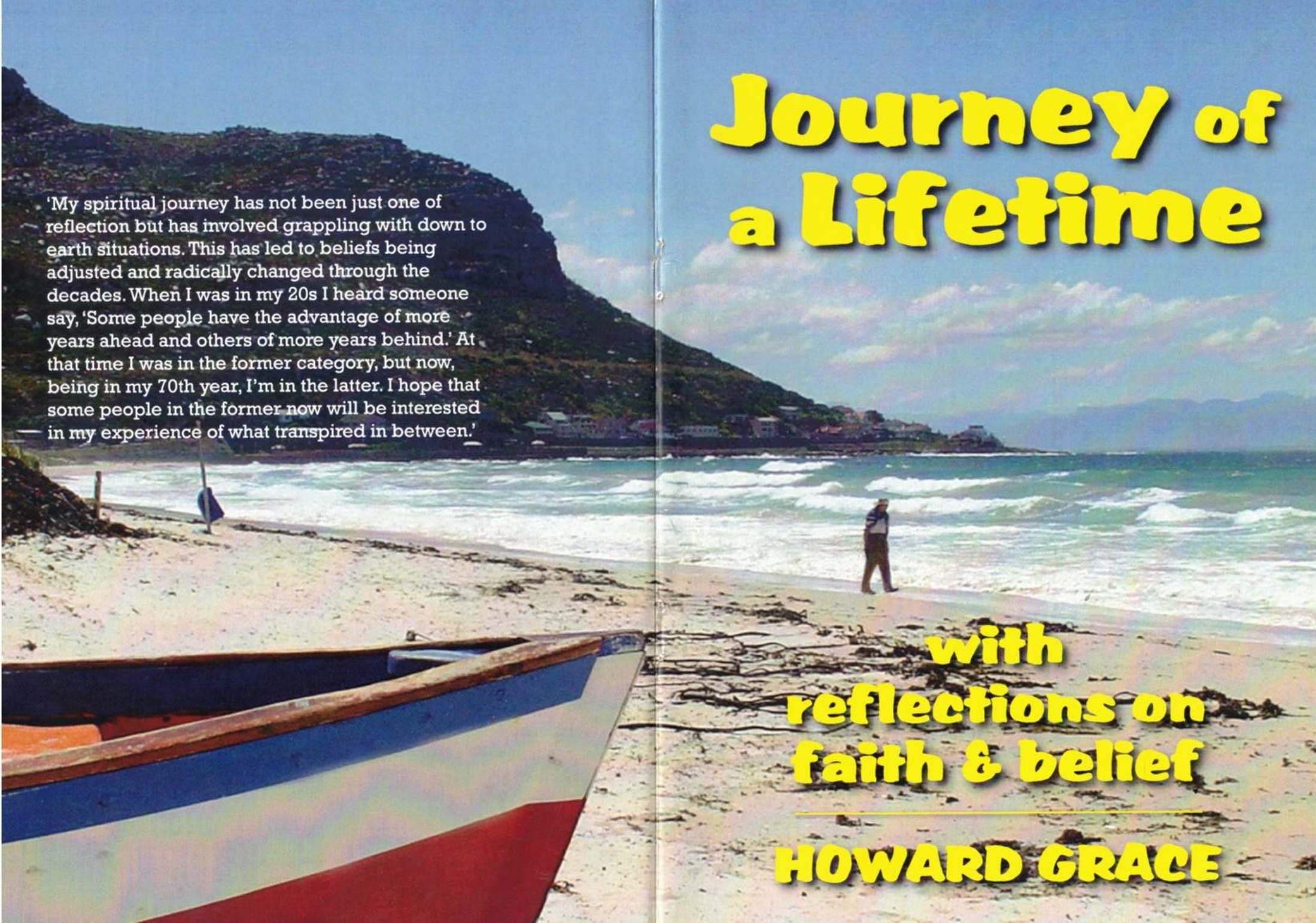




'My spiritual journey has not been just one of reflection but has involved grappling with down to earth situations. This has led to beliefs being adjusted and radically changed through the decades. When I was in my 20s I heard someone say, 'Some people have the advantage of more years ahead and others of more years behind.' At that time I was in the former category, but now, being in my 70th year, I'm in the latter. I hope that some people in the former now will be interested in my experience of what transpired in between.'

Journey of a Lifetime

**with
reflections on
faith & belief**

HOWARD GRACE

Journey of a lifetime

With reflections on faith and belief

by Howard Grace

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*Cover design - With many thanks to Blair Cummock.
(photo of Fish Hoek, South Africa)*

Journey of a lifetime

Introduction

Early in 2010 I was listening to the BBC radio. One phrase caught my attention. It was, 'Learning to live creatively with difference for the sake of a bigger cause.' The present-day world faces a number of major challenges. There are indeed big 'differences', in culture, religion, lifestyles and beliefs. But what is this 'bigger cause'?

I come from an ordinary, non-religious, Western background. I have worked, for some years, as a teacher of mathematics in a local state school in England. But I have also been privileged to spend large parts of my life in other parts of the world, in Africa, Continental Europe, the USA, Asia and Australia. The friends I have made and worked with have many different religious beliefs. Yet we have worked together in common cause. These different influences have shaped who I am.

My own spiritual journey has not been just one of reflection but comes from grappling with very down to earth situations. This has led to beliefs being adjusted and radically changed through the decades. When I was in my 20s I heard someone say, 'Some people have the advantage of more years ahead and others of more years behind.' At that time I was in the former category, but now, being in my 70th year, I'm in the latter. I hope that some people in the former now will be interested in my experience of what transpired in between. In recent years I've written several reflections updating my spiritual perceptions. Some of these come at the end of this booklet. I am very aware that great men and women through the centuries have explored these issues in ways far more learned than I am capable of. But I hope that there will be many who have more grass roots perceptions who will be able to relate to my questing.

First of all though I would like to share something of my overall life journey, to give context to these reflections in the last section.

May 2010

A potted life history

The early years

I was born in Thatcham, England on May 30th 1940, just after the beginning of the Second World War. I am an only child. My father enlisted in the Air Force and the following year was sent to India where he spent the rest of the war. It must have been very hard for my parents to be apart for nearly four years at a time of such uncertainty. When my father returned home at the end of the war I was five. I remember that I didn't know who to expect.

I grew up in a loving, caring home. My mum and dad were ordinary people with a good sense of humour. At the age of eleven I went to a Grammar school. I was not the most academic of students, in fact near the bottom of the class in most subjects (I have a school report from when I was 14 which shows this vividly) but top in mathematics, and quite proficient in physics. I was good at sports and held school records in athletics and swimming, also played rugby for Berkshire schools, as well as the school first team for three years. The other side of me was to become well known for getting up to all sorts of pranks.

Just to give one example. From a novelty shop I bought a plastic 'pooh', which looked very realistic. Early one morning before school assembly I crept into the school hall and put the aforementioned object on the platform in front of where the senior teachers, in their academic gowns, would sit. All students stood as the teachers walked in and sat down. During the assembly I watched as, one by one, their eyes alighted, with brows furrowed and minds stirring, on the front of the stage. At the end they walked out, followed by all the pupils. I never did know what happened to the pooh! There were plenty of other escapades which demonstrate my mentality in those days.

For two years in the Sixth Form I had my first girl friend. This relationship meant a lot to both of us. But while she was a Christian, religion didn't mean anything to me. This eventually caused us to break up. That, in turn, contributed to my becoming a militant atheist.

Leaving school

After school I did a one-year apprenticeship at a physics research lab at Aldermaston. Then I went to university (Northampton College, London, which later became The City University) to study Applied Physics. It was a four-year Sandwich Course, which meant that I spent six months of the year at university and six months working in the research lab. This included periods in the nuclear reactor and also in the thermonuclear section working on the earliest stages of research into the controlled thermonuclear process. This was in the early 60s.



Academically I had worked reasonably hard but the social side of student life and yet more sophisticated pranks featured prominently. For example, walking around London with my top hat, tail suit and no trousers, with a bicycle bell on my umbrella, gave me great enjoyment. Walking behind some unsuspecting pedestrian and ringing the

bell, causing him/her to leap out of the way in fright, then raising my hat in greeting is just one thing which gives insight to my mentality.

But I'd also become involved with social issues. For instance I had spoken at Hyde Park (Speakers) Corner for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (even though my studies specialised in nuclear power). I'd also demonstrated outside the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square, against Apartheid. On top of this there were also things in the university which I wasn't happy with. So I decided to run as President of the student body of Northampton College, and was elected.

However, although I graduated with a low honours degree I didn't feel that a career in physics was for me. So for this extra year, as I had to be involved in a course of study, I opted for a Post Grad course in Industrial Administration. I couldn't get a grant for this, and had no money. So I worked for six months as a labourer in the cardboard box factory in Thatcham (near Newbury) where my father had become a manager. My official title was a 'stripper'. Stripping waste cardboard from boxes in their early stage of production became my main focus in life. It was piecework and I worked very hard to save to finance my Post Grad year.

A decisive encounter

It was during this year that I first encountered, what was then, Moral Re-Armament (MRA). The student leadership of London were invited to The Westminster Theatre for a buffet meal and to see a play, *Through the Garden Wall*. A lot of student leaders took up this offer. They were probably as penniless as I was, and in need of a good meal! I went with my girl friend, of that time, and had a very enjoyable evening, including being struck by the play, also liked some of the people we had met there. A few months later there was a similar invitation to see a different, but equally thought-provoking play. I went to that too, but this time enquired a bit deeper as to what was behind it, which seemed to relate to the social concerns that I was engaged with.

But I still led a very mixed life. One Christmas, with two friends I went to Downing Street dressed as workmen with a ladder. We stole the street sign, high up on a wall, in a daring(!) hit and run escapade. Another adventure was when a couple of us organised about 200 students to decorate the insides of all the London Underground Circle Line trains, in both directions, with Christmas decorations. That took an afternoon and made the front page of tabloid newspapers on the following day. There were various other such antics but this gives a feel of my continuing mischievous and adventurous spirit.



Inter-college child's scooter race
-Brighton to London.
Captain of winning team.

Amongst other aspects of life, what people didn't know was that as chair of a Student Union meeting I had altered the voting figures of a motion that I wanted to see passed. I thought that the students hadn't realised how important it was for this motion to be passed! Yet I was critical of politicians for being dishonest and corrupt. The MRA people that I had met after the play at the theatre knew nothing of this background. But they said to me that if I was really serious about bringing change to the issues that concerned me I should take a good look at the root of the changes I wanted to see in the world, and then have a good look at myself and see if I was living the quality of life I wanted to see in others. I didn't have to think too deeply to be aware of the mismatch. The first step in changing the direction of my life was to be honest in the next Union Meeting about what I'd done with the vote fiddling and reverse the decision.

My knees were shaking as I did this and I fully expected to be thrown out. But although there was plenty of booing and hissing from the back, I wasn't thrown out and I sensed that there was more trust in me after that. I don't think that I was a particularly good president from an administrative and leadership skills point of view, but at least I became honest. For me that act of honesty (there were also plenty of other things that needed to be put right) was about being true to what deep in my heart I felt to be right. It was linked with a commitment to be part of building a better world. It caused inner liberation. It was however nothing to do with religious beliefs.

My atheistic thinking had hardened during those years at university. For instance at the annual dinner of the student body, with honoured guests, etc. I declined to say grace before the meal, which was traditional for the president. Why should I thank an entity which I didn't believe in?

Leaving uni - the next phase

After leaving university I spent one year working as an official of the National Union of Students in London. Then in 1965 I became part of a delegation to the USA to a young people's MRA Summer convention. As I was working with the NUS I got a free passage on a student charter boat across the Atlantic with 650 other students from Europe and the USA. Another adventure. I remember organising a debate on board with the motion, 'This house believes that Columbus went too far.' Whilst in the

USA I decided to work as a volunteer with MRA and spent most of the year (right through a severe winter) working on a building site for a new college library on Mackinac Island, Michigan. That was a unique and formative experience for me.

In the summer of 1966 I returned to the UK and became part of a musical review, *Its Our Country Jack* which in one year toured 30 ports and industrial centres of the UK. Our international cast and support team of 60 people set out to address the acute industrial unrest that was a big issue at the time. In the summer of that year IOCJ developed into, *Anything to Declare?* which went on tour in the wider world for the next three years. But I stayed in London and worked mainly with students in connection with the Westminster Theatre. Also for about six months I shared a room with Conrad Hunte, at the time when he decided to stop his international career as Vice Captain of the West Indies cricket team, to tackle the explosive issue of race relations during the time that Enoch Powell made his famous 'Rivers of blood' speech. Conrad became a much-valued friend.

Five years 'on the road'

Then in 1968 I was invited by Rajmohan Gandhi (recent biographer of his grandfather, the Mahatma) to be part of a travelling team of 40 people through Sri Lanka and India. I became part of the support team for various stage plays. That was a memorable adventure in cultures that were very different to what I was used to. But I also encountered a yet different culture that was to have a considerable impact on my life in the decades ahead. Another person on that team was Maria Driessen, from Holland. She was the nurse for the group. Although I became her patient on a couple of occasions I didn't think of her as a possible future soul mate. Nor she me!

After the adventures in Colombo, Jaffna, Madras, Mumbai, Delhi, Calcutta, Assam, etc. the group dispersed. But I decided to stay on in India. My main focus for the next year was with students at universities all over the country. But also for several months in Delhi I was supporting Harijan (formerly called 'untouchables') friends who were bringing about amazing transformations to people's lives in their colony. This was an even more drastic culture shock for me but one, which I greatly valued.

One thing which struck me about the friendships with Indian students, became formative to my conviction many years in the future. I will just add this here. Many of the young men and women I met were very intelligent and getting a good education. But I wondered what they would use this ability and education for. Would it be largely to just make a 'nice' life for themselves? Or would it be in some way to serve others, and the wider community. This question of deeper motivation was often not directly addressed in training institutions, whether in India or the UK. But it is a very important factor both for the individuals themselves and for the needs of society.

In 1970, after nearly two years in India, I rejoined *Anything to Declare?* in Australia and New Zealand. When they went on to Papua New Guinea I stayed in Australia to follow up growing initiatives there. Yet another adventure. My main team-mate was Kolezo Chase, a young man from Nagaland in North East India. At the age of 14 he had gone into the jungle with his sten gun to fight as a freedom fighter for a number of years. Many of his relatives had been killed. His experiences of hate and forgiveness gave him profound insights to the inner struggle that goes on inside all of us in one way or another. We spent much time with radical students, some of whom had refused to be drafted to go to fight in the Viet Nam war. Kolezo's perspective led us to become good friends with some of these student leaders.

I realised I had been too sensitive to how others had hurt me and not sensitive enough to how I had hurt others. (Kolezo Chase)

During these years I tried to tolerate, and sometimes to accommodate to, the religious beliefs of some of my colleagues. But they weren't my own beliefs. My driving motor was to create a radically better world. As time went on however I realised that that wasn't going to happen. Some things (including ones we were involved in trying to address) took a turn for the better. But there were plenty of massive new issues that raised their ugly heads. I reached a point of realising that my Utopia would never happen. So what was the point of carrying on? I might as well go off and make the most of living it up. But that inner struggle persisted, between, 'To hell with it' and, 'This is how you are meant to live anyway.' I began to wonder whether this was what people called 'God' impinging on me.

I think the other factor at that time was that I deeply valued the fellowship that had become my life. So, although I am not the conforming type, there was probably the temptation to adapt to the accepted norms of those I was with.

Thus, for a combination of reasons, I decided to carry on but the basic motivation of 'Be true to what deep in your heart you believe to be right' found a new basis. Instead of being primarily focussed on results it became more centred on love. Also I became more open to the possibility of a greater spiritual dimension 'God' at 'work' in this. I carried on doing the same things but the motivation was changing. This has since become an important factor in my understanding of my commitment.

Engaged!

After a couple of years in Australia I became even more based in Armagh, the MRA centre in Melbourne. There were about 20 of us living as a community. One of those was, the earlier mentioned Maria Driessen. So we got to know each other better, just as did everyone else in the community. However, one night when I was sleepless I had a real sense that one day Maria would be my wife. That thought persisted in my quiet times the following mornings. Although I had been attracted to other young women during those six years, in my heart I knew the primary motivation was my own human vibes. But somehow the sense about Maria seemed to come from a deeper place. This matured in my heart for the next months, but she had no idea what I was processing. Then I went to Brisbane to help organise a conference and stayed there for a couple of months.

Following that I was asked to go to Papua New Guinea to help prepare another conference. The day before I went to PNG I was in a small church on a Sunday morning. During a time of silence in the service I had a conviction that our futures lay together and there was no need to wait any longer. So I wrote a letter of proposal and put it in the post before flying off in the opposite direction. Maria phoned me a few days later, and the rest is history. Looking back on it now I can honestly say I could not have wished for a better life's partner.

We had left Europe on the same day, and arrived back on the same day,

together, five years later. We were married in Holland in 1973, had a camping honeymoon in Cornwall, England in a hired Austin mini and my small tent. Fortunately for us the weather was beautiful. And so our life together had started.



South African adventure

That summer we went to Caux, the MRA World Centre in Switzerland, and spent two months heading up one of the meal service teams, but really in search mode of, 'What next?' Amongst other possibilities we were invited to South Africa to support a very mixed group of South African friends who were engaged in the struggle to bring change to their country, right at the height of the time of Apartheid. This grew in our spirits as the next step in our 'calling' together. En route we spent a couple of months in Kenya with Maria's sister Fien and her husband Tom with their two young boys, Fred and Laurence. Then on to South Africa in time to help with the Pretoria conference, early 1974. This was a groundbreaking event when all the delegates lived together in a 4-star hotel in Pretoria, - the first time such a multiracial conference had happened in the capital.

We decided to stay on in South Africa (including six months in Rhodesia). When we got married people hadn't been able to give us presents as we didn't have a home. So most gave us money towards a car. Thus we were able to buy a small car in South Africa, which was very well used. In those two years we moved a lot, living in 55 different homes, sometimes as guests, but also living in people's homes when they went on holiday. A major part of our action was to lead a small group 'performing' a multimedia presentation on the life of Frank Buchman (the initiator of MRA), called *Cross Road*. That led us to many adventures around Southern Africa, including quite pioneering and sometimes tense situations in some places.

(Footnote: The cover shows the beauty of South Africa. But when we were there beaches were racially segregated. So we decided not to go on any beach during those 3½ years.)

Family life in Holland

In 1976 our conviction was to have a couple of years in Holland, so that I could live more fully into what made my wife tick! This was a great time, the main focus of which was involvement with friends who were developing a programme with the focus of family life. This resulted in my making a half-hour, 150 photos, diaporama (slide tape production) "Families, Looking in and Reaching Out." This was made in Dutch, but also in English, German and French with all the participants from a dozen families speaking their own parts in these languages! About 90 copies were made of the finished product and it was used all over the world.

But during the same week that it was completed our own family life went into a new dimension. Our first daughter Wendy was born! Maria's parents were on hand and spent happy times with us and their grandchild. My mother and father also came over from England to make Wendy's acquaintance. So this whole period had a family emphasis.

Back to Africa

We then returned to South Africa, to continue our work there. As we now had a child, we were based more in one place in Johannesburg. But there were still adventurous journeys, for instance down to Cape Town, with Wendy in a carry-cot on the back seat of our car for the two-day journey. We climbed Lions Head the peak beside Table Mountain, with Wendy on



With friends, on Table Mountain.

my back. From there we were able to look out to Robben Island in the distance, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned.

But my main work was in support of young black students in townships like Soweto and Atteridgeville. By then the Soweto school boycott had happened when it was estimated that 800 school kids were shot dead. One of my friends, Linda Mogale (aged 16) had been a leader of the boycotts. He was arrested on trumped up charges of arson and murder. My efforts to support him in prison and what it led to are documented in Hennie de Pous' book, *Reaching for a New World*. (see book references at the end). There was one landmark day when our second daughter Karen was born in Johannesburg, Wendy took her first steps, and I was able to visit Linda in prison for the first time.

However, a few months later the SA Security Police became too uneasy with my activities and we were compelled to leave the country at a few days notice. This was a very difficult time for us as we had felt it our 'calling' to support our friends in South Africa. So, suddenly that was cut from beneath our feet. Linda was in danger of being executed (He actually ended up in Robben Island prison) and we had two small children under the age of two. We had been working voluntarily (for the last fourteen years) so had no money either.

I was in great inner turmoil but had my wife and children to support. So I left them in Holland with Maria's parents and returned to England to explore what to do next. There were several possibilities for continuing work with MRA but I was too burdened with the inner battering I had received to be able to give of myself. So eventually I decided to go into teaching and managed (at the age of 40) to get a grant to become a mature student for post-graduate teacher training. We were able to rent a house in Southampton and that year of living a fairly 'normal' life enabled my spirit to settle down somewhat.

Back home - to my roots.

At the end of that academic year I was offered a job as a teacher of mathematics in my old school in Newbury. I took that and it was the start of 15 fruitful years as a teacher, based in my home-town. Once again there were many adventures, as well as the steady day-to-day work of teaching, which I mostly loved. Besides teaching up to A-level including Pure Mathematics and Mechanics I also became responsible for 'Lower

Sixth, Current Affairs'. This, with a team of colleagues, involved about 150 seventeen-year-old students for 70 minutes each week. My previous international experience was obviously very helpful in this role. After a few years I wrote a play called, *Beyond Comprehension* based on life in a comprehensive school like ours. It was at a time of teacher's unrest and strikes, so this reality came through in the play.

We began to wonder whether I should take a year out of my teaching so that I could go around England putting on the play in Sixth Forms (16-18 age group) using casts of students in the schools I went to. After a couple of read-throughs as preparation, they would do the play as a dramatic reading. It seemed like an inspired idea, but there were considerable implications for our life as a family. We searched and prayed about this for many months. The minister of Newbury Baptist Church, which we attended, said to me one day, 'Don't do it unless you have no alternative!' I understood what he was getting at. Eventually, in my spirit, I did have no alternative. So we launched out. I had three young people move around with me as support, who could play some of the roles too. We rented out our home for the year and based in Tirley Garth, the MRA conference centre in Cheshire. That proved to be a really good experience for Wendy and Karen, (aged twelve and ten) who went to local schools and flourished in those in different ways.

At the end of that year we returned to Newbury, and I was able to return to my mathematics teaching, replacing one of my former colleagues who left to have a baby. As well as the teaching and Current Affairs sessions I also initiated discussion evenings in our home, inviting Sixth Form students to meet interesting visitors. I remember vividly one evening inviting two senior diplomats from the Chinese Embassy to meet with 17 of the leading students from our school. Some sat on bean bags and I asked the Chinese men to speak on the theme of why they felt that Communism was necessary in China in the first place, and how it had worked out in practise, the strengths and the weaknesses. This was before China had opened up in the way it has since then. It was a memorable evening for all concerned. I'm sure those Chinese officials had never had an informal evening like that with young Brits, sitting on beanbags! One off-shoot of that was my being invited with five other teachers, who were involved with MRA, to go to China, visit schools and universities to compare what motivated young people in China with what motivated young people in the UK. Yet more adventures!

I'll share just one amusing incident that happened in Beijing. We were entertained in one large High School and after being shown around had a stimulating discussion with the headmaster, many of the staff, and six of the senior students. At the end of the time a sweet Chinese girl sitting next to me turned and said, 'Can I say something personal to you?' 'Yeees' I replied. 'I think you are a lovely old man.' That very well-meant comment brought me down to earth from the youthful image I was trying to portray! We all had a good laugh.

Launching out again

During the year 1994-5 Maria and I wrestled with the thought that I should stop formal teaching. This was to be free to develop the programme, outlined above, visiting Sixth Forms all round Britain, doing interactive sessions to provoke thought about purpose in life. I mentioned earlier that in India I had been impacted by thoughts about this issue. This had resurfaced in me concerning the British students. Leaving my job had a number of implications for our personal lives, including financial ones, which had to be weighed. Also Karen, our younger daughter was about to enter the Sixth Form of my school.

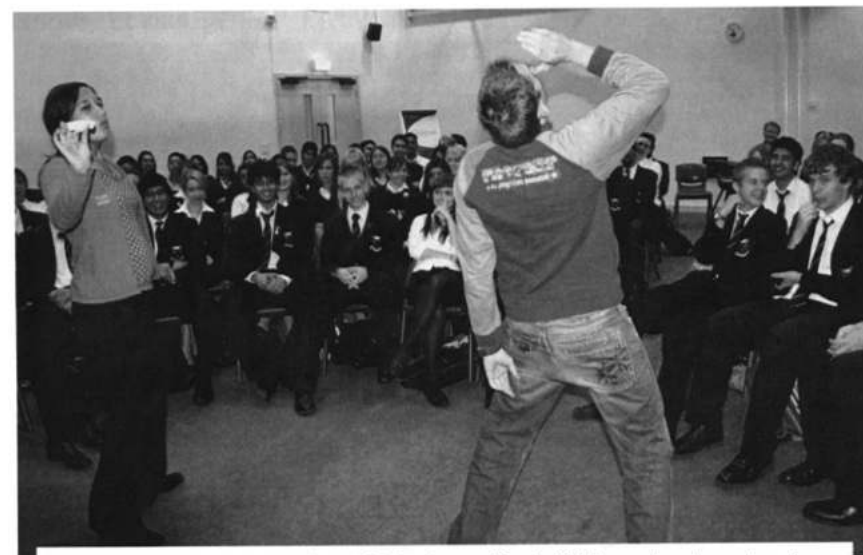
Eventually we sensed that 'God's leading' was that I should continue with teaching. So I accepted that I should plough on. Then a few weeks later, in a staff meeting, the head teacher announced that government money was being made available for Grant Maintained schools like ours to restructure. That would include the possibility for early retirement for some older teachers. I suddenly started taking notice, looked into it and found that I would be eligible. So, out of the blue, it became possible for me to take early retirement at the age of 55 and have a small pension.

I had a sense, of what I interpreted to be God's prompting, that I had accepted I shouldn't launch out on the Sixth Form venture, but now He was giving it. That was actually a much more solid basis to move forward from – a sense of calling, rather than a good idea. But then I thought, 'Do I really believe that God arranged for the possibility of early retirement of teachers in all Grant Maintained schools in the UK, just so that I could take this step?' That didn't make sense. Yet I still felt it as a gift. That is one of those mysteries which we accept gratefully.

Maria continued nursing part time and became our primary bread-winner. But the schools programme came into being. The first visitor to join us

for a foray into schools was Dr. Yusuf Al-Azhari, former Somali Ambassador, who for political reasons had suffered six years in prison. He made a deep impact in the schools we visited. I also valued the chance to have this dedicated Muslim as a team mate.

During the years since then the focus has been on small teams of younger people who spend the autumn and spring terms together. Amongst countries represented in these teams have been Australia, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Honduras, India, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Moldova, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Sudan, UK, USA, Ukraine and Zimbabwe.



Roshan Gul (New Zealand) and Chris James (Australia) in a school near London.

One older person who joined me in 2005 was Letlapa Mphahlele from South Africa. Our conversations about the spiritual dimension were very searching. These are summarised in the first reflection at the end of the booklet as it sets the scene for the subsequent spiritual exploration focus.

Up to the time of writing, together with these teams, I have facilitated at least 800 sessions in Sixth Forms all over the UK. Most recently these have concentrated on themes related to Muslim/Christian/Western relations. Using the film, *The Imam and the Pastor* to stimulate discussion I have had young African Muslims as team mates. We aim to

model people of different beliefs, cultures, race, gender and generation who decide to work together for a greater purpose.

This emerged out of a fascinating time in Caux during the summer of 2009, with 70 young European Muslims training to be peacemakers from Qur'anic principles. The whole thing was a stimulating and ground-breaking session. Although the first four days were exclusive to the participants I was fortunate to be there as a video camera man, so experienced it all. Over the next couple of months I was hard at it, editing and making a DVD of that experience. The completed product is 23 mins. long, and called, *Make me a peacemaker*. Over 200 copies have been sent out all over the world, including to a lot of the young Muslim



Dutch/Indonesian singing group.

participants, who are happy to have something visual to show to their friends and others. But it is this DVD and young Muslim participants that I have worked with in schools most recently, under the theme, 'Who are my people?'

In recent years I have also been on faculties of several 'Visiting Courses' to Eastern European countries. This has been in connexion with *Foundations for Freedom*. I've also run a similar six-day course in Sri Lanka for 24 young teacher trainees, on the theme of *Vision and Values*.

These were all Buddhists. It was a wonderful opportunity to accept invitations to the villages, homes and temples of the participants, who became real friends. I made a DVD of this visit too. In all I've made about a dozen DVDs on a wide variety of subjects. But most of them include exploring aspects of different religious beliefs and motivations.

Maria, Wendy and Karen

For well over half my life Maria has been my partner. We have shared many ups, also a few downs, and numerous adventures. Far more than I have been able to include in this brief life resume. I've been grateful for how she has fitted into life in my home town and made many friends here. We have enjoyed many walks in the Berkshire countryside, also the holidays in Cornwall, armed with wetsuits and surfboards.



My 'young Dutch'.

Wendy and Karen (see centre page for photos) continue to be a great joy to us, in their different ways. Wendy (aged 32) has now been married for ten years to Jon, who is the ideal soul mate for her. When they got engaged I said to Jon, 'Arranged marriages are not part of our custom. But if they were you would be top of the list.' They now have three lively children, Keren (8), Isaac (5) and Abigail (4). They are unique personalities who mean a great deal to us as we see their characters and abilities blossoming. I hope that one day they will read this and find this bit of their heritage of interest.

Karen studied music at university, and this talent plays an important part in her life. Apart from her present job with people who have severe learning difficulties she is also a singer/songwriter. Her first CD contains excellent songs, which capture different facets of her life's experience. In the evenings she sometimes does gigs in pubs, churches, or other venues. She has an adventurous spirit which has led to doing the Coast-to-Coast walk in Northern England, together with her tent and several friends. She also hitch-hiked and joined others by mini-bus from the UK to Jordan via Europe and the Middle East.

Wendy and Karen have trodden different spiritual paths, which mean a lot to them. I rejoice that both are being true to following their inner stars.

The spiritual thread

Bearing in mind my atheistic background, the friendships with people of different religions, and various Christian interpretations, I have wrestled with many angles of the heart of spiritual allegiances. So I would like to devote the second part of this booklet to six reflections, or other pieces, to give a feel of where my spiritual journey has reached



In India. 2003

so far. I realise that some people are quite convinced by their own religious understanding. If you are one of them you may see little point in reading what follows. But this is written for those who are in search mode with their spiritual journey. As someone said, 'We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we know the answers.'

The word 'God' brings up different conceptions and emotions in different people. So as I sometimes use it in what follows, the second reflection tries to give a feel of what I have in mind. In that way I hope that people reading this who are turned off by that word will be more open to reference to it in what follows later. I actually see statements like, 'Either you believe in God or you don't' as unhelpful.

These pieces include substantial passages from other people that have contributed to developing my own understanding. I hope that I will be forgiven for approaching my journey in this way.

Interspersed with these reflections will be quotes, which have rang bells with me from time to time. Actually, through the years I have written down many quotations that mean something, as I hear them. So far about 650. So the ones that follow are but a small fraction of what could have been included.

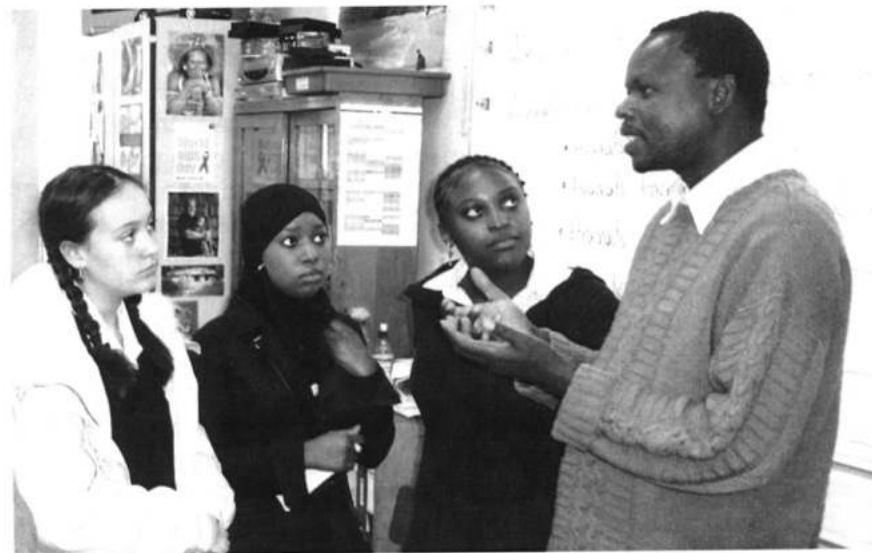
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Bede Griffiths

Be true to your roots, but go beyond their limitations.

As mentioned above, to set the scene I outline some discussions I had with Letlapa Mphahlele. He had been a 'born again' Christian, but is now an atheist. The piece is titled, *Letlapa's experience*.

Reflection 1



Letlapa in a Liverpool school.

Letlapa's experience

Letlapa Mphahlele from South Africa joined me for six weeks on the UK schools programme early in 2005. During that time we went together to 36 schools to do interactive sessions with their Sixth Form students. He had been commander of the Azania People's Liberation Army during the time of Apartheid and had ordered massacres on white civilians in response to black civilians being killed by the authorities. In the schools we always showed an 8-minute video of Ginn Fourie speaking at Caux about the death of her daughter Lyndi in the Heidelberg Tavern massacre, which Letlapa had authorised. What Letlapa said would certainly have stood on its own, but to have the video of Ginn greatly added to the depth of the occasion and touched many hearts. Ginn is a Christian and forgave Letlapa as a consequence of this.

After Letlapa left the UK I wrote a reflection on our time together. One section of that was about the spiritual dimension. We had some very searching discussions. Part of what I wrote is as follows:

It was intriguing and very worthwhile for me, a Christian, to work with an atheist on a spiritually motivated venture. We compared our spiritual journeys. Letlapa had become a 'born again Christian' in his earlier years after rejecting his traditional African beliefs and practices. He was very passionate in 'spreading the word of God.' But eventually his experience of 'white, Christian oppression' changed all that. In his later teens he rejected Christianity and, not long after, went into exile to join the liberation struggle.

Yet, in talking with him, I was interested to find that in his earlier years in the liberation army he still believed in and prayed to God, through Jesus. It was only after reading a variety of authors (also in the heat of the struggle) that he eventually became an atheist. According to Letlapa, he felt 'liberated' when he took his step in (un)belief.

A Christian teacher, in discussion after one session in a school we visited, tried to get his mind around Letlapa's beliefs. How was it that this 'backslider' nevertheless seems to be moving forward in his spiritual journey? I commented that I would hate to see Letlapa slide back to the sort of Christianity that he had formally espoused. In saying that I was not only thinking of the dogma and practice that fuelled Apartheid. Letlapa had also told me about his former literalist beliefs such as 'Only Christians will go to heaven.' Initially this sort of fear-engendering doctrine led him to become a Christian. Eventually it came to repel him. As a young man I too had been alienated by such beliefs. Later, I came to see them as a grave misinterpretation of Jesus' message. In contrast to Letlapa, this deeper perspective has actually led to my becoming a Christian.

However Letlapa's rejection of belief in God had come after his break with Christianity. In his mind there was a distinction. It makes me wonder what actually is being

rejected or accepted. I am also a non-believer in the concept of God that Letlapa has rejected. But that doesn't make me an atheist. I believe in a different kind of God, one far bigger than any box our minds can put him into.

I find actually that Letlapa's beliefs and mine are very similar. However, I am happy to use the word, 'God' to describe the mystical, creative, loving force; while he has rejected a literalisation of that word, which some insist has to be followed.

Some people wonder how it is that Letlapa values things like forgiveness, love, responsibility, etc. yet is an atheist. He replies that he is an A-theist. But that doesn't make him A-everything else. He is very much for spiritually inspired values. It is just that he doesn't believe in a human concept of a Creator behind them. Some people of faith put forward the argument of cause and effect to prove that these things must originate from a Creator. But actually that argument doesn't get us any further, as you then have to ask, 'What caused God to come into being?' What we really know is that there is a loving spirit in the heart. What that is and where it comes from is a matter that theists and atheists can debate. Personally, my Christian faith sees Jesus as a manifestation of that divine love in action. But whatever we believe the important thing for all of us is to respond to that spirit.

(At the time of writing this booklet, Letlapa is now president of the Pan Africanist Congress in South Africa and is a Member of Parliament. I continue to have good e-mail contact with him.)

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Martin Luther King

There are many paths to the mountain top, but only one moon.

"We talk about God as if we know what we are talking about."
(Heard on BBC radio in 2002.)

Reflection 2

Letlapa has rejected a concept of God, which I also reject. This next piece looks further at a different perspective, and at what I do respond to.

Who or What is God?

Much of what is quoted below comes from an article with this title by John Hick. It can be seen by Googling his website. He is a Vice-President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion and of the World Congress of Faiths, and has doctorates from Oxford and Edinburgh.

His article starts by outlining what the man in the street might mean by the word 'God'. Such things as, *Creator of the universe*, and *An infinite personal Being*, come to mind. In church we pray for world peace, for the victims of flood, earthquake, famine, war and other disasters, and we pray privately for ourselves and our own family and friends.

Thus God is seen as an all-powerful force who is motivated by a limitless love, and who has knowledge and wisdom infinitely surpassing our own. He has the power to intervene. But when our prayers are not answered, this is because God always knows better than we do. Hick thinks that this is a fair depiction of the concept of God that operates today in western society, and it applies to atheists as much as to theists. This is the 'God' whom people believe in and equally whom people believe not to exist. He then continues:

The central aspect of this prevailing concept of God is divine activity in the course of nature and of human life. It is the concept that God can and does perform miracles, in the sense of making things happen which would not otherwise have happened, and preventing things from happening which otherwise would have happened. The Bible, and church history, and contemporary religious discourse are full of accounts of such occasions.

(Hick continues) The problems that it raises has led many to atheism. If, for example, in a car crash, God intervened to save only one of the people in the car, who then gave God thanks for a miraculous delivery, this implies not only that God decided to save *that* person, but equally that God decided *not* to save the other two. It also inevitably poses the question why God intervenes so seldom, leaving unprotected the great majority of innocent victims of natural disasters and of human cruelty and neglect? And given the biblical and traditional assumption that God does intervene miraculously whenever God so decides, one can understand why this belief has led many to atheism.

So we have a dilemma. Can we find any way through it or beyond it? At this point I want to suggest enlarging our field of vision. We then broaden the question, 'Who or what is God?' by not confining it at the outset to a particular concept of the religious ultimate. Some then prefer not to use the word. But let us for our present purpose stick with the familiar term 'God', reminding ourselves however from time to time that we are not now using it in a sense restricted to the Western monotheisms.

I suggest that at this point it will be helpful to take account of an enormously important distinction drawn by some of the great Christian mystics, as well as by mystics of the other major traditions. Augustine, for example, said that 'God transcends even the mind'. This is not simply saying that God does not have this or that attribute but, much more radically, that to apply them to God is a category mistake. To say, for example, that molecules are not stupid, although true, is misleading because it assumes that molecules are the sort of thing of which it makes sense to say that they are either stupid or not stupid.

It is worth stressing here that what is being suggested does not entail that the ultimate reality is an empty blank, but rather that God's inner nature is beyond the range of our human conceptual resources. This distinction between the

ultimate divine reality and its humanly thinkable and experienceable form is also found within each of the other great traditions. For instance, The Sufi mystics of Islam distinguished between the ineffable ultimate reality, *Al-Haqq*, and the revealed God of the Qur'an. It is also what Mahayana Buddhism intends when it speaks of the Ultimate Reality.

Hick then explores the thoughts of a number of Christian mystics, with the sense that in scriptures we speak about God in true myths. These are descriptions, which are not literally true, but evoke in us an appropriate response on a deeper level than in our minds. We are reaching out to the 'Ultimate Reality' on a level not limited by our intellects. He also observes that people of Christian approaches different to our own, as well as from other (or no) religious traditions have many experiences, which touch them on the spiritual level. He continues:

It would be unreasonable not to grant to religious experience within other traditions what I affirm of it within my own tradition. My hypothesis is that the ultimate reality of which the religions speak, and which we refer to as God, is being differently conceived, and therefore differently experienced, and therefore differently responded to in historical forms of life within the different religious traditions.

Actually, the reality behind the word 'God' is beyond religion, just as it is beyond science. American physicist Henry Stamp expresses something similar, from a scientific angle. "The most fundamental processes of nature lie outside of space-time, but generate events that can be located within space-time." Hick continues:

What does this mean for the different, and often conflicting, belief-systems of the religions? It means that they are descriptions of *different* manifestations of the Ultimate; and as such they do not conflict with one another. They each arise from some immensely powerful moment or period of religious experience, notably the Buddha's experience of enlightenment under the Bo tree at Bodh Gaya, Jesus' sense of the presence of the heavenly Father, Muhammad's

experience of hearing the words that became the Qur'an. In sense perception we see as far as our horizon but cannot see how much further the world stretches beyond it. Likewise we can experience a high degree of goodness or of love but cannot experience that it reaches beyond this to infinity. Religious experience always has to take some specific form, and the forms developed within a given tradition 'work', so to speak, for people within that tradition but not, in many cases, for people formed by a different tradition.

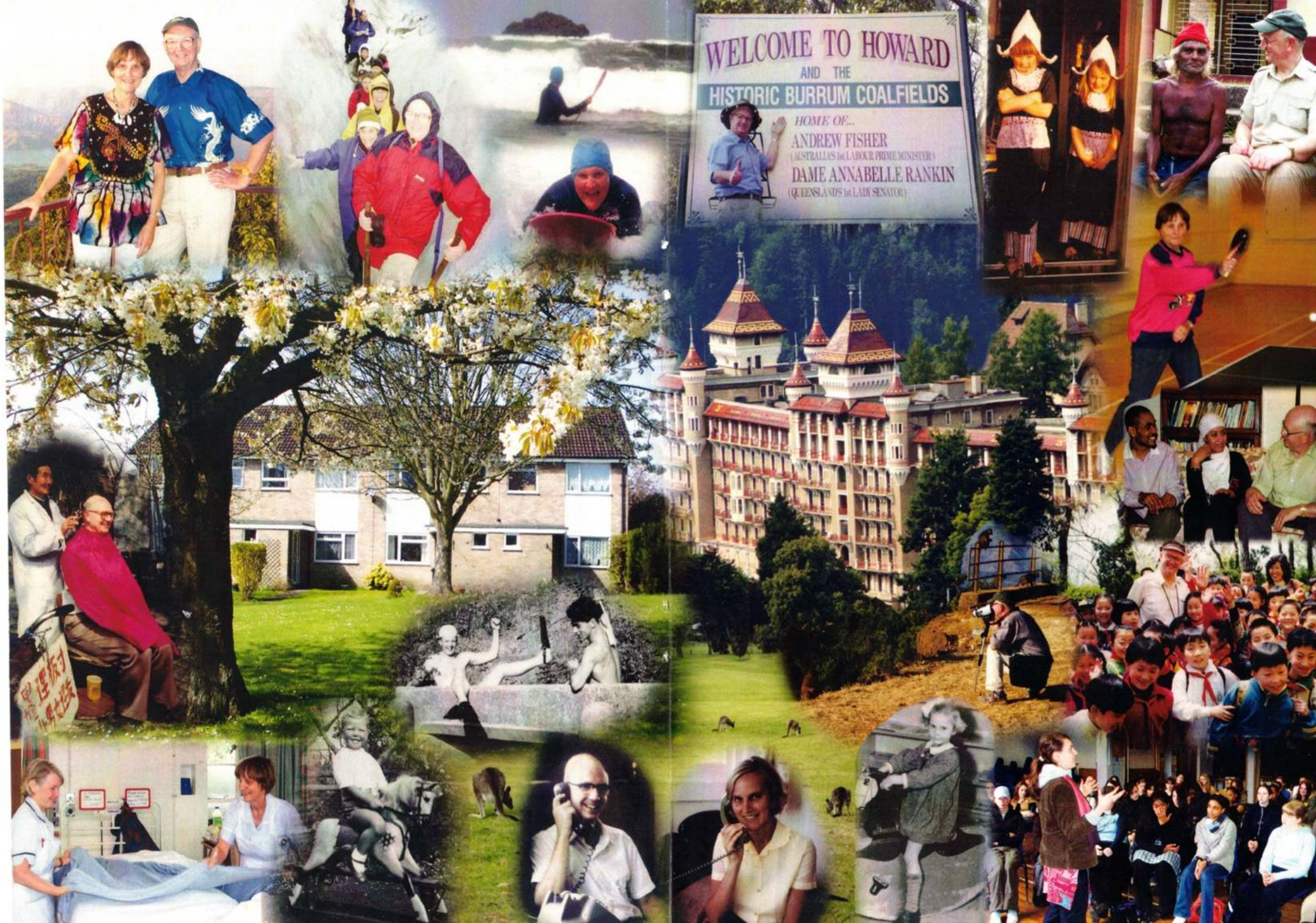
See map analogy (left) on centre spread

Related to this Hick writes:

Concerning the different, and often conflicting, belief systems of the religions: our earth is a three-dimensional globe. But when you map it on a two-dimensional surface, such as a piece of paper, you have to distort it. You cannot get three dimensions into two without distortion. But if a map made in one projection is correct it does not follow that maps made in other projections are incorrect. If they are properly made they are all correct, and yet they all distort. Perhaps our different theologies, both within the same religion and between different religions, are human maps of the infinite divine reality made in different projections. These all necessarily distort, but perhaps all (in different settings) are equally useful in enabling us make our journey through life.

When in Kenya a couple of years ago I stood on the edge of a massive (non-active) volcano crater. It was a *thin place* revealing the hidden activity at the core of the earth. There are many others around the world, some large, some small. Other phenomena, like hot water springs also reveal activity below the surface.

There have been many *divine volcanoes* into the life of creation through the centuries, all over the world. Some have been big ones, and very varied, in the lives of people like the Buddah, Mohammed, Gandhi, Martin Luther King. For me as a Christian, Jesus is the decisive one. But there are also billions of smaller ones in the lives of more ordinary people. For instance being honest, and saying sorry about something on one's conscience, often leads to a freeing of the heart.



WELCOME TO HOWARD
AND THE
HISTORIC BURRUM COALFIELDS
HOME OF...
ANDREW FISHER
(AUSTRALIA'S 16th LABOR PRIME MINISTER)
DAME ANNABELLE RANKIN
(QUEENSLAND'S 1st LADY SENATOR)

Developing the Hick reference on page 25 (right):

We will all have our own ways of trying to relate this to the present-day world. What follows is an inter-dimensional analogy which I recently came across and found helpful.



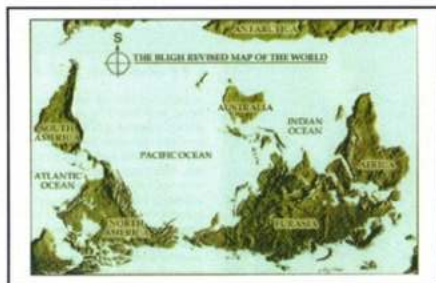
The earth is spherical. The challenge of any world map is to represent a spherical earth on a flat surface. There are literally thousands of map projections. Each has certain strengths and corresponding weaknesses. Choosing among them is an exercise in values clarification.

You have to decide what is important to you. That is determined by the way you intend to use the map.

In this first map, which is centred on Spain (longitude lines vertical), Greenland and Africa look about equal. But which is bigger?

When the Peters Projection Map (right) was first introduced by Dr. Arno Peters in 1974 it generated huge debate. It is an area ratio accurate map. Not what we are used to.

In fact Africa is 14 times larger in area than Greenland.



(Left) Map by Australian, Donald Bygh, tired of seeing Australia in the bottom right-hand corner.



Keren, Wendy, Isaac, Jon, Abigail.



Karen at 'Greenbelt'



Hick continues: But finally, let us return to where we started, namely prayer, particularly petitionary prayer, prayer for other people. In my opinion it is an observable fact that such prayer does 'work' sometimes. I do not however see this as our asking an omnipotent God to intervene miraculously on earth and of his then acting accordingly. I see it rather as depending upon a mental field or network, below the level of normal consciousness, within which we are all connected and through which our thoughts, and even more our emotions, are all the time affecting one another. But when in 'prayer', or what Buddhists call loving-kindness meditation, we concentrate upon some particular individual who is in a distressed state of anxiety, fear, anger, despair, etc., concretely visualizing a better possibility for them; this can have a positive effect. Even in the case of bodily distress our thought may affect the patient's mind and sometimes through this his/her bodily state.

This observation of Hick prompts me to reflect on my physics background. For millions of years animals and our human forefathers have lived under the influence of gravity. This manifests itself in many and varied ways which they and we have just accepted as a fact of life. But then humans began to wonder. One day an apple is reputed to have fallen on the head of Isaac Newton. That was a 'eureka' moment! We began to understand much more about this gravitational field we live in.

Actually every material thing plays its part in the field. We are not just recipients, but contribute our own bit of gravity to the whole. Could there be something similar at work in the spiritual realm? Maybe what Hick is describing is humanity tapping into, and contributing to, the stupendous spiritual 'field' which is beyond our human comprehension but is what we are reaching for when we use the word 'God'.

Einstein

There remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion.

Reflection 3

On becoming a Christian I took on board certain beliefs which I was told were part of the overall package. But subsequent reading of other interpretations, and the space to think more deeply, has led me to reconsider. So, having outlined a perception of God which rings true to me, I'll go next to a reflection on what it means to me now to be a Christian.

Rediscovering a life of faith A personal perspective

'Daddy, did Jesus think the earth was flat?' my seven-year-old daughter asked when we were chatting about the bravery of people like Christopher Columbus who, despite thinking the earth was flat and they might fall off the edge, sailed off into the unknown. A very good question. Did Jesus understand Quantum Mechanics and other such scientific complexities? And if so when did this understanding come to him?



Personally, I do not believe that Jesus had supernatural insight to such things as geography and the laws of physics. But, to me, this does not diminish the spiritual perception and inspiration that radiates from his life. It intrigues me that our scientific understanding has increased by mind-blowing proportions since biblical times. Yet the same cannot be said for the spiritual dimension with issues such as relationships and love, where Jesus and his parables are still basic reference points 2000 years later.



solely thinking with spiritual

When whoever wrote the Genesis stories of creation put pen to paper (or quill to parchment) they too didn't have laws of science creation. I believe



insight to the and physical that they were hearts and minds.



Setting the scene

Marcus Borg, a renowned American biblical scholar wrote in one of his books:

My involvement with mainline churches in North America suggests that many people are experiencing a crisis of confidence about a certain understanding of Christianity. I describe this understanding with five adjectives: in harder and softer forms, it is literalistic, doctrinal, moralistic, exclusivistic, and afterlife orientated. It has ceased to work for a large number of people. They find that if they must take the Bible literally, they cannot take it at all. Moreover, the notion that Christian doctrines are true, and the teachings of other religions false, sounds increasingly dubious. As a result, many have left the church, while others remain in church and struggle to make sense of things.

Since becoming a Christian in my early 30s I am one of those who have remained and struggled. I've remained because I continue to be inspired, not only by Jesus' message, but also by his life, which showed total commitment to building God's Kingdom on earth. I've struggled because my spirit frequently feels sidetracked and frustrated by fundamentalist insistence that Jesus' life is meaningless unless certain biblical and creedal claims be taken factually/literally.

Meeting a belief requirement?

As a teacher of mathematics I know how easy it is to alienate people against mathematics just by the way it is presented. Another subject which can also easily 'turn people off', even by well-intentioned teachers, is RE (Religious Education). This raises an important question. If a child is alienated by RE lessons, amongst other things is it the real Jesus who is being rejected? Thus, is having a particular belief about Jesus truly the basis of God's decision about our eternal destination? Common sense suggests not.

If we think of having the right set of doctrinal beliefs as the crucial aspect of Jesus' way, the internal dynamic of the Christian life becomes 'meeting requirements'. But during Jesus' ministry he took strong issue with Pharisees who made living by certain rules the requirement of acceptability by God. I suspect that in the present time Jesus would have

confronted, just as strongly, the belief requirement of 'correct' doctrine as the route to salvation. The troubling thing is that many people have been alienated from Christianity, and continue to be, by being presented with exclusivist beliefs as part of the Christian package.

As I see it now people reach out to the Divine on two levels, with the heart and with the mind. In our hearts we all experience the struggle that contrasts emotions like hate and fear with love, forgiveness and



selflessness. We use our minds to try to understand where these things come from and how they operate. A Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or agnostic may come to different beliefs but it is on the heart level that people can find a common way, whilst respecting each other's differences of belief. To me Jesus' way, of love, is a universal way aspired to by millions who may not have even heard of him. The sense of dying to the old way of life and being born into a new way of life is known to all the religions of the world.



Two different paradigms

It seems to me that many people, including Christians, have been so focussed on accepting or rejecting what has become orthodox doctrine that they haven't really been aware that there is this different paradigm, a very different way of understanding the Bible as a whole and Jesus in particular. But many books from people such as Antony Fernando, Karen Armstrong, Bishop John Spong, Adrian B. Smith and Elaine Pagels have pointed to a perspective of Christianity, which for me has a much greater ring of truth to it. The quote from Marcus Borg above sets the scene for others, which I share from *The Heart of Christianity*. (See book references on page 48.) These begin to clarify for me further another mainline understanding of Christianity I can really respond to.

It leads me to see, for instance, that many more things in the Bible than I realised were probably not written to be taken literally. For instance I always strongly doubted the literalness of the 'virgin birth' story and wondered how Matthew and Luke came to believe it. But maybe they never did. Borg, like a good number of other Christian writers, see

the tradition of Israel as using the theme of exceptional births as a metaphor. For instance, in the Bible in the book of Genesis, Abraham was promised that he would have many descendents. Yet he and other patriarchs of Israel who were his descendents all have difficulty having children. The Bible says that Sarah and Abraham were ninety and one hundred years old when Isaac was conceived. Isaac married Rebekah, and they too were unable to have children until their more advanced years. There are similar references to Jacob and his wife Rachel. Also the conception of Samuel. This recurring theme gives a sense that the people of God come into the world by the grace of God. On a normal human level, it was impossible that God's promise would be fulfilled, but He is able to intervene in a miraculous way.

Matthew and Luke are both building on this theme. Just as God had acted in the history of Israel to create and sustain people of God through remarkable births, so God had now acted in the birth of Jesus. But Jesus is even more special than the people mentioned above. So a virgin birth, as opposed to a birth late in life, conveys this.

Thus, Borg writes, 'I do not see the story of the virginal conception as a marvel of biology that, if true, proves that Jesus *really* was the Son of God. Rather, it is an early Christian narrational confession of faith and affirmation of allegiance to Jesus.'

The disciples clearly saw Jesus as an amazing, spiritual person. This was so during his life but also as they reflected back after his death. How were they to express all this? Human language couldn't describe literally what they had experienced, and in some sense were continuing to experience, in Jesus. So they, and the Gospel writers, set about describing his life and message using the language available to them, including metaphor.

Thus, a considerable number of Christians see the gospels, like the Bible itself, as not only a developing tradition, but as a mixture of historical memory and metaphorical narrative. Metaphor and metaphorical narratives may not be literally factual. But they can nevertheless be profoundly true.

I realise that Christians who read the Bible in a literal sense see things differently to what rings more true me. But I would like to look at the non-literal approach a little further.

The Bible – The Word of God

What does it mean, 'The Word of God'? Words like 'infallible' and 'inerrant' come to mind, as if God had somehow dictated all the contents. Yet surely the Bible comes from people wrestling to make sense of how God was working in their history, and in their own lives. Borg writes:

As their response to God, the Bible tells us how people saw things. Above all, it tells us how they saw their life with God. It contains their stories about God's involvement in their lives, their laws and ethical teachings, their prayers and praises, their wisdom about how to live, and their hopes and dreams. **It is not God's witness to God (not a divine product), but their witness to God.**

When the Bible is approached in this way, many of the problems that people have with the Bible largely disappear. The conflict between the Genesis creation stories and science vanishes. The stories of God destroying Israel's enemies are Israel's way of telling its story, just as violent destruction of the enemies of Christ is what early Christians hoped for. Of course, this realisation doesn't make them 'good stories'; but at least the problem of thinking of them as expressing the will of God disappears.

Within this paradigm, inspiration refers to the movement of the Spirit in the lives of the people who produced the Bible. The emphasis is not upon *words* inspired by God, but on *people* moved by their experience of the Spirit, namely, these ancient communities and the individuals who wrote them.

Viewing the Bible in this way also has implications for how we see religious pluralism. It enables us to affirm the Bible as the response to God in our particular cultural stream, even as it enables us to recognise the sacred texts of other enduring religious traditions as the response to the sacred in their particular cultural streams.

Jesus' way, truth and life

So many implications arise from which of the two basic paradigms a Christian faith is based on. This reflection is only to set the scene and encourage those who are interested in the understanding outlined above, to explore it more broadly.

The early Christians met, in Jesus, the embodiment of a unique, godly love. It was a love that endured even unto death. They were brought up with a Jewish world view, so inevitably they perceived things in the light of this. However, that godly quality is one which permeates all civilisations, East and West, through the ages. So, what is the message for us in the present day? The Bible encourages us to reach out from the heart in obedience to God. Something of that divine spark is in each of us, whatever our beliefs. This is the realm in which I respond to Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

This article is headed, *Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. For me faith is not about 'I hereby agree to the literal-factual truth of the following statements...' Rather, it concerns what I give my heart to. It concerns that *creative, loving, prompting and incomprehensible* **More** I give my heart to. As a Christian I try (very inadequately) to follow Jesus to the point where he could say, 'The Father and I are one.' (John 10.30).

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In 1998 Maria and I visited the Holy Land. In **the Garden of Gethsemane** we saw this plaque,
'My Father, I do not understand you but I trust you.'

Roger Hicks, *The Lord's Prayer and modern man.*

These friends of Jesus would not have called themselves Christians. In his lifetime the name had not been invented. There had been no crucifixion or Resurrection for them to believe in; no Pentecost for them to experience. There was no creed to which they could subscribe. Jesus showed them a road along which they could go, an experiment they could make.

Desmond Tutu, *God has a dream.*

When you want to bake a cake you don't go to a geometry text book for instructions. The Bible did not intend to tell the 'how?' but much more the 'why?' and 'by whom?' of creation.



Neils Bohr –scientist.

The opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.

Edward Markham poem. *Outwitted.*

They drew a circle that shut me out. Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the will to win. We drew a circle that took them in.

Philip Yancy. *God of Surprises.*

No religion can monopolise God, although most of them will try to do so, claiming that unless you follow their particular way, you cannot be saved.

Karen Armstrong. *A History of God.*

Buddha used to say, "He who sees me sees the Dharma, and he who sees the Dharma sees me."

Mother Teresa.

I love all faiths, but I'm in love with my own.



Howard and Maria greet the Dalai Lama.

A Buddhist friend from Taiwan told me:

The caring Buddha was once asked, "When you die, do you want to go to heaven or hell?" After a pause he replied, "I think I prefer hell. There are still people there who need me."

Reflection 4

Two-thirds of my life has been in association with MRA (now renamed Initiatives of Change). My close colleagues in that fellowship have been from a wide variety of cultures and beliefs. How have we been able to work together in common cause? What follows considers this.

The spiritual basis of Initiatives of Change

Initiatives of Change (IofC) has Christian roots, yet its fellowship comprises people from a wide variety of beliefs. The last three international presidents are (not by design) Christian, Muslim and Hindu. It is from this background that a recent Think Tank of IofC UK put a lot of thought into the nature of its spiritual basis. The eventual statement began, 'IofC is faith-based in its work and lifestyle, and is open to all.' There had been much discussion on what 'faith-based' actually means. In the dictionary there are two senses of the word 'faith'. One gives a sense of trust, loyalty and fidelity. The other is with the sense of 'faith = belief in God'. This article explores which (or is it both?) of these is the basis for IofC. The views expressed in it are my own, not those of IofC UK.

To reflect on this I thought back to summer 2008, which marked the 100th anniversary of Frank Buchman's transforming experience in Keswick. (see booklet, *Frank Buchman's legacy*, by Archie Mackenzie, referenced on the back page.) I was part of the group of 17 people who travelled from Keswick to Oxford and onwards marking steps in Buchman's spiritual journey and thinking. The Elders of IofC started a process of reflection to mark this anniversary and raised some questions for us to ponder. The first was: *What was the heart of Buchman's experience in Keswick? How can that be expressed and understood authentically for people of diverse religious traditions today, and (perhaps more importantly) equally for the non-religious?*

Afterwards I wrote:

Buchman starts one of his speeches by saying that the 'battle front' of the issues the world faces is whether we are **guided** (my emphasis) by God or not. I respond to the sentiment behind that. But it seems that a number of people interpret that as, 'whether we **believe** in God or not'. I find this to be an unhelpful dividing line.

I can find a common heart with Selly (a Muslim) who was on our journey. Also with some people of other religions who believe in God. But there are some fellow Christians whose perception of God I can't relate to. (And them to me, no doubt.) So the dividing line is not simply one of belief in 'God'. Also there are a number of spiritually motivated non-believers who I find I do have an identity of heart with. So I see the question of an understanding of Buchman's experience by those who are non-religious as not primarily about **belief** in God.

We understood that Buchman's, 'I too was wrong' revelation was encompassed in a Christian belief and setting. He experienced his transformation in the context of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. Concepts like 'Where God's will crosses my will and I choose God's will.' lived deeply for him. But on what basis does this relate to the non-religious? Can non-believers also come to a realisation of, 'I too was wrong', say sorry, and this lead to freedom of spirit and some sort of transforming experience? There are, to varying degrees, numerous examples of this. Many of us have had these in our small ways.

The essence of the next two paragraphs came in the initial 'Life History' part of this booklet. But I'll repeat them because of their relevance here.

My first contact with IofC was when I was a student in London in 1964. I happened to be a militant atheist. As president of the Student Union of what is now The City University, London I had altered the voting figures of a motion I wanted to see passed. Yet I was critical of politicians (unlike today!!) for being dishonest and corrupt. The first step in changing the direction of my life was to be honest at the next Union meeting about what I had done and reverse the decision. For me that act was linked with a commitment to be part of building a better world. It was nothing to do with believing in God, yet it caused a level of inner liberation. It was about being true to **that compulsion deep within**.

My work over the last fifteen years has been to found and co-ordinate a programme going to Sixth Forms (16-18 year old school students) around the UK. With international teams of young people I have facilitated about 800 sessions with groups, often of around 100 students, for an hour. I am aware that many students don't relate to religious terminology or concepts. Yet many are very interested in down to earth spiritual reality in issues concerning purpose in life, motivation and integrity.

Those of us with religious affiliations need to accept that spiritual growth doesn't necessarily involve belief in God. For some it clearly does. But for others the path may be more akin to the Buddhist path towards enlightenment. We need to forge a sense of solidarity and working together, not necessarily with those who use the same terminology, but with those who respond to a deeper inner leading. This is especially so in the light of increased dangers to life on this planet which we all face together. I was struck by something from Grigory Pomerants, the final Caux lecturer, summer 2008. In his book *The Spiritual Movement from the West*, about meeting MRA, he quoted Fedotov: (page 52) '*We do not ask of what belief you are, but of what spirit.*'

Buchman was a young, evangelical Christian minister. He knew all the teachings about Jesus. He was nevertheless burdened by his anger towards those six men who had thwarted his aspirations. He was doubtless struggling to find a way forward. But the experience he had at Keswick came as a gift, a revelation, rather than as a decision. He had a deep mystical experience (Rather like St Paul). Few of us have them to that intensity. But on our various levels, and from our different beliefs, we should all live so as to be sensitive to any inner promptings that we may unexpectedly be given. That is the path to transformation, both personal and of society.

It is crucial that a spiritual depth remains at the heart of IofC. However, in the light of what is written above it seems clear to me that the interpretation of 'faith' that we should primarily be aspiring to is the one of 'trust' rather than the one of 'belief'. Or, as someone wrote to me recently, 'The word God relates to **an experience to be had**, rather than **a belief to be held.**'

In his book, *The Dignity of Difference* Jonathan Sacks refers to Timothy Ferris' writing, 'All who genuinely seek to learn, whether atheist or believer, scientist or mystic, are united in having not a faith, but faith itself.' It is in this sense that I am happy to say that IofC is faith-based. If we take it in the other sense of 'faith = belief in a Creator God.' this would exclude Buddhists as well as millions of other non-religious kindred spirits.

Another perspective on this is that one of the divisions which gets inflamed in wider society is between those who 'believe' in God and those who don't. To my mind one role of IofC should be to build bridges across this divide, which is actually easy to do if we emphasise the common heart. But that is not so if our interpretation of *faith* is about intellectual assent, and draws a belief battle line.

Nobody (certainly not me) is saying that those whose Christian beliefs are dear to them shouldn't openly share them as Buchman did. But the problem comes if we insist as an understanding of 'faith' that integrity and values only make sense in the context of a belief in God. Mihailo Mihailov wrote (in a Soviet prison camp), 'To obey the inner voice, that is faith.' All who concur with this should feel fully welcome as equal partners in the IofC fellowship.



Keswick to Caux travellers. June 2008.
The church where Buchman had a transforming experience.

I had some helpful responses to this reflection, and will just quote from two of them.

Friend 1

I agree that faith does not have to be one, which is faith in a deity. My main concern is that those who profess to have no active spiritual structure are in danger in several ways, unless of course, they have informal structures, which serve the same purpose.

The first is the danger of painful thresholds. There are times on the inner journey when we come to points of real, deep, pain. These are the points where many turn back, because avoiding pain seems easier than going through it and dealing with it. So, how to help people have the courage (and faith) to move through these points ... especially when they hold that there is nothing beyond themselves?

This does not, of course, discount people of no religious conviction from having a full part in this work, nor to suggest that those people who are religious automatically do have the courage to go through this either.

I think the real role of IofC is how does its philosophy and fellowship keep the challenge alive in each person. Of course, the wider the net stretches, the larger the challenge to communicate meaningfully. I feel my own journey a case in point ... I wouldn't be around if I was not welcomed as an agnostic and fairly derisive of religious people. Luckily, I have managed to make a lot of mistakes and taken a lot of dead ends, so, I know what it is like to be outside a spiritual structure and yet trying to move forward.

Friend 2:

There is orthopraxy and orthodoxy. The first is right practice and the second is right belief. Traditionally IofC has been more practice based. On this basis Buchman was able to happily work with atheists, agnostics, monotheists, polytheists and all. He trusted they could be led as profoundly as himself. He did not hide his beliefs but joined in practice. This was the common ground.

The following article, which I wrote, appeared in the PCN (Progressive Christianity Network) newsletter in 2006.

Reflection 5

The emergence of pondering



As Homo Sapiens emerged from caves in different parts of the world and began developing with different cultures and varied creeds he/she began to wonder where it all began. He/she became aware of the dimension beyond the simply material - of creativity and love and of a wide variety of emotional nuances.

'There is more to all this than meets the eye' they thought, each HS group from the point of view of their own world-perspective. Concepts of *the Divine* began to take shape as hearts reached out for an understanding. Across and around the earth (depending on whether you thought the earth was flat or round) understandings of this *Divine* varied greatly. But it was the same truth, the same *Divine* that was being sought.



Nevertheless, the people began to argue, and even got into devastating wars, about whose ponderings were correct, and about whose holy scriptures were revelations directly from *the Divine*. Some even concluded that unless others accepted the same beliefs as them those others were heading for eternal damnation. Though it has to be said that there were still a number who, deep down, sensed that *the Divine* was more about what was in their hearts. *He/she/it* was bigger, much bigger, than any of their understandings.

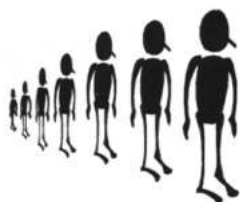
One day a person, of no particular gender, had an idea and told it as a parable*:

*(see *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense* by W. H. Vanstone)

'Let us suppose that a blind man and a deaf man are together in a room when a thunderstorm breaks out close at hand. The blind man experiences and reports a loud noise; the deaf man experiences and reports a bright light; and each is convinced of the reality of his experience and the truth of his report.



'But the two reports are different, and, on the face of it, that of which the blind man is convinced is different from that of which the deaf man is convinced. The 'truth' of one appears quite unconnected with, and irrelevant to, the 'truth' of the other. But if each should discover his own truth, exploring the implications, the causes and the origins of that of which he is convinced, the two might soon recognise that what they had experienced in different ways and reported in different ways was, in fact, the same thing - the proximity of a thunderstorm. The 'truth' of each would then become relevant to, and even a confirmation of, the 'truth' of the other.'



The implications of this vibed for some who had ears to hear. Together, and with growing numbers of others from very different beliefs and ponderings, they went forth into all the world with expanding hearts and minds. As they lived and proclaimed their new sense of connectedness with each other Homo Sapiens grew more and more in tune with *the Divine*.



And the heart of *the Divine* did leap with joy!

Where is the thrust of what is in these articles taking us? Since developing the atomic bomb in 1945 we human beings have the ability to destroy the earth. Our effect on the environment in many ways has come to light in recent years too. Yet we are conscious of all being in the same boat (or earth) as never before. This is a challenge to us all. This next article, written recently, looks at a positive possibility for our way forward.

Reflection 6

Evolution. The next step?

As a Christian who is centred on the spiritual aspect rather than on literal doctrinal interpretations, I see no conflict between evolution and my faith. In fact a realisation about how humanity is evolving shows me an inspiring path ahead. I personally see the evolutionary process as an expression of God. (In saying this I am not assuming anything about the nature of God, which I personally have come to understand in a mystical sense.) But before considering the moral and spiritual implications let us consider briefly how this evolutionary process has developed. There seems to be a large consensus on four distinctive steps.



Pondering the next step with grandson Isaac.

First step

The first step is that about 13.7 billion years ago the universe started with a big bang. How this came into being is a mystery to our present understanding. The Milky Way galaxy, which we are part of, is thought to have evolved about 10 billion years ago, and the earth about 4.6 billion years ago. (The exact figures I quote may be debatable but that does not concern me here. The point is that we are talking about huge periods of time.)

Second step

Life on earth, in its simplest form, is believed to have begun to evolve about 3.5 billion years ago. It thus happened about 10 billion years after the big bang. It is the second of the four steps that I see as distinctive. From this eventually evolved an immense variety of more complex plants and animals.

Third step

Right to the present day, the vast majority of life on earth is not conscious, but at some recent stage during this time consciousness arose. Some animals developed who could think and be aware of what was going on around them. They had brains. This for me is the third distinctive step.

It is largely agreed now that some mammals have some form of consciousness. However, although conscious they wouldn't be able to ponder the origins of the universe, the nature of love and things like this. It is worthy of note though that bees, salmon and many other species reach a stage at the end of their lives where, by instinct, they relinquish their personal existence for the ongoing propagation of their species. Also, many parent animals have an instinctual defence of their young.



Fourth step

Then human beings came on the scene hundreds of thousands of years ago. Thus, even our most primitive ancestors have only been around for a time, which is about **ten-thousand times** less than when the universe kicked off. However, in this extremely short time we have evolved into beings that can think about and question so many things including the origins of the universe and our own being. How has 'matter' evolved to be able to think about itself!? To me that fourth step in evolution, which has led to our self-consciousness about our own place in the universe and our desire to survive, is as remarkable as the first step. This questing ability has led to an extraordinary acceleration of scientific achievement, especially in the last 200 years. So, although human beings are only a minute part of life's story, they are having a huge impact on this planet. It is this I would like to focus on now.

Step 5?

As self-consciousness emerged, becoming self-centred would also seem to have been a natural aspect of the fourth phase of the evolutionary process. However, in recent millennia, as humanity has further evolved, some people have sensed that we should develop beyond being so egocentric. Love means that we should be prepared to sacrifice for our loved ones. And even beyond that. Such concepts as right and wrong have emerged. Religions have developed which suggest that all human beings are brothers and sisters, and in some circumstances the common good should even come before our own lives. Great people like Gautama Siddharta, who was given the title 'Buddha' wrestled with the need to embody 'non-self'. I suspect that his inner struggle, which came from a totally different context and culture, was of a similar nature to what Jesus ultimately experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane. Both were set free from the personal survival mentality. Many other human beings have struggled with this development in our spirit, which puts humanity above our own lives. Some succeed more than others. But where is this leading us? Where is this conscious process heading?

To me religion has been a natural stage in our evolutionary process. We have wrestled with questions of meaning and purpose, and our religions have all tried to address this stirring in our spirits. It may be that now the human quest away from self-centredness is the next step in this process? However, it is distinguished from earlier evolutionary stages in that it is a conscious one.

A few days ago, in my morning time of reflection, I wrote, 'I am a Christian. But in my heart I've moved beyond the doctrines of religion.' I think that what I respond to in Jesus is the total self-giving to his deeper inner leading which, because of the society into which he was born he understood and expressed in terms of God's will, 'Thy will be done.'

I am nowhere near that stage of crossing out the ego. But I wrestle with it as an aspiration, and Jesus is my inspiration and guide on that path. Paul Tillich wrote about 'The God who lives beyond the Gods of men and women.' Could it be that our next step as humanity is to accept that we know as much about the divine dimension as a cantankerous toddler knows about the complexities of life, which he/she will encounter in full maturity?

Moral and spiritual implications

The fourth step has given rise to self-consciousness. This has enabled us to make conscious decisions which could now affect the next stage of the evolutionary process. We can decide (and to some extent are deciding) that it is not the path of the survival of the fittest and strongest we want to be on, but the development in people of love, care and selflessness. This is affecting our attitude towards such issues as global warming. It is not only instinct that leads some to make decisions for the common good, rather than just to live in a way that is convenient to ourselves. In varying degrees we are thinking for future generations.

To be realistic though the picture is not all rosy. A biologist friend of mine pointed out that, 'For 99.99% of the time that there has been life on this planet there were no humans and everything got along OK. Now this experiment by Nature with this clever, self-conscious being is leading to countless thousands of other species being driven to extinction. If the other 10 million or so species could vote we'd be sent packing.'

Another friend wrote, 'I think I am probably more cynical than you about "the development in people of love, care and selflessness". I think humanity may be losing this. For example, look at the breakdown of structures in family life. My view of society is that it is becoming more selfish, individualistic, etc. Could this be linked with the move away from religion?'

I'm not naïve about this perspective. But there are many needs out there. So I prefer to focus on the positive challenge. Our journey forward is not primarily a personal struggle with self. It is a total giving of self for the needs of others, the environment, the living world and humanity. As a Christian I see this as what Jesus was embodying. And it was his living and dying challenge to the whole of humanity to follow his path of total self-giving as the way forward for us all to emulate.

The conscious submission of the 'self' - of our hearts, minds and wills - to the infinite, encompassing, Divine Spirit could be the next step in the evolution of mankind. To see things in this way, and to be an integral part of it, may be a big step in faith. But whatever our beliefs about the source of that inner impulse, for each person the next step involves a moral and spiritual choice.

Einstein.

Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind.

(Opposition to Galileo) Quoting Psalm 93 v1.

The world is firmly established. It cannot be moved.

Dennis Covington.

Mystery is not the absence of meaning, but the presence of more meaning than we can comprehend.

Bishop Jack Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*.

Mother earth is fighting back against the way she has been treated by a single species, which acts as if the whole world exists to provide comfort and wealth for that species.

Dr Robert Muller.

Either the twenty-first century will be a spiritual century or there will be no century at all.

St Thomas Aquinas.

A mistake in one's understanding of Creation will necessarily cause a mistake in one's understanding of God.

Jim Coulter.

I often find myself zigging when I should be zagging.

Adrian B. Smith. *God, Energy and the Field*.

In the course of our physical evolution, without any deliberate act on our part, we became self-conscious and perceived ourselves as separate from God, as from all else and all other creatures. The invitation of Jesus is to move on to a further stage: purposefully to identify our consciousness with the consciousness of God.

(also) We are each part – a contributing part – of the unfolding drama of evolution.

Kolezo Chase. (Nagaland)

Any person, who is fully committed to building a new world in the right way, is already living in that new world.

Summary

One of my friends, on seeing the subtitle of this booklet said, "Faith and belief. Aren't they the same?" One possible summary of what is written in these reflections is that the true answer to that *faith/belief* question may lie more in our hearts than in our minds.

However, as I said at the beginning, I am very much aware that far more intelligent and virtuous people than I have wrestled with issues like this through the centuries. Volumes have been written. Those who would like to explore such issues further have plenty of scope. But I hope that the practical journey of an ordinary person like me will be of interest and help to others who may be setting out on similar journeys.

(I'll reference a few books at the end of this, which have been helpful to me in recent years.)

We are sometimes told about the importance of being well grounded in our spiritual roots. So, as I started my 'potted life history' with reference to my parents, I'd like to return to them, with a piece I wrote a few years ago, *Forward to my roots*. My roots are not about beliefs. The influence from my parents was about how we live, and about the love we exhibit in our everyday relationships.

Forward to my roots

My parents came from East London. My mother's father (who was the only grandparent I remember meeting) was a London bus driver. My



father's parents ran a tobacconist and confectioners shop. They, as my parents too, were ordinary people - the salt of the earth. After my parents were married my father found a job in a cardboard box factory in Thatcham, Berkshire, a small

country town. He worked there for over thirty years. The major break in this however was caused by the Second World War.

I give this brief background to paint a picture of the sort of people my parents were. Although faith in God didn't seem to feature in their lives and they never went to church except for occasions such as weddings,



Mum and dad. Golden Wedding.

they had a loving, caring and simple approach to life and were devoted to each other. When my father died just after their Golden Wedding my mother was devastated but bravely continued with her giving heart and lifestyle.



Some years later came my mother's turn to approach the end of her life. I spent several days at her bedside in hospital. She was remarkably peaceful. I said to her 'Are you fearful?' She said, 'No, I've had a good life and done my best. If there is an afterlife I trust that I will be judged according to how I've tried to live in this one. And if there is nothing after this, that's OK too. I am at peace about it.'

Running through this booklet is the idea that we reach out to the divine on two levels. I happen to have a questing mind and am vitally interested in the concept level. This is clearly very important in exploring life's meaning, purpose and motivation.

However I suspect that the 'heart' of the GOD I believe in is gladdened more by 'warm hearts and selfless living' than by 'correct belief'. Do we, whatever our beliefs, live true to how, deep inside, we know we should? Those such as my mother and father and many more like them from a wide variety of cultures often come closest to that with their integrity, simplicity and intuitive common sense.

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The final quote is from Hugh Dawes, of the *Progressive Christianity Network* in Britain.

'Where is the Christ?' Well look around you; and look within you; and look beyond you to the whole family of humanity as well. Look and then do something about it.

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