

– Iterations –

spirituality in post-Christian times

Monday 14th May 2018

day conference – Sarum College, Salisbury

with Prof. David Tracy (University of Chicago)

TIMETABLE

- from 09:15 – registration etc. and TEA/COFFEE in the Common Room
- 09:55 – Introductions
- 10:05 – 1st plenary session (*Cavell Room*): Dr. Andreas Telser (Catholic University of Linz):
“*Always look on the bright side of life*”: or what could happen, if an ever-ambiguous humour engages spirituality...’
- 11:00 – 5 min. stretch break
- 11:05 – 2nd plenary session (*Cavell Room*): Dr. Andrew Todd (Sarum College): ‘Spirituality, autonomy and heteronomy: intrusions, interactions and inter-dependence’
- 12:00 – TEA / COFFEE in the Common Room
- 12:20 – 1st parallel session (*Cavell, Anderson & Tindall Rooms*)
- 13:00 – LUNCH in the Refectory
- 14:00 – 2nd parallel session (*Cavell, Anderson & Tindall Rooms*)
- 14:40 – 5 min. stretch & move-between-rooms break
- 14:45 – 3rd parallel session (*Cavell, Anderson & Tindall Rooms*)
- 15:25 – TEA / COFFEE in the Common Room
- 16:00 – Concluding plenary session (*Cavell Room*): Dr. Colin Greene (Sarum College):
‘Post-Christian or Post-Christendom?: Converging or competing perspectives?’
- 16:55 – Thank-yous
- 17:00 – Reception in the Common Room

SPEAKERS, PAPERS and VENUES

Plenary speakers (downstairs in the Cavell Room):

Dr. Andreas Telser is Assistant Professor in the Institute for Fundamental Theology and Dogmatics at the Catholic University of Linz.

Dr. Andrew Todd is Programme Leader of the MA in Christian Spirituality, and Director of the Centre for Contemporary Spirituality at Sarum College.

Dr. Colin Greene is Programme Leader of the MA in Theology, Imagination and Culture, and Director of the Centre for Theology, Imagination and Culture at Sarum College.

Parallel sessions

| Cavell Room (large plenary room) | Anderson Room (by the top of the stairs) | Tindall Room (up the stairs, end on the right) |
|---|--|---|
| <p>12:20</p> <p>Christian spirituality as political resistance: the construction of self as the way of liberation and freedom</p> <p>Yin-An Chen is an MPhil student in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Kent.</p> | <p>12:20</p> <p>Post-modern therapeutic practices and the language of the soul</p> <p>Dr. Laura Béres is a psychotherapist and professor of Social Work as well as a dissertation-year student on the MA in Christian Spirituality at Sarum College.</p> | <p>12:20</p> <p>Autofiction, truth-telling and writing about yourself: some Irish and Norwegian examples of tormented confession</p> <p>Patricia McKee Hanna is a Priest in the Church of Ireland, has been a University Chaplain, and is a recent graduate of the Certificate in Spiritual Direction at Sarum College.</p> |
| <p>14:00</p> <p>Becoming a temporary hermit in the Cathedral Tower of Linz – a pastoral project in Austria taps Christian spiritual traditions</p> <p>Dr. Sibylle Trawöger works at the Institute for Fundamental Theology and Dogmatics at the Catholic University of Linz.</p> | <p>14:00</p> <p>Public rites of mourning: ‘mourn porn’ and the hidden balm of belonging</p> <p>Caroline Bruce is a dissertation year student in the MA in Theology, Imagination and Culture at Sarum College.</p> | <p>14:00</p> <p>Most of all body, then the mortal soul: Christian spirituality beyond body-soul dualism and idealism</p> <p>Dr. Barnabas Palfrey is Lecturer in Christian Spirituality at Sarum College.</p> |
| <p>14:50</p> <p>Forty years on, is M. Scott Peck’s classic self-help book <i>The Road Less Travelled</i> still a worthwhile travel guide for those seeking a spiritual path, or has it lost its way?</p> <p>Paul Ivin is a recent graduate of the MA in Theology, Imagination and Culture at Sarum College.</p> | <p>14:50</p> <p>Labyrinths of Meaning: spirituality in city space</p> <p>Matt Valler is Founder & Director of The Alchemy Project, a community research adventure with life and death stories. Matt is a consultant with the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship and was formally global Ambassador for Youth with United Bible Societies.</p> | <p>14:50</p> <p>‘Blessed radiance’: perspectives on transfiguration and the spirituality of divinisation from Patristic theology and contemporary popular music</p> <p>Ewan King is minister of Heath St. Baptist Church, Hampstead, London. He works as a pianist, band-leader and arranger, and has research interests in literature, music, philosophical theology and patristics.</p> |

SHORT PAPER DESCRIPTIONS

12:20 – 1pm

Christian spirituality as political resistance: the construction of self as the way of liberation and freedom (Yin-An Chan)

Christian spirituality should be considered as a method of political resistance rather than an apolitical individual contemplation with God. The common understanding of spirituality is regarded as a religious and personal practice since it has been appropriated by capitalism and liberalism to support the individualisation of the self in the circumstances of secularisation. That is, the personal and apolitical understanding of spirituality, maintaining the dominance of capitalism and liberalism, excludes the possibility of religion leading to political changes and resistance. This article, however, introduces the insight of Michel Foucault, analysing the relationship between various dynamic power relationships and the construction of the self, called in his words 'subjectification,' to retrieve the understanding of spirituality as a way of political resistance. Christian spirituality, in this sense, is about the construction of the self in a relationship with God and also with other power relationships. Spirituality is about how the self is constructed within the world because it is impossible to have any individual subject that can escape from any power relationship. Christian spirituality has to point out that the construction of the self is the process of discerning and recognising the impact of the power, directing our desire, sexuality, and the body. Spirituality is not apolitical but a method of political resistance.

Post-modern therapeutic practices and the language of the soul (Laura Béres)

As a psychotherapist, and more specifically as a post-modern narrative therapist, I have been arguing for the need to incorporate spirituality into 'biopsychosocial' assessments and ongoing counselling services for many years. Since 'spirituality' is often defined in health and social service literature as that which gives people a sense of meaning and purpose, I believe it is crucial to engage service users in conversations that include this area of their lives. However, what has been missing in much of this literature is a description of how post-modern psychotherapists might be informed by conceptions of the soul, when their main approach to understanding the 'self' has been through the social construction of identity and the impact of discourses on meaning-making behaviours. Drawing upon Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* and *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, as well as Edith Stein's *Finite and Eternal Being*, I will explore how their images of the soul may enrich psychotherapy's discourse and practice.

Autofiction, truth-telling and tormented confession (Patricia McKee Hanna)

Memoir and autofiction deserve a fuller amount of attention than has been given to them in anthologies addressing the turn to theological reflection.

Autofiction in particular raises complex issues around how we write using our own experience as the basis for truth-telling and reflection, from the singular perspective of the self as engaged in the long gaze back. Writings in this genre tend to be controversial, tormented and involve a full public confession as an act of catharsis. Examples abound in recent writings on memoir and autofiction by Irish and Norwegian authors, especially Frank McCormack, Hugo Hamilton, Nuala O'Faolain and Karl Ove Knausgaard.

I follow the dilemmas that some of their writing raises and ask, within the context of theological reflection, how a God of intimations addresses us on the issue of forgiveness, as raised in writings based on the confessions of the self.

2 – 2:40 pm

Becoming a temporary hermit in the Cathedral Tower of Linz – a pastoral project in Austria taps Christian spiritual traditions (Dr. Sibylle Trawöger)

When in 2009 Linz was one of the European Capitals of Culture the project “Being a Temporary Hermit in the Tower” was originally initiated. For that purpose a small room of approximately 86 squarefeet was built inside Cathedral tower at approximately 76 yards height. In this room a person can stay for a seven days retreat. For most of the applicants it is their first contact with religious exercises, and they leave the hermitage in Cathedral tower captivated by their insights into the Christian spiritual tradition(s).

I would like to present a few (theological) insights that I gained from this pastoral project focussing on what has been particularly fascinating to some of the self-appointed “non-believers”. These are mainly people who have been brought up Catholic but have distanced themselves from Church and who by participating in the ‘Hermit project’ get in contact with a dimension of spirituality which was unknown to them thus far but which is nevertheless part of the Christian tradition.

At first sight such a retreat in the hermitage is a contrast program to the challenges of everyday life. People are searching for places of quiet and rest in a society of permanent acceleration (c.f. Hartmut Rosa) leading all too often into a burn-out-society (c.f. Byung Chul Han). The “Becoming a Temporary Hermit in the Cathedral tower” is a pastoral project which reacts *creatively* to the defaults of society in so-called post-Christian times by letting the deeper meaning of aspects of the Christian spiritual tradition flash up. Projects like this make the ongoing relevance of the Christian *spiritual* tradition visible again.

Public rites of mourning: ‘mourn porn’ and the hidden balm of belonging (Caroline Bruce)

To die young is a tragedy; to be killed young is an outrage. The Manchester Arena bombing and the Grenfell Tower fire affected not only those who died or their families, but the whole nation. In this paper I want to look at the spiritual practices that we, as a society, engaged in and what they expressed. As a society do we grieve especially only those who resemble us culturally as Butler suggests? By unpicking some of the responses that ensued, I want to show that public grieving is often an emotional response modified by our participation in a group (Tajfel). Being part of a group necessitates the creation of limits (Lynch). Grief at a national level can become a reiteration of societal ideals and practices that affirm them (Žižek). In our attempt to smooth the trauma of mass murder in ‘group think’ (Arendt) something of the complexity of what it is to be human is negated from the equation. In shoring up vulnerability do we block the possibility of effective change? How can we mourn well?

Most of all body, then the mortal soul: Christian spirituality beyond body-soul dualism and idealism (Dr. Barnabas Palfrey)

The contention of this paper is that recently coined ‘Christian spirituality’ must learn to think itself more thoroughly in terms of Christ and the Spirit. I contend that this invites, first and foremost, a theological discourse of participation in ‘the body’ in all its Christological registers. For Christ’s body is presented to Christians as simultaneously individual-mortal, social-collective and cosmic-transcendental. It is within this hope for embodiment in Christ that Christian spirituality then also sorely needs spiritually sensitive psychological discourses of the truly mortal soul (here, I shall fly a brief flag for Jacques Lacan).

This approach contests the romantic-idealist and individualistic bents of many notions of ‘spirituality’ inside and outside of the churches today. It also entails an adjusted hermeneutic towards classical Christian discourses that have tended to be read as addressing an immortal soul more or less ambiguously related to its body.

2:45 – 3:25 pm

Forty years on, is M. Scott Peck's classic self-help book *The Road Less Travelled* still a worthwhile travel guide for those seeking a spiritual path, or has it lost its way? (Paul Ivin)

The self-help book is often derided, ridiculed for its simplistic advice by self-professed experts, written with little literary merit for naive and narcissistic readers. Many Christians are wary of the self-help book with its recipes for worldly success. It is my proposal, however, that the spirituality found in self-help literature has much to commend it to readers of any faith or none. These books in fact follow the *Bible* as the classic self-help book, and its pages offer a wisdom for the believer as best exemplified by Jesus as a celebrated Wisdom teacher.

In this paper I want to focus on the spirituality of one of the most significant and influential self-help books *The Road Less Travelled* by M. Scott Peck. As a psychotherapist, Peck recognised the importance of religion in the lives of his patients. In his classic bestseller he wanted to bring the two disciplines of psychology and religion together. Any valid contemporary spirituality must be able to understand psychology as well as other aspects of modernity, such as science, evolution, diversity and world religions. Peck depicts a spirituality in the pages of *The Road* that is full of potential, unfettered by the judgment of an angry God or the limitations of a sinful self. Many of Peck's critics came from traditional Christian believers but forty years since first published *The Road* remains a bestseller, presenting a spirituality that resonates with contemporary spiritual seekers who welcome a travelling companion on their individual spiritual journey. Forty years on, it is time to review the impact of this paperback on its ten million readers and beyond. What kind of spirituality does this 'ultimate self-help manual' provide and is this a spirituality that is still relevant today?

'Labyrinths of Meaning: spirituality in city space' (Matt Valler)

How does the physical environment of a city space affect spiritual experience? This case study explores the *Labyrinth City Hack*, an intentional walking practice, and how it has been used among post-Christian communities in both London and Melbourne. Drawing on insights from psycho-geography, this presentation will explore how parsing layers of symbolic meaning in a space allows for the creation – or discovery (the question of agency is elusive) – of narratives that draw the participant into a deeper relationship with that space. When this is done on pathways along which city-dwellers repeatedly walk, the process of 'getting from A to B' is punctuated by encounters with webs of story that offer both connection and provocation. The case-study will critically reflect on both the limitations and opportunities of the City Hack for post-Christian spirituality, with particular reference to the challenges of reconceptualising the divine in contemporary spirituality and the impact of globalised culture on notions of community life.

'Blessed radiance': perspectives from Patristic theology and present-day popular music on transfiguration and the spirituality of divinisation (Ewan King)

In many Western Christian congregational contexts the very idea that "God became man that man might become God" has become startlingly unfamiliar. But how has divinisation – an idea once so central to Christian spirituality – come to occupy this equivocal place in Christian thinking? That question underlies this paper's attempt to juxtapose the seventh-century Byzantine theologian, Maximus the Confessor, with contemporary songwriter and singer, Sufjan Stevens.

Maximus is one of the classic thinkers of divinisation, and a key site for his thought on the subject is the Gospel account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, and so we'll begin by considering the series of interpretations of the theme Maximus offers in the course of his great tenth 'ambiguum'. We'll then attempt to hear Sufjan's song, *The Transfiguration*, in dialogue with the work of the Byzantine monk. A first read or listen might suggest the two approaches are diametrically opposed. Exhorting the reader to get beyond the human and textual "flesh", by piercing the "veil" and "cloud" of created reality, Maximus insists that it is only by transcendence that we can penetrate to the "blessed radiance" of divine changelessness. Sufjan, on the other hand, seems to prefer staying with the human. In Sufjan's vision of transfiguration, soaring flights of vision seem to be precluded by the laconic, almost affectless singing voice, while the many-layered repetitions of the band arrangement

chain the song firmly down to earth. Does the songwriter want to shut the listener out from the divine vision? Perhaps – but there are deeper similarities below these contrasts. Maximus and Sufjan on transfiguration and divinisation proves a pairing rich in potential for resourcing both contemporary theological thinking and (perhaps more importantly) the lived spirituality of Christian devotional and artistic practice.