

BIBLE VERSE

Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. (Romans 14.13)

Things to do include:

- a. A story to read, think about and discuss
- b. A plan for drawing your own map of where you go and belong
- c. Some discussion starters.

1. A STORY

Take me to your leader

Imagine a friendly alien has been observing our planet from his capsule. The capsule is characterised by a highly individualised lifestyle and has everything technology can provide to make the inhabitant comfortable: computer systems, TV, Internet, videos, CDs, microwave, washing machine (with multiple functions), a gym. The alien is alone but never lonely for he can chat to his friends using satellite communications. He knows via a multiplicity of channels what is happening on the earth. He supports a particular football team and belongs to a number of societies by using his electronic communications. He feels he is reasonably fulfilled and would be called 'post-materialist' for he has a high quality of life – *but does he belong to this planet?*

When the alien stops to consider such things, he thinks that all in all he does believe in God. Indeed, he is not above talking to God when things go wrong, or when the shadow side of his comfortable life intervenes.

One day the alien does something rather unusual. He leaves the capsule and goes to an unfamiliar place where human beings are gathered together. He goes in and is overwhelmed by the numbers of people sitting in rows. He ventures to sit down, but Mrs Brown always sits there and, sorry, Mandy's friend will be along in a minute. He finds an empty space uncomfortably near the front and works out that he should have equipped himself at the door with a red book, a green book and a sheet.

Something is happening and everyone but him knows what to do, when to stand, sit, sing. He can just about follow the book, but bits keep getting missed out and other bits mysteriously put in, so he spends his time catching up – a stranger who stands out. How is he ever going to learn what to do? He is left standing when the others are sitting down and feels embarrassed. Suddenly there is hand-shaking – thirty seconds of intense attention. What was that for?

Now he is asked for money, but he doesn't have any and his credit card won't do. Now everyone's getting up and going to the front. Why? He sits still and people stare. He feels envious of the people who know the drill, but how much effort is it going to take to achieve that level of familiarity? Where is there a book that will help him make sense of it all?

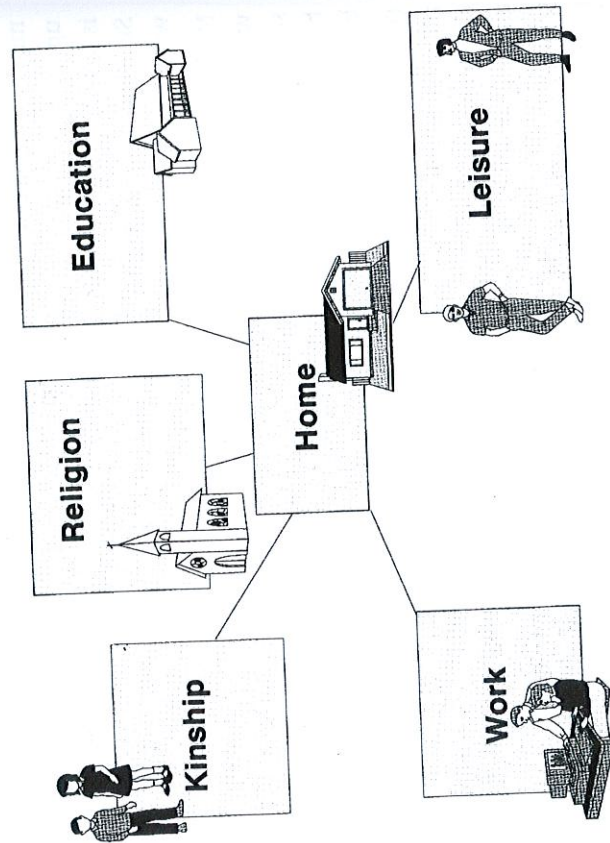
On the way out most people are friendly but still manage to pretend he doesn't exist. There is coffee in the hall but he can't bear the agony of standing out as an alien. Is the urge that brought him here enough to bring him back again, or to try somewhere else?

He goes back to his capsule and turns on the TV. *Neighbours* is on. Thank God.

Questions

- What is happening in this story?
 - How do we treat non-church members – like people from another planet?
- Could you retell this story as if the church were an alien spaceship and the incomer had been captured by aliens? Think back to a time when you entered an unfamiliar place. What were your feelings? What helped you to feel that you belonged? Have you been back since?

Figure 3 Networks



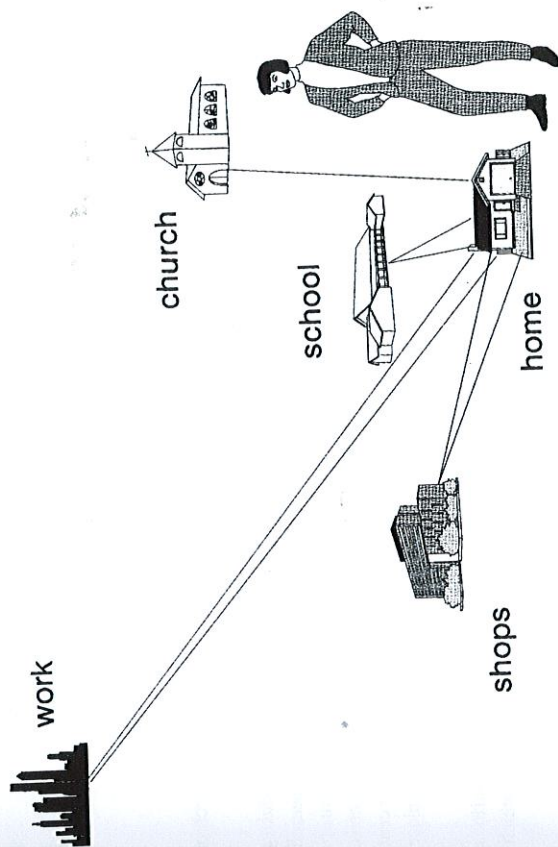
2. LANDMARKS

Divide into groups, preferably of those who live near one another. Use the landmarks sheet to draw a map of where you go every day. Compare this with other people's maps. Where are your opportunities for meeting people? How many of them are outside the church?

3. SOME DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Choose a question from the list of discussion questions below that is relevant to your situation. This can be done in pairs. Ask each pair to discuss the question generally and then contribute two ideas at the end of the discussion period. Write these up on a flipchart. Use these ideas with the whole group to get a picture of what you can learn or do in response to the question.

Figure 4 Geographical landmarks



- In your opinion, do churches care more about those who pay for the church to be maintained, or about those searching for faith outside?
- Do you think baptism is about believing, belonging, or both? Do you have a baptism policy which reflects this? Are there ever grounds for refusal? If so, why?
- What can we learn from people who decide *not* to join the Church? Are there people we don't want to join the Church? Why?
- What role does 'doubting Thomas' have to play in the Church? What does Peter's denial and faith tell us about those searching for God and about ourselves?
- Is it important if the church turns out *not* to be the centre of our personal map?
- Where do you think your church is on the diagram of believing and belonging? Where do you think your mission opportunities are?

- g. Are networks more important than neighbourhoods in your area?
How can your church make use of relevant networks?

Notes

1. Grace Davie, paper for the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England.
2. See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, in the *Making Contemporary Britain* series, Blackwell, 1994, p.78. Results from Robert Towler's research 'Conventional religion and common religion in Leeds' and published in H. Krarup, *Conventional Religion and Common Religion in Leeds: Interview Schedule*, University of Leeds, 1983, include: 72 per cent of those surveyed said they believed in God (p.46); 71 per cent prayed (p.64); 76 per cent claimed to have a religion but only 30 per cent attended a place of worship.
3. Davie, op. cit., p.79. 'The diversity of religious experience is well attested by the various research documents from the Alister Hardy Research Centre in Oxford, some of which will be examined in other chapters of this report.'
4. Davie, op. cit., p.2.
5. See Robin Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church*, SPCK, 1993. Gill outlines what he sees as a consensus of opinion among sociologists concerning reasons for church-going decline and lists these on pp.2-3. His counter-propositions are given on pp.9-12. In chapter 8, he also examines diachronic data concerning decline in the twentieth century, on the premise that if the 'empty church' is inherited from structural problems in the nineteenth century, decline would appear to be inevitable: 'At many levels the empty church feeds the empty church' (p.190).
6. Paul Handley, 'Faith and Reason', *Independent*, 28 October 1995, p.14.
7. Margaret Drabble, *The Millstone*, Penguin edition, 1968, pp.126-7.
8. Quoted by Clifford Longley in 'A Message from the Voters', *Spotlight* section, *The Tablet*, 2 December 1995.
9. *Christian Initiation and Church Membership*, BCC, 1988, p.25.
10. See *Good News in our Times: The Gospel and Contemporary Cultures*, CHP, 1991, chapter 10.
11. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order paper no. 111, WCC, 1982, p.3.
12. *Christian Initiation and Church Membership*, op. cit., p. 25.
13. *The Alternative Service Book*, OUP, 1980, p.243.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Also see *On the Way: Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation*, CHP, 1995.
16. *Initiation Services*, a report by the Liturgical Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England, GS 1152, p.47.

17. 'Me and My God', Kathleen Hale talks to Frances Welch, *Sunday Telegraph Review*, 26 February 1995. Despite her son's perception, see note 20 below.
18. David Winter, 'Diary' in the *Church Times*, 9 June 1995.
19. See *Anglican Marriage in England and Wales: A Guide to the Law for Clergy*, from the Faculty Office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, 6:6.1-6.2, pp.15-16, viz.: 'In England every resident of a parish is entitled to marry in his/her parish church.' The exceptions to this do not include the unbaptised: 'the fact that a party (or both parties) are unbaptised does not deprive them of the right to marry after banns'.
20. David Winter, 'Diary' in the *Church Times*, 11 August 1995.
21. *Finding Faith Today*, op. cit.
22. *Ibid.*, p.25.
23. Susan Hope, 'Sanctuary', in *God in the City*, Mowbray, 1995, p.195.
24. The Archbishop of Canterbury in Mary London, *Revelations: The Clergy Questioned*, Penguin edition, 1995, pp.262-3.
25. And see ARCIC, *The Final Report*, Windsor, September 1981, SPCK/CTS, 1982, p.83.
26. Oliver Sacks, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Picador edition, 1986, p.36.
27. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (1923) English edition, R. R. Clark, 1937.
28. Professor Ruud de Moor in *The European Value Systems Study 1981-1990*, summary report, European Values Group, Gordon Clarke Foundation, 1992, pp.6, 10.
29. For an exploration of Spencer's ideas, see Kenneth Pople, *Stanley Spencer*, Collins, 1991.
30. Brian Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, Vintage edition, 1993, p.76.
31. *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift*, a report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England, CHP, 1995, p.142.
32. Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, CUP, 1990. Also compare the work of J. Zizioulas in *Being as Communion*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985.
33. 'Autism as a subject touches on the deepest questions of ontology, for it involves a radical deviation in the development of brain and mind' (Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Picador edition, 1995, p.235).
34. *Ibid.*, p.248.
35. See Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, *Mission and Dialogue: Proclaiming the Gospel Afresh in Every Age*, SPCK, 1995, pp.6-7.
36. This phrase is sometimes used to describe the 'shop-around' ideas of post-modern culture. See, for example, Graham Cray, *From Here to Where: The Culture of the Nineties*, Board of Mission Occasional Paper, Number 3, 1992.
37. See Finney, op. cit., chapter 4.
38. Martin Robinson, *The Faith of the Unbeliever*, Monarch, 1994, p.87.
39. For an examination of this see *Something to Celebrate: Valuing Families in Church and Society*, CHP, 1995.
40. Although the European Value Systems Study group detected a slight swing towards the 'traditional' pattern of family in its study, there are currently in Britain a number of

challenges to the supremacy of the nuclear family: 'the nuclear family is seen by too many as too stifling, secretive and imprisoning The family may be important in the world, but Jesus ... is surely a corrective to any tendency to give it inflated importance.' Christine McMullen, writing in *Home and Family*, the magazine of the Mothers' Union.

41. An example might be the practice in some churches of giving flowers to mothers on Mothering Sunday and thereby ignoring the role of single fathers, devoted aunts and other carers in the nurture and care of children within the family.
42. *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England*, CHP, 1994, p.3.
43. For a discussion of this, see Greg Smith, 'You and Who Else' (the 'C' Word) in *Third Way*, February 1995, pp.21-4.
44. Catherine Shelley, 'A welcome kind of crisis', *Face to Faith* section, the *Guardian*, 22 June 1996.
45. Lavinia Byrne in Mary Loudon, *Unveiled: Nuns Talking*, Chatto and Windus, 1992, p.149.
46. See Robin Gill, *Moral Communities*, Exeter University Press, 1992.
47. Archbishop Aram Keshishian, *Growing Together Towards a Full Koinonia*, in the Moderator's report to the WCC Central Committee, August 1992.

2

Pearls are for tears...

My name's Jenny. When I get up in the morning, I say a little prayer to the good spirits, just to make it a good day. It's not that serious. I know that there's something important at the bottom of it all, but it's deep down. It only comes out when something happens to shock you out of the ordinary way of seeing things, like those little children in Dunblane.

I do go up to the church sometimes because my nan's buried there. I go and tell her what I'm worried about and maybe tidy up the grave a bit. It gives me a sense of peace doing that. I'm sure the dead are watching out for us and keeping us away from the bad things. Sometimes I think I can hear her saying comforting things to me and that makes me feel good.

I never actually go in the church though. It's not really necessary, is it? As like as you keep to the side of the good, like taking your baby to be done, that's all you need, isn't it ...

Introduction

Implicit religion can include both 'folk' or 'popular' religion as well as 'civic' religion. It can be characterised by religious ideas and concepts which are embedded in history and culture and expressed by the deeply felt need in people to enact rituals and have 'sacred occasions'. How does the Church meet these needs and respond to them?

Superstitious beliefs and behaviour based on superstitious feelings about the world demonstrate how people feel the need to stay on the side of the good and ward off the bad. The Church is challenged to provide an understanding of Christian faith which releases people from superstitious anxiety and offers peace and reconciliation.

The occasional offices of the Church, especially baptism, marriage and funerals, often provide occasions where the implicit religious awareness of people comes to the surface and is strongly expressed. How can the Church react sensitively to people's implicit religion on these occasions while still maintaining its duty to make sure the sacraments are not abused?

Occasions of civic religion, especially at times of national mourning, such as attended the Hillsborough tragedy or the murders in Dunblane, can expose powerful religious needs to which the Church is required to respond. Other kinds of civic occasion also provide opportunities for the Church to help bring out people's implicit belief, and may represent issues important not only to Christians, but also to other world faiths.

Challenges from implicit religion

2.1 In Chapter 1, we discussed the important interaction between believing and belonging, which finds many of those who are searching for faith left outside the Church when it cannot offer them a mode of belonging that makes sense to them. In this chapter and in Chapter 3, we look at two sorts of believing which go on inside and outside the structures and institutions of formal religion. In this chapter, we look at the deep down elements, often buried inside a person's search for faith. In Chapter 3, we look more closely at overt and systematised expressions of people's spiritual lives, for both implicit religion and contemporary spirituality challenge the Church about what it offers those searching for faith. Some of the stories and material contained in the previous chapter have a particular relevance in this and in the next, and to this extent, Chapters 1–3 may be said to fit together and form a cluster around similar issues.

2.2 When the Church of England Doctrine Commission published its report *The Mystery of Salvation* in January 1996, public interest in its pronouncements about the nature of hell was quite remarkable. Even though less than 14 per cent of the population regularly attend church,¹ many national newspapers commented upon the report's findings about hell and *The Times*, *Telegraph* and *Independent* regarded the subject of sufficient significance to write about it in their editorial columns. As we saw in the previous chapter, this reaction indicates a greater interest in some areas of faith and

belief than church attendance figures would suggest. Indeed, it is a consistent finding in surveys about belief in Britain that there is a widespread belief in God, though the nature of that belief varies greatly. In the 1991 British Social Attitudes Survey, only 10 per cent of the population claimed to be atheists and 13 per cent took an agnostic position and the rest (over 75 per cent) acknowledged some kind of belief in some kind of God.²

2.3 In the last chapter, we considered the existence of this 'drifting belief' in terms of its relation to belonging, but we also have to consider it in terms of 'postponed decision'. The search for faith may be crowded out by the practicalities of modern living, but elements of a belief system are strongly embedded as religious feelings and ideas both in language and culture: the former can be seen in such throw-away phrases as 'Thank God for small mercies' and 'Heaven help me'; the latter is exemplified in the relationship between Church and State, which has ramifications at every level of society. Furthermore, the close association between belief and culture is underlined when one remembers that the word 'culture' is derived from the Latin *colere* which means to worship. This implies that the worship of *something* binds together the people who make up a culture.

2.4 The depth and extent of religious feeling are seen in the way that it can bubble up spontaneously, even among people with so-called secular lifestyles, at times of thanksgiving and disaster (both local and national), and at times of personal milestones such as birth, marriage and death. The Alister Hardy Research Centre has discovered from surveys it has conducted that around one third of the adult population of Britain are prepared to admit that they have been aware of some presence or power, usually interpreted religiously, which has at some time entered into their lives.³ We shall further explore some of the Centre's findings in the following chapter. This religious consciousness, which is frequently unarticulated and is a phenomenon shared by all who believe, both inside and outside formal religious structures, is commonly called implicit or folk religion. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore what is understood by implicit religion, to reflect upon the dynamics of the relationship between it and formal Christianity and then to suggest a response from the point of view of mission.

Exploring implicit religion

2.5 We will use the term implicit religion in this chapter to refer to the religious consciousness described in the foregoing paragraph. However, this religious consciousness reveals itself in a number of different ways and so under the category of implicit religion there is 'popular' or 'folk' religion (we shall be using the word 'folk') and there is 'civic' religion.

2.6 Although this chapter will be concentrating on the relationship of folk or implicit religion to formal Christianity, it is important to be aware that a similar dynamic exists with other world religions. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam have 'folk' elements too.

2.7 Folk religion is an *ad hoc* mixture of formal religion and local beliefs. It is a set of loosely related practices, often mutually contradictory, used not to present a coherent view of reality, but to produce immediate results and to offer strategies for living. It provides, for example, various courses of action for those facing immediate problems such as illness, bad fortune and sudden deaths; for those seeking success in love, in winning chance games such as the National Lottery and in passing exams; and for those wanting guidance in making important decisions.⁴ It suggests ways in which one can ward off the bad and align oneself to the good.

2.8 Anthropologist Clifford Geertz compares folk religion to the inner parts of an old city with its narrow winding streets, dark corners and many little shops where there is often little apparent order, yet much is going on.⁵ People of many kinds crowd the lanes and fill the cafés with laughter and animated gossip. Formal religion, on the other hand, is like the suburbs surrounding the inner city with their neatly laid-out streets and spacious houses arranged in precise order. Here life is more sedate and peaceful; and sometimes those living here venture into the inner city for its excitement and colour. Folk religion seeks immediate answers to particular situations, whereas formal religion deals with cosmic questions facing humanity regarding the meaning and end of this world and the ultimate meaning of life. If people feel that their needs and questions are not being taken seriously or cannot be met by formal religion, then they may turn to alternative religions or practices such as astrology, the reading of tarot cards and fortune-telling.

2.9 One of the ways implicit religion can manifest itself is through rituals. In general, human beings need ritual to help them encounter the mysterious

and the incomprehensible and to enable them to move on from such an encounter. Ritual makes connections between meaning and making. Hans-Gunther Heimbrock, drawing on the work of the social anthropologist Mary Douglas, alludes to her definitions of rituals as 'restricted code' in which there is 'a more rigid ordering of linguistic patterns, a higher degree of particularity, contextuality, and a higher count of non-verbal elements'. Douglas, however, sees social preference being given to 'elaborate code' in which 'the rational, explicitly verbal and personal relation to God is more highly developed'. Suppression of rituals in favour of rational and articulate religiosity contains 'seeds of alienation'. Heimbrock concludes:

Coupled with the loss of the ritual dimension is the loss of that dimension of religious communication which satisfies the lifelong need of persons to grasp things in non-verbal fashion as well as their recurring and by no means infantile yearning for an overcoming of the deeply ingrained boundaries between 'interior' and 'exterior' which they perceive in their everyday experiences.⁶

2.10 So Madeleine Bunting comments:

The role of ritual was to inspire and then formulate our response to the sacred. With so little appreciation for the latter, it's not surprising that we have largely junked the regular practice of rituals which have been a feature of human society for thousands of years. We seem to manage very well without them, you might say. But where it all collapses is in those great life events, when even the most hardened sceptics find themselves floundering to find a ritual which will express the profundity of the experience, and this is the important point, expresses the event's life-changing significance – which places it on a different level from our daily mundane preoccupations.⁷

2.11 Some significant rituals, which previously were imbued with powerful symbolic value, still survive in various forms today, such as dancing round the Maypole and the crowning of the May Queen. J. G. Frazer's famous study quotes W. Mannhardt, an authority on vegetation rituals:

We may conclude that these begging processions with May-trees or May boughs from door to door ('bringing the May or the summer') had everywhere originally a serious and, so to speak, sacramental significance; people really believed that the god of growth was present unseen in the bough; by the procession he was brought to each house to bestow his blessing. The names Father May, May Lady, Queen of the May, by which the anthropomorphic spirit of vegetation is often denoted, show that the idea of the spirit of vegetation is blent with a personification of the season at which his powers are most strikingly manifested.⁸

2.12 Rituals become particularly necessary at milestones in people's lives, as Bunting points out. The May rituals were associated with sexuality, fertility and fruitfulness. So in some European rural societies even today, a boy at puberty may be taken to the woods and passed through the two halves of a split sapling while prayers are said. The sapling is then bound up again and, as it continues to grow and flourish, so does the boy-become-a-man.⁹ Such rites of passage can have a tremendous hold and significance on those whose faith is not located in a particular religious context, and it is here that the rites and sacraments of the Church may have much to offer.

2.13 For example, the rite of baptism enables an encounter with the mystery of creation and marks a new beginning. We noted in the previous chapter that the birth of a baby may encourage a flood of religious feelings expressed as gratitude and wonder. Such feelings may well prompt the request for baptism and find a home in its ceremonial. A new-born baby will bring parents asking for baptism even though they find it difficult to articulate precisely why they want their baby baptised. Such comments as 'I want her to be baptised so that she will go to heaven if she dies' and 'My mother thought he should be done' are frequently expressions of a deeply held untutored belief and need to belong, with which many practising Christians would identify. The Church would want to speak of baptism as incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and membership of the Christian community: the challenge to formal religion is how far it can interact with the local needs in the way suggested in the previous paragraph so that both are renewed and challenged by the encounter with Christ. Mircea Eliade, who has done much study and research in this area, writes in his book *Images and Symbols*:

By its renewal of the great figures and symbolizations of natural religion, Christianity has also renewed their vitality and their power in the depths of the psyche The adoption by Christ and the church of the great images of the sun, the moon, of wood, water, the sea and so forth amounts to an evangelization of the effective powers that they denote. The Incarnation must not be reduced to the taking of flesh alone. God has intervened even in the collective unconscious, that it may be saved and fulfilled.¹⁰

2.14 The Roman Catholic writer and artist David Jones makes the point in his writings that elements of the natural world such as water, wood and stone, become conveyors of the holy and structures in God's plan of salvation: baptism, cross, altar.¹¹ So the recognition of what is numinous in nature at the folk religion level is raised through increasing consciousness of God's activity to find its ultimate expression in Jesus's life and death and in the sacraments of the Church. The challenge to the Church is to help people understand the transition from the basic elements to the sacramental reality. We should not assume that this is either easy or automatic for people whose relevant signs and symbols may be quite other than the traditional ones.

2.15 Marriage represents another place where implicit religion bubbles to the surface. When so much attention is paid to the bride's make-up preparation, white dress and veil, attendants, flowers, rings, confetti, and cake, this may pass to attention to the liturgical parts of the whole ritual: the music, vows and prayers. Because so much attention and energy is typically focused on a wedding day, this represents a particular opportunity for the Church to leave a deep impression of joy and completeness. Marriage will bring couples seeking the Church's blessing and affirmation on their union. The location and beauty of a building may be a factor that encourages them to decide in favour of the Church rather than the Registry Office; they may feel that their marriage stands a better chance of working if it is blessed by God; but the religious potential within such a situation should not be underestimated. Moreover, in view of a recent debate in the media about whether it is proper to hold 'divorce' rituals in church, we have to spend time trying to understand what kind of faith (implicit or otherwise) drives people back to the Church at crisis points in their lives and what we offer them when they do.

2.16 The laying of hands on sick people is a sign of the mutual recognition of illness which may open up a way forward in which the progression of the illness is accepted or resisted. People who feel their peace of mind disturbed in some way may find laying on of hands or anointing within a liturgical setting successfully allows their spiritual feeling to be addressed.

2.17 Death too is the occasion for an encounter with formal religion. When the bereaved are surrounded by fear and uncertainty, the Church provides a link with the inexpressible, unfathomable and mysterious and offers hope and the possibility that there is meaning to life and death. In many villages one often finds more people attending the graves of their loved ones in the churchyard on a Saturday than attending services in church on Sunday. It is often easier to collect money for the upkeep of the village churchyard than for the upkeep of the Church.

2.18 The following illustration explores the interest in churchyards:

As a minister, I would feel slightly less than charitable to those who were coming to the churchyard to tend family graves while I was leaving the church after worship. Now I have come to a new understanding of the faithfulness of those who bring fresh flowers on special occasions, even all year round. It may be that more people use the churchyard round the year than come to the church building I also became interested in what people were doing (internally, as well as externally), when they 'did' the graves. At its simplest, they 'put things straight', and then placed their flowers there. But I could also see they checked their arrangement, and its positioning, to make sure they were 'just right' and then paused.

People said they had 'a little think' or even 'a little talk' with the one for whom they still cared Then the parallel dawned. The tending of the grave may be compared to the reading and exposition of scripture; the offering of the flowers which are both gift and sacrifice provides the way to a moment of communion with the recipient. So the churchyard is a gathering point like the wayside shrines found in so many countries. The grave becomes an altar, set aside for a ritual sacrifice which is the place for a spiritual communion.¹²

2.19 Here, Edward Bailey discovers a contingent belonging in which people enact rituals in the environs of the church but not actually within it. Relationship, here, is all important and provides the gateway for religious expression in ways in which the participants feel comfortable. It is interesting to note that in the BBC soap opera *EastEnders*, Michelle, troubled about having to make a decision whether or not to go to America, went to have 'a little talk' with her grandmother at her grave. Her grandmother's friend Ethel, also come to the graveyard to be close to her friend, offers to help Michelle by reading her tea leaves. The tea leaves offer her conventional domesticity. Michelle, rejecting projected hopes and superstitious practice, draws on her relationship with her grandmother and, seeing more clearly, leaves for America.¹³ Edward Bailey's gravetenders and Michelle require, like the poet Philip Larkin, a sacrament of the personalised ritual. In 'Church Going', Philip Larkin writes that he is drawn to churches but will enter only when 'there's nothing going on' and is moved to meditation, if not by what the Church teaches then by the fact that 'so many dead lie round'.

2.20 Yet even Philip Larkin, who spent much time meditating on 'The sure extinction that we travel to/And shall be lost in always' ('Aubade'), strikes a different note when contemplating the effigies on a tomb. What for him proves 'Our almost-instinct almost true' is the idea that 'what will survive of us is love' ('An Arundel Tomb').¹⁴ The placing of coins in the hand or mouth of a dead person enables the bereaved to feel that they have provided payment for the 'journey' of the deceased and they can now allow them to go. The sense that the bereaved have to be reassured that the dead have got safely through to the afterlife is particularly powerful and can override both the intellectual acceptance of dissolution in Buddhism, as well as trenchant atheism.

2.21 This highlights the importance of memory and continuity in people's lives. Believing may become important precisely because this continuity of belonging means something to people. We can see this where some cultures have annexed Christian worship to their traditional ancestor worship.

Recourse to them [the ancestors] is made not only to ask some favour, such as a cure or the satisfaction of some need, but also, simply in order to remember them – as a memorial, to perpetuate a memory, a history of deeds and words, an experience of the victory of life over death. Recourse to the Ancestors, whatever its nature or occasion, is always a source of blessing.¹⁵

2.22 Japanese Christians may have the names of their ancestors pinned to the vestry wall, and hold memorial services for these ancestors. In Ghana, the local religious practice of pouring beer over the graves of the dead has been changed through the encounter with Christianity into a eucharistic celebration. Similarly, in the west, occasions like All Souls Day and Remembrance Sunday provide particular opportunities for the Church to open windows onto this aspect of people's need. Similarly, *In Memoriam* notices posted in local papers testify to a need to retain the sense of belonging to the dead person and the hope to be reunited with them in restored relationship. In some hospitals, there may be a service for all who have died there in the past year.

2.23 We may see here, and will discuss below, the importance of acknowledging the love relationship which is occasioned by birth, marriage and death. People's consciousness of love in their relationships may be precisely what opens them to be receptive to God's love and allows them to conceive of relationship with God (cf. John 13.34; 15.12; 1 John 4.7). Understanding how love makes people receptive to the gospel is of particular importance to the Church's response to those who have not made a religious commitment.

2.24 One way in which the Church might address people's needs for rituals in daily life is to use versions of home liturgy. This is common in parts of the Anglican Communion, but celebration of events such as the coming home of a new baby, New Year's day, birthdays, anniversaries, death-days, have tended to become secular occasions in the west. The provision of a short ritual to bring secular celebrations into religious settings and thereby to familiarise people with praying together and offering thanks to God can be a powerful way of bringing the sacred into a special occasion.¹⁶

2.25 Ritual can also provide protection from evil. Thus, for some people it is important that their child is baptised as soon as possible because they believe that if the child were to die unbaptised he or she would not go to heaven. One of the functions of religion, both formal and folk, is to provide both the ritual and its meaning. We have noted that people often post *In Memoriam* notices in the local paper, and these often invoke safety for the dead loved one through the continued love and memory of the relatives. The Church can provide its own place of safety for these memories and should perhaps help people find the words to express their sentiments, rather than the local paper.

2.26 We can see, then, that there are occasions when the needs of folk religion can be met by the Church. Non-attenders do frequently approach their local church for its support and blessing in the rites of passage of birth, marriage and death. It may be argued that people are seeking public recognition and affirmation of the important threshold that they have reached: in other words, they seek, through baptism, communal recognition of the new birth; through marriage, communal recognition of a new relationship; and through a funeral, communal recognition of having to face a new future without the deceased. Indeed, Christianity takes root more deeply in a culture when Christians listen seriously to local beliefs and myths, struggle to discover where God is already at work in that culture and then, in humility, enable the loving and judging light of Christ to love and judge that culture and themselves.¹⁷

2.27 Civic religion is another manifestation of implicit religion. In civic religion Church and State share a common religious expression, which is seen operating on such occasions as Remembrance Day, both at local and national level, and at civic services with local authorities. It is also seen at religious services connected with the royal family. These are occasions when Church and State join in common religious expression and provide opportunities for communities to give vent to shared religious feelings. Civic religion becomes especially significant in times of war and can be expressed in hymns. 'O Valiant Hearts' was written in 1919 and points to how love of God and love of country were regarded as the same. The hymn speaks of the great sacrifice that many had made for their country and how this sacrifice can be compared with that made by Christ. The last verse reads:

These were his servants, in his steps they trod,

Following through death the martyred Son of God:

Victor he rose; victorious too shall rise

They who have drunk his cup of sacrifice.

2.28 The difficult and explosive potential of the encounter between civic religion and formal religion was well illustrated after the Falklands War in 1983 when the Prime Minister wanted a service highlighting a victory theme, whereas Church leaders wanted to commemorate the ending of a war in a more penitential atmosphere.

2.29 Expressions of implicit religion may occur spontaneously. For example, Edward Bailey has described the implicit religion of pubgoing.¹⁸ The ritualised aspects of going to the pub at a certain time, meeting friends, sitting in a particular place, drinking from a 'special' glass, interacting with the group in the 'round' and with the people at the bar, may all work together to achieve an effect of well-being that is not entirely dependent on the consumption of alcohol. If any of the elements of the ritual are disturbed – a friend is ill, the seat is taken by an outsider – the effect can be to disrupt the whole evening.

2.30 Another example of the way implicit religion emerges spontaneously is seen in the way that flowers are laid at the site of a fatal accident or disaster. Such occasions encourage a certain level of debate about the sacred, evoking such comments as why should such accidents happen and how unfair it all appears. The offering of flowers sets up a temporary 'shrine' and the flowers express unspoken fears and prayers.

2.31 The public response to the Hillsborough disaster in Sheffield in 1989 when 94 Liverpool supporters died at the beginning of the semi-final of the FA Cup between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest reveals both the depth and extent of implicit religion and how it can interact creatively with formal religion. The disaster unfolded not only before the capacity crowd at the stadium, but also before the millions who were watching on television. In the days that followed one million people filed through Anfield, the home of the Liverpool Football Club, and the football pitch was hidden under a carpet of flowers, red and blue scarves and caps, mascots, souvenirs, football rattles and even a plaster Madonna from a Christmas crib. In an article in the *Independent*, Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock wrote: 'Blasphemy, unhealthy superstition, tawdry sentimentality. Or a rich blend of personal mourning, prayerful respect and genuine faith.'

2.32 When mourners attended the Liverpool cathedrals at this time, it was common to see football regalia there and in the moving memorial service which was broadcast on national television the Liverpool supporters' song, 'You'll never walk alone' was a significant part of the liturgy.¹⁹

2.33 An even more recent manifestation of implicit religion was in Dunblane in March 1996 when 16 infant school children and their teacher were shot during a class in the school gymnasium. This disaster not only

shocked people in Britain, but also evoked messages of sympathy from around the world. Once again a mass of flowers was laid outside the school and the people of Dunblane filled their cathedral and local churches during the course of those disturbing days. Furthermore, the Prime Minister announced a national one minute's silence to remember the children and their teacher on the Sunday after the massacre. The observance of this silence appeared to be more widespread than the two minutes' silence traditionally observed on Remembrance Day. Candles were lit for the dead in Presbyterian churches where such a thing is not normally done. Furthermore, John Drane tells this story:

I made my way to the school gates which had become a centre of devotion, transformed by the floral and other offerings placed there by residents and strangers alike. As I approached, the street outside the school was deserted apart from a handful of police officers, and a gang of youths aged, I suppose, about 17–20. As I watched, they took from their pockets sixteen nightlights – one for each dead child – and, kneeling on the damp pavement, arranged them in a circle, and then lit them – using glowing cigarettes to do so. They stood around the candles for a moment, then one of them said 'I suppose somebody should say something.' As they wondered how to do it, one of them spotted me, identified me as a minister, and called me over with the words, 'You'll know what to say.' Of course, the reality was quite different. As I stood there, tears streaming down my face, I had no idea what to say or how to say it. Words had not been especially useful to me, or anyone else, in this crisis. So we stood, holding on to one another for a moment, and then I said a brief prayer. That was the catalyst that enabled them too to start praying. A question came first: 'What kind of a world is this?' Another asked, 'Is there any hope?' Someone said, 'I wish I could trust God.' 'I'll need to change,' said a fourth one. As he did so, he looked first at me, and then glanced over his shoulder to the police who were on duty. He reached into his pocket and I could see he had a knife. He knelt again by the ring of candles, and quietly said 'I'll not be needing this now', as he tucked it away under some of the

flowers laying nearby. One of the others produced what looked like a piece of cycle chain, and did the same. We stood silently for a moment, and then went our separate ways.²⁰

2.34 This moving story points up the symbiotic relation between the felt need of the improvised ritual and the minister of religion who supplies the right words to say. Out of this comes not only a release of prayer but also change and repentance as the young men lay down their weapons. When the full story of the nation's response to this event is documented in detail, the role of implicit religion, revealed in both its folk and civic forms, will be very apparent.

2.35 Apart from the rites of passage, Christmas and Harvest are times when the needs of implicit religion are explicitly met by celebrations within the Church. Many people who would not dream of darkening a church door are moved by their child's nativity play at school or will turn up for midnight mass and sit at the back. Similarly, Harvest Festival can still have a powerful impact even in the most urban areas, where the gifts might be tins of beans rather than garden fruit and vegetables but still drawing on the desire to give thanks and give back. So too the 'Churching of Women' in the Book of Common Prayer and its contemporary equivalent of 'Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child' in *The Alternative Service Book* are rituals which meet deep pastoral needs recognised inside and outside the Church.

2.36 Implicit religion also finds expression in practices which, at first sight, seem totally divorced from any religion at all. For some, religious instincts find their outlets in the following of sport: the singing of hymns before rugby and football matches indicates the link with a religion; for others a regular ritual, such as the annual West Country carnivals, provides an expression for their religious instincts.

2.37 All religions, both formal and implicit, are prone to engender superstition, though superstition is a very subjective concept. Some Christians find genuflection before the Reserved Sacrament helpful to their devotion while others would regard both genuflection and the Reserved Sacrament as harmful superstitions. Some Christians use the veneration of relics to enrich their worship, while others would, again, dismiss this practice as harmful superstition. Superstition has negative overtones suggesting manipulation and magic, but perhaps it can best be defined as religious practice which

may belittle humanity. Religion becomes superstition when it uses its rites and beliefs in an attempt to manipulate and control others, including God. Since superstitious behaviour underlies some forms of implicit religion, it is important for the Church to look at it carefully.

2.38 For some people, superstitious behaviour forms a kind of background, which is mostly unseen against the overlaid sophistication of modern life. However, it is surprising how many people touch wood or cross their fingers almost unconsciously. Superstitions about good and bad luck (black cats and horseshoes are lucky; walking under a ladder and opening an umbrella indoors are unlucky) hint at embryonic ritual actions for keeping oneself and one's family safe. Superstitious elements within rites of passage bring to the surface the human desire to influence the future by ensuring that all are safely gathered into the path of the good. For example: catching the bouquet at a wedding is lucky and presages marriage; wearing pearls at one's wedding leads to grief, hence *pearls are for tears*...

2.39 Other superstitions are prejudicial: anyone who has seen *Mary Poppins* knows that chimney sweeps are lucky people to know; but some people who are genuinely black may suffer from a prejudicial and superstitious fear that is directed against them. Similarly, some negative attitudes to people with AIDS may arise from a superstitious fear of contact with an afflicted person, similar to fear of the 'evil eye' or 'witches' bane'. For example, in various *EastEnders* episodes in June/July 1996, a woman whose husband is HIV positive is prevented from approaching a new baby by members of the baby's family, who acknowledge their fear is unreasonable, but who are also unable to combat it. In some cultures, particular professions are anathematised. In the Dowayo culture in northern Cameroon, as described by the anthropologist Nigel Barley for example, blacksmiths cannot have any contact with ordinary people, because they are regarded as powerful and dangerous.²¹ Rainmakers and witchdoctors may also fall into this category and their importance may be underestimated by Christians encountering the culture. In our own history, the wise woman has often turned into the witch, a person who becomes the agent of fear and object of reprisal.²²

2.40 We can also see that a ritualised aspect of superstitious belief is characterised by some forms of magic. Some people may turn to spiritualism or some 'magic' practice such as astrology if they feel the Church has failed them, because here they obtain quickly what they need, at the expense of

rational thought about what they are doing. Such people may also come back to the Church once their urgent need has passed. This is a challenge to the Church to identify and respond to such needs. For some people, the world becomes easily divided into angels and demons. In our own times, scapegoating remains an unpleasant but real social phenomenon: a person or group may become invested with whatever is superstitiously felt to be 'bad'. Consequently at Dunblane, the dead children were characterised as innocents and angels; the murderer, Thomas Hamilton, was characterised in the tabloid press as a demon: 'Monster burns in hell' was one front page headline when he was cremated.

2.41 We may say, then, that people who are searching for faith may try as hard as possible to eliminate the demons from their lives, and to relieve the anxiety of having to keep on the side of the angels. For some people, this results in creating their own liturgies and rituals which involve a destructive or cathartic element, such as when Christian survivors of sexual abuse burn photographs and weep openly together, but then:

We returned for the Eucharist, lit candles for our loved ones or fellow survivors who could not come, received communion together and then sang of our strength, courage and survival.

We ended with the hug of peace – embracing each other as sisters.²³

2.42 For people who have been hurt or who are living in fear, the teaching of the Church about the reconciling work of God may come as a great relief. Jesus has a way of dealing with demons, which results in annihilation of the confusion and terror and restoration of confidence and right relations. As Christians, we have an opportunity to show that where the implicit religion of people results in despising and rejecting others, there is a model of justice, judgement, forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ which allows peace to replace fear and anger and recovery of those demonised, or anathematised (e.g. John 8.1–11). For Christ himself was a scapegoat and an outcast, like the vision of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (Isaiah 53) whom God raised up (cf. Philipians 2.5–11).

The relationship between implicit religion and formal Christianity

2.43 The issue of the relationship between implicit or folk religion and formal Christianity is not a new one. Rather, there has always been an interplay between implicit religion and formal religion which can work in two directions. While implicit religion can borrow from formal Christianity (such as using the Bible as a fortune-telling device), formal religion can also borrow from implicit religion. A revealed religion, in particular, does not create its theology from nothing, but will borrow and incorporate other elements where God is seen to have brought about something new. We can see this in the Judeo-Christian tradition in the way that the faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob related to local religions.

2.44 For example, in the first chapter of Genesis, the story of creation is a version of various creation myths current at the time. The Israelites who adapted the story changed some of the emphases to fit in with their understandings while allowing the implicit religion to remain. The story is therefore 'claimed' for the God of Israel, but the new story's challenge to the various myths does not remove the important sense-making elements of how human beings came to be. In the 'Enuma Elish', the Babylonian creation myth, for example, human beings are formed from the blood of a rebellious god and the purpose of humanity was to be at the service of the gods:

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be. I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name. Verily, savage-man I will create. He shall be charged with the service of the gods that they might be at ease!²⁴

2.45 The writer of the Genesis account replaced this understanding of humanity by placing this part of God's creation as the culmination of the story and by making humanity, not as a slave, nor from the blood of a rebellious god, but in the image and likeness of God and the purpose of humanity was to be a steward of God's creation:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the

fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' (Genesis 1.27-28)

2.46 This critical response to local religions and understandings is reflected throughout the Old Testament. Religious practices such as human sacrifice, magic and divination were strictly rejected, while others, such as altars, the offering of sacrifices, many birth, wedding and funeral customs were accepted and given new meanings. Similarly, in the New Testament Jesus accepts and adapts some popular religious practices such as anointing with saliva (cf. Mark 7.33; 8.23), healing by touch (e.g. Luke 8.44) and by the laying on of hands (e.g. Mark 8.11 and parallels), but he condemns magical approaches to power and refused to perform signs and wonders as ends in themselves (e.g. Matthew 12.39).

2.47 In his book *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian?* Anton Wessels argues that Christianity takes root when it recognises and interacts with local religious practices. If the local folk religion is ignored or repressed, then not only will it reappear in a potentially dangerous form, but Christian influence is likely to be limited. Wessels uses the rise of National Socialism in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany to illustrate his thesis. He argues that National Socialism was a resurgence of a Teutonic paganism which has been repressed ('it had disappeared like the *Titanic*')²⁵ at the Christianisation of the Germans. Wessels uses a powerful quotation from Abraham Joshua Herschel:

In its roots Nazism was a rebellion against the Bible, against the God of Abraham Sensing that it was Christianity that implanted the bond with the Hebrew Bible in the hearts of Westerners, Nazism resolved to exterminate both the Jews and Christianity and replace them with a revival of Teutonic paganism.²⁶

2.48 What attitude does the Church adopt towards implicit religion? Does this attitude promote God's mission? There have been times when the Church has regarded implicit religion with disdain, rejecting it as pure superstition. This view has reflected a sense of social superiority of church attenders over and against the religiously disenfranchised lower classes. It was well exemplified over one hundred years ago by John Henry Newman:

In the next place what has power to stir holy and refined souls is potent also with the multitude; and the religion of the multitude is ever vulgar and abnormal; it will ever be tinged with fanaticism and superstition, while men are what they are. A people's religion is ever a corrupt religion, in spite of the provisions of Holy Church.²⁷

2.49 However, there is strong evidence to suggest that what Newman calls 'fanaticism and superstition' but what we are calling implicit religion is not the preserve of one particular group of society: differences of social standing and education play no significant part.²⁸ One vicar recounts how the death of his predecessor was reported by a churchwarden, who was a retired naval officer, with the words, 'Fr X has now departed to rest with his forefathers', which reveals more about the cult of the dead and implicit religion than about traditional Christian theology. Thus, the Church needs to acknowledge that implicit religion is as much present inside the Church as outside, and the Church needs to relate to it appropriately. These elements of belief and practice may become noticeable in the most regular of church attenders at times of crisis. There is not a great chasm between orthodox Christian believers and implicit religion, indeed, there is no real gap between them, but they are integrally connected. As regular, religious practice diminishes so there is a drift away from Christian orthodoxies, and elements of implicit religion become more prominent.²⁹

2.50 At the beginning of his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott, Professor of Political Science at Yale University, quotes from Václav Havel:

Society is a very mysterious animal with many faces and hidden potentialities, and ... it's extremely shortsighted to believe that the face society happens to be presenting to you at a given moment is its only true face. None of us knows all the potentialities that slumber in the spirit of the population.³⁰

2.51 Scott then promotes an understanding of relationships which provides some insight into the relationship between implicit religion and formal Christianity. Scott uses the categories of the 'powerful' and the 'powerless' to show how the powerless can express their thoughts, concerns and resistance (their 'hidden transcript') in ingenious ways frequently not recognised

by the powerful. Such expression can range from jokes against the powerful, to taking the opportunity to push them 'by accident' a little harder than usual. The Negro spirituals, composed and sung by the slaves on the plantations of America, were expressions of the hidden transcript of the powerless. Few plantation owners would have understood the political significance when they heard their slaves singing such biblically based songs as:

When Israel was in Egypt's land

Let my people go;

Oppressed so hard they could not stand;

Let my people go.

2.52 The agenda of the powerful is, in Scott's terminology, the 'public transcript', which represents the formal, acknowledged way in which the powerful relate to those in their power (the powerless). The crucial part of Scott's argument is that 'the public transcript, where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations. It is frequently in the interest of both parties to tacitly conspire in misrepresentation', and he thereby points to the significance of the hidden transcript commenting, 'Unless one can penetrate the official transcript of both subordinates and elites, a reading of the social evidence will almost always represent a confirmation of the status quo in hegemonic terms.'³¹

2.53 Scott's arguments point to the significance of implicit religion, which can be described as the hidden transcript, if we seek a realistic picture of the context in which formal Christianity is functioning. Scott's approach indirectly raises important questions about power: can formal Christianity, a revealed religion with professional practitioners (that is, its ministers and administrators), be regarded as the 'powerful' with its 'public transcript'? Scott also provides a warning because if the hidden transcript of the 'powerless' is not allowed expression, then there is the potential for revolution. In other words, if formal Christianity does not allow the expression of implicit religion, there is the possibility that the latter will replace the former.

2.54 The Church needs to recognise and take implicit religion seriously and through the opportunities of contact, for example provided by the parochial system, to 'negotiate' with it. The rituals offered by the Church at the rites of

passage and on other occasions will meet the needs of many outside the Church: it is surely important that the Church allows these needs to be met without placing insurmountable conditions on accessibility to these rituals which only allow a narrow interpretation of them? For example, a funeral in church or a marriage may be meeting a particular need for one group of people, but it may be meeting another need for another group. This privilege is to be a channel for God's grace and not to try and control or dictate the way in which God works. Such an understanding reflects the Church's role as a serving church.

Conclusions

2.55 The relationship between formal Christianity and implicit religion is not an area of concern confined only to Britain. Independent Churches have sprung up throughout the world, in particular in the developing countries of the Southern Hemisphere. Independent Churches have enshrined and made explicit beliefs and practices encountered in local cultures. One may therefore find a greater proportion of the worship taken up in singing, dancing, prophecy and healing. Furthermore, the growth of these churches is far outstripping that of the so-called mainstream churches. There is evidence that by the end of this century, there will be as many adherents of Indigenous Churches in Africa as there are Anglicans. Furthermore, and perhaps more disturbing, the Independent/mainstream Churches division reflects a First World/Third World division.³² There can be little doubt that implicit religion is posing and will continue to pose one of the major challenges to the Church as it enters the twenty-first century.

2.56 There has been a tendency to dismiss implicit religion as folklore and superstition, regarding it as the religion of the uneducated. This attitude needs to be addressed seriously and urgently and this is being done vigorously and enthusiastically by the Network for the Study of Implicit Religion.³³ There are elements of implicit religion which are not compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ just as there are some actions and practices legitimated by the Church which are not compatible with the gospel. These elements, such as using folk religion to control or invoke fear or to justify revenge, need to be vigorously challenged and resisted. Again, a 'test' question that can be asked is whether the practice or belief belittles or enhances

humanity. Therefore a creatively critical response is required, which recognises the complicated interplay between a 'public' and a 'hidden' transcript and between what is life-enhancing and what is life-denying. It is, therefore, important that the Church listens (and *listening* is always the first step in any missionary endeavour) to God's voice in creation which includes the medium of implicit religion.

2.57 Acknowledging the significance of implicit religion should enable the Church to reflect upon the relationship between the active-believing minority and the less active-believing majority. The Church needs to find ways of reactivating religious language and concepts which may be buried in expressions of implicit religion. Christians could also spend more time working on how to build bridges to people's rite-making and personal 'sacraments'. This reflection would enable the local churches to be in touch with the deepest hopes and fears of their communities and provide appropriate symbols and images in order that the communication of the gospel may be more effective.

2.58 The Church is already taking advantage of a number of opportunities to communicate the gospel where implicit religion becomes explicit in rites of passage such as baptism, marriage, and funerals, or in festivals such as Christmas, Harvest and various civic services including Remembrance Sunday. It is important that pastoral strategies enable these missionary opportunities to be used to the full. There are many different ways of viewing these occasions. The Church should not misuse its position to limit or control the activity of God.

2.59 Furthermore, local churches are in a position to develop appropriate liturgies for their communities which will enable implicit religion to become explicit. Examples of such occasions could be a celebration of All Souls, to which the relatives of all who have died in the parish over the previous year can be invited and the practice of house blessings. The idea of home liturgy could also be extended.

2.60 Mission and ministry are integrally connected. The ministry that the Church offers comes from a missionary strategy, which will be implicit even if it is not made explicit. Because the Church has access to a large part of the community, not least through the parish system, its ministers and representatives need to use this privilege with respect and care, not inflicting the

Church but offering the Church, showing that they respect and take seriously those whom they meet. A creative and open pastoral approach will enable implicit religion to become explicit.

2.61 Finally, it is worth remembering that church attenders are as much part of the world as non-church attenders and so church attenders are also open to the beliefs and practices of implicit religion. As the Church focuses on the relationship with implicit religion, it is at the same time focusing on activities and beliefs deep within itself.

Summary

KEY WORDS

- implicit religion ● folk religion ● civic religion ● rituals
- superstition ● restricted code ● hidden transcript

The high level of general belief among those who are not committed to a faith tradition can be expressed as implicit religion. Such a religious consciousness, which is exemplified in the language we use and in the ideas and concepts we have inherited from our culture may come to the surface spontaneously, particularly during life crises or times of national crisis or tragedy.

Implicit religion exists alongside formal religion and the two may interact. If the Church cannot meet the felt needs of some people, the strength of their implicit religion may drive them to satisfy their needs elsewhere.

People need rituals in their lives, but we live in a society where many occasions for ritual have been eroded. Consequently, people feel a strong lack of this opportunity for expressing themselves and may make up their own rituals. Baptisms, marriages and funerals may therefore become critical occasions when the Church has a great opportunity to reach people in their needs.

Superstition may show how people desire strongly to ward off evil and keep on the side of the good. Equally, they may become trapped by it, or demonise people or things they designate as bad. The Church has a strong message to give here, for the gospel promises freedom from fear and overwhelming anx-

ity. Further, the example of Jesus's own attitude and dealings with the outcast, the demonised, the sick and the tortured, gives Christians a model of how God's healing and recovery can come into damaged lives.

Civic religion also creates an opportunity for the Church and implicit religion to meet and interact positively. In times of national mourning, for example, people's mostly unarticulated belief may become more overt and they will look to the Church for ways in which to express it.

The historical relation between formal faith and implicit religion even from Old Testament times shows that formal faith is able to reject or absorb elements of implicit religion. Further, implicit religion can flourish even within the Church itself. There are no hard and fast boundaries, but the Church cannot afford to ignore the effects of implicit religion, either within formal Christianity, or outside.

Another way of looking at implicit religion is in terms of the 'hidden transcript' of the powerless against the 'official transcript' of the powerful. If the 'hidden transcript' is not allowed expression, then revolution may occur. This means the Church must take implicit religion seriously.

Further reading

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- Bruce, Steve, *Religion in Modern Britain*, OUP, 1995.
- Thomas, Keith, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Peregrine edition, Penguin Books, 1978.
- Wessels, Anton, *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian?* SCM, 1994.

Interested readers might also contact:

The Network for the Study of Implicit Religion
Winterbourne Rectory
Bristol
BS17 1JQ

CONTACT MAKERS

Packs of ideas for contacting people at baptisms, weddings and funerals available from:

Mrs Claire Hams
Board of Mission
Church House
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3NZ

HOME LITURGIES

Contact

Marjorie Allen
Diocesan Church House
175 Harborne Park Road
Harborne
Birmingham
B17 0BH

Things to do

- **AIM:** to see where your church or group meets the needs of implicit religion and see where it operates in your Christian community.
- **PURPOSE:** to create mission opportunities for the Christian community to interact with people's implicit religion.

BIBLE VERSE

He [Jesus] took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village: and when he had put saliva on his eyes, and laid his hands on him, he asked him 'Can you see anything?' (Mark 8.23)

Things to do include:

- Listing superstitions
- Looking at hymns
- Describing secular rituals
- Discussion starters

1. SUPERSTITIONS

Get people to make a list of superstitious beliefs, or ask people in pairs to look at superstitions in categories such as marriage, death, good luck, bad luck. You might be able to use good luck cards or messages from the local paper.

Ask people in pairs to talk about which superstitions they observe (even if not very seriously) and ask them to think about why they do so. Ask pairs to think about how far implicit religion influences their lives.

Ask people in pairs to think about what superstitious beliefs people might have about church, about the minister, about church furnishings, about graveyards, etc. You might also use a film clip of a horror film that includes churches, graveyards, crucifixes, etc.

2. HYMNS

Have a look through your hymn book and see if you can find examples of implicit religion in some of the well-known hymns. Or have a look at spirituals. (Someone might like to play or sing some of the hymns or spirituals.)

3. RITUALS

In groups of four or five, ask people to identify rituals outside the church, such as pubgoing. Ask them to write down what the elements of the ritual are.

Ask the whole group to discuss what secular rituals they are involved in. What, if anything, makes church rituals different or special?

Pool all these ideas by drawing up a list of ways in which your own implicit religion can build bridges to those who are searching for faith.

4. DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Is people's implicit religion helpful or harmful to the Church?
- Does the Church use its power to suppress people's implicit religion unhelpfully?
- How do you think services in your church or group meet the needs of implicit religion?
- Do you think there are ways in which worship, prayer, Bible study, youth groups, etc. could appeal to those searching for faith? If so, how?
- How should Christians treat people who are either helped or trapped by superstition?
- Do you think your Christian community fails to take implicit religion seriously?
- How can your church or group be involved in civic religion? Does this mean taking more initiatives?

Notes

- Church attendance figures (published in P. Brierley and V. Hiscock (eds), *UK Christian Handbook*, CRA, 1993) are 14.4 per cent for 1992 and are estimated at 13.9 per cent for 1995.
- Although these figures give a general impression of the state of belief, their precision cannot be guaranteed; a similar survey of a London Borough in the 1940s (see Mass Observation, *Puzzled People*, Gollancz, 1948, p.32) noted: 'Of the doubters, agnostics and atheists ... over a quarter say they pray on occasions to the God whose existence they doubt.' To keep these figures in perspective, post-war surveys point to an increase in unbelief. For further details and analysis of these statistics see Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain*, Oxford University Press, 1995, from which these statistics have been quoted.
- See David Hay, 'Individuals' Religious Experiences' in Edward Bailey (ed.), *A Workbook in Popular Religion*, Partners Publications, 1986, p.12.
- See P. Hiebert, 'Popular Religion', in J. M. Phillips and R. T. Coote (eds), *Toward the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission*, Eerdmans, 1993, p.255.
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7. Madeleine Bunting, 'Lost in these trivial pursuits', the *Guardian*, 24 February 1996.
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9. There is now an increased interest in 'green cemeteries' and in planting trees to commemorate the dead.
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13. *EastEnders*, 16 October 1995.
14. Philip Larkin, 'Church Going' in *Collected Poems*, Faber, 1988, pp.97-8; 'Aubade', pp.208-9; 'An Arundel Tomb', pp.110-11.
15. Francois Kabasele, 'Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother' in Robert J. Schreiter (ed.), *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, SCM, 1992, p.119.
16. For example, see Marjorie Allen's Home Liturgies selection, Diocesan Office, 175 Harborne Park Road, Harborne, Birmingham B17 0BH.
17. See Anton Wessels, *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian?* SCM, 1994.
18. Edward Bailey, "'Implicit Religion?'" A Follow-up to David Martin', *Crucible*, Jan-Mar 1995, pp.19-25.
19. For further discussion, including details of the *Independent* quotation, see G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, in the *Making Contemporary Britain* series, Blackwell, 1994, pp.88ff.
20. John Drane, 'Dunblane: A Personal Testimony'.
21. See Nigel Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist*, Penguin, 1983 and *A Plague of Caterpillars*, Penguin, 1986.
22. For a comprehensive study of the relationships between formal religion and implicit religion, including wise women and witches, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Peregrine edition, 1978.
23. From a report of the Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse (CSSA) retreat, October 1994, an ecumenical weekend in Crewe led by a religious sister and survivor. The liturgy was led by an Anglican female priest survivor.
24. Tablet VI.1.5-9.
25. A. Wessels, op. cit., p.164.
26. H. Kasimov and B. L. Sherwin (eds), *No Religion is an Island: Abraham Joshua Herschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, 1991, p.4, quoted in Wessels, op. cit., p.163.
27. J. H. Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt By Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1888, pp.80-81.
28. See P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p.19.
29. See G. Davie, op. cit., p.76.
30. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1990, p.90.
31. *Ibid.*, pp.2, 90.
32. See Walter Hollenweger, 'After Twenty Years' Research in Pentecostalism', *Theology* LXXXVII, November 1984, 403-12.
33. This is based at Winterbourne Rectory, Bristol BS17 1JQ under the direction of Canon Dr Edward Bailey.

The world is my oyster

My name's Adam. I think it's up to me to decide what's right — work it out for myself. I know there's God, but it's God getting through to me, not driving me to join up to some organisation. I believe in lots of things, karma and reincarnation and that. It makes sense when you look at it, right?

I'm really worried about what we're doing to the world and how we're destroying it. I think the earth talks to us and that the earth is full of power. I've done cards, pyramids, stones — and all that turns out pretty hopeful for me. I like to glimpse the future. I feel like I'm in control of my destiny. I like to work out, too, to feel good, really alive, right? Then I'll have a good massage to chill out, let myself go. Or meditate, be quiet. Then I know it's God telling me it's OK, it really is.

I don't need Church. You have to believe the party line, but I've worked all this out for myself. I want to pray and worship what I want in my own way and the Church doesn't give me that.

Introduction

We do not live in a godless or totally secularised society. We live in a pluralist society in which most of the world's faiths are represented. Also, many people outside formal religion feel that their life has been touched by the transcendent and seek to respond to this. Such responses, however, are often conditioned by the kind of culture in which we now live. The highly privatised culture and the proliferation of choice inspire many people to make their spiritual journeys through a pick'n'mix approach. Such people may be attracted by New Age practices, or adopt a spirituality focused on the natural world.

In a stressful world, self-esteem and self-worth may become the driving factors in developing spirituality, and these may be allied to a need to feel good about one's bodily health, appearance and sexuality.

The challenge to the Church is to recognise the profile of this kind of burgeoning spirituality and to show how Christianity can meet its needs. Christianity should not have to ride roughshod over expressions of contemporary spirituality, for there is a capacity for a dynamic and interactive relationship between the two. Christian faith has resources in its traditions, such as Celtic spirituality, which can speak to the needs of those who are searching for faith. Christians also have the opportunity to build bridges in mission to those whose idea of God is as yet undeveloped, but whose desires are for blessing, wholeness and hope. Christian people have Jesus Christ to offer as a pattern of human existence, and the witness of the Christian community to offer as a way of human living. The perfection of these in the kingdom can be held out to those who are struggling to live in the complexity of the present as a perfect hope and proper end for our spiritual journeys.

How contemporary spirituality challenges the Church

There was also commonly expressed, if often only indirectly articulated, the feeling that (churchgoing) was not all that 'being religious' really consisted of.¹

3.1. We have noted, in both previous chapters, that the level of generalised belief remains high. In the chapter on implicit religion we recognised the deep down residues of belief. Now we need to move on to discover what it is that people outside the mainstream religions believe, in order to see how this does or does not interact with the Church's mission to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

3.2 The research undertaken by the Alister Hardy Research Centre provides us with information about various forms of generalised belief. If we look at examples from some of this research, we can begin to see trends which fit in with what we have observed in earlier chapters. In the examples which follow, it should be remembered that they are drawn from a specific sample of *young* people, who are at a particular stage in the search for faith and who are able to tell their story.

Examples

A. Sometimes, I don't know when but I sort of fall into my own little world, where my mind just wanders through things and then sorts it out. It is hard to explain. I am really sitting apart from the world, and it just gives me a sensation; it is as if my inner self is healing me and giving me a new perspective. I don't know, I can't explain it, you have to experience it for yourself; may be it's God or part of God in me, just as it is in everyone else, but you have to find it.

B. We have to believe in something, otherwise life is terribly pointless. That's why people believe in a God or a religion. There must be a God or something behind it all, but I think that it is too exceptional and almighty for our petty minds to interpret. People who are really into religion are for ever looking for this thing. But they never find it. I believe life is our God. We can either make our life a good one and one to remember, or we can be evil. It is totally up to us, no one else can decide this for us. I believe I was put here for a purpose, but I think I have done it all wrong.

C. Sometimes when nothing really exciting is happening in my life, but at the time I am not unhappy, a great relaxing, motivating feeling grips me. I feel excited about something, and know a good thing is going to happen. To me, it feels as if something is governing my life, balancing out good and bad experiences. Although I have been brought up without religion, and am unsure about the existence of God, I can't help wondering if this could possibly be God in action. Very frequently I debate this issue within myself, trying to reason these feelings out.²

D. Often when I am walking outside, sometimes when I am somewhere I have been many times before, or somewhere new, I feel a sort of softening feeling that blends me as an individual into everything else. It is like being sucked into an enormous void – only it's full of unimportant things which make up a whole. I notice things, little things that I couldn't have cared about before but now seem wonderful.³

E. Sometimes I sit in a dark room, like my bedroom, and feel a power around me. I don't think of bad things that have happened but I only think about how lucky I am to be alive on this beautiful earth. Everything else is unimportant. I can get this feeling on my own.⁴

3.3 What is interesting about these examples, is the high degree of personal and individual language: 'my own little world' (A), 'I believe I was put here for a purpose' (B), 'I debate this issue within myself' (C), 'blends me as an individual into everything else' (D), 'I can get this feeling on my own' (E).

3.4 In view of what we have seen previously in the chapter on belonging about individualisation and post-materialism, it is entirely consistent that this kind of religious experience should be couched in terms of the individual, alone and isolated, trying to make sense of an understanding of the 'other', of some vague transcendence.⁵ In these examples, the experiences are isolating and isolative, rather than in any sense being community-building or corporate. Is it so strange, then, that the people who have these experiences have difficulties in locating their search for faith within a corporate body, the Church, which offers religious experience in solidarity with other believing Christians? The former Archbishop of York, Dr John Habgood, makes this point when he says, 'I think the whole post-modernist tendency towards individualism makes it very difficult to believe or to find where a faith which has universal claims fits into an individualist approach to life.'⁶ How does the Church reach out to the many people having these kinds of experiences in a way that allows these experiences to become part of legitimate faith development? This question is especially pertinent when we consider the power and intensity of these experiences, for is it perhaps a quality of the power and intensity that the experience is personal and unconnected to anyone else?

3.5 In the first place, we should perhaps learn to value the way people are able to articulate powerful experiences of the 'other' or of the numinous. It is clear that experiences of this kind are widespread, but for some people it is simply not possible to articulate them. Where there are no words, the experience is untransmissible, unsharable; the sense of God's presence is powerful but silent, so private as to be untouchable. Perhaps, then, we should begin by assuming that all human beings are touched by God in some way during their lives, but this activity of the missionary God is ultimately personal and unarticulated. If this is true, then the mission of the Church does not start from nothing in its outreach, but approaches each person as a place where God has already been. Further, as the Church seeks to proclaim, it speaks into ground which has already been seeded by the Spirit and it should not seek to till that ground again. The assumption that God is ever at work in the world and that we should seek to discover what God has

already done and work with this under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,⁷ is a theological stance which is now increasingly important for mission.

3.6 If the Church is going to engage with contemporary spirituality, then it has to deal with the various elements of that spirituality and use these to help people test their emergent spiritual experiences inside Christianity. For this reason, we now need to look at some of the component elements of contemporary spirituality and see which are open to Christian relationship and encounter.

Being in control

3.7 These examples given above point up how religious experience can be related to a sense of purpose, but the purpose is itself related to the affirmation of self-worth and to the ability to control: 'as if my inner self is healing me and giving me a new perspective' (A), 'it is totally up to us' (B). The sense that there is a power inside or outside the self which can be accessed by the self is a positive and healing experience leading to joy and hopefulness. This can be located and named as God: 'maybe it's God or part of God in me' (A), 'there must be a God or something behind it all ... I believe life is our God' (B), 'I can't help wondering if this could possibly be God in action' (C).

3.8 Where this happens, such experiences do not seem far from specifically Christian understandings. For example:

Often too I feel a presence with me, it can comfort me when I am worried about something or when things seem to be going right for me, it seems to fill me with an amazing sense of happiness, completeness and knowledge that everything is somehow in control. Being a Christian I would call this God.⁸

3.9 In some cases, reliance on 'other Power' can seem to belittle the self and the power of the self to be in control:

I feel that turning to outside influence is a total denial of self-capability

I usually say what the hell

I stand on my own feet. I have no God, only hope.⁹

3.10 In these examples, it is clear that any sense of dependency on God's power affects the sense of self-worth and is therefore to be rejected. The Church's understanding here might be that God affirms human personhood and that the sense of self-worth is itself a religious experience. It is not necessary to renounce the strength of the self in order to come to Christian faith, but to understand that Jesus releases us into a way of being human which permits the exploration of our full human potential. Consequently, there may well be further discoveries in subsequent communion with God, including a self-giving which will lead to greater self-worth and discovery of new strength.

Feeling good

3.11 Another theme emerging from this kind of example is the need to feel good about oneself. The need is also connected with self-worth and value; and with the desire to have and maintain control: 'as if my inner self is healing me' (A), 'a great relaxing, motivating feeling grips me. I feel excited about something, and know a good thing is going to happen' (C), 'softening feeling ... I notice things that ... now seem wonderful' (D), 'I ... feel a power around me ... how lucky I am to be alive' (E).

3.12 Or, as W. B. Yeats writes in 'Vacillation',

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body on a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness
that I was blessed and could bless.¹⁰

3.13 When we look at this kind of language, we move on to an area that is increasingly important in an understanding of contemporary spirituality, which is the need for people to feel good about the human body and to acquire feelings of peace and harmony within the life environment. This is entirely in accord with a post-materialist society, with its emphasis on quality of life, and as such may be a good indicator of the feelings of those who

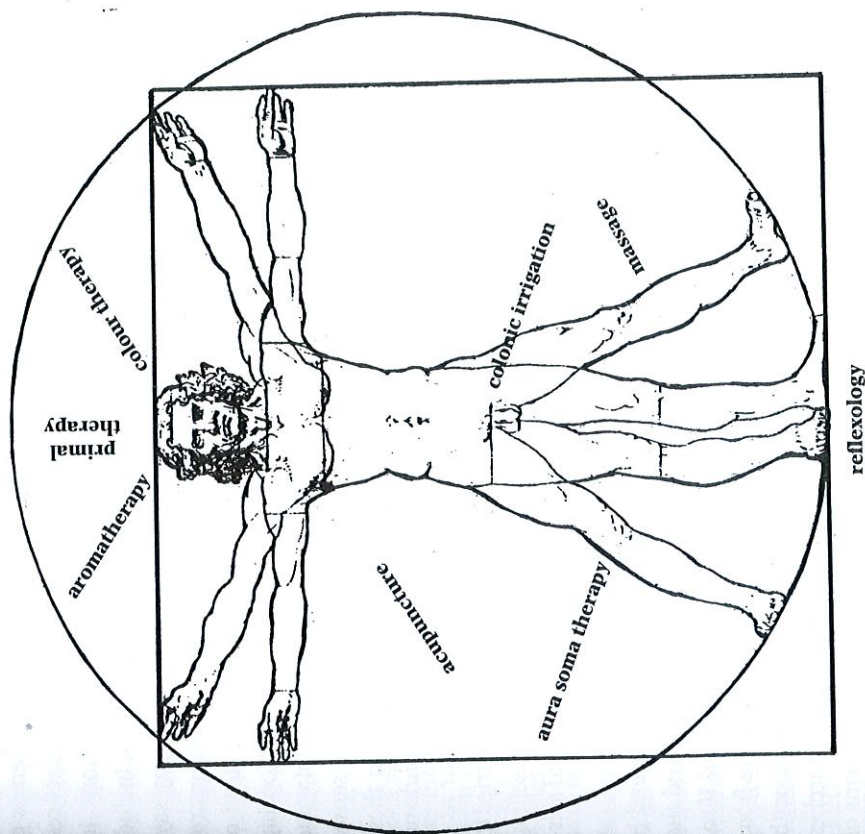
are most integrated into western culture. In this sense the Church meets a challenge, because while reaching into the kind of spirituality that demands self-fulfilment and self-realisation, the Church still has to maintain its option for, and solidarity with, the poor. The Church is committed to those who may be spiritually mature but still dealing with material needs and who have a long way to go before they can encounter the post-material situation. The Church is therefore faced with this question: when the needs of the poor are met, is this emphasis on feeling good what we most want to offer, or is it rather that the Church should in all humility take the opportunity to learn from the spirituality of the poor? The largest version of this question is a political one, but the Church must also address the matter of spiritual growth. Christians cannot ignore the way loss of self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness can destroy a person, but the restoration of self-worth that is offered in Jesus Christ is not power over others, or increased or privileged status, but confidence that the self is uniquely loved. This may be a touchstone of difference between contemporary spirituality outside the mainstream religions and the life in Christ offered by the Church.

3.14 The way in which the 'feel-good factor' operates in the public sphere and in the commodity market is evident in the number of 'alternative' or 'New Age' therapies and practices which are currently around. Some of these are in the business of healing, with emphasis on the relief of pain and developing a more positive approach to life. Some concentrate on the idea that a healthy body is directly related to peace of mind and to a spiritual wholeness. Consequently, it is possible to obtain a number of 'therapies' in various ways according to one's inclination and one's pocket. At the bottom of the pile, as it were, are such practices as aromatherapy, which in the Boots and Body Shop versions may be little more than fragrant bath oil or perfumes, albeit often preferentially drawn from natural sources rather than artificially produced. Some of these are sold as massage oils, with the indication that pleasure and calm are to be derived from scent and tactile contact.

3.15 Other therapies involve consultations with people qualified in various forms of massage: reflexology, palpation of the foot, is one such currently in vogue. Other forms of massage practice may also be advertised in the local paper, but while some relate to particular needs, such as pregnancy and back problems, they can be mixed with advertisements for a much commoner form of physical service. The practice of colonic irrigation is also

supposed to cleanse and purify the body from the inside out. Some of these body-centred experiences create intense feelings of well-being, which, when the effect wears off, can be repeated as necessary. The only cost may be money. When the novelty of one therapy wears off, another takes its place. In an age when the message about the danger of drug use is heard more clearly, the 'trip' or 'fix' can now be through the 'body spiritual' rather than by direct action of chemicals on physiological processes. Another implication is that the stress of modern living interferes with a person's spiritual well-being, which has to be restored by removing the stress. This highlights

Figure 5 Feeling good?



the fact that for many people in contemporary western society, life is indeed very stressful and the need for stress management has to be recognised by the Church, where Jesus's words 'Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11.28) may come to have new significance. On the other hand, it may become a barrier to Christian commitment if joining a church is seen to be adding to a person's stress in relation to their family, job, or the church's own expectations.

3.16 What has the Church to say to people whose spiritual life is nurtured in this way? First, there is no point throwing out the baby with the perfumed bath water. Many of these therapies and practices are vestigial or adapted versions of old religious practices, while yoga and the chanting of mantras have a well-validated place in eastern religions, and indeed, awareness of eastern religions may have much to do with the adoption of some practices. Meditation, fasting and prayer also have honourable traditions in Christianity. We should also mention that stimulation of the senses, including the use of scent, is part of authentic Christian tradition. We may say, however, that in New Age and other practices, such as colour therapy, aromatherapy, meditation music, etc., the focus is often missing. Instead of using these techniques as a means to an end – to obtain a closer relationship with God – these practices are seen as an end in themselves: a feeling of value and enrichment, without meaning. The powerful stimulation of the senses which is unified in, for example, Orthodox worship, is fragmented in these New Age practices. The reaction of some Christians has been to condemn these kinds of practices and therapies, especially where these appear as a hedonistic or self-indulgent retreat from the world, while others have tried to reach into them. So the St Marylebone Centre for Healing and Counselling provides both complementary medicine, through its NHS practice, and spiritual direction.

3.17 Is it possible, however, to see a kind of scale in which at one end is someone adding aromatherapy oil to bath water, and at the other end the use of practices for a specific religious end, such as druidism or wicca? If so, when does it become necessary to define criteria that distinguish one from the other? At what point in the scale does the label 'incompatible with Christianity' apply? A number of cases in which some members of churches have been revealed as being simultaneously practitioners of other forms of spirituality or religious practice have caused problems for ministers and con-

gregations, and some such people have been simply asked to leave. Here, looking at the mission implications, we might say that the response to such a person depends on the amount of distraction from the Christian occupation of working for and in God's kingdom is created by that person's choices. At the same time, the appropriate response is surely not a knee-jerk defensive reaction, but a loving concern undegirded by confidence in the truth of the Christian message. Further, mission may not mean trying to dissuade a person from a particular practice (unless this is causing real mental or physical harm), but encouraging him or her to work through it and beyond it into an understanding that a deeper and more long-lasting satisfaction can be found in what is offered by the Christ-like God.

3.18 It is also worth noting that an increasing number of churches now hold healing services, or may incorporate a time of healing ministry and prayer within the traditional liturgies. It is also characteristic of such ministry times that they may include a defined tactile experience: the laying on of hands with prayer, or anointing with oil. It may be that the sensitive development of such ministries within the body of the Church's worship may serve to attract those who need to have their bodies affirmed and cherished under God and who have perhaps grown past self-centred practices which are not directly referential of God.

3.19 Here we cannot avoid addressing the abuse of power which can go on even within the Church. People who surrender themselves to the care of others may leave themselves open to exploitation; unscrupulous practitioners have opportunities to make money from those who need help but cannot really afford expensive therapies, or may in extreme cases abuse people's bodies. Uncontrolled situations may also leave practitioners open to blame and accusation from those they have tried to help. For this reason, the St Marylebone Centre has a Code of Ethics and Practice. There are no rooms without visual access from the corridors and healing by touching the affected part of the body does not take place. This enables the Centre to provide services for cases of need within proper guidelines and boundaries. This protection of people and practitioners also needs to be taken seriously by the whole Church.

3.20 Unless the Church is seen to be offering such people something they want and need, however, it is likely that those growing up with 'pick'n'mix' practices will simply seek more and more complex versions of the same thing

without even finding a place to locate the spiritual part of these experiences. The lesson for the Church here is that it can no longer be afraid of the notion of embodiment, for human beings are created corporeal and sexual. Mission has to reach out and nurture holistically, not just in terms of intellectual apologetics. In this respect the Church has to be more aware of people's feelings about their bodies and to deal genuinely with issues concerning our creatureliness and sexuality.¹¹

3.21 The fact that many people do need to feel good about their bodies also challenges the Church to *affirm* our creatureliness, as beings made in God's image and this includes our sexual nature. In a highly individualised society, relationships, including intimate relationships, may be less easily entered into and sustained, leading to casual and impersonal encounters. People may draw the boundaries of their individual needs so tightly around themselves that it becomes almost impossible to let another person in, to communicate with them openly and honestly, and to give of oneself in sharing and mutuality. The search for love, like the search for faith, can be characterised by frustration and loneliness. Christians then may be challenged by the fact that an ideal of lifelong faithful commitment may be for many in modern society a remote concept or impossible dream, yet it is part of our task to show forth a model of enduring and unchanging love. We are challenged to witness to a relationship with God which makes it possible for us to be faithful and committed in the giving of our hearts, minds and bodies to another person, as to God. Further, the recovery and affirmation of concepts such as faithfulness, self-giving, obedience and forgiveness, in respect of all our relationships, including our sexual relationships, are an important mission task in a world of emphasis on self and personal choice. Christians have to deal with a society in which Aldous Huxley's satirical words 'ending is better than mending' have real force.¹²

The future and hope

Hey you, you're a child in my head
you haven't walked yet
your first words have yet to be said
But I swear you'll be blessed ...

... you'll be blessed
you'll have the best
I promise you that
I'll pick a star from the sky
pull your name from a hat
I promise you that you'll be blessed

(Elton John, 'Blessed' from *Made in England*, 1995,
William A. Bong Ltd, Mercury Records)

3.22 Another important theme of contemporary spirituality is a need to look forward to the future and to hope. The current popularity of psychic fairs indicates increasing interest in fortune-telling and reading the future. New Age practices have many ways of doing this, from sophisticated versions of looking at your stars in the daily paper, to consulting crystals, the Tarot, other forms of modern divination and even Mystic Meg, a television personality who predicts for you if you are the kind of person who is going to be several million pounds richer by the end of the Saturday lottery draw. While it is easy to laugh at Mystic Meg, it is not so easy to laugh at the reports that wives of recent presidents of the United States consult fortune-tellers and astrologers. This story illustrates how people may fasten their hopes and affections on those who can supposedly help them to face the future.

The death of Patric Walker last week knocked a nation for six. As one letter said: 'I couldn't help but shed a tear when I heard of Patric Walker's death. In a way he was like one of my relatives, even closer. He was a leading light in my small world. He used to tell of me, touch my life, push me towards creating a better tomorrow.'¹³

3.23 The desire to know the future before it happens and the need for messages from the transcendental realm have a long history. In the Old Testament, casting lots (see e.g. 1 Samuel 14.41-42) and consultation of the Urim and Thummim (see Exodus 28.30; Deuteronomy 33.8; 1 Samuel 28.6) precede verbal prophecy and symbolic actions. What seems to have been lost from today's practices is the sense that we are moving into God's future. As Christians, we believe that the future is not unsure or uncertain, but already achieved for us. All we have to do is work to bring ourselves and our fellow

people into the vision set out for us in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church. New Agers reject this vision, believing that this belongs to the Age of Pisces which is passing, and are left with the Age of Aquarius in which human consciousness becomes ever more perfect. In this sense followers of New Age see the Christ-like God as being of the past and not of the future and have turned away from the reality of God's promise and find themselves trying to make sense of a world without a coherent and meaningful vision of the future. For them, then, making sense of the chaotic must come through the power of the human person and our resourcefulness in 'pick'n'mix' to make a whole. This is a condition of what is called post-modernity and leads some to believe that we are now in a post-Christian culture.

3.24 However, for many, an encounter with the Christian vision of God's kingdom made real on earth and the *eschaton* in which all things are created new and perfect, is not seen as a living reality. For such people sometimes, our Christian hope is dismissed as dead and dust even before they have had the chance to encounter it. The challenge to the Church is to present the vision of God's future as the sustaining vision of authentic spirituality, into which all desires to know what is in store may be poured and satisfied with God's promises.

Encumbered forever by desire and ambition

There's a hunger still unsatisfied

Our weary eyes still stray to the horizon

Though down this road we've been so many times

The grass was greener

The light was brighter

The taste was sweeter

The nights of wonder

With friends surrounded

The dawn mist glowing

The water flowing

The endless river

Forever and ever

(Pink Floyd, 'High Hopes' from *The Division Bell*, 1994,
Pink Floyd Music, EMI Records)

3.25 This song, which refers not only to the stress of life, but also to the desire for quality and permanence, opens and closes with the persistent ringing of a (church?) bell, the 'division bell'. Those on the outside are aware of their unsatisfied hunger. The challenge to Christians is to convince those who hear the bell that it is not the death knell of Christianity but that there is a hope of a future that is indeed sweeter and brighter, and one which lasts 'forever and ever'.

The natural world

3.26 Another important aspect of contemporary spirituality is the increased emphasis on the numinous aspects of the natural world and feelings of interconnectedness with all of creation, without losing the sense of the supremacy of self. This manifests itself in places of pilgrimage, such as Glastonbury, an interest in ley lines and in the planet as a self-regulating being: Gaia.¹⁴ Where people's spirituality is inclined in this direction, green issues come to the fore and ecology and spirituality become mixed. Non-exploitation of the environment is stressed and non-harming of living beings. 'Do what you like but harm none' is the ethical maxim of some groups, including paganism. This touches the Church's pursuit of justice, peace and the integrity of creation in its task of furthering God's kingdom on earth. However, it also reinforces the challenge to the Church to be clear about its moral teaching and commitments in a world in which ethical issues become ever more complex. The Church also has to be clear about the relation between God and creation. The pantheistic colouring of some New Age beliefs may be attractive to many who are searching for faith, but Christianity sees a dynamic relation between the creator God and the created order. This allows us to perceive more of God as the creator and sustainer of all that is (see Chapter 4) by finding analogy rather than identity in the natural world.

3.27 For example, the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell writes about a drop of dew as if it were longing for the sun to draw it back towards the sky. By using the analogy of the morning dew's evaporation in the sunlight, he writes about the dew as if it were a soul longing to be reunited with God.¹⁵ Moreover, many other Christians have found God in contemplation of the natural world and have been able to express this. For example: