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Free to Believe



An occasional magazine for *Free to Believe*

Summer 2023

Contents

Christian Witness of Faith: Some Basic Principles	David R Peel	page 4
O Holy Spirit of Fire	Hildegard of Bingen	page 9
The View from Mount Nebo	Martin Camroux	page 11
Reflections on the Reading Party	Nick Straw David Parkin	page 16 page 17
Book Review: <i>The Jesus Puzzle</i>	Graham Hellier	page 19

READING PARTY 2023

Welcome to the Summer 2023 edition of *Briefing*, which mostly contains reports and reflections on the *Free to Believe* Reading Party that was held at Westminster College, Cambridge, in July. The book under consideration was Martin Camroux's 2020 publication *Keeping Alive the Rumour of God* – a title which perhaps sums up in a few words what *Free to Believe* is all about.

The Reading Party offered up much to digest. How, as church people, can we spread the rumour of God when we are so concerned about the future of the Church itself? How do we faithfully follow the Jesus who honoured and respected his faith and its scriptures, yet sought its radical reform? In what ways do we experience God inside and outside the Church?

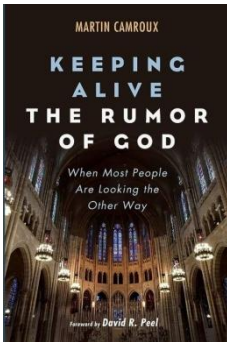


The Reading Party was led by the URC theologian David Peel, whose article on the following pages, along with Martin Camroux's Reading Party sermon *The View From Mount Nebo* invite us to explore these and other vital questions.

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CHRISTIAN WITNESS OF FAITH: SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES

David R Peel



This short statement is based on notes I made for the 2023 “Free to Believe” Reading Party when I was facilitating a discussion of Martin Camroux’s, *Keeping Alive The Rumour of God* (Wipf & Stock, 2020).

There are only two types of Christians: first, those who are Apostles, the earliest followers of Jesus, who post-Easter found in Jesus the answer to the most basic questions concerning human existence, and, secondly, those who follow *after* the Apostles, where the word “after” carries not only chronological connotations but material content which connects all Christians to those who first witnessed to Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. The Christian witness of faith has evolved over time, its evolution revealing not only *repetition* and *development* but also *mutations* that break the connection with its origins. One of the tasks of theology is to analyse expressions of Christian witness so that we are able to celebrate the connections whilst eschewing the mutations.

Theology is the process and product of critical reflection on the Christian witness of faith. First, it is a process: we subject expressions of Christian witness to analysis by asking and answering questions such as: Does this witness stand within the stream of witness that flows from the Apostles? Or, to put it another way, Is it congruent with the earliest examples of that witness we find in the New Testament? But along with a line of questioning concerning *appropriateness* to the Jesus tradition another line of investigation is also involved, one which asks the question: Is this expression of Christian witness *credible* in the modern world? Does it satisfy the minds, gladden the hearts and drive the wills of contemporary

people? Contemporary Christian witness has evolved out of an interchange between the questions each age has posed to Christian communities. It has never been a static phenomenon; development as well as repetition has been present from day one. It is a living phenomenon open to questions about its *appropriateness* and *credibility*, in order that possible mutations can be eradicated. Theology therefore results, secondly, in a product, a new statement of the Christian witness of faith.

The Christian witness of faith requires *holistic* understanding. If you will pardon my cod psychology, we should never forget that human beings are made up of hearts and wills as well as minds. Our witness of faith cannot be fully understood if any of the three dimensions of being human are not taken into consideration. Witness is not just an intellectual matter; nor does it just move our inner spiritual being; nor is it solely a motivation for a radical activism. It is rather a combination of all three elements. The Christian witness of faith is praxis, an attitude and commitment of the whole person.

Psychometric testing is a common feature of professional Western life. It helps us understand who we are as individuals and how we respond naturally to various human encounters. To continue with the cod psychology, we learn from it how we tend to use our minds, hearts and wills in living situations and which of the dimensions of human personality we prioritize over the others. It allows us then to learn how to compensate for our natural tendencies, hopefully making us in the process more rounded individuals. We can thus learn to live with our personality “distortions” as we strive after greater “wholeness”. Or, to use Heideggerian language, we can use it to move from *inauthentic* to more *authentic* existence.

Having a witness of faith is not a state of affairs limited to religious people, let alone Christians. Human beings are distinguished from other creatures

in the evolutionary process in that we not only have life but also lead our lives. We do not live solely by instinct but are self-conscious about what we do with our lives. And we are able to make free decisions about how we live from among a myriad of options available to us, unless injustice or oppression drastically reduces our freedom. That aside, we not only exist but know we exist and to certain extents can choose how we exist, either *authentically* or *inauthentically*. In a Christian context, *authentic* faith is a way of living which reflects the call placed upon Christians by Jesus to love God and those whom God puts a claim on our lives. But there are other forms of praxis that claim *authenticity*. They belong to the non-Christian religions and what we might call the “secular faiths”. Having a witness of faith is a common feature of being human: the important question then concerns that faith’s content or, to put it another way, what underpins the *praxis*. To use the language of Paul Tillich, we all have an “ultimate concern”: the ten thousand dollar question concerns the ultimate concern’s identity.

For existentialist thinkers like Martin Heidegger, it is only when persons come face to face with the ultimate fact that they are “beings-born-unto-death” that they acquire the kind of lucid outlook of life (*praxis*) which makes them sense the triviality of many of the concerns to which the daily round is often devoted. They are then drawn away from the crowd and in the process take the path to *authenticity* as individuals taking responsibility for their lives. This new resolve is rooted in a realization that we exist self consciously, in relation to others, even the whole of reality itself. It leads to *some praxis*, a faith by which we live our lives. The *theological* questions then become: Is the faith we live by appropriate to the Jesus tradition? Is it credible and life-enhancing?

German existentialist philosophy provides us with two key terms for understanding our witness of faith: *existentiell* (our primary faith) and *existential* (our reflective faith or belief). *Existential* faith is *existentiell*

faith drawn up to a fully reflective level. Thinking through this important distinction in Christian terms we can say that the faith which saves, what puts us in a relationship with God, is *existentiell* faith. It might then bring us some comfort to know that, in God's eyes, what is necessary in our relationship with God is not our belief/theology, but an inner attitude/trust which commits the whole person to God. What we are called upon to achieve is a correspondence between the *existentiell* and *existential* that ensures our *theology* is an adequate reflection of our *praxis*. Am I actually describing my witness of faith, or am I merely receiving things second hand?

In dialogue with others, particularly those of different or no religious commitment, we sometimes find that, after tunnelling under our respective *existential* faith claims, there may be a great deal in common at the primary faith level (*existentiell*), so much so that we feel able to engage together with them on social and political projects. Even if we may not see eye to eye with others at the reflective level of faith (*existential*) it is perfectly normal to find common humanitarian aspirations with people at the level of primary faith (*existentiell*). Such humanitarian common ground ought to encourage us to look for "the rumour of God" beyond the church walls. The fact that Jesus himself stood in an authentic religious tradition makes it clear that God cannot be *confined* to a religious tradition post-dating Jesus (or indeed any of the religious traditions that believe they are the only true religion). When it comes to God's mission (*missio dei*) it is rather short-sighted to believe that God would have (so to speak) put all the eggs in one basket. The results of inter-faith work make it difficult to continue with an *exclusivist* understanding of the place and point of Christianity. Not only do I no longer believe that the truth about God and the divine engagement with the cosmos is *confined* to the stream of witness flowing from the earliest witnesses to Jesus but I am increasingly made aware of ways in which it may not even be defined by it.

We are also pointed, therefore, to a wider ecumenism than that which has been a URC obsession these last fifty years: one concerned not so much with church polity and practice (though that remains of limited importance) but with “the whole inhabited earth” (not just the *humanum* but the entire cosmos). Everywhere I go in the church, though, I encounter what seems to be an “ultimate concern” about the future of the institutional church; everywhere I go outside the church the “ultimate concern” of thinking people is about the future of the planet. One of our problems is that we find ourselves getting wound up about the church rather than what it points to, what it is supposed to express and the end it is expected to move towards. Unless I am mistaken, that is to confuse “means” with “ends”, which in theological parlance is “idolatry”.

At the root of many of our theological problems lies a failure to see that the scientific worldview which almost totally encompasses us is incapable of delivering much of great insight beyond the “world” it is most successful in exploring and explaining. [If atheists with great minds think that the concept of God can be used in ways typical of how we treat finite objects then all we can do is invite them to a course in elementary theological understanding; and if preachers want to treat God-talk in similar wooden ways, outside its life-blood in symbol, story, metaphor and myth, I suggest we have even greater problems – I can excuse Richard Dawkins for not knowing better, but it’s rather more difficult to sympathise with some of our preachers!] The problem is not new and, relatively recently, I have found a distinction made by Samuel Taylor Coleridge most helpful in resolving it — and, please remember, before becoming a theologian I trained as a natural scientist: “*understanding*”, the science of phenomena — thinking that separates, analyses, measures, classifies and knows in terms of cause and effect and is concerned largely with means rather than ends; and “*reason*” or “*knowing*” — conscious self-knowledge, an intuition of ourselves as related to ultimate reality, a knowing that is religious/poetic, a seeing beyond space and time, the organ of the

supersensuous, the faculty of the infinite, the knowledge of the whole considered as one. To use Coleridge's terms, no amount of trying to "understand" God will ever enable us to "know" God. As I.T. Ramsey was fond of saying in an Oxford captivated by linguistic analysis, "God" is logically odd!

David R. Peel

July 2023

Hildegard of Bingen – a poem read at the Reading Paty

Hildegard of Bingen was a Benedictine German abbess who lived for 81 years in the 12th century. She was a writer, a poet, a mystic, a theological visionary, a spiritual guide, a medical practitioner. She a mother superior, the founder of two monasteries and the person considered to be the founder of natural history in Germany. In her spare time, she wrote music and Hildegard of Bingen is of the best known and most recorded composers of sacred monophony. In fact she was a renaissance woman about two centuries before her time:

O Holy Spirit of Fire,
life in the life of all life,
holy are you,
enlivening all things.

Holy are you,
a healing balm
to the broken.
Holy are you,
washing
blistered wounds.

O Holy Breath,

O Fire of Life,
O Sweetness in my breast
infusing my heart
with the fine scent of truth.

O Great Way that runs through all,
from the heights,
across the earth,
and in the depths,
you encompass all and unify all.

From you the clouds stream
and the ether rises;
from your stones precious water pours,
springs well up and birth waterways,
and the earth sweats green with life.

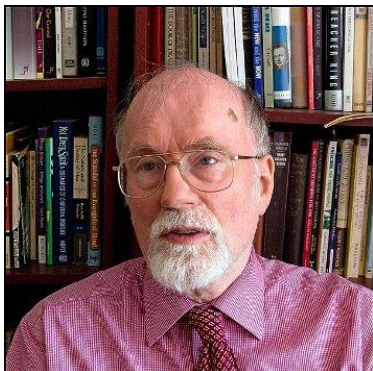
And eternally do you bring forth knowledge
by the breath of wisdom.

All praise to you,
you who are the song of praise
and the joy of life,
you who are hope and the greatest treasure,
bestowing the gift of Light.

O Holy Spirit of Fire,
life in the life of all life,
holy are you,
enlivening all things.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

THE VIEW FROM MOUNT NEBO – Martin Camroux



In the course of 50 years someone has walked out on my sermons only twice. Once was when I said apartheid was morally evil. He was kind enough to wait at the door of the church in order to explain to me when the service that I knew nothing. The other was over gay rights. The lady resigned her membership and as a lay preacher. They were both

good liberal issues.

A little special Free to Believe introduction that I wouldn't normally give. This is a story of Moses – I emphasize the word story. "The things that you're liable to read in the Bible, It ain't necessarily so". Was Moses a historical person. I am not certain. If he was were those who came out of Egypt the same people as those who were at Mont Sinai? Possibly. Was there a conquest of Palestine – not on anything like the sale the story suggests. But the story is not reducible to the archology. It lives as an expression of belief. When I look out from the walls of Troy, I See Achilles and Hector through the eyes of Homer, When I go to Mount Nebo, I see Moses through the eyes of the story tellers of Israel. The history is not the thing, the story is.

So, with that health warning. Mount Nebo, is a striking outcrop to the east of the Dead Sea near Jericho. From its heights you have a breathtaking view in all 4 directions. And here Moses died. He has spent the last 40 years of his life trying to forge a nation out of an army of ex-slaves, and dreaming of a promised land where they can be free. And from here he can see it at last, the land he had described to his people to keep them

hanging on. He can see it but he will never enter it. He will not be going any further.

I looked over Jordan
And what did I see
Coming for to carry me home
A band of angels coming for me
Coming for to carry me home.

There will be no Hollywood ending, just the bittersweet reality that time is running out and there is nothing more to do except to imagine what it will be like someday from afar. He is buried somewhere here. The people mourn his death for thirty days and then move on into their future with a new leader.

It was this scene which was in the mind of Martin Luther King the night before he died when had a premonition of his death. He knew now the task of creating racial justice was one he would have to leave unfinished. As indeed it is unfinished now. "I've been to the mountaintop. And I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!" One dies reasonably young, the other old, but both with unfinished business, leaving work that others must take up.

Something like this is true of all of us. However old we live our best work is never finished: our parenting, our service to the causes we care about, our work, a family, there is always something we have to pass on to others. The great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said this: "Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a life time; therefore we must be saved by hope," and went on: "Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be

saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love.”

The Moses story is by no means where Israel’s faith is going to end. It contains savagery on all sides.

Look at cathedrals. One of the things that’s most moving about them is that they were inter-generational. No one individual was there from start to finish. Generations of carpenters, roofers, stonemasons worked on them. A young boy might sign on as an apprentice, learn the trade by practicing it every day, year in and year out, teach his children, who work beside him and in time a grandchild would begin the process and when the now old man died, his work would continue on and on. This is how it is. The things that matter in our lives rarely finish with us. They go on.

Think work. At Christmas my wife Margaret retired from Colchester Borough Homes. Since Covid she’s been working from home taking calls from people with problems. People who need repairs, people who are behind with their rent, people who have problems with neighbours, People who have mould on the ceiling, people who are facing evictions. Quite a few have mental problems. Come 1 January she handed it all on. Now it was someone else’s responsibility. Surprisingly she missed it less than I expected.

Think family life. Our family life stretches back through the generations. Margaret’s relation who was a minister in Wimbledon had a son who around 1900 emigrated to Canada where he became a cowboy, to the United States where he was a soldier in the Spanish-American war, then a Congregational minister in Walthamstow, before converting to Catholicism, and becoming a journalist on the Catholic Herald. Makes me look pretty dull by comparison, although I suppose there is still time. And

then after us it goes on. We had two children who spent many happy hours on a little tricycle and a rocking horse. Then when they too old for them we put them up in the loft. When we moved we took them with us to another loft. Last year at last we had our first grandchild. Now they're down again. When our granddaughter comes to see us, while she gives great whoops of laughter as our son pushes her round on the tricycle that he and his sister used to ride, Family life is inter-generational. "Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime",

It's a good thing to remember and acknowledge and even celebrate. The important work you and I are privileged to do, our business, our profession, in education, in our families, began long ago, before us, and by God's grace will continue after we are gone. Church is just like that too. Church a chorus singing God's praises from all eternity. We are privileged to join during our lifetime. But the music was there before we added our voices, and will continue after our voices are silent.

Moses was not going to experience the final completion of his life's work. Joshua, a young leader full of wisdom and courage, would lead the people into the land and over the years secure it. Moses would descend from Mount Nebo and die. Never was there another like him, the Bible says. We finish what we can and then hand it on in the belief that it will not be in vain trusting it will not be wasted. The idea is taken up in one of the great psalms, Psalm 90. God is eternal; God's steadfast love will never come to an end.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, . . .
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Our lives on the other hand are limited and fragility—like a dream, like grass, and then rather poignantly the Psalmist issues a plea:

Prosper for us, the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands.

Moses peering into the promised land, his work over, but not quite complete.

O prosper the work of our hands.

Us here in church living out faith in our time, give me the faith and trust that others will pick it up and bring it to conclusion.

O prosper the work of our hands.

What do you suppose Moses saw from the heights of Mt. Nebo? He could see Jericho, of course. He could see the Dead Sea to the west and the great plain immediately to the North. I think he saw more than that. I think he saw, for a moment at least, all the way to Judah, to a little town called Bethlehem. I think he saw and knew that God's work of creating and redeeming creation would go on, that his labour was not in vain.

"Nothing worth doing," the great theologian said, "can be accomplished in a life time; therefore we must be saved by hope,". Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love." And we are saved by a love that accompanies us all our days; love that forgives our sins, and wipes tears from our eyes; love that opens us to the beauty of life; love that inspires us to work for God's kingdom to come while we live and to trust God to bring it to completion. Thanks be to God. Amen.

FREE TO BELIEVE READING PARTY 2023 – Nick Straw

“We tend to believe the things that those around us believe”. Thus saith Martin Camroux, he of the vividly patterned floral shirts and wayward belt strap. The 2023 reading party had commenced. Three days of discussion followed, based on Martin’s latest book ‘Keeping alive the rumour of God when most people are looking the other way’. The format of the event was slightly different from previous reading parties, in that whilst it was based on a book, there was no slavish following of chapter headings or detailed analysis of text. This was to be a more general discussion on the big themes raised in the book, facilitated principally by David Peel, *“the brightest theologian in the URC”* according to Martin. By the end of the reading party, I suspect that many if not all participants would fully endorse that view!

My big ‘take away’ point from the week was Martin’s emphasis on the importance of experiencing God through beauty, or rather ‘as beauty itself’, as Paul Tillich would have it. Art, poetry of course, music & architecture, and personal relationships were all vehicles for Martin’s experience of the transcendental nature of God. As an Anglican fairly high up the candle, as we like to say, I teased Martin by ‘outing’ him as a closet Anglo-Catholic. But joking apart (or was I?), I found the mixture of reformed, scripture-based, Jesus-centred Protestantism with ancient mysticism completely fascinating.

The week ended with feedback from the participants. One gentleman said that the concept of God had disappeared for him and that he was discovering what a Christianity without God looked like. At the other end of the spectrum, a lady acknowledged in a very moving way that she had lost God in the teachings of Jack Spong some years back but had rediscovered God during the course of the reading party. Powerful stuff.

David Peel was the final respondee, who revealed his 'lightbulb moment' to be a realisation that where we stand largely determines what we see, which I thought neatly echoed Martin's opening remarks. The meeting may have come, in one sense, full circle, but my goodness, what a journey we had been on. Completely absorbing and enormously enjoyable.

Nick Straw

THE MYSTERY OF GOD – David Parkin

On the section of the FTB website about the committee, the bit about me says I am still trying to find an idea of God that I can relate to in this age of quantum physics and mind-blowing cosmology.

As I approach my eightieth birthday those words are still appropriate, but recently a friend recommended a new book by Karen Armstrong called *Sacred Nature*. Quite early on she quotes from Wordsworth's poem *Tintern Abbey*, ten lines as close as I've come yet to an idea of God I can relate to;

"And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean, and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,

A motion and a spirit that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things."

Wordsworth won't call this God, but it seems to me he does have a sense of the sacred. I'd spent years thinking about it, trying to define God, without any success so until *Sacred Nature* I was reasonably happy with either of two possibilities. First with the German theologian Karl Rahner who saw God as the infinite mystery, or with Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, who once wrote, "*God is something so simple: always to live for others, never to seek one's own*

advantage.” I liked both, despite their seeming contrast, and they still have something to say. But now Wordsworth has it for me. It seems to fit with what an ancient Jewish philosopher called Philo thought; that God is the mind of the universe and each person bears a piece of that divine mind. And more recently Martin Camroux quoted some words by Hildegard of Bingen that speak to the same idea, *“O Holy Spirit of Fire, life in the life of all life.”*

Beyond such thinking I wonder if we are therefore called to the idea of deep ecumenism, of a time coming when all the world’s religions see themselves as complementing one another rather than competing. I have this vision of what I call “sacred space” where within any community there would be a space that could be sacred to all faith communities, and around the sacred space there would be other community facilities such as meeting rooms, eating rooms, therapy rooms, talking rooms, silence rooms and so on. Most of all there would be an acceptance that no one faith has a monopoly of truth - that God is found in many ways.

I would reckon any chance of something like that happening is a long way off but, for me, all the world’s religions are at best about two things: how human beings live together in life-enhancing community and in harmony with the rest of creation, and how we relate to whatever we call the divine. So I dare to hope it might at least be possible.

David Parkin

‘Keeping Alive the Rumour of God’ is available from bookshops or from Martin Camroux at 4 Sorrel Close Colchester CO4 5UL for £17 including postage.

BOOK REVIEW – Graham Hellier
THE JESUS PUZZLE

Brenda Watson - former Director of the Farmington Institute for Christian Studies and an educational consultant.

Christian Alternative Books pp117 ISBN 978-1-80341-012-8 pp117.

Our sceptical age has obscured the face of Jesus with major consequences. Many writers simply overlook his significance in Western history. Those who interpret the gospels discount crucial elements - not least, those seen to be supernatural. Committed Christians find themselves following whoever can present a fresh approach - from Bultmann to Crossan, trying to find 'the key' to understanding.

Brenda Watson, in her study, *“The Jesus Puzzle”*, challenges us to remember the guiding principles that inform all historical study and which should not be laid aside in assessing a figure of such importance. It is not enough to present the Galilean holy man, the revolutionary, the wandering healer, the Jewish rabbi, and more, unless we have treated the sources with respect, free, as far, as we are able, from secular assumptions.

This book offers a valuable opportunity to re-examine the source material of Christianity, to reflect again on the roles of faith and reason, and to approach afresh the the miracles, not least the miracle of the Resurrection. Watson stresses the need for initial trust, when dealing with unique claims. Whatever conclusions we reach, the very existence of Christianity in history is seen as a miracle in itself. This demands an explanation and therein lies the challenge.

The Revd. Graham Hellier, RE teacher (ret.) and author of “Free Range Christianity

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