honest, brave, and forthright account of a preacher’s life and convictions. It is an exposition of liberal theology which shows both its apologetic potential and the sustaining power of its attendant spirituality for churches in ‘post-Christendom.’ Moving and provocative, it deserves respect and scrutiny in equal measure.” David Cornick

“Camroux offers us a thought-provoking and reflective account of the Christian faith in the light of the current challenging circumstances of the church. It emerges from a lifetime of learning, worn with the lightness of touch of a preacher. Rooted in the classical liberal tradition, this is reflection on the reality of God as encountered in human experience. He offers an account of the faith which, even where I might disagree, always makes me think more deeply.” —JOHN BRADBURY, General-Secretary URC

As usual with reading parties the group will be limited in size and there will be plenty of spare time to look round Cambridge or relax. The cost is £260.

Further details and a booking form online at freetobelieve.org.uk

The book is available from bookshops or from Martin Camroux at 4 Sorrel Close Colchester CO4 5UL for £17 including postage.