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# The Fraternal

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# THE THEOLOGIAN, THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

## Authority of the Bible

It is perhaps obvious to most of us today that older ideas of the inspiration of Scripture lacked a historical sense, as we understand it. Our idea of inspiration must correspond to, and very largely be dictated by, what we can come to know about the Bible through modern scholarly methods.

It seems to me that, if we look squarely at what the Old Testament actually is, we have to arrive at some such formula as the following: The OT is that verbal expression of its developing religious experience and faith which the People of Israel eventually came to regard as classic. 'Verbal expression', because Israel expressed its faith also in the cult, and lived it in a host of practices and characteristic attitudes which have created the whole ethos of Judaism. 'That' verbal expression, because there was much verbal expression that was never preserved as classic. The religious experience of Israel, or knowledge of God in their history was clearly prior to its expression; it developed over the 1750 or so years to which the OT bears witness. It was preserved because *this* was the heritage of verbal witness which Israel came by degrees to recognise as the classic expression of their faith. And, of course, the written classic continues to form and influence the later religious experience and its expression. One needs to realise that, until about 200 BC, Israel kept adding to its classic literature, and until this process somewhat mysteriously ended, the Writings were not regarded as *the* corpus of sacred writings in any definitive sense. More significantly, theologians of Israel continued to re-write parts of their received writings in the light of later insights, which is not something you do to a corpus regarded definitively as 'Holy Scripture' or in some sense 'God's word'. Part of the whole process of forming *the* Writings is subsequent recognition. Prophets may initially have been rejected: but the fact that what they said or wrote was preserved and 'canonised' shows that they were later realised to have given true expression to Israel's faith. It is this factor of reception which distinguishes the true from the false prophet. Indeed, one must say that it is constitutive of what makes a prophet: God acts both in the prophet and in the people. One could not give the name 'prophet' to a would-be speaker for God, to whom no one then or later paid the slightest attention.

Implicit in this understanding of what the OT is, and of how it came into being, is the realisation that inspiration, the action of God's Spirit, is primarily and basically of the People, the religious community, and only secondarily and derivatively of the text. God's Spirit is at work, not only in the utterance of words, but in reception of words, and in the way in which received words are subsequently modified, reshaped, qualified, added to; and in the slow process of their eventually receiving final form and acceptance. The words remain human words, with all their limitations and inadequacies; some parts are of more value to the continuing People than others; the corpus must be taken as a whole to be regarded as 'message (logos) from God', and only theological disaster can result from the naivete

of taking each sentence or passage as directly 'spoken by God'. God continues to inspire *us*, not least to respond intelligently.

**Mutatis mutandis** one must say the same of the New Testament: it is that verbal expression of their developing religious and faith which the christian communities eventually came to regard as classic. Exactly the same factors are at work as in the case of the OT, and there is no need to repeat them in detail. Only, of course, the time span is considerably shorter. It took some 450 years before the particular corpus we now know as the NT was accepted in all the Churches as their common classic. In the process some very early works were excluded as not ringing true, or for unknown reasons (e.g. the entirely respectable *Didache*); others were included because wrongly attributed to original apostles (e.g. Peter and probably the Pastoral Epistles). Some parts proved of less value than others (e.g. James and Revelation), but the corpus must be taken as a whole without literalist views of any of it being directly God's word. Theology does not begin 'after' the NT. As with the OT, it is plainly at work within the corpus: all the Gospels are reformulations of received material (tradition) in the light of developing christian experience; each has its own theologies; the faith entered progressively into a diminished expectation of the Second Coming and into the realisation of a continuing Church (something which can hardly have crossed the mind of Jesus of Nazareth); it entered into increasing involvement with the hellenistic world, which not only necessitated re-expression of the received tradition of oral and written material, but posed new questions.

The question how a christian should regard the OT, which is an expression of Jewish and not of christian faith, is an extremely complex one, which cannot be given even a summary treatment here. One thing is quite clear: it cannot be regarded by a Christian as 'the word of God' for him in its own right; it cannot be given an independent and equal status with the NT as simply 'the word of God Part One'. A tidy theory would be that the OT is to be regarded as Holy Scripture by a Christian only in so far as its main themes and aspirations were taken up in the NT and seen to find their fulfilment in Christ and his Church. (And a lot of themes and aspirations taken up by Jesus and his followers are found in Jewish intertestamental rabbinic and apocalyptic literature, and hardly in the OT at all). That is precisely what nearly a thousand years of patristic exegesis in East and West was trying to do in its much neglected and underrated attempt to find the spiritual, i.e. christian, sense of the OT. However, the tidy theory, though it may offer a good start, runs into considerable complications. The fact is that the Christian Church has preserved and venerated the OT as a whole, even the most boring and the most repulsive parts. And there are certain OT themes, notably that of social justice, which receive little if any attention in the NT, and which have continued to prod the christian conscience. So the question must be left hanging in the air.

The NT is the unchallengeable classic of the Christian Church. Not only does it contain embedded in it the original and irreplaceable witness to Jesus of Nazareth and to the Easter faith in him which began the christian proclamation, but it has been formative of all subsequent christian thinking, praxis and literature. It does not need to be given any further or other cachet

to establish its authority. That is the authority it has always had. It is the normative expression of christian faith, and must be because Jesus was a historical person. It is the merit of Schillebeeckx, among other contemporary theologians of all traditions, that he seeks by meticulously scholarly exegesis to establish the fact that post-Easter christian faith in its original content and in its subsequent expansion is solidly grounded in the self-awareness of Jesus of Nazareth and in the reactions to him of his followers at the time. One wonders whether the curial bureaucracy which has got bothered about Schillebeeckx has even begun to understand, let alone be competent to assess, the crucial importance of his enterprise.

### **The task of the theologian.**

As with Israel, the christian communities (the True Israel, they thought themselves) precede the expression of their faith; inspiration is primarily of the followers of Jesus. (I am leaving out inspiration of Jesus, and the continuity between the two). They vividly experienced the risen and exalted Jesus as present and active among them as Lord in the power of his Spirit: as heirs to nearly 2000 years of complexities, we may well hanker after the simplicity of their creed, 'Jesus is Lord' (Rom 10:9). It is this experience to which they gave developing expression. In this sense the Church was prior to the NT, though it is at all points formed by its received tradition while it is also expanding it. It was the Churches which in time decided which works to include within an accepted NT canon, as the classic expression of the faith which they were here and now experiencing. It was the Church which, under the guidance and norm of its classic Writings, produced later christian literature, much of it a commentary on the Bible, as christian faith was actively lived in new cultural settings, and as new questions were posed to it. Fathers of the Church came to be so called, not because they dropped from heaven with the title already conferred on them, but because they were recognised by the Church to be exemplary exponents of the faith it here and now held, lived, experienced. Much the same as with prophets. At Councils, Church leaders gathered to give expression to faith, the faith received and lived, at points where it seemed seriously threatened; they gave profession of their faith.

The task of the theologian has always been the same, both in the formation of the Old and the New Testaments, and subsequently. The theologian is the christian thinker, who is in and of the Church, and who experiences today's christian life as it is shared in the community. He ponders this shared experience of faith in the light of the whole received tradition (of writings and, in the broadest sense, of praxis), and in the light of today's world, wherever and whenever this may be, which is different from other worlds in which christians have expressed their faith. It is very important to realise that there are three factors at work in the theologian's task, not two: today's experience of christian faith; the tradition; the different cultural world. Some contemporary British theological writing appears to omit the first factor, and thus to over-simplify the theologian's task by reducing it to the remaining two and gravely to distort it in the process.

The theologian cannot simply be a detached scholar, analysing ways in which people have expressed themselves in the past, tracing the literary pedigree of 'their' conceptual patterns, and suggesting modern equivalents in the light of various cultural shifts. He is a spokesman for the experience of the risen Jesus as Lord present and active in his people, an experience which he shares with the community. The task is even more over-simplified and distorted if it is reduced to providing translations of biblical theologies in the light of today's cultural world. The Spirit did not cease to be among his people, guiding their various expressions of their faith, when they had 'canonised' the NT. If he did, we do not share the faith-experience of the first christian generations. If he did not, then all expressions of christian faith through the centuries which have gained acceptance in the Church are in some way evidence of the Spirit's guidance and are part of the theologian's task which is thus a great deal more sophisticated and complex than some seem to suppose! Nor is the theologian fulfilling his task if he takes off into some intellectual stratosphere and plays conceptual games with other theologians, even when he does so on the basis of the whole tradition: if he ceases to be reflecting on today's experience of today's faith, and trying to give it expression, he has ceased to be authentically a theologian.

There can, of course, be only one possible guarantee or guarantor that we share the same faith as the earliest christian generations, and that is the continuing activity of God's Spirit in his people. We can 'know' it to be the case, in our bones as it were, when we too experience the risen Jesus as Spirit in us and among us, and recognise our experience to be that of which the NT writers wrote, or of which Augustine etc wrote. But there cannot be any sophisticated hermeneutic, any epistemology or theory of language established merely intellectually, which would prove that what they said and what we say is evidence of our sharing the same faith.

### **Doctrinal authority in the Church**

There have been many unacceptable ideas of doctrinal authority prevalent in the Church at different times, as the theology of authority progressively gets worked out: and here I speak mainly though not exclusively for Catholicism.

It cannot be the case that it is the function of primatial bodies or episcopal persons, or various mixtures of the two, to tell the Church what its faith is, with the implication that it would otherwise not know. It could only be the case that it was the function of those holding ministerial office to give as good expression as possible to what is in fact believed, and has always been believed, by Christians. The subject of teaching office in the Church (*magisterium* is the 19th century term which has outlived its usefulness because of distorted usage) is too complex to go into here. Such teaching office is distributed almost universally in the Church, but in different ways, among mothers, fathers, teachers of various kinds, ministers, local communities, theologians, episcopal persons and bodies. They are all trying to teach the faith our mothers taught us.

The Western Churches lived right into the 20th century with an unconscious intellectual imperialism, based principally on two factors.

They were unaware of, and so to a greater or lesser extent despised, the values of non-western cultures (including those of Eastern Christians). And traditional western philosophies, which were philosophies of nature conceived on a hellenic pattern in terms of timeless essences, left them with a belief in a timeless language (*philosophia perennis*) which was supposedly the language of man as man, transcultural, and indefinitely perfectible. Today we realise that all languages about God and his self-communication to man are not only extremely limited because of their subject matter (we do not definitively understand man, let alone God), but are wholly conditioned culturally. There are no timeless, or perfect, or adequate statements of christian faith, however authoritative. Not even in the Bible. But what was authoritative for other Christians in their time and place in history remains something of a guide for us in ours.

Next, not all tradition, of thought or praxis, is necessarily good tradition. Catholic veneration of tradition has led, first of all, to overlooking the essential pluralism of tradition from the beginning. Secondly, it has encouraged what is now called triumphalism, the conviction that, since the Spirit guides the Church, what develops in the Church is God's will. Hence there has arisen self-propelled doctrinal tradition, articulation of doctrine in terms of a particular and immediately preceding tradition, in an uncritical way, to the point where such doctrine reaches a more or less entrenched position, increasingly based simply on itself. (In that sort of theology Scripture is not really listened to, but quoted in snippets, relevantly or irrelevantly, to support conceptual patterns increasingly at odds with Scripture). Christian history certainly attests the Spirit's guidance of the Church; but it also attests the inadequacies and deficiencies of man's response to the Spirit. Hence doctrinal tradition must always be open to criticism and to judgment by the matrix of all tradition, the New Testament within the present experience of the Church. Protest (or Protestantism) of this particular nature is always needed in the Church but surely as an inbuilt force within it and not as a separate entity? And there must always be challenge to doctrine in the light of the NT tradition but in the light of the whole of it, please (and not just a few chapters of Romans!).

Finally there are no good grounds for thinking that high ministerial charge and office in the Church, itself and by itself, confers or carries some special gift of wisdom that would enable such ministers to enunciate christian truth with exceptional reliability. The theological credentials of this notion have often enough been examined and found wanting, apart from the implausibility of the idea anyway.

But ministerial office in the Church *does* confer *responsibility* for true doctrine, and higher office confers greater responsibility. This is not a responsibility borne in the same way by others. The theologian has his own responsibilities: to the faith and tradition he explores, to the professional standards of his field of study, to the problems of today's Church. He is often at the frontiers of the Church meeting needs and challenges, the existence of which the main body of the Church, and sometimes of its leaders, are as yet unaware. He needs every support and encouragement in a difficult task, but his work is of its nature exploratory. He does not have

pastoral responsibility for the whole Church in the way episcopal bodies and persons have. The remaining paragraphs of this short study will make some basic observations about the carrying out of this latter responsibility.

It is accepted by all christian traditions, as a result of their faith in the Lord's care of his people, that in a substantial sense the Church is reliable in its teaching. And that is what the misused and misunderstood word 'infallibility' means. And if the Church is substantially reliable in its teaching, i.e. if the Lord cares for his Church, there must be traces of the fact in history. The question is, what are they? It seems fair to say that the Catholic tradition has tended to stress the institutional factors at work in history, and the Protestant tradition has tended to challenge these with spiritual and religious factors. There has also been a parallel tension between the corporate and the personal. If this perspective is the right one, it seems an obvious conclusion that the Church needs both; that these are tensions to be lived, not to be resolved, as that is the nature of our human condition creaturely, limited and sinful, but also both societal and personal. If either factor is emphasised to the exclusion of the other, or absolutised, the result is caricature. It has been the merit of Hans Küng to be a sort of gadfly within Roman Catholicism on certain issues, puncturing holes in absolutising tendencies. It is a useful role, which of its nature demands publicity, but not necessarily a constructive one. It is a very different role from the painstaking and constructive work of a Schillebeeckx. Hans Küng has asked the right questions, but he has not in my view given satisfactory answers to the ever pressing questions: such as, how do we know when the Church is teaching reliably? Absolutising tendencies need to be challenged, in either direction, in the institutional-spiritual tension. If either overstates its case, the true merits of what it has to say will be overlooked by the other.

The tension of authority in the Church is perhaps a threefold one (see N. Lash, *Voices of Authority*, Sheed and Ward, 1976). There is much to be said for Newman's distinction between three kinds of authority in the Church: that of the saint, of the scholar, and of the minister (or office holder). By 'saint' he meant the ordinary committed and practising Christian, in the biblical sense of the term, which all in the Church basically remain even if they also become ministers and/or scholars. He did not mean that a minister could not also be a saint and a scholar! As such, these represent three different types of authority in interaction with each other. They also represent the three factors we have discerned in the theologian's task. What is important is that the tension between the three should be lived and maintained. Attempts to resolve it in favour of one of the three elements simply produce distortion. It is to be expected that episcopal persons, in view of their overall responsibility, should be on the side of the received tradition, and in that sense conservative. It is fine to grumble about that sort of authority, and bash bishops whose eyes do not seem to be open to new issues, as long as one basically appreciates and respects their role. How episcopal persons and bodies are to fulfil their responsibility as guardians of the faith is a matter of legitimate debate: but, if one recognises the validity of the three factors, and the need of interaction between them, the debate

can then become one of pastoral concern, with the heat of doctrinal confrontation taken out of it. At the end of the day, only that exercise of 'episcopal' authority (responsibility) will in fact *have* authority, i.e. be respected, which is seen to have been responsibly carried out.

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John Coventry, S.J.

## Historical Backcloth for Urban Mission

Back in 1851 West Ham was a collection of villages framed by rivers and the remnants of Epping Forest. Today it is a densely built part of East London, facing industrial decline, multi-racial and set between City centre and the Essex suburbs. My own experience of West Ham began in 1965 when I became the minister of the Church at West Ham Central Mission.

I found myself grappling with a series of questions. What had shaped this urban society? How had the Church responded to the population inrush? Were there clues to spiritual success or reasons for failure? Why was the Church so weak and unrepresentative?

Working for a thesis on 'The Inter-action of Church and Society in an East London Borough' I began to dig into the history recorded in local papers, read through the books and pamphlets, interviewed older people with long memories and explored the network of agencies that had grown up over the years. Patterns began to emerge as eight key areas of inter-action stood out. These can be seen in the spatial symbolism of buildings; the faith issues of religious practice and evangelism; the wider issues of social caring, personal morality and politics; and the underlying process of secularisation running alongside the cultural and class conflict.

### 1. Spatial Symbolism

In an urban society buildings carry messages. The Church expresses itself, and carries the Gospel, in buildings. Spires and towers, vicarages and halls, community centres or cathedrals — all are symbols. The visual image of churches and their ancillary buildings is a primary concept in the way people think about the Church as an institution. Pre-urbanisation symbols in West Ham were the great *Abbeys* at Barking and Stratford Langthorne (symbolising power and control) and the *Parish Churches* planted at the crossroads of the villages and gathering all life together through the rites of passage and the liturgical cycle.

The industrial invasion, followed by a rapid build-up of population (West Ham grew from 18,817 to a highpoint of 300,860 in 1921) created a greater social complexity and a wider range of human needs. *Missions* were the ad hoc answer as relief, entertainment, education and worship all took place in

# **WEST HAM CENTRAL MISSION**

**409, Barking Road, Plaistow, London, E13 8AL**

My dear Fellow-Minister,

September 13th, 1980 will be a significant day in the history of the West Ham Central Mission. On that day we shall officially open our new Family Centre at Orchard House, Stock, Essex.

If you read my earlier letters in 'The Fraternal', you will be aware of the sort of ministry we hope to exercise in the Family Centre. To a large degree, the success of the enterprise will depend upon whether our ministers and leaders feel that we have something worthwhile to offer. In order that what we offer may be as relevant and useful as possible, I should like to engage in a little market research.

It would be tremendously helpful if you could think about this and let me know your feelings as to what we can most usefully provide. We are concerned about proper and adequate preparation for marriage — we are eager to help all who have any part in this vital ministry if we can. There are areas of marriage counselling in a Christian context where our experience might be of service — not only in doing the counselling, but in helping to equip others to do it. Redundancy and unemployment throw up problems which have a direct and potentially devastating effect upon family life — even the "Manse marriage" is by no means immune to stress and even breakdown! Such a vast field — yet so important.

How can we best help? what courses would you appreciate? Is there any way in which we can put our resources at your disposal in order to achieve our aim of celebrating, reinforcing and encouraging a joyful, Christian view of marriage — and of ministering to those for whom this has not worked out?

Looking forward to hearing from you. God bless you.

Yours sincerely

Trevor W. Davis  
Superintendent

hastily erected buildings. West Ham Central Mission was the Baptist segment within the new agencies growing up alongside traditional pastoral patterns. Under the umbrella of Mission marched a great variety of approaches ranging from powerful 'empires' with large staff to the tiny tin-roof backstreet Mission Hall. Whether the dominant motive was evangelism, pastoral care or social action the message of the Mission was that of concern. Most *Chapels*, whether Free Church or Catholic, were erected by congregations for their own use and local people saw them as worship, teaching or fellowship centres for denominational purposes. Within these congregations the commitments of membership, high standards of personal morality and shared beliefs created a gathered community who believed themselves (and were considered) to be different from the wider society. The fenced-in, solid Chapels spoke of difference. *Halls* in the urban scene carried a double concern for social caring and evangelism as new forms of buildings were opened by the Salvation Army, the London City Mission and the Methodists with their Central Hall.

This blending of Parish Church, Missions, Chapels and Halls has been augmented in recent times by the Community Centres and Shop-front Churches. *Community Centres* have replaced the old-style Settlements and often taken over redundant Chapels. In West Ham centres like the Mayflower, Lawrence Hall, Durning Hall, the Salvation Army Goodwill Centre and the programme of the Newham Community Renewal Programme are sustained efforts to build bridges between Church and community with an open door approach expressed in large, often purpose-built, centres which convey a clear message. Over against these agencies stand the *Shop-front Churches* with their stress on smaller, more spontaneous, often charismatic cells engaged in evangelism.

The Christian bases for missions have now been joined by a wave of black Churches taking over halls and by the visible evidence of changing religious patterns as synagogues close and mosques and temples open.

## 2. Religious Practices

In 1902 the survey *Life and Labour of the People of London* commented that 'the great section of the population, which passes by the name of the working classes, lying socially between the lower middle class and the poor; remains, as a whole, outside of all the religious bodies, whether organised as churches or as missions, and as those of them who do join any church become almost indistinguishable from the class with which they then mix, the change that has come about is not so much OF as OUT of the class to which they have belonged. The bulk of the regular wage-earning class still remain untouched, except that their children attend Sunday School'.

Nothing this century has occurred to modify that judgement and the literature written, the research undertaken and the experiments carried out all confirm the view that religious practice is at its weakest, whatever criteria is used, in the inner urban areas of England.

Yet in 1851 national Census figures showed 44% of the people of West Ham at church on a given Sunday over against a national average of 36%.

Church-goers were divided into Church of England (65%), Non-Conformist (25%) and Catholics (10%). By 1903 the whole scene had changed dramatically as industry and close-packed housing covered the marshlands and the population jumped from 18,817 in 1851 to 267,358. The Daily News Religious Census of 1903 revealed that only 20% of London's population were in church and that West Ham was next to bottom of the Borough list confirming that areas like West Ham had then, and still have church attendances of one-third of the national average. The 1903 figures also showed changes in composition as the Non-Conformists with 56% had overtaken the Anglican 32% and the Catholics had 12% of church attenders.

Today the picture has changed. Against a background of a dropping population, industrial decline and a pluralistic society the practice has shifted even more sharply. Only 5% worship God on Sundays and now the Catholics with 3% are easily the strongest section with Asian religions (Buddhism, Hinduism etc.) a growing 1% and the Protestants divided almost equally between the traditional denominations and the new black churches. Although the incoming migrant population has reshaped the religious pattern in both numbers and composition the underlying urban process continues. There is a steady decline in religious practice as churches close, attendance drops and influence wanes.

But over against this century long atrophy must be set the remarkable persistence of religion which continues to emerge in the experiments, new methods, life-styles and even superstitions of the urban poor. Yet nothing can hide our failure to win the bulk of the population into the living practice of religion.

### **3. Evangelism**

For 120 years social observers, historians and church leaders have noted the evangelistic intractability of the urban situation. In 1854 a summary of the 1851 Census pointed out that it 'showed that well-tried approaches to the working classes were having little success. It helped church leaders to realise just how solid was resistance to their ministry, especially in the large towns'. In 1971 Nicholas Stacey concluded an intensive five-year period of team ministry in Woolwich by saying 'I plead guilty to under-estimating massively the depth and significance of social pressures which keep the English working class away from the worshipping community of the church'.

Failure has not been due to lack of effort. In West Ham the records show that the traditional work of parish or gathered congregations was soon supplemented by the Missions, the University or Public School Settlements and a wave of campaigns. Evangelistic movements like the Salvation Army (1865), Moody and Sankey (1884), the Church Army, the London City Mission and the Pentecostals moved into West Ham. All shared a concern to reach the 'unchurched'; a willingness to use new, often unorthodox, methods; a basis of strong evangelical doctrine; the opportunity for lay-people to play key roles; and an immediate initial success which eventually petered out.

Traditional churches used 'bridge' methods. Pleasant Sunday Afternoons and Brotherhoods for men, Women's Meetings and Sunday Schools reached thousands (West Ham Central Mission had a Women's Meeting of 2000) but very few joined the church itself. Even the post war Christian Commando Campaigns and the Billy Graham Crusade reached few East Londoners.

A combination of church weakness and mistaken methods fused with social factors peculiar to the working class to create an impasse. From the church side, evangelism has too often been indirect with organisations replacing the 'face-to-face' act of witness; non-indigenous, with clergy and imported missionaries bearing the responsibility; and spasmodic, with occasional bursts of activity assuaging the guilt of neglect. From the non-churchgoer's angle the claims of the church have appeared to be irrelevant in the midst of the day to day struggle for the basic necessities of life; remote, in the different thought-forms, attitudes and activities of the churches; and non-attractive, in the lack of spontaneity and the demand for changed standards.

Contemporary examples of evangelistic success point to biblically rooted, strong fellowship groups often centred in homes and stressing individual responsibility.

#### **4. Social Action**

Church buildings, religious practice, and evangelism have all been set within an area of social change. The arrival of industry, the inrush of population and all consequent social history is the story of the struggle with unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, and population mobility. Christian social action has moved from the tradition of personal charity to the massive network of agencies and programmes that serve many people in a variety of buildings. There have been difficulties, opposition and weakness in the efforts of the churches to face the hurt of the inner city.

It has often been difficult to disentangle social action from evangelism and even harder to see the demarcation lines between caring, reform and political revolution. Opposition has come from evangelical Christians fearing the 'Social Gospel' and from local leaders disliking the power and patronage of insensitive church agencies. Weaknesses include fragmentation of effort, creation of dependency, empire building and the 'poultice' approach which tackles symptoms but not causes.

The problem of unemployment relief illustrates both the concern of the churches and the reaction of recipients. In 1933 soup kitchens, labour yards and relief programmes led to a reference to church kitchens, labour yards

and relief programmes led to a reference to church kitchens where the unemployed 'could have a basin of abide with me with tea and rock-cake' and a correspondent from the National Unemployed Worker's Movement wrote 'we have no quarrel with the churches, but we don't accept their theory of pie in the sky when you die. We want the pie while we are still alive'.

In spite of the weaknesses the catalogue of Christian social action in West Ham is massive. Provision of education and health facilities, housing programmes and leisure centres, unemployment relief and concern for minorities, hostels for the inadequate and settlements for community activities ... the list is endless. Even in today's Welfare State the churches of West Ham are a key component in the social caring network as they work through their community centres, homes, youth programmes, and action groups. Partnership with statutory authorities, personal pastoral care and individual participation in the political and social structures are all contemporary features.

The positive contributions of this aspect of Christian ministry are those of initiation (District nurses, poor man's lawyer and Darby and Joan Clubs all began in West Ham church agencies) flexibility, resource gathering and the continual creation of communities of care. The underlying dilemma was known to General Booth of the Salvation Army who 'turned to social reform because he became convinced that poverty itself was a grave impediment to salvation' and left a legacy of uneasy co-existence between the witnessing, evangelising corps and the caring, institutional centres.

## 5. Politics

The churches preferred poulitice application to political involvement but the emergence of socialism sharpened the question. The first Labour MP in Britain, Keir Hardie, was elected in south West Ham in 1892 and the first labour-controlled council followed in 1898. The old alliance of Tory/Church of England and Liberal/Nonconformity had been powerful — in the 1892 election when Anglican vicars graced Tory meetings and Baptist and Methodist churches were used for Liberal party meetings but only the occasional Freechurchman or Catholic priest stood with the militant socialists.

The relationships between the churches and the forces of socialism have known distinct phases. Initial ambivalence moved through a period of misunderstanding into open hostility — in 1911 church candidates opposed labour party councillors on the issue of the Sunday opening of cinemas! Between the wars an uneasy co-existence was maintained in the face of comments like that of the Bishop of Chelmsford in 1920 that 'decay in the churches is co-incident with the rise of Labour'. Since the last war both sides have been drawn together by their shared experience of decline and their underlying desire to face the accelerating urban problems.

The fringe, but potentially explosive, activities of the National Front (the blackshirts of the 1930's) in an area of high immigration and the revolutionary aims of the extrme left (the Communists of the 1930's) in a deprived and powerless district must not distract attention from the fundamental political reality for the churches. That is embodied in the gulf that grew, and has never been adequately bridged, between those working class political movements gathered into trade unions and labour parties and the institutional churches. Only the Roman Catholic church has really kept a political foothold within the local Labour movement.

## **6. Personal Morality**

Over against the political uncertainty has gone a pre-occupation with personal morality. The tests of a 'true Christian' were seen in the attitude taken to 'drink'; the use made of Sunday; the disapproval of 'entertainments'; the discipline expected in sex; and the refusal to engage in gambling. Unfortunately enjoyment of alcohol, the view that Sunday is a leisure day, interest in entertainments, earthy matter-of-factness in sexual matters and participation in gambling have all characterised the working class attitudes in East London. (The evening congregation at West Ham Central Mission stood in 1927 to pass a resolution ... 'having heard with dismay of the formation of a company to lay a greyhound racing track at Custom House we record unqualified protest against such a project, and urge the citizens of West Ham to use every means in their power to defeat the proposal'). Christian has been linked with 'kill-joy' and 'thou shall not' has been the message received.

Positively, the pre-occupation with personal morality has maintained Biblical ethical attitudes, challenged the slide in moral standards, urged a distinctive style of life, reminded society that social evils are accompanied by victims, and initiated a network of caring agencies. But the churches have failed to explain the reasons—stewardship, discipline, wholeness etc. — for their attitudes. An even more serious defect is the evasion by the churches of the corporate morality involved in economics, war, or racism. I found no record of any church meeting passing a resolution on war or race to match those taken on betting or drinking.

## **7. Secularisation**

Harvey Cox maintains that the 'rise of urban civilisation and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related movements' Secularisation is linked to both movements and this process has affected the institutions and attitudes of East London.

Institutions like schools, hospitals and the probation service have seen a massive shift from voluntary to statutory and from local to national control. The churches were once in a position of control and influence which has steadily and inexorably waned. Once able to unify and permeate all facets of social life the churches have found their social role diminished at every point of change.

There have been equally dramatic changes in the attitudes and beliefs of individuals. The acceptance of materialistic standards has been accompanied by a sense of political powerlessness. Anomie has become the distinguishing trait — featuring acceptance, apathy and indifference.

Within the churches the secularistic stripping has taken both social influence and resources as buildings have closed, personnel declined and programmes changed and this has been paralleled by a shift of theological emphasis from 'other-worldly' to 'this-worldly' concerns, confirming the view that 'secularisation is man turning his attention away from worlds

beyond and towards this world and this time'. From one angle, the advance of secularisation can be seen to have lifted from the shoulders of the churches heavy responsibilities in the realms of education, social caring and leisure facilities — the church is now free to be herself and to reveal the inner realities of faith and fellowship. But, in practice, the churches are in a noman's land. Not yet free from temporal commitment and not yet able to reveal their true nature; unable to shake off the long established suspicions of the community or to answer John Robinson's question 'Is secularisation the enemy of the Gospel or the fruit of the Gospel?'

## 8. Them and Us

The geographical location of West Ham, economic pressures, social attitudes and political experience have all helped to create an attitude of 'them and us'. Expressed in accent and attitudes it is a deep-rooted conviction that others have the power and the privileges and that there is a cultural divide in Britain.

At one level David Martin has pointed out that 'one aspect of working class style especially important for participation in church life is the widespread resistance to any kind of major involvement in voluntary associations, trade unions included. With every step up the status scale active participation in voluntary associations of every kind increases'. At another, more intrusive level there has been a continual reinforcing of the cultural divide through the imposition of structures, whether political, social or ecclesiastical; the use of imported leadership in the settlements, churches, religious communities and professional services; the necessity of external aid funnelled through churches, settlements and charities; and the acceptance of 'social safety valves' seen in royalty, aristocracy and public personalities.

The churches in West Ham have been caught up in this process of control and manipulation. Ecclesiastical structures have compelled the parishes of West Ham to live through four shifts of diocese. Imported leadership has been evident in the power of the clergy (heightened as other professionals move out) allied to the articulate 'incomer' entering and often taking over local congregations. Financially, access to denominational and trust funds and the means to publicise local needs at a national level has given power to the social caring of the church and often created a one-sided image of East Londoners as improvident, helpless creatures. Historically, there is much evidence to support the view that the establishment has used social manipulation in its efforts to assuage both an uneasy conscience and the rumbling discontent at living conditions in industrial areas. The church is seen by working class society as 'establishment' in orientation as it is patronised by royalty, led by university-trained men, dominated by public school figures and linked financially with external resources.

Geographically, historically and socially East Londoners have lived in a world of their own. They have resented the way that political structures have been arbitrarily imposed upon them; they have disliked the influence of imported leadership; they have been bitter about their financial

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Employer’s Liability insurance is provided with unlimited indemnity, whereas Public liability insurance usually has a limit of £250,000 on any one accident. For this reason, we deem the Minister appointed by the Church to be an employee, thus providing the diaconate with maximum cover in this respect.

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Yours sincerely,  
M. E. Purver  
General Manager.

dependency; and they have been very much aware of the power of other classes. Reaction has taken several forms. Many have moved out of West Ham, usually by educational attainment, to share the suburbs with the middle classes. Others have fought for their rights through trade-unionism or political activism. Many have remained, resenting their powerlessness. And so often the church has been trapped in another social level, carrying other values and acting as a bridge to another world.

## 9. Conclusions

An analysis is one thing, an answer another. Social change does not stand still and West Ham has now been merged into the London Borough of Newham which has inherited the deeply rooted urban problems and is now embattled by the twin pressures of historical legacy and contemporary economic pressures. In itself it is a microcosm of the urban scene — and was used as such by David Sheppard in his book *Built as a City* — and represents what is now a national, and even a universal phenomenon.

Within this maelstrom the Christian church has witnessed and worked and inter-action has taken place at all the levels I have listed. Today church buildings carry a wide variety of messages. Congregations gather for worship, evangelism takes place at many levels, social action responds to human needs, political relationships remain uneasy, the theme of personal morality still outweighs corporate concerns, the process of secularisation is accelerating and the cultural/class tensions still exist.

Signs of hope can be seen in:

a. The continuing strength of Roman Catholicism. Strategically placed churches, Catholic schools and the presence of three religious orders in West Ham assist in providing a constant and powerful framework.

b. Protestant churches — in spite of retrenchment, introversion, lack of professional ministry, and theological uncertainty — still contain lively, strongly rooted fellowships.

c. New congregations are constantly emerging. The growth of at least 20 black churches has been paralleled by the opening of shopfront churches and the arrival of house churches. All are biblically rooted and evangelical in ethos.

d. Change in attitudes within churches as team and group ministries operate, experiments in worship and research into programmes take place and a willingness to welcome and accept spiritual trends is evident.

e. Indigenous commitment is growing as young couples decide to stay and the 'believer-drain' is easing! By the use of housing associations, residential accommodation and active encouragement churches are retaining key personnel.

f. Theological differences have given way to acceptance and appreciation.

g. Wider concern as national groups and committed communities begin to face the problems and opportunities of what is now a major mission field.

The possibility of urban renewal has been explored by a wide variety of agencies in recent years and the churches have reflected both the repercussions of decline and the experiments in urban renewal. Patterns of church life, organisational structures, traditional emphases and inner attitudes have all been affected. Urban misison takes place within this setting.

I am deeply grateful to West Ham for the place and the people have taught me so much. There is a realism and directness which is refreshing and there is a sense of history in the economic, racial and social struggles taking place which echo the experience of so many of the world's population. Here I have found energetic and encouraging Christians facing and grappling with urban problems and seeking to carve out an authentic Christian presence in both the established and new forms of the church of Christ. My own research has helped to shape the work I now do in the district alongside a team of local people. These notes are a brief introduction to some of the historical factors which need to be faced by anyone living or working in areas like West Ham.

**Colin Marchant**

## **The Re-organization of Baptist Women's Work**

Women! This must surely be the subject round which more varied discussion takes place than any other under the sun.

Thank you for giving space in the Fraternal to three excellent articles in the last issue illustrating the ever increasing range of roles for women in our society today and particularly in the church. In this article I shall be writing almost exclusively about the mission work of women but let me leave you in no doubt, the proposals we are making will, we believe, affect for good the local Church, Associations and Demonominational life.

We are living in an exciting era when women have been given opportunities to climb to the top of the ladder in most of the professions; trades; politics; even the Baptist Union! But ... it seems to me that never has there been a time when women have been more confused about their particular role in life. Which role should they choose?

From the many books, magazines and television programmes designed specifically for women and about women it is clear that there are many who find life extremely difficult and frustrating ... they are struggling with their role as females, pulling in several directions as they try to cope with a multiplicity of jobs about the house, at work, in the community; often torn and tired by the demands on time and energy as they seek to fulfil their role as: Wife, Mother, Homemaker, Neighbour, Friend, Assistant Breadwinner, Career woman etc. If, on top of all this they should also be Christian then this opens up another wide range of 'roles', often accepted willingly, sometimes enforced because it is 'expected'.

And so the pace of life quickens: women making their way through the early years of a chosen career or married life — or both — to the middle years with the ups and downs of seeing family through 'O's' and 'A's' and on to university — or, with heavy heart, to join the dole queue! Often this is a time when another 'role' has to be taken more seriously than before — that of daughter or daughter-in-law to aging parents. Or, in an emergency, dropping everything to rush to the aid of someone special, wearing the most favourite hat of all — that of grandmother. (Is there any wonder that often people in their middle years are the ones who are missing from our churches?).

Then, in late middle age comes the promise of retirement and the leisure to do so many things that have hitherto only been dreams, but dreams are quickly dashed when life becomes so full of action people wonder how they ever found time to go to work. And a whole new role is demanded of women who have always been at home — to adjust to having someone around the house all day again.

Other roles are to be considered: singleness, one parent families, battered wives, widows etc., all requiring special understanding and sometimes, real practical help to accept and adjust to life and the often sudden new circumstances around them.

It is against a background of the constantly changing role of women that we must take a closer look at what we are offering in our churches. It is said that the biggest problem for women today is not the lack of opportunities in the world, the local community or the church but in women themselves. I have to admit there is some truth in this as discussions on work among women has revealed that there are many women in our congregations who are basically happy with things just the way they are and don't have aspirations to enter into the political arena of either Church or State. A mould has been set for them over the years and it is one that, for many, has been accepted with grace and fortitude. They are faithful in everything; always there when work has to be done, especially when it means donning an apron and rolling up their sleeves and many a church service, Bible Study Group and Prayer Meeting would be drastically depleted without them.

It is that kind of loyal life-style that has kept the Baptist Women's League flag flying for so many years and no-one can deny the powerful influence for good this has been in churches the length and breadth of the country and at national level too. The BWL has as its purpose: 'To promote the objects of the Union by encouraging the Christian service of women; by uniting and equipping them for Home Mission and evangelistic work; by linking up work being done; and by promoting a fellowship of prayer and service for the Kingdom of Christ at home and abroad'. This is still taken seriously by many today and through the 'Branch Return Forms' sent out each year, we are aware of dedicated workers for Christ open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and being wonderfully used in ministering to others.

Alas, this is not true of all meetings within the League and one minister, taking courage in both hands has written: "Women's work must not be allowed to continue as a separate sub-culture often ignoring and

sometimes competing with the church, suspicious of the minister and (unless she conforms) hostile to his wife. Women's Work has to be evaluated and re-organised to achieve New Testament objectives on New Testament principles in line with the total policy and goals of the local fellowship. It must be weaned off its addictions to imported speakers, its passivity and leader domination." Obviously not written by someone who has had a good experience of work among women in his church.

However, new generations of women are growing up in our churches who want to serve the Lord, just as sincerely as their mothers and grandmothers before them, only now the scene has changed and therefore, their role must change in order to meet today's needs.

In 1977 our Planning Committee reported: "The growing number of Playgroups, Shoppers' Play-ins, Mother and Toddler Groups, run by the younger women, often with help from the older ones, shows an awareness of the needs of young mums frequently lonely because separated from their families and old school friends. This forms a valuable contribution to the community around as well as providing opportunity for Christian witness and outreach. Other significant changes can be seen in the increasing number of Young Wives Groups, meetings for 'other' age groups. Coffee mornings, lunches for the elderly, luncheon meetings with speakers, Morning Bible Study Groups, Lunch-time Prayer and Bible Study Groups, often home-based, reflect a genuine desire to be more informed about the fundamentals of our faith."

These different types of activity tend to be fluid in character and unstructured in business and thus perhaps do not see as clearly the value of joining an organisation like BWL.

In any case, because of the present constitution of the BWL, there are no means of communicating information to the leaders of such groups, or, more important, to hear direct news of their progress and development.

Many pointers indicate a 'new look' is needed, to include every aspect of work among women in our churches. You have probably heard 'rumblings' of changes afoot and the consternation it is causing in some churches and Associations but you must realise also that this is no new topic of conversation!

For over ten years discussions have taken place periodically, at national level, on the re-structuring of our Work among Women, without affecting major alterations to the national set-up. Therefore, when a Working Group was formed in 1978 and its members confronted with the plea to look at the whole situation again, they knew they were faced with no easy task.

Our work throughout the country was discussed fully at the 1977 October Women's Conference (this meets in February and October each year and is made up of representatives from all over the country from Federations and Associations). An extract from one of the reports coming out of our debate expresses something of what was felt then:-

"At the present time the denominational women's work is in a some-what uneasy situation with its inherited BWL structure, beloved by some, neglected and misunderstood by others. The problem of integrating the whole potential of women's groups in the churches into a working

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relationship with the Department of Mission and the Baptist Union has yet to be resolved. Not for the first time the Conference tried dealing with such topics as the relationship of BWL Federations to Associations, use of the National President, communication and the fostering of fellowship."

The collated information revealed that Federations were fluctuating to varying degrees, some full of life, others comfortably static or facing great difficulties.

Taking into account all that had come out of talks at different levels throughout the country; personal correspondence; the wider interests of women in the Church and the economic situation, it was felt the time was right to take a step forward in faith.

In the summer of 1978 questionnaires were sent out to all Federation Secretaries, Association Representatives, Association Secretaries and Ministers' Fraternal.

It was only after a great deal of background work that eventually a report was prepared and sent out to all Federations of the BWL in August 1979. Later a draft constitution was sent to women's Conference members with a covering letter inviting comments for or against the proposed changes and promising time for open discussion at the October 1979 Women's Conference — here are extracts from an outline of their findings:-

*From all their investigations, the first conclusion the Group reached was that there must be change. It is clear that the present structure does not include many forms of work done by or for women and that the name and image of the BWL is no longer helpful in some situations.*

*In any future structure the Group feels that much of the responsibility for work among women should be devolved to the Associations but, in order that there may be an overall policy and sharing of information and views, there should continue to be committees at national level. The Group therefore recommends the setting up of Association Women's Committees which shall be representative of ALL work done by women and that Association Women's Secretaries should be appointed who would be responsible for servicing and developing the work. We recognise that we need the co-operation and support of Area Superintendents and Association Officers and women themselves.*

*To link these Association Committees at national level the Group recommends the setting up of a National Council of Baptist Women (this, by the way, is the name given to the decision-making committee - not a new name to take the place of Baptist Women's League). This Council would have representatives elected at Association level. It would meet during the Baptist Union Assembly and on one other occasion during the year.*

*The Group recommends the appointment of an Executive Committee made up of a number of members elected from the National Council and from the Baptist Union Council.*

*If these recommendations are accepted, the Baptist Women's League will cease to exist and with it its Constitution.*

*The Working Group would emphasise that we see all women's work as part of the total work of the Church, and in particular the local church, and we realise that any fragmentation of the mission and ministry of the Church*

into individual sections could be damaging. Carried to its logical conclusion this would mean doing without separate programmes and structures for men, women, children, young people, etc. However, since we recognise that such groups as these exist within the life of the local church and because we recognise the appeal of such groups to many people, we see the proposed structure for women's work as a necessary element in restructuring our lines of communication with them.

The Group is convinced that it will be for the furtherance of the mission of the Church that these changes are made and they trust that the new structure will serve the future well and continue to fulfil the high ideals and aims set for us when our women's work began.

At the October 1979 Conference, the Chairman summed up the day's discussions as follows:-

"At the moment all the emphasis of our structure focuses at the national level and that is the BWL structure. (This in itself causes a block in some areas of the country.) We are now saying that, instead of everything focusing at national level, we would try to turn it round so that it focuses at Association level which is where other Baptist work focuses, eg. youth work, evangelism, education, social responsibility, etc. This is where the churches relate. We feel that the right place for women's work to relate would also be at that level."

The Chairman also confirmed that the BU/BMS Joint Standing Committee and the Planning and Newington Court sub-committees would continue; sub-committees would be appointed by the National Council.

After discussion at the Women's Committee it was unanimously agreed to adopt the proposed structure in principle and to recommend via Mission Main Committee and the BU Council that notice be given at the 1980 Nottingham Assembly to change the BU Constitution at the 1981 Assembly at the points where it referred to BWL.

At the February 1980 Women's Conference the company was divided into seven groups, each led by a member of the Working Group and with members of the Women's Committee in each group. The Rev. Donald Black was chairman for this session and during the group discussions written questions were passed to Mr Black so that he could prepare to answer them in the open session which followed. Some of the questions raised in the groups and put to Mr Black were:-

Some members were concerned that there would be no President to travel round and speak to the constituency.

"It is appreciated that you would want someone to come and speak to your rallies and it is hoped to overcome any difficulty by having a list of names for you to choose from. The list would include members of the Executive Committee and Mission Department staff. This has yet to be worked out in detail but its importance for many of you is certainly not being overlooked."

A number of the delegates expressed dismay at the general attitude coming through the Associations towards their work, and they were fearful of the reaction when asking that an Association Women's Committee be set up. Will Associations accept women?

Mr Black thinks they will — "One of the mistakes made by the Women's Liberation Movement is to say there is no difference between men and women (to say there is no difference of opportunity is a different thing

altogether). God created us different. Therefore we *need* one another.”

Could the National Council of Baptist Women meet in different Associations in turn?

“In principle there is no reason why not, though there may be valid reasons, eg. travel costs. There could be considerable advantage in meeting in different Associations and the money aspect would have to be weighed off against the advantages in general.”

Will HMF miss out with the demise of the Personal Membership, and the “Fee”?

“The cost of the existing mailing already takes up some of the HMF money received from you at the moment. What Personal Members now pay is not a “fee” as such but an encouraged donation. It is hoped that women will continue to donate to the HMF.”

We want women’s work to continue. Women need to meet together. AT NO TIME HAS IT BEEN SUGGESTED, OR EVEN THOUGHT OF, THAT WORK AMONG WOMEN IN THE CHURCHES SHOULD BE DONE AWAY WITH! Of course they can continue to meet together. But we hope that they will also be open to changing needs within the total Church family.

Many are fearful about the proposed changes to the known and much loved pattern of our work. (In the trauma of change mistakes unfortunately can be made and intentions so easily misunderstood.)

Are we really saying that God’s love for us is so small that we have to hold on to the past with all our strength? What would the founder members of the BWL think of us now. They were people who grasped every opportunity for progress with both hands. They had to begin a special work for women because that was the only avenue open to them at the time. It is difficult to believe that they would have been satisfied with the present day situation. They were alive to the political trends of their day; actively involved in campaigns to alleviate the suffering of the poor; undeterred by what people might say and wholly committed to the task God had given them to do. How do we compare?

Are we going to miss the opportunities God is holding out to us today whilst we confer endlessly about the things of yesterday. With a new century just around the corner can we honestly afford to keep looking back?

The Fringe meeting at the 1980 Nottingham Assembly on the ‘Role of Women in the Denomination’ ended on this note:-

“If the purpose behind the arranging of this session was to make us, as responsible Baptists, take a long, hard look at the role of women in our denomination, it has abundantly succeeded. It was also evident from the active participation of those present, and from the numbers turned away, that there is already a great deal of interest in this subject, and the future trends in our churches will reveal whether such interest will find an outlet in changed policy.”

A kit has been prepared on this subject called “Free Indeed?” and will be available from the Mission Department at the end of September — price £1.00 including postage.

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# Book Review

Title; **Dynamics of Spiritual Life**

Publisher: Paternoster

Length: 455pp

Author: Richard FL Lovelace

Price: £4.50

It is some time since a book came into the hands of this reviewer which he could commend more heartily to the readers of *Fraternal*. Beneath the slightly journalese title and the distinctly garish cover lies a work of quite remarkable insight and genuine scholarship which has all manner of things to say to us all. Richard Lovelace came recently into prominence through his firm yet compassionate stand within mainline American presbyterianism on the Christian attitude to homosexuality. This book however takes him to his primary theological interest, spirituality and revival. A life-long student of the writings of Johnathan Edwards, Lovelace harnesses here his considerable Biblical and historical scholarship to the task of outlining a theology of spiritual renewal, and in the process gives us a blueprint for a renewed Church which is at one Biblically-rooted, comprehensive, compassionate, and open to the winds of God's Spirit. It abounds in valuable insights over the whole range of individual and corporate Christian experience which a brief review cannot begin to do justice to. Inevitably in a work of this range every observation or historical generalisation will not carry every reader with it, and this reviewer was no exception in that respect; but that in no way qualifies a whole-hearted commendation of this book. At a time when the talk is all of Church Growth, charismatic renewal, initiatives in evangelism, and a 'whole' gospel here is a book which confronts them all, sets our current 'cries' firmly in their historical perspective, and brings to bear a Biblical critique which is both a corrective and an encouragement. Many a ministry would find a new sense of direction in these pages; no ministry could fail to find help. Here, for the next Booktoken, is a book to be read, studied, discussed and returned to.

Bruce Milne.