

**On Returning to the Church: Practising Religion in a Neoliberal Age**  
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In 1999 I wrote an article for a collection whose purpose was to offer a range of perspectives on the future of Methodism at the turn of the millennium (Craske and Marsh 1999). In that article I described my reasons for leaving the church in which I had been brought up (Clack 1999). In one of those quirks of memory, I had completely forgotten writing this article until reminded of it by an academic researching people's reasons for church-leaving.<sup>1</sup> This reminder came at a strange time: I had recently returned to the church, indeed, to the same Methodist tradition I had previously left.

In what follows I reflect upon my reasons for this return which, when I revisited my previous piece, were strikingly similar to those that led me to leave. While those reasons reflect my own struggles to find a meaningful life, they also offer, I hope, some more general insights into the attraction of religious perspectives for some philosophers.

**The Heart Has Its Reasons**

It would be wrong to over-intellectualise my return to church. When feminist philosophers of religion like Pamela Sue Anderson argue for the significance of lived experience in the construction of knowledge (Anderson 1998), they offer a framework for considering religion that grounds it in the fullness of experience, not just in the out-workings of reason. Anderson is not alone in attempting to flesh out what makes for a religious position: Amy Hollywood focuses on the under-theorised role of religious practice (Hollywood 2004), while Tina Beattie challenges the tendency of philosophers of religion to focus on examining belief at the expense of "the quest for a more holistic way of being and living in the world"(Beattie 2004: 120).

It was not a simple engagement with the justifications for belief or non-belief that led to my return to Church practice. Rather, a mosaic of experiences paved the way over a number of years. I was not altogether conscious of the religious repositioning taking place. That does not surprise me: when it comes to religion, as with all other human activities, I subscribe to the Freudian view that unconscious desires and motivations shape our engagement with the world more than we might like. Logic, rationality and belief arrive rather late on the scene when it comes to the things that we do and believe (Clack 2012).

Some of these experiences were prompted by the aesthetic. I remember sitting in silence in Antoni Gaudi's extravagant church, the Sagrada Familia, in Barcelona, my eye following the delicate frond-like pillars up to the circle of light in its ornate ceiling. The use of vegetation in such a fabulous way opened up my sense of being part of the natural world, as well as the realisation that delight in the natural world can be just as much a part of Christianity as nature religions.

Some of these experiences were emotional. I recall being profoundly affected by the celebration of the Eucharist in a tiny, ancient, candlelit chapel on the island of Papa Westray, the wind howling in the eaves, the midsummer twilight playing on the walls. Exploring the reasons for my return is not to play down the importance of these stirrings of the heart. Religion is never simply a matter of belief. The attempt to respond to the arguments of the logical positivists in analytic philosophy of religion - such a central part of undergraduate courses - does a disservice if it colludes with the suggestion that religion is either rational and coherent or it is meaningless.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Charity Hamilton for drawing this piece to my attention.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne's *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, remains a crucial text for how the subject understands its role. For a defence of logical positivism that challenges my view of the role given to it in 20th century philosophy of religion, see Brian R Clack's essay 'Religious Belief and the Disregard of Reality' in *Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs*, edited by Joseph Carlisle, James Carter and Daniel Whistler, London: T & T Clark, 2011, pp. 261-287.

Philosophers of religion are increasingly aware of the disconnect between professional philosophy of religion and the practice of religion. Working with the resources to be found in continental philosophical traditions, increasing numbers are finding alternative ways of constructing the discipline's engagement with religion (Anderson 2010; Moody and Shakespeare 2012; Pattison 2001). Such approaches are not always without their own problems, most notably in the technical language that can leave non-specialists more adrift than when they started. This is unfortunate; not least because it suggests such alternative approaches are for a highly specialised audience rather than the wider (non-academic) world.

At this point, I feel compelled to introduce that most unfashionable of academic ideals, depth. The limited scope of professional philosophy to enable the exploration of richer ways of living and thinking made me hungry for spaces where this might not be dismissed but embraced. In the churches were places where I felt I would be able to cultivate depth. In *The Shaking of the Foundations* ([1949] 1962), Paul Tillich employed the language of depth psychology to develop a vision of Christian practise as a journey into the depths. Tillich is not an unproblematic figure,<sup>3</sup> but that should not render all he says worthless. Written in the aftermath of the Second World War, I still find his approach extremely helpful for shaping my life. The model he advocates requires moving beyond the surface of our lives to better self-knowledge and thus richer ways of being. If he was not able to live according to the standard he set, it does not mean that we should not try to follow this pattern.

Similarly, some churches may construe worship as another form of entertainment in an age of distractions. This does not rule out the possibility that some churches might cultivate space for silence, stillness and quiet reflection. Recent works by Sara Maitland (2009) and Diarmaid MacCulloch (2014) suggest the possibility of revisiting these neglected features of life which stand in stark contrast to a world shaped by what Ansgar Allen calls "the narcotic of constant activity" (Allen 2015: 6). That one might yearn for some kind of deep connection to the universe, or some deeper sense of one's self, can seem quaint and out of place in this noisy world.<sup>4</sup> Yet only the pursuit of depth meets my desire for the kind of serious enquiry that leads not just to knowledge, but to wisdom.

Bringing together academic philosophy with that quest for wisdom is no easy task. Philosopher and motorcycle mechanic Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soul Craft* (2010) goes some way to breaking the mould of academic philosophy. Crawford makes the case for manual labour as an undervalued way of establishing a meaningful life. This is an unusual book, weaving together personal experience and philosophical and social critique with an agenda for enabling better ways of living. That it is unusual says much about a professional philosophy removed from the issues facing people outside the academy. The downplaying of 'existential' themes that might speak to non-academics in favour of more arcane forms of discourse, valued for their cleverness, is a problem enshrined by the mechanisms determining academic merit. In the church there is the possibility of a place to do the serious reflection that is so difficult to pursue in the contemporary academy.

### **Reasons and Returning**

What surprised me on re-reading my 1999 article was the way in which the reasons I gave for leaving church mirrored my reasons for returning. Two aspects lay at the heart of that original decision. The first related to the Church's complicity in misogyny; the second (the aspect to which I gave greatest weight) concerned how best to understand the relationship between the divine and the world.<sup>5</sup> The Church has a long way to go when it comes to gender empowerment and the

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<sup>3</sup> See Hannah Tillich's *From Time to Time* (1973).

<sup>4</sup> See Mark Edmundsen, *Self and Soul: A Defence of Ideals*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard 2015 for a reappraisal of the values of the soul for the modern world.

<sup>5</sup> I am more comfortable using the word 'divine' than the word 'God'. That analytic philosophy of religion has obsessed about the concept of God as the expense of other religious concepts and practises is, I think,

acceptance of sexual diversity, but it alone cannot bear the weight of a sexist society. Misogyny remains a feature of life, with or without the church.<sup>6</sup> The continuing male-domination of political and cultural life suggests that it is not just the church that has a problem. Just as it makes sense to work to combat sexism in society, so recognising sexism in the church need not necessitate walking away, but might better be addressed by working with others to challenge it.

How best to value the world is the part of the article which continues to resonate. Contrary to the claims of my younger self, I am not now convinced that the exclusion of the Christian God from our understanding of that world offers a better way of enabling the positive flourishing of human beings. While I did not subscribe to Freud or Marx's view that the eradication of religion would necessarily lead to greater human happiness, the forms of religion I turned to were post-Christian (Clack 1999: 90-93). I am not now convinced that this post-Christian move is necessary. The desire for a form of religion that challenges assumptions of what constitutes political 'progress' and that takes seriously evil and suffering led me back to the symbol of the Cross. That we need to think again about what constitutes success and what makes for failure seems to necessitate the framework of a religion that places the realities of pain and loss at its heart.<sup>7</sup>

For an age confronted by the phenomenon of religious terrorism, it hardly needs saying that religion can be used by charlatans, the callous and the inadequate to justify their failure to care for others. Monotheism may be peculiarly problematic as it can lend itself all-too-easily to exclusive ways of thinking detrimental to the plurality of positions that Hannah Arendt suggests are necessary for a healthy public sphere (Arendt [1958] 1998).<sup>8</sup> We deceive ourselves, however, if we think the problems of mono-thinking are limited to the religious sphere. Consider the economic consensus which emerged in the late 1970s and which determined the political priorities of Western societies. This 'neoliberal' consensus embraced conservative and social democratic movements, going largely unchallenged until the global financial crisis of 2008.<sup>9</sup> David Harvey offers a succinct definition of its key features:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2005: 2).

Societies which have adopted this model have become increasingly subjugated to the demands of a triumphant and, ultimately, destructive capitalism (Goodchild 2002). Religious practice, I contend, provides a model for challenging such ideas. For me, this means returning to Christianity; for others it might be found in alternative religious forms. That religious practice offers the possibility of reaching out beyond the self and connecting with something beyond the desires of the individual

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extremely unhelpful: not least because the word 'God' can too-easily lead to assumptions that the divine is a being like ourselves, only greater.

<sup>6</sup> For an example, see Catharine Buni and Soraya Chemaly, 'The Unsafety Net: How Social Media Turned Against Women', *The Atlantic*, October 9, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Lewis' *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B Eerdmans, 2001, presents a powerful theological and cultural critique of some of the challenges facing contemporary ideas of meaning read through the narrative of the three days of Easter.

<sup>8</sup> See Laurel Schneider's critique of 'the logic of the One' in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, London: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> The history of neoliberalism is a complex one. While faith in the market, coupled with the commitment to an ideal of human freedom, might well be viewed as the 21st century hegemony, it takes on different forms reflecting its manifestation in particular cultural contexts (2005, chapter 4). Jamie Peck has gone so far as to describe these as "mongrel, shape-shifting forms" (Peck 2010: 276); Philip Mirowski, similarly, describes the difficulty of identifying neoliberalism as an ideology, suggesting the most effective way of understanding its hold on attitudes to economics, subjectivity and society is to consider it as a 'movable feast' (Mirowski 2014: 50), a 'Russian doll' (p. 43) of interlinking ideas, set out by the Mont Pelerin Society, which group around "general issues such as liberty and private initiative" (p. 47).

and economics enables different ways of thinking about the nature of human existence. It also, I think, offers the possibility of different, richer ways of being human.

### **Being Human in a Neoliberal Age**

Let us, first, consider the dominant model for human subjectivity which arises from neoliberal economic models. This model of subjectivity can be viewed as an inheritor of European Enlightenment vision of the human subject as rational, autonomous, and capable of choice. In its contemporary iteration, it takes on a particular economic construction, individual destiny being shaped through the ability to make rational choices in a market place; choices invariably shaped in terms of the ability to purchase and consume the material goods deemed necessary for a meaningful life.

That every aspect of life can be boiled down to a series of economic transactions suggests something of the problem this model has for understandings of what it means to flourish as a human being. In the reification of 'the Market' as the arbiter of all value, human life in all its wonderful, messy complexity is reduced to a series of figures on a spread sheet. The promoting of utility at the cost of all other considerations is not new (Arendt [1958] 1998; Scott 1998); the form it takes, at this point in late modernity, is. The lack of any other transcendent value to challenge the Market in the public arena lends itself to the diminishment not only of human life. As Philip Goodchild points out, this mindset has severe consequences for the wider ecosystem, seen as worthwhile only when formulated as a commodity that can be bought and sold (Goodchild 2002). Even an event as cataclysmic for this economic system as the 2008 global financial crisis did not undermine the desire that it 'should' work, Philip Mirowski noting the ease with which a crisis revealing the fragility of global capitalism was used to ensure a retrenchment of its values: the 'solution' to the problem was more competition, more privatisation, more of the same (Mirowski 2014).

Neoliberalism is successful because it gets people to see themselves in a way conducive to the needs of the market. The neoliberal subject is an *entrepreneurial* self. Viewed as a business, the aim is to maximise one's talents and skills in order to achieve the kind of successful, affluent life that all are deemed to desire. This competent self corresponds rather well to the vision we like to have of ourselves. Yet this model is not without an impact on ethical behaviour. Viewing the self as entrepreneurial necessitates the promotion of self-interest. Competition becomes a necessary way of considering our neighbours. Cooperation is only possible so long as I get something out of it. The goal of all this striving? One achieves the resources necessary for self-expression, the lifestyle I create being dependent upon my purchasing power (Rose 1999). When relationships are viewed principally as economic transactions, there is little space for the realisation that as social animals we need each other, not just to survive, but to flourish.

Recognising the importance of the social realm for shaping and sustaining us opens up the question of what makes for good community. My return to the church was paved by a craving for community: and not just the kind of community defined by the sameness of the people we meet through our work or the places we live, determined as they are by similar socio-economic groups. I wanted a greater sense of connection beyond those comfortable parameters. In part, the desire for diversity was met by my growing involvement with a political party. Here were a group of people - many I wouldn't have met in my ordinary shuffling between home and work - who were united by a broad set of shared ideals which they believed capable of creating a better kind of society, and which they were actively working to realise.

In returning to church, I deliberately sought out a similarly diverse group of people committed to a transcendent ideal for shaping the good life.<sup>10</sup> We might have differences in our respective theologies, but what we share unites us more than our differences. There is a shared recognition of something that is more than the self, something that is considered to transcend human desires and

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<sup>10</sup> The congregation at Cowley Road Methodist Church in Oxford is relatively small (between 35 and 40 regular attenders), but mixed in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and age.

preferences.<sup>11</sup> There is the desire to find a way of living well in the world. Others will find similar patterns outside organised religion. For me, it is in the community and shared practices of the church that I find a vital context for a more connected, more human way of living.

### Thinking Creatively

When I came out of the church, I did so in order to reclaim what I called rather grandly “the freedom to think” (Clack 1999: 96). The discussion of whether a particular theological idea was ‘Christian or not’ was a barrier to thinking creatively. Given a context where neoliberal paradigms are like the air we breathe (McLuhan 2005), providing space for challenges to these commonly accepted tropes makes the church feel less like a strait jacket and more like a place where countercultural ways of reflecting are possible.

That religious perspectives might enable different ways of thinking resonates with the role Michele Le Doeuff’s account of philosophical practice is playing in my feminist philosophy of religion. Towards the end of her essay on the exclusion of women from the history of philosophy (1989), Le Doeuff describes the pull of religion for those who, like her, are not religious but who are attempting to shape alternative accounts of philosophy:

Still confused, I now open Pascal - and I suddenly see why, however foreign the religious concepts of his work are to me, I feel more ‘at home’ in the *Pensees* than in any of the other classic texts. *It is because the religious perspective hints at this penumbra of unknowledge* (a penumbra which has nothing to do with the limits of reason), which metaphysics has denied. Here is a form of writing which does not claim to reconstruct and explain everything, which slides along the verge of the unthought, develops only by grafting itself on to another discourse, and consents to be its tributary. (1989: 127; my emphasis.)

The religious perspective, Le Doeuff argues, opens up ways of thinking which allow for uncertainty. The kind of religious practice I value is, likewise, more concerned with opening up than closing down our engagement with a universe that is so much more than human thought and society. That the universe transcends human thought and structures encourages a kind of humility, recognising in our smallness the greater reality of the cosmos. The recognition of limits enables resistance to the arrogant reductionism which dogs contemporary science, politics, economics and, indeed, forms of religion itself. For Le Doeuff, Pascal’s willingness to recognise openness undercuts temptations to absolutism in thinking. No one master or paradigm has the true answer. Accepting that this is the case opens up richer forms of philosophical practice. Rather than commit to one school of thought, or to one master, philosophy becomes simply that which we do. It is “an unfinished philosophical discourse, never closed and never concluded” (1989: 126); an incomplete practice that involves “the abandonment of any totalizing aim” (1989: 127).

Rejecting the role of the master obviously challenges commitment to any particular religion. Arguably Christianity has a particular problem given the role of Christ: as Rosemary Ruether asked in the early 1980s, “can a male saviour save women?” (Ruether 1983: 116) The question remains important, but given the variety of Christological approaches it need not be insurmountable. What Le Doeuff suggests is that religious frameworks can be capable of supporting open, critical reflection. When the value of human life is lost to the dictates of economic forces, a framework developed over two millennium, reflecting different ways of thinking about the human condition, may be particularly well-suited to challenging contemporary cultural narratives that diminish what it is to be human.

Against a backdrop that makes easy promises about what you can be if you only work hard enough (Adkins 2002), a narrative that returns us to contemplation of those things that place necessary limits on such striving is to be valued. The Christian framework is helpful for me as it

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<sup>11</sup> For a fuller expression of this idea, see Stewart Sutherland’s *God, Jesus and Belief*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984, where he sets out a vision of a revised theism.

provides stories that engage with the painful aspects of life: loss, failure, death. These things are not aberrations but part of the rich fabric of every life. Rather than ignore their reality, we might instead work with the key aspects of the Christian story - Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday; failure, disappointment, new life - in order to find better ways of living with each other.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

This is a personal piece, yet I hope it can contribute to the discussion of the relationship between religion and philosophy. The attraction of religion as a focus for academic enquiry may say something about the desire for a better understanding of the relationship between personal concerns and philosophical questioning. Religion is never simply a matter of belief. To suggest that the concern with belief should constitute the limits of philosophical engagement with religion suggests a paucity of approach both to its study and to the understanding of philosophy itself. Religious perspectives reflect the existential questions that professional philosophy has increasingly seen as irrelevant to its practices. Why am I here? What meaning might I ascribe to my life? What does it mean to live well? What does reflection on death and mortality mean for how I view and engage with this world? These questions require serious reflection on the things that shape our lives. In grappling with these questions lies the possibility of enriching rather than diminishing our current understandings of what it is to be human.

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<sup>12</sup> I have already mentioned Alan Lewis' powerful rendition of the Three Days of Easter. Similarly Belden Lane's *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, Oxford: OUP 1998 offers a desert spirituality that allows the Christian apophatic tradition to transfigure understandings of the self.

Sutherland, Stewart (1984), *God, Jesus and Belief*, Oxford: Blackwell