

# *Engaging the Powers*

## **PART 3 BEYOND THE RECEIVED WISDOM**

**Part 3 is the work of Hamish Preston, compiler of the earlier two sections of *Engaging the Powers*.**

In his book *Leading Improving Primary Schools*, (1999), Geoff Southworth offers this insight quoted from an earlier book of which he was co-author:

**Every school has its own distinctive culture, it is ‘the way we do things around here’.**

He continues:

**If you consider different schools in which you have worked you might detect differences between them. The character, conduct and content of staff meetings, for example, may be different. In some schools staff meetings are highly interactive sessions with everyone engaged, where ideas, plans and proposals are debated in a lively manner...In some other schools, staff meetings are sombre affairs, where the chair conduct a series of monologues and where most participants are passive and looking for the earliest opportunity to close the meetings.**

The community of individual churches is very similar to that of primary schools in some ways: both are small and intimate units of a much larger organization. Both have their own distinctive culture – ‘the way we do things round here’. This ‘microculture’ consists, I suggest, of a series of unwritten and unspoken do’s and don’ts, some of them being quite powerful prohibitions. In churches, these prohibitions will relate to ensuring that everyone feels comfortable and not ‘got at’ or ‘put down’. Admirable in their way, but I will suggest, they can result in pushing under the carpet matters which need to be discussed and shared even though they risk both making some people uncomfortable and causing unwelcome disagreements.

I wrote this in order to explain the slightly enigmatic title of Part 3 of the present website. *Beyond the Received Wisdom*. The ‘received wisdom’ to which this refers is, of course, the set of unwritten, unspoken set of do’s and don’ts which regulate beyond argument ‘the way we do things round here’ in any given institution. It applies not only to the humble primary schools or church community but also to the most powerful institutions such as banks and large corporations. The phrase ‘beyond the received wisdom’ carries with it, I hope, the suggestion that any institution which is ruled too exclusively by its received wisdom is in danger of inflicting serious damage on itself. For the received wisdom is hidden and tacit; it is therefore not subject to critical examination or review. The situation of such an institution might be compared to an aircraft on autopilot as it enters an area of severe turbulence or, even more graphically in the well-known phrase, to rearranging the deckchairs on

the Titanic. Most institutions, of course, are saved from disaster most of the time because they are capable of switching off the received view autopilot and turning to human judgement when the crisis looms. They are then of course in an area which is *beyond* the received wisdom.

The moral is, of course, that every institution to save itself from rigidity, inflexibility and yes, sheer ignorance, needs to have the capacity to go beyond its own received wisdom. It needs to be able to summon up the ability to exercise critical intelligence regarding its normal practice, to identify and reflect honestly on those practices and to call on outside resources to provide information and the example of different ways of looking at things in order to consider a wider range of options.

## Encountering problems

I need now to indulge in a little autobiography. In 1999 I set up a small organization called the Reading Churches Campaigning Network. The aim was to stimulate support for campaigning charities like Christian Aid, CAFOD, and (what is now) Global Justice Now. At that time these organizations were very keen on distributing postcards to be sent by supporters to people in a position to 'do something about' the latest misdoings of 'the powers that be', usually big corporations or the international financial institutions, ie. the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. From the literature I was receiving from the charities I would select about three 'causes' a year, send for a quantity of postcards and distribute batches of them amongst the churches in my network. About half the churches in the Reading Churches Together Directory responded to my initial appeal to nominate an 'advocate' who would distribute the cards around their congregations and, hopefully, say a little to explain why the issue was important.

This seemed to work well enough for a year or two but, I felt, it was rather mechanical. This is when I started to write a series of papers based on books dealing with the strange world of global politics and finance. These, I hoped, would help gain interest and support. I offered these papers to 'my' churches but did not otherwise distribute them. This was testing the waters and I found them pretty chilly. Response was minimal, most of it from people whom I knew were already committed to working in this area. At the same time I was getting rather discouraging feedback from my 'advocates' who reported that it was uphill work at church trying to get people interested; there was no evidence that ministers were giving any kind of a lead on this. Furthermore, as advocates left the churches I found they were not being replaced, so churches gradually fell off my list. Subsequent appeals for new churches fell, as they say, 'on stony ground'.

It was this experience which led me to venture the generalization to be found in the introductory material to the *Engaging the Powers* website that whilst churches had a deserved reputation for rescuing and supporting the victims of both man-made and natural disasters, they seemed to show remarkably little curiosity as to how the man-made disasters were occurring in the first place. I backed this up with a pithy observation from Archbishop Desmond Tutu to the effect that 'the churches are

very good at fishing the bodies out of the water, but not so good at finding out how they got there in the first place. This suggested that the problem I was encountering in Reading is a real one but is not confined to the English home counties.

Since 1994 I have been a practising member of the Church of England and a regular attender at two different parish churches. During this time and speaking in general terms, I have noted a consistent distrust of and hostility towards anything which has the flavour of authority. To attempt to bring into consideration anything which had that flavour, it seemed, was straying beyond the prevailing 'received wisdom'. I have come to the conclusion from my experience of parish life including reading a great deal of parish-oriented literature, that this problem of hostility towards any form of authority is widespread, at least in the liberal part of the protestant church. I don't for a moment believe that it is a characteristic peculiar to our particular church community.

'Authority' is a resource which comes to us (at us?) from outside, and a particular manifestation of it which concerns me here is what I call the academic literature. This seems to provoke the usually unspoken reaction: 'who are these people who are trying to tell me what to think? I am an autonomous individual and I do not accept their authority'. That most academic writers today, in a postmodern world, would not accept this particular conception of their work is beside the point. It is still the reaction that they widely provoke, I maintain. Of course, some of this literature may not be addressed to a parish readership at all whilst some may simply fail to communicate its relevance to a parish audience. Some academic literature, however, has been written with sympathetic imagination and skill so as to be able to convey its meaning to a non-academic reader. Such works, in my view, are 'pearls of great price' and for any Christian community to consistently rule them out of consideration seriously diminishes the capacity of that community for Christian growth.

## **Two valuable texts**

I am now going to provide two examples from the academic world which indicate paths of development for church communities to learn about, reflect on, examine and explore. Both have a significant potential for increasing Christian understanding and development. The first example is N T Wright's major work of biblical scholarship in *The New Testament and the People of God*, and its companion volume, *Jesus and the Victory of God* – the subject of *The Wright Papers* (Papers 1, 2 and 3 in Part 2 of this website). As explained in the Introduction to the Wright Papers, using research methods not available to earlier generations of scholars, Wright creates a vivid recreation of life in first century Palestine. Setting Jesus' ministry in its actual context, as opposed to more traditional interpretations which are context-free, produces a portrait which is quite at variance with the traditional Jesus meek and gentle who didn't do politics. The same Introduction outlines the contours of Jesus' ministry set in its social and political context as revealed by Wright. Interestingly, there is nothing new to add to the biblical evidence for what Jesus said and did, but its significance is quite transformed by Wright's account of Jewish beliefs and

customs and the background of political tensions concerning the Roman occupation. Readers may refer to the Wright Papers for a full description; enough to say that Wright sums it all up by observing that if Jesus had spent his time just going around, healing people and generally doing good, he would not have provoked the violent hostility that he did from the Jewish authorities. One of Wright's gifts is to be able to bring to life the specific causes of the authorities' violent animosity. The fact is that Jesus was quite unsparing in his criticism of practices which stood in the way of the coming of his Father's kingdom. No wonder, says Wright, that his ministry lasted for only three years or less; it was only because he was continually on the move that it lasted as long as it did. In addition to Wright's interpretation of the New Testament story, he provides a fascinating insight into the revolution in historical method which occurred during the post-World War II period and which enabled him to provide a much fuller and more lively account than was previously possible. He also disposes, convincingly, of the disturbing nineteenth century judgement that the biblical evidence is fundamentally unreliable and cannot be used to mount a theological case.

In so far that Christians see Jesus as a living interpretation of God's kingdom on earth, it is presumably quite important to have an idea of what Jesus was like and how he conducted himself in the society in which he lived. One might indeed expect that a radical reinterpretation of the nature of Jesus' ministry would prompt many believers to revise their own estimate of what being a Christian actually entails. The topic is certainly not one of merely detached academic interest. To say 'no thanks' to this highly significant contribution from a leading contemporary bible scholar doesn't square with the open and intelligent attitude one hopes Christians adopt towards the world around them.

My second example of academic work which has a huge potential for the development of Christian understanding comes from a quite different angle. Pete Ward describes his book *Liquid Church* (Henderson/Paternoster 2002) as 'practical theology', so he has one foot, so to speak, in the academic puddle and the other in the pool of the wider outside world. Ward's title acknowledges his debt to Zygmunt Bauman's groundbreaking book, *Liquid Modernity* (2000). In Ward's words:

**Modernity was shaped by the Fordist principles of expansion, size, plant, boundaries, norms, rules and class-oriented affinities and identities. Now, says Bauman, modernity is undergoing a liquefying process. Central to this change is the way that capital has been released from location. 'In its heavy stage, capital was as much fixed to the ground as were the labourers it engaged. Nowadays, capital travels light – with cabin baggage only, which includes no more than a briefcase, a cellular phone and a portable computer'. (p.16)**

Ward continues:

**Changes in productive processes mean that individuals can no longer expect to follow a safe career within one organization. Changes in technology and work arrangements have meant that an identity located in being a company employee or a particular skill or trade becomes less feasible...**

Goodness me! What is all this? We don't expect to hear this kind of language in church. No, indeed. And that's the point. Ward's thesis is that the outside world has changed dramatically in the last few decades but that most of the Western

church has preferred not to know about it. The price it pays for this is a failure to connect with the outside world and consequently an incapacity to speak to the multitudes of people who, as the anthropologists and sociologists increasingly find, are searching for 'spirituality' – whatever that may be held to mean. What might help, says Ward would be a liquid church to match liquid modernity. He goes on to sketch out what such a church might look like. It would mean changes in organization and structure, he warns. But we don't have liquid church yet, he writes in 2002. Indeed, unless church leaders are prepared to contemplate the nature of liquid modernity – or to listen to alternative accounts of how things began to change in the last quarter of the twentieth century - they will not be equipped to do so. This, however, means getting immersed in secular language and looking at things the way the outside world looks at them. Deep water indeed.

Obviously, Pete Ward is adopting a quite radical position. To understand that position it is necessary to follow his thinking in some detail so his book is being given here the same treatment as those in the previous parts of the present website project.

- [Paper 1: Pete Ward \*The Liquid Church\*, chapters 1 and 2](#)
- [Paper 2: Pete Ward \*The Liquid Church\*, chapters 3 - 5](#)

## Communication difficulties

I said, a little earlier, that the two examples I have provided from the academic world, N T Wright's two books and Pete Ward's *Liquid Church* indicated 'paths of development for church communities to learn about, reflect on examine and explore'. Actually, the two examples exemplify two distinct major strands of academic inquiry for churches: inquiry about Jesus and inquiry about the world. Both strands of inquiry amongst others, in my view, need to be fed into the institutional church on a continuing basis, if the church is to save itself from lack of focus on the fountainhead of our religion, namely Jesus Christ, and from falling into the trap of becoming a cozy refuge from the hostile world outside, as so unsparingly described by Pete Ward. My experience of parish life suggests that, in fact, any such inquiry falls well outside the 'received wisdom' of some churches, maybe indeed outside that of many or even most churches within liberal Protestantism in my part of the world. If this is the case, it follows that such churches are systematically cutting themselves off from their spiritual roots. They are not prospering despite what any outward appearances might suggest. This, I contend, is a serious matter.

It may well be immediately suggested that learning directly from books is not the only, or even the best way for church congregations to learn about Jesus or about the outside world. A focal point of traditional worship is the preaching; it is for the preacher to communicate in suitable language the teaching of the gospel on all matters of faith. But there is a problem here which I touched on in the Introduction to Part 2: a good congregation consists of all sorts and conditions of people; it is like a secondary school with a comprehensive intake; pupils with a wide range of different intellectual ability are taught together under the same roof. Schools

recognize this is a problem and take steps to deal with it; some subjects can be taught effectively with pupils of all abilities together, others are taught in sets according to pupil ability. Much effort is spent on ensuring that pupils don't see themselves as having a particular place in a pecking order. This is done mainly by the way staff talk to and about pupils.

I see nothing like this at church. There is the same problem, but it is never referred to. This has its advantages; no one, in a good church atmosphere feels inferior to anyone else by any measure, intellectual, social dress or whatever. But it is a problem for ministers. Most of what they talk about, whether on social or other practical matters, or when they talk about God can be said well enough to an 'all sorts and conditions' congregation; but not all. There are matters which need to be inquired into, thought about and explored, and these call for – well – thinking; they are intellectual in nature. Many ministers in their preaching handle this with skill and sensitivity; 'difficult' matters can be raised – a perennial example occurs every year on Trinity Sunday, for example; 'three in one'; how can it be? – but in general it is necessary to keep things simple and down to earth, and to handle them with a light touch.

I make no complaint about this as a means of handling a difficult issue within the bounds of the received wisdom. It is surely right that Christians remember St Paul's teaching on gatherings of Christians being like the parts of the body. Different people come with different gifts, but they are all valued equally in God's eyes. But the result is that looking 'beyond the received wisdom', exploring the thinking of people like N T Wright and Pete Ward, is very difficult within the ethos I have just described. It could be 'managed' quite easily, with opportunities for discussion of accessible academic texts provided outside of the Sunday morning set-piece service, for instance, but if this difficult topic remains unacknowledged amongst church leaders in private, as it must be in public, then solutions to the problem are not likely to be considered. All in all, I contend, you don't have to look far to discover reasons why there is a general resistance to considering the work of the academics, such as I experienced in my house group meetings. Understandable, but it amounts to a significant impoverishment of church life.

Of course, the problem is not limited to that of accessing the academic literature. Looked at more generally, one might ask, 'what can be done to encourage a spirit of curiosity, enquiry and exploration – or in other words, the means by which one is enabled to look beyond the prevailing received wisdom?' The Vicar of my present church inaugurated a few years ago a very effective way of doing just that. He organized film sessions during Lent, the subjects being films which explored features of real life in terms of human relationship; this year, for instance, one of the films was *Forty Years* with Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtney in an study of married life in its later stages. At the end of each series, an evening meal is arranged where discussion of the films flows. This approach does not deliver the quick, tangible results which the organizers of our lives always long for. It is more generic, encouraging an attitude of attention and reflection to real life relationship problems, and to exchanging and sharing views about it. Discussion about the place of God in our lives might easily follow. Given such an ethos, casually suggesting the occasional academic text as profitable reading matter would follow easily enough. Time scale?

Possible a decade. Would this be considered a good idea by an instrumentally-minded visiting archdeacon? Probably not. Quick results it will never deliver.

## **Venturing beyond the received wisdom**

I want to say a bit more about the idea of going beyond the received wisdom – ‘the way we do things round here’. The received wisdom in any institution is not only ‘the way we do things’ but also the way we think about things; the way we make judgements about events and people, the possibilities we are allowed to consider in making plans about the future; there is, perhaps a whole ‘received’ worldview within which we have to operate in the institutions to which we belong. In making any move within the received wisdom we can safely act or make proposals without having to explain ourselves in detail. Once we move beyond that however, we are in foreign territory; the terrain is at once unfamiliar. We are therefore called upon to explain in greater detail than we otherwise would have to do, what we are planning to do, why we are proposing it and offering an account of the benefits of our course of action that would accrue to the institution. It is likely that this will in all probability require a lot of words, and time and effort on the part of ourselves and our hearers in order to make a persuasive case. Immediately, in any busy institution – and what institution is not perpetually busy? – this encounters resistance for who has the time to listen unless they are already convinced that your ideas will be worth spending time on – in which case they will be, almost by definition, confined within the institutional worldview. Going beyond the received wisdom requires courage and self-confidence because it will, at the very least lead to accusations that you are unrealistic and lack a sense of judgement; in other words, you will lose credibility among your peers. If your venture is construed as criticizing the ‘powers that be’ within your institution, you will arouse hostility and this will become acute, and, as the gospel story will always remind us, if you are perceived to be threatening to overturn the ‘powers that be’, the hostility will be deadly, and in short order.

An interesting example of the operation of ‘beyond the received wisdom’ is to be found in the natural sciences. It can be said, and will probably not be contradicted, that the natural sciences offer the most outstanding example that we have of producing knowledge and applying it to the greater benefit of humankind as a whole. Scientific knowledge, as Lesslie Newbiggin so clearly explains in Chapter 4 of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (our Paper 9 in Part 2), rests on a tradition, the tradition of the knowledge already acquired and approved within the scientific community. Now within that community, contrary to my generalizations above, going beyond the received wisdom so far from being viewed with disapproval of various degrees, is actually the generating hub of the scientific enterprise. It is the job of research scientists to push beyond what is already known and to uncover what was previously unknown. These scientists are thus the heroes of enterprise, and sometimes of the world beyond. But all the attempts of research scientists to go beyond what the tradition already knows is subject to peer review – they will be subject to systematic scrutiny and criticism by those who are expert as they are. As Newbiggin points out,

more often than not, such proposals are rejected as unsound or just plainly wrong. Sometimes however, and this is the most interesting part, proposals which are at first rejected by the guild of fellow scientists, turn out to be winners. But the whole point about the natural sciences, and indeed about the scientific method as a whole, is that it actually relies on successfully reaching out beyond the received wisdom. More usually, in institutions, professional fraternities and other organizations, I venture to propose, going beyond the received wisdom is regarded as rocking the boat, or at the very least, wasting time; it is not generally approved of. But perhaps this is where the scientific community is right and the rest are wrong. Certainly, to go back to the matters in hand here, if churches were a little less resistant to going beyond the received wisdom and could even view it as something to be encouraged, then perhaps they would be more lively and interesting places and would be able to travel down the path of spiritual development more easily than they do.

## **The academic literature**

But I return now for a moment to the potential of the academic literature for illuminating and enhancing Christian understanding and practice. I suggested just now that once one ventures beyond the received wisdom, in any context, things get more complicated because every new step requires explanation and justification. One moves here into unfamiliar territory and whereas before one could move around without the need for any special guidance, now one cannot move without the help of a map of some sort. The great virtue of a reliable text is that it provides something better than a map in the form of a personal guide. The kind of book I am thinking of will usually be the work of a single individual who has already immersed him or herself in a particular problematic area of study. The writer will be describing his or her own exploration of the problematic territory, but will be holding you, the reader, by the hand and taking you along on the journey. Every step will be described and explained. This is a personalized venture, infinitely superior to any generalized and impersonal set of instructions. For myself, such reading has been quite invaluable – ‘a pearl of great price’, as suggested earlier. It is almost always hard work, but the reward is incalculable. This is the kind of reading that the present website project aims to promote, whether in order to find out more about how the world works – with special attention here to the activities of ‘the powers that be’, or whether it is concerned with illuminating the path towards the Triune God, that is to say, with what is normally bundled together under the general term of ‘theology’.

I need to explain here, I think, why I keep adding the qualification ‘academic’ when I refer to appropriate reading matter. The hallmark of an academic text is that it comes from someone working within one of the established disciplines. All these disciplines, as with the natural sciences discussed above, involve a body of knowledge accrued over time and consisting of proposals which have been examined critically by fellow members of the academy and found to be consistent with that body of knowledge though, presumably, adding some new insight, thus taking the knowledge base of the discipline beyond where it was before.

But ‘Whoa! – Hold on a minute! I say to myself. There’s a body of sociological literature about ‘the new spirituality’, the emergence of a significant number of

people who see themselves as 'spiritual but not religious', beginning with Grace Davie's *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (1994). The manifestations of 'spirituality' in this group are many and various but there is a common theme of objection to and dislike of 'religious dogma' and institutional hierarchies such as those of the established churches. A BBC survey in 2000 reported that 76% of the UK population admitted to having had 'a spiritual experience', whilst only 7% remained committed to regular church attendance.

There's a fundamental change going on here and, clearly, the church would be very unwise to ignore it. Equally clearly from the volume of sociological commentary, if the churches are to get into dialogue of any shape or form with the new spiritual seekers, it must address the question of its fixed positions and authoritarian procedures. Assuming this is the shape of things at the moment, what I have just written about the academic literature is thus travelling fast down the wrong road.

This headline description of the new circumstances obviously does no more than point to them; to reach a position of being able to understand and appraise what is going on, it is necessary to know in some detail what the new spirituality involves and also how the church might adjust itself to come alongside the new movement in dialogue. I provide an insight into this situation in Papers 3 and 4, based on the first two chapters of David Tacey's *The Spirituality Revolution* (2004), and will not repeat myself in the main website text here. It is sufficient to say here that the position described by Tacey in his first two chapters is that of apparent incompatibility between what might be described as the autonomy of the free spirit where the individual decides for him or herself the direction of the spiritual search, versus the ultimate insistence of the church on the non-negotiability of its allegiance to the triune God and to the recognition of the facts of the Incarnation, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ. In a masterly later chapter Tacey explores the outworking of both positions to reveal considerable room for manoeuvre.

### **Papers 3 and 4, based on Tacey's *The Spirituality Revolution* follow.**

In the light of Tacey's work, I stick by my reliance on academic texts as a reliable source of enlightenment concerning Christian belief and the interpretation of Scripture, but I see the need for a root and branch elimination of all authoritarian approaches to these matters, whether in dealing with believers or seekers. Dialogue with seekers must be pursued courteously, along the lines indicated by Pete Ward in *Liquid Church*. This involves listening to and accepting the various positions taken by individual seekers, but inviting them to become involved in Christian practice and to consider Christian teaching relevant to their own experience. Seekers thus retain their 'autonomy', with freedom to pursue or not to pursue a Christian pathway – that is, of course, until such time as they are ready to accept the challenge of submitting to the Christian Lord in loving obedience.

One last point; in using the term 'academic literature'. I don't mean necessarily books written by academics, but books which are rooted in the interpretative traditions of the different churches. This flexibility brings within the definition of acceptability offerings from lay-people, conveniently including myself! 'But who do I think I am, barging in on the highly specialised preserve of the professional theologians?', someone is bound to ask. The questioner, I will have to point out, is

making the same dodgy assumption that I referred to earlier when talking about a perceived general hostility to literature which appeared to carry the stamp of 'authority'. Theologians today do not claim to be authoritative; they are not 'telling people what to think'. They are, in fact, engaged in an exploratory enterprise which is perpetually on the move. The process is that which I have already discussed in connection with the natural sciences and with Newbigin's key chapter on tradition. So I am not pretending to an authority which I do not have; I am simply joining in an exploratory enterprise. The questioner may nevertheless persist: 'it is still a highly specialised preserve and you are no specialist. You are not qualified to take part in the enterprise'. And my answer would be: 'what I have written is subject to the peer review which is integral to the process of building and improving the tradition of any academic discipline. My contribution may be accepted or it may be rejected; most likely it will be accepted in part but subject to critical modification'. There is no reason an amateur should not contribute to the explorations of theology provided he or she is prepared to risk being shot out of the water when the critical peer review is applied. Amateur participation is a sign of a healthy process; theology is not written on the basis of being handed down to the uninformed to be accepted without question; that is precisely the misconception of those who bridle at the idea of authoritarianism where academic literature is concerned. Theology, as written, is always open to discussion.

## **Our church – a sketch**

Before summing up, there is one further matter to be dealt with. Readers of the *Beyond the Received Wisdom* might be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that I am wholly preoccupied with the concerns of the mind in pursuing a Christian path. This is not the case. I have been considering the intellectual dimension of Christian life because, incredibly, it is necessary to make the case for its inclusion in 'the way we look at things'; incredible because it is necessarily integral to every human operation which could be considered in any degree to be rational; there are desirable things which may go beyond rationality, such as poetry or, indeed, theology, but the category of the wholly irrational, is not attractive. The operations of the mind, often in the form of what I call critical appraisal, are a necessary component in the Christian enterprise but they are certainly not sufficient.

What, then, constitutes a sufficiency? That is a very big question which I will duck by offering instead a personal description of what our parish congregation assembled on a Sunday morning seems to stand for. It is our implied collective answer to the general question 'what is *church* for?'

We are a diverse group both in terms of age, race and background. The social ethos is lively and welcoming; we frequently see new faces. The contribution of the children is a key feature; as well as joining groups operating simultaneously to the main Sunday event, the children also sometimes play a ritual part in the actual service and each week talk about what they have been doing and display their handwork at the end of the service. Unsurprisingly, young families constitute a major element of the congregation. The existence of an 'outstanding' church primary school on the site which is closely related to the church in more than a purely

administrative dimension, has a lot to do with the vigorous child-centred element of our proceedings.

The long-time core of our congregation contains a significant number of what I call refugees from evangelicalism, that is, people of evangelical upbringing who have fled from the authoritarian and coercive aspect of their background. Indeed, anti-authoritarianism, in my view, is the key element in our collective Christian make-up. We are a diverse group, as I said at the outset, but there is a dominant theme to our way of going about things; no questions are asked about individual beliefs or conduct; all are welcome. There is a strong social sense within the group; people look after each other, there are social events like monthly lunches. Various good causes are pursued; we are an eco-church, we do Christian Aid Week, and some of us, including myself, make appeals for campaigning charities; there are invitations to take part in sponsored events and so on.

But, of course, in answer to the question 'what are we here for?' we would take it for granted that the focal point of our practice is attending the Sunday morning service; we are here to worship. The service itself is the Eucharist; officiating clergy are robed but there is no anglo-catholic ritual 'nonsense'. Sermons are an important element. Besides the Vicar there are several unofficial assistant clergy and a number of licenced lay ministers; all preach from time to time.

Our Vicar who joined us about eight years ago is not an evangelical. At a meeting which I attended in his early days, he suggested that we lacked focus. To cut a long story short, I think that could be taken to mean fairly specifically, focus on and about worship. What exactly *is* worship? And why 'worship'? Why not, for example sacrifice – sacrifice of time, money or effort? And what does each of us imagine the God that we worship to be like? How should we approach and try to relate to God? And so on. But in accordance with our ethos, such matters do not get aired, even in sermons, that is, until the new Vicar arrived; they are part of the dangerous ground where people will disagree and fail to get on with each other; it is our received wisdom to keep off this territory. The Vicar, for his part, is a lively theologian in the tradition of Karl Barth. He has spent his ministry with us trying to communicate about worship, but he doesn't do it by explaining; he has read his Derrida as well as the contemporary theologians who know that words will not provide meaning unless the way they are being used is common between the speaker and the listener. In so far as 'worship' in our community means simply 'what you do in a service', Vincent, the Vicar, cannot convey what *he* means by worship in any such tangible terms. Of course, dialogue between Vicar and congregation is not limited to this one, central topic, but I don't think I am distorting the situation to say that the key work of his ministry is to find ways of communicating about the intangibles, what Tillich (but not Vincent) calls 'matters of ultimate concern'. It is a difficult process which leaves his congregation, or most of it, doing its best to come alongside 'what the Vicar is on about'.

Readers will have spotted the resonance between the autonomy of the free spirit, noted just now amongst the body of those today who think of themselves as 'spiritual but not religious', and the anti-authoritarian character of the congregation in my present church. I might add that the position of our people is unlikely to be an idiosyncrasy of ours; individualism is in the air of the postmodern UK, and

elsewhere. Where does this leave the undeniably non-negotiable bits of Christian belief? As David Tacey indicates, the position is by no means as black and white as my headline and rather superficial account suggests. Vincent pointed the way when he proclaimed 'there is only one objective reality; Jesus Christ. All else is in a state of flux'. Well, that will certainly not put an end to the discussion, neither is it intended to. There is much to be explored and reflected on here.

## **The transformation of the Part I Papers**

It is time to sum up. The core of this website is the thirty or so papers of Part I (*The Powers at Work*). These started off as an extra source of information for my 'advocates' in the Reading Churches Campaigning Network, set up by me to encourage church people to take part in the campaigns of various charities to oppose economic oppression and injustice in the world at large, but largely in what were then called the developing countries. The charities always provided a short briefing with their cards but these briefings could never do more than explain the immediate crisis the cards were addressing. What was missing, and what was needed, I reckoned, was an awareness of the flow and development of events from which the crises being addressed emerged. My papers, I hoped, would address this need by providing a dynamic, as it were, of the situation as a whole and that they would thus invigorate the campaigning work.

Part 2 of the website (*Christians in the World*) consists of accounts by four prominent theologians to persuade their readers that it is integral to the vocation of the church that Christians should involve themselves in this kind of work; in N T Wright's case, through paying attention to the ministry of Jesus himself; in Walter Wink's case, through interpretation of the abundant New Testament references to the 'Principalities and Powers'; in the case of Stanley Hauerwas, by looking at the situation of the protestant churches in the wake of the demise of 'Christendom', and the opportunities that present themselves with the severance of the old link forged between church and state in the interests of power and control. Newbigin's penetrating critique points to a church which is content to sit imprisoned inside the walls of secular humanism. I will refer to this again later. So, the Papers of Part I now take on a new and more general significance; the four theologians are saying, in effect, 'go on, you Christians, get into the world; find out what is going on; get engaged!' The Part I papers point to what 'getting engaged' means.

In Part 3, I present the idea of 'beyond the received wisdom'. Every institution, I argue, from primary schools and individual churches, at one end, to the transnational corporations at the other, operates on a daily basis by means of its 'received wisdom', a set of unspoken rules and procedures to which everyone conforms, thus ensuring smooth and efficient conduct of business throughout the day. Undue reliance on this procedure, however, leads to trouble. Things go wrong, outside events obtrude, routines become too entrenched. It is necessary for the vigour of

any institution, that it has the capacity to look beyond its received wisdom. My target here is the individual or parish church where, in my experience, just keeping the show on the road can easily seem to be all that is required.

Then, putting these ideas to work, I applied them to the situation, as I saw it, in my present church a few years ago, when I first joined it. Here I found a general opposition towards anything which could be described as 'intellectual' or 'academic'. This was understandable but, in my view, severely detrimental to the Christian flourishing of our church. If the situation I found was merely an idiosyncrasy of our particular organisation, then further comment would not be helpful; things could be remedied within the church itself. But I enlarge on this situation because I do not for a moment think that our particular church is especially deficient in this respect. I am proceeding now on the assumption that the malaise I describe is widespread, at least among protestant liberal churches in our part of the UK, if not more widely.

I have taken the example of the Wright Papers (in Part 2) to point up what any church which chooses not to consider Wright's exposition is missing; a radical reappraisal of 'what Jesus was really like' in the light of recent scholarship about the culture and worldview of first century Palestine. Surely this is something that congregations, by whatever means, could profitably become aware of. Looked at my way, in an institution which says 'we don't want anything academic or intellectual here', this is a case of the need to be able to explore *beyond* the received wisdom of the institution. I then looked at another work, Pete Ward's *Liquid Church*, which explores ways in which 'church' might reach out to make contact with those who have never had any contact with it. Ward's particular experience has been in working with the young, but he is mindful of the general situation that there are large numbers of people 'out there' who are searching for some sort of spiritual life. Conventional church, which Ward calls 'solid church' is not able to meet their needs. He looks towards a different conception of 'church', more compatible with the 'liquid modernity' which Zigmunt Bauman portrays as the prevailing ethos of our time; Accordingly, Ward's vision is one of 'liquid church'. I suggest again, that this is an idea, a vision, which the church cannot afford to ignore; a received wisdom which says 'no thanks', needs to be superceded.

Consider now the significance of the collection of papers constituting Part I of the project as the enterprise progresses. The papers began life simply as an aid to churches which were involved in campaigning for a more just world, particularly in the poorer regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. Filtered through the screen of my four chosen theologians, they take on a wider significance as an answer to the call engage the powers! Many church people will say 'but we already do that'. My response is pinpointed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu's one-liner – 'The Church is very good at fishing the bodies out of the river, but it doesn't consider how they got there in the first place'; clearing up the mess after the powers have passed by is admirable work which needs to be done, but it is not really engaging the powers; engaging means questioning and challenging, questioning and challenging in the name of Jesus Christ. This is a crucial qualification because there is a danger that an enthusiastically activist church may lose sight of its central vocation and come to believe that getting involved in the painful and damaging problems of the world is sufficient in itself: 'we are doing it because humanity cries out', the activists may say, but this is no more than the enlightened humanist would sign up for. It is no better

simply to stick a banner saying 'in the name of Jesus' in front of our activities. No. It must be in the name of Jesus in reality. But what does that mean? I return to this in the epilogue to the project.

It is the central 'message' of this project that the church should be wholeheartedly involved in engaging the powers, and there are signs, identified in the script here, that round here where I am, at any rate, this is not at present the case. Pete Ward in *Liquid Church* refers scathingly to 'solid church' seen often as a refuge. Ward is right, yet there is an important sense in which the church is indeed a refuge – for refugees in general sense; those to whom Jesus calls when he says 'Come unto me all you that are heavy laden and I will refresh you'. Church as a general bolt-hole, however, is something different. The prospect of engagement in general needs careful consideration; it is not simply a call to activists to 'do more and try harder'; more of the same. I commend particularly the Wink Papers in Part 2 for wise guidance. Enough here to refer to his dictum: 'The Powers are good; the Powers are fallen; the Powers will be redeemed'. There is much more to it than tilting headlong into activities.

Indeed, what those Part I papers signify is a different kind of involvement; not just more and better campaigning, but stepping back to examine what the powers are made of; it is not just money for themselves, though that is certainly a significant component; they have a virulent ideology which people need to get the measure of, and it has ambitions of power and control going well beyond present manifestations. If these features were more widely understood than they are, I maintain, challenging the powers would be more vigorous and better directed in its objectives.

I make two claims here. The first is that the information needed to acquire an adequate understanding of 'what is really going on' cannot be found in the press or on the internet. Neither of these media is capable of providing the full context of visible, day-to-day events; their background and history and the dynamic that drives them, as well as the scope of the data of what they are doing now, what they have done in the past and what they are planning for the future. It requires the elbow-room of a book to do all this. And it is through books that the present project seeks to make contact. Moreover, as suggested earlier, a well-written book doesn't simply pile on more and more information in an impersonal way; its author or authors will be conducting a personal or group investigation in which the reader is led by the hand through the thicket of unfamiliar territory. My second claim comes as a reminder: there is a special feature to the books in this collection; they have been reduced in volume to a fifth or less of their original length, thus making a much less onerous read, which, if I have succeeded, captures the main thrust of the authors' investigation and thinking along with enough of the supporting data to convey the solid evidence on which the authors' views are based. These papers, in a word, offer an unusual opportunity for anyone who is motivated to find out more but who is usually daunted by the amount of labour involved in tackling a two or three hundred page text.

## **The significance of the Part I Papers after the EU referendum**

I have reached this stage of the project in early July 2016, that is to say, in the aftermath of the seismic EU referendum. This, I think, lends a new significance to the papers of Part I. They provide a panoramic view of the track record of the whole neoliberal project from its germination at the end of World War II, to its annexation of government under Reagan and Thatcher, and on to the financial crash of 2008 and the resultant age of austerity which we still live with. Paper 1, *Understanding Predatory Globalization* provides an excellent introduction; incidentally, globalization was the child of the revolution in electronic communications, not of neoliberalism *per se*. Papers 2 and 3 depicts the treatment meted out to the poorer nations once they entered into unequal partnership with the dominating powers whilst Paper 4 identifies the conditions needed for direct foreign investment to benefit the poorer nations, conditions contradicted systematically by the legislation flowing from the WTO. Papers 5, 6 and 7 highlight the depredations of the transnational companies once they achieved a foothold in the developing world facilitated in no small measure by the structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on debtor nations during the 1980s and 90s. Paper 7, *TNCs – controlling the world’s food supply* additionally charts the systematic subversion by the TNCs and their lobbyists of supposedly neutral international bodies entrusted with the equitable distribution and management of the world’s food supply. This topic is taken up again by Susan George in Papers 25, 26 and 27, *Shadow Sovereigns; How Global Corporations Are Seizing Power*.

Paper 8, based on *Market Whys and Human Wherefores* by David Jenkins, reveals the ideology of neoliberalism and describes how it came to birth with the publication of Von Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* in the 1940s. This is no mere academic tract. Activists who dismiss the theory of neoliberalism as irrelevant to dealing with it make a great mistake. Neoliberalism works on consistent principles and it has ambitions which have not yet been realized. Anyone who ignores these is severely underestimating the depth of the conflict between neoliberalism and any notion of governing countries ‘for the common good’. The Susan George papers, already referred to make this abundantly clear in scary detail. Papers 10 and 11 respectively by Joseph Stiglitz from the US and William Keegan from the UK provide an economists ‘take’ on the room for manoeuvre, even within a restricted economic framework, for arranging matters in ways less punitive towards the less well-off than neoliberals will allow; the issue of growing inequality surfaces here.

Papers 12 – 15 deal with climate change. Michael Northcott in *When an Irresistible Force Meets an Immovable Object* chronicles the scandalous influence of the corporations, compliant Western governments and their army of lobbyists to block any significant progress towards climate change mitigation through from Rio, to Kyoto and on to Copenhagen and beyond. The papers based on Hannah Reid’s *Climate Change and Human Development* describe the harmful effects of global warming already being experienced in poorer parts of the world. Northcott and Reid both underline the massive injustice of allowing the poorer countries to bear the financial brunt of the effects of global warming brought about by the developed countries over the past 200 years or so. Papers 18 and 19 examine the state of play in various South American countries which have produced governments of the left which have dared to challenge the neoliberal hegemony of the US. Are these countries blazing a trail for similar challenges in the West? The data is being attentively studied by those who would like to think so. The Africa Papers, 16/17 and

20/21 demonstrate that the sub-Saharan countries which are today at the bottom of the heap of the world economic pecking order are, contrary to some perceptions, not just helpless victims. Papers 16 and 17, based on research by Tim Kelsall and a team of colleagues take an unorthodox look at the much criticised governance of most sub-Saharan regimes for most of the time. Looked at their way, they see episodes of much more successful governance under certain circumstances than is generally recognised but they are not looking through orthodox neoliberal eyes. In Papers 20 and 21, the authors of *Africa Uprising* look at various revolts and revolutions in the region, efforts to break out of the iron cage of government incapacity and corruption reinforced by the backing of 'the powers' for the incumbent rulers. None has succeeded so far but, say the authors, influential African intellectuals are learning from the failures and are urging continued hope of more successful outcomes in the future.

Finally, I refer to Papers 23 and 24 based on Tim Jackson's *Prosperity Without Growth*. It addresses the problems of dealing effectively with climate change, given the severe economic constraints which operate at present. This is without doubt the most challenging text of the collection. Given the prevailing orthodoxy, says Jackson, prosperity without growth is impossible; according to current economic opinion, prosperity, as usually defined, depends absolutely on the maintenance of economic growth. Jackson agrees. His solution is to offer an alternative vision of what is meant both by prosperity and by growth. This is radical stuff, but, as I see it, progress at the rate the situation demands will not happen until the world leaders begin to look seriously at economic alternatives to neoliberalism. Currently they are in thrall to Mrs Thatcher's mantra 'there is no alternative'. Either effective leaders emerge who are prepared to consider Jackson's radical model, or something like it, or we simply await the inevitable natural catastrophe which forces the reality of nature on to the collective conscious. That is a black and white scenario. Sadly, what is more likely to occur is a series of natural catastrophes but not in our back yard, so that we in the comfortable West can continue as before. If that happens, I suggest, we will see a massive migration from now uninhabitable regions to regions such as ours. The effects of such a development are incalculable and will certainly be tragic.

So, the Part I Papers now carry with them this message: 'Here's an opportunity to find out what is really going on especially with regards to the neoliberal ascendancy'. In the uncharted territory which we in the UK now find ourselves, people are having to look beyond the customary political stereotypes to get a bearing on what option there may now be for a better future. In this situation it may be possible to think the unthinkable; this is an opportunity but only for those who are prepared look at the realities for themselves; people who rely on 'what everyone else is saying' will have to go on doing so, as will those who are always happy to reach a firm opinion without bothering too much about the relevant data. But to acquire an independent, autonomous outlook one must be prepared to become well-informed. This, as I have been arguing requires reading, and that is reading beyond the headlines and beyond the surfaces to which the daily media is limited. This means books! Or, in the present case, responsible reductions of books which cut down the reading time to a fifth or less of the original text.. I commend both the scope of the subject matter of the Part I papers and the specific methodology by which I have made this more readily available. My target is the neoliberal ascendancy; its certainties must be called into question and, if necessary, its practitioners must be challenged through the

democratic process. I was not amongst those who voted for us to leave the EU, but I reckon, paradoxically, that the uncertainties that we now face offer possibilities which a more settled regime – in the neoliberal matrix – would not have offered. There is hope.

It is worth adding that the Part I papers, taken as a whole, also shed a powerful light on the role played by the dominant neoliberal worldview in digging even deeper the gap in living standards between the poorer countries and the rich West. John Madeley's account of the depredations of the transnational corporations and Hannah Reid's papers on the already existing effects of climate change on the poorest countries are particularly relevant in this respect. This, of course, is not just a theoretical objection to radical inequality, but points to a major underlying cause of the deeply problematical migrant crisis. Zygmunt Bauman's recent *Strangers at our Door* (Polity 2016) provides a deeply disturbing analysis of this cosmic development.

In conclusion, I have to add a couple of explanations which I think are called for:

### **Explanation I**

The theology on which I have based my arguments here all comes from the late 1980s. To the contemporary theologian this thinking is woefully out of date. The contributions of Pete Ward and David Tacey indicate thinking which overtakes Newbigin, Hauerwas *et al* in some respects. In fact, of course, both Ward and Tacey in their writings of a decade and more ago are now 'behind the curve'. I am currently exploring more contemporary writing and am discovering the idea of Christians moving beyond the iron cage of a secular 'reigning plausibility structure' as Lesslie Newbigin would have it, or moving from a concept of 'solid church' to that of 'liquid church' as Pete Ward proposes. These concepts are perhaps being overtaken by a vision of the walls between the church and secular society simply dissolving, in such a way that Christians merge with secular society without losing the essentials of their faith; mingling with the outside world, offering it the Christian Way not by dragging people inside the walls of the church but as a Way which has its own doubts, perplexities and uncertainties which sit alongside those of secular spiritual searchers. The title of three books reviews in a recent edition of Church Times, hints at this new prospect. Here they are: *Atheism after Christendom - Unbelief in an age of encounter*; *Faithful Doubt - the wisdom of uncertainty* and *The Soul of Doubt and the religious roots of unbelief from Luther to Marx*.

But this is an explanation rather than an apology. I stand by my selection of theologians partly because this essay which forms Part 3 of the website has an autobiographical flavour. The theologians I have chosen are the ones which have most influenced me in the course of a twenty year long enquiry into Christian thinking; what they say continues to resonate insistently in today's world even though they have been superseded in some respects. But also because I am addressing existing churchgoers and I have indicated that the prevailing ethos at individual church may well not be very well practised in thinking theologically; in which case, it may be more congenial for many people to consider what was being written in the earlier stages of what is now thought of as postmodernity, before they try to get their heads round contemporary developments.

## **Explanation 2**

Readers will be wondering what authority I have for providing a critique which rests on my personal experience in two local churches along with that of running a small local campaigning network for local churches. The answer is, I have none. I have no qualification in the social sciences and I have not been conducting a properly regulated scientific enquiry. All I have done is to communicate my personal perceptions of the experience. I am not offering 'knowledge' as any scientist would understand it, but merely opinion. What I would claim, however, is that by virtue of living inside this church community for several years, I believe I have been able to identify some of the unspoken undercurrents which have become formative as the group's 'received wisdom'. I am also claiming that this kind of insight will not readily come to light through the investigations of social scientists working from outside the community. If readers of this essay recognise the same features in their own church communities, then there is the potential for identifying a problematic characteristic which church leaders might want to attend to.