

Le Chéile - 'together' -

an occasional newsletter
of hope for Christianity in Ireland

issued by the Open Christianity Network

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Editorial

A chairde – friends –

The Open Christianity Network now has a website – or at least, it probably will have by the time this newsletter comes out. Its address is www.ocnireland.com. It will include details of meetings, a list of the steering group members, the current issue of this newsletter, suggested reading, and selected articles from the press, as well as telling enquirers what OCN is all about. Have a look at it, and recommend it to anyone who might be interested.

Bail o Dhia ar an obair.

Hilary

Regional Open Christianity groups

Cork

The OCN-Cork group met on December 6, at one member's house in Kinsale. Each of us had brought a book that had intrigued or impressed them, and talked briefly about it. The books included: 'Journey to Inner Space, by Rodney R. Romney (1980), 'Setting the Gospel Free' by Brian C. Taylor (SPCK, 1996), 'The Changing Faces of Jesus' by Geza Vermes (2000), and the current best-seller, 'The God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins (Bantam Press).

The date of the group's next meeting has not yet been decided, but newcomers will be very welcome. Contact me for details. - Hilary Wakeman

Limerick

The first meeting of the potential OCN-Limerick group was to have been on January 28. However, this has now been postponed, as it was felt that there was an insufficient number of people to make it viable. If there are other interested people within reach of the city, who would like to get together for an informal and exploratory meeting, would they

please make themselves known to Donal O'Connor through this newsletter.

Northern

The next OCN-Northern group meeting will be held in Grovenor House Glengall Street Belfast on Monday 12 February 2007 commencing at 6.00pm and finishing around 8.00pm. We hope the change in time will allow some of those who have not been able to attend to make the next meeting. Visitors are welcome.

We are reading, and will discuss at the meeting, 'The Calling of a Cuckoo: Not Quite an Autobiography', by David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham (paperback, 187 pp, publ. Continuum, £9.50. ISBN 0 8264 7099 8).

Bill Patterson

Dublin

The Dublin group of OCN is due to meet next Saturday, January 20, at the Taney Parish Centre in Dundrum. The topic for discussion, 'Understanding Fundamentalism in world Faiths', will be introduced by Andrew Furlong

The meeting is from 2.00 – 4.00 pm, with opportunity for a shared lunch (optional) at 1.30 pm.

God

Rowan Williams, Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, was asked in interview with Melvyn Bragg, "What do you mean by God?" His reply:

God means that depth behind and beyond all things,
into which, when I pray, I try to sink;
and also the activity that comes to me out of that depth,
that tells me that I am loved,
that offers me transformations that I cannot imagine,
very much a mystery,
but also a presence, person,
whom I can turn to,
whom I can have a relationship with,
for the expression of which we need the language of love.

Thanks to John Peirson for sending this

From the papers

The Irish Conference of Bishops has announced plans to introduce a permanent diaconate, which will include married men. Minimum age for admission is to be 25 for celibate men, and 35 for married men. The first deacons will be ordained in 2010.

From *The Tablet* (30.12.06)

'The continued appeal and resonance of the Christmas stories is a tribute to their genius and inspiration. For the critical reader, this other way of appreciating the texts brings an extraordinary depth of insight into the religious

and theological concerns of the gospel writers. We find ourselves in agreement with Andrew Furlong regarding the chief theological rather than historical nature of the texts. (This is, in fact, a commonplace of modern biblical scholarship.) The all or nothing approach implied in fundamentalist readings is not the only option. Mature faith has nothing to fear from critical reason.'

Seán Goan and Kieran O'Mahony
Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy
in the *Rite & Reason* column
The Irish Times (06.01.07)

'This is a moment of challenge. It is also one of great opportunity. For different reasons the north and south of this island are at pivotal moments. There is hunger and appetite at all levels of the Church of Ireland to ask itself searching questions. This willingness may rock the boat alarmingly but it brings the possibility of a release of energy. Riding the storm is a more energising choice than being becalmed or indeed sinking.'

Rev. Earl Storey,
(Director of the Hard Gospel Project)
in the *Rite & Reason* column
The Irish Times (08.01.07)

'The Catholic hierarchy in Northern Ireland has cautiously welcomed new legislation that will outlaw discrimination against homosexuals in the provision of goods and services.

The reaction of the Northern Irish Bishops contrasts with the hostility with which similar proposals have been greeted by the Bishops' Conference in England and Wales...'

Chris Ryder,
news item in *The Tablet* (09.12.06)

LGCM

The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement aims to help the Christian Church re-examine human sexuality, and to work for a positive acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships. Members include Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, and Roman Catholics. Membership is open to all irrespective of sexual orientation.

Although the movement has been strong in Britain for many years there is only a small number of members in Ireland. For further information, and subscription details, go to the website www.lgcm.org.uk, or write to LGCM, Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, London E2 6HG; or email lgcm@lgcm.org.uk

High and Low Christianity

by Irene Ní Mhaille

What is distinctively 'Christian' about any Christian group today? What does it mean to be 'Christian'?

My reaction to the words "seeing Jesus of Nazareth as someone who dies for the freedom of all" is

that that no longer carries meaning for me. Worse, it hides the fact that the real human Jesus died because he had the guts to stand up and be counted, as we all must do, and here lies the real meaning of Christianity, as I see it. Hilary Wakeman, in her book 'Saving Christianity', deals with this topic of the death of Jesus in a very interesting and helpful way (pp 84 - 89). However, even though I disagree theologically with some people on this, I see that any one of them can be a great example to me of someone who stands up today and is willing to be counted. So we can agree to disagree about who Jesus is. Sooner or later, and I believe sooner, the Open Christianity Network must clutch the nettle, and the nettle is the whole edifice of institutional Christianity!

For, in fact, we are at loggerheads within Christianity and within each of the different traditions probably, about who Jesus is. As I see it, for some Jesus is a Jewish teacher/prophet who pointed his fellow Jews to the divine life within themselves and to their responsibility, arising from this, to build God's Kingdom on earth. This "Low" or "Theocentric" Christology is sometimes known as "Inclusive Christology" -e.g. Paul Knitter. The RC Jesuit theologian, Rahner, was very close to this position, as were several others but closely watched by the hierarchy! At the other end is High Christology, the Christology that claims that Jesus was factually God, endorsed by the Emperor Constantine, and by which Christianity was linked to the power structures of the Roman Empire, a belief that is so incomprehensible to many young people today that they have become "atheists".

The question is, on which side of the see-saw are members of OCN?

Naming the sin, finding the goodness

by Sean O'Conaill

"These old women were lying, without treatment ... I asked why the new radiation machine was not being used to treat their cancers. I was told they could not pay the people who had charge of it..."

It is December 2006 in Moldova. The speaker is Ludmila Voretski. She too is undergoing radiation treatment for cancer - in Chisinau (pronounced 'Kishinau'), the capital.

The radiation machine that Ludmila refers to had been presented to Moldova by another western charity, with a view to enabling free treatment in probably the poorest country in Europe. Moldova's President Voronin had received the gift at the hospital in a glare of publicity - but once the media had disappeared Moldova's grim culture of corruption had enveloped this gift also. With state salaries at a level that would make a westerner laugh, 'the culture' dictates that every opportunity for personal gain must be exploited, even if that opportunity has been provided with an entirely contrary intent.

Things are so bad, I hear, that Moldovan surgeons have been known to leave the operating theatre in mid-operation, to interview relatives of the patient undergoing surgery - to make sure they can afford the rest of the procedure!

I have no idea what it must be like to live one's whole life in such a society. Ten days or so at a time is enough for me as a visitor who collects information for an Irish charity. But this time when I arrive home in Ireland the media are soon abuzz with the Moriarty Report, detailing the staggering corruption of the most prominent Irish politician of his era. Incredibly, there is still a pro-Charlie lobby - as though the entertainment value of his gargantuan appetite for bribes is some kind of compensation - a miracle of 'performance art' perhaps? I was left with the impression that if 'Charlie' manages to make it into the Guinness book of records for venality, a staggering number of Irish people would feel entirely satisfied.

It's coming up to Christmas 2006, so we also hear the obligatory "Who was Jesus anyway?" media discussions. On one of these we are told, as usual, that the Creeds are not literally true - and that to sin is merely 'deliberately to miss the mark of what it is to be human'. How much deliberation is there in corruption, I wondered. Have we forgotten that sin is not merely an individual option but also an oppressive force - an enveloping smog that can weigh us down, especially if we have no resources of our own, no power to exploit? Even the drug crime that could assault any one of us at any time in Ireland is part of this oppression - and grows out of that very level of prosperity that Ireland has now acquired. (There is far less drug crime in Moldova, because there is a serious deficiency in ready cash.) Every culture has its own forms of sin, its own oppressive forces.

For the early Christians this sense of sin as an oppression, an eternal cycle of evil, was far more acute. So was their conviction that Jesus by his life and death had somehow broken this cycle. We intellectuals now seem capable of grappling with sins only atomistically, one at a time - because that is far easier. And this renders our Christian tradition often incomprehensible and apologetic about itself.

It also renders us incapable of naming the sin that seems to be the root source of the connectedness of evil in our own time: vanity. This tendency to seek self-satisfaction in the admiration of others is what drove Haughey to ape the lifestyle of the old ascendancy. It also dictates to Moldovans that if your fellow workers are 'on the take' you are merely foolish if you do not follow suit. All mimetic behaviour, even that which leads to addiction, is initiated by a fear of being left out and laughed at - or by a desire to be admired.

But if vanity is the source of all that is wrong with the world, then humility is the solution - and it is this above all that Christmas celebrates. Humility arrived with us, in the flesh, at a moment we cannot now precisely determine - but precision is less important than celebration. I could choose to meditate depressively this Christmas upon the power of vanity, or celebrate instead a contrary power that seems determined to release us from it.

So finally I thought again of Michael McGoldrick, who died in April 2006. Had Michael not experienced the connectedness of evil in 1996 he would not have had his own revelation of the power of goodness, nor would I ever have heard him speak of this. Nor would I ever have found myself in Moldova, or made strong

friendships there - or learned to appreciate how fortunate I have been in my own life experience in Ireland. Nor would I have received a joyful message from Moldova on Christmas day that a surprise I had prepared for someone had borne fruit. Suffering from muscular dystrophy, Ana is crippled and confined to her small apartment in Chisinau for most of the winter months. A sum of money that could have bought very little in Ireland for her sponsor allowed her to be taken by special taxi to see Chisinau town centre at Christmas time - an unprecedented experience for her.

Our charity will also spend some money to make sure that Ludmila and her epileptic husband receive the small state pensions they are entitled to, something they are too poor and tired to do themselves - because of the labyrinthine bureaucracy that still obtains there.

So goodness is also making fruitful connections these times. It too must also be driven by some power designed to release us from oppression. Finding it, and allowing it then to make use of us, makes life everything it needs to be - a great adventure.

Wanted:

One or two more editors for this
newsletter
(no payment)

Please contact Hilary if you would like to
discuss the possibility

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- anything concerning hopeful developments
or trends in our churches -
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