

society of the sacred mission

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European Province

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SECULAR SOCIETY? BELIEVING, BELONGING AND FAITH

by Martyn Percy

We are most grateful to the Reverend Canon Professor Martyn Percy, Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, for writing this article. It arose from a most interesting Look at a Book event, when he talked about his book: Clergy: The Origin of Species¹.

Secularisation is a deeply debated and highly contested concept. In general, the word is used to describe the relatively recent decline of religion in the Western world. However, even with this very basic understanding, there are some immediate problems. First, religious affiliation in the USA – in theory a liberal, modern state – remains vibrant. Second, Europe seems to be the exception rather than the rule when it comes to a general decline in religious interests. Third, it is far from clear that religious interests necessarily decline in direct proportion to the rise of industrialisation, modernity, globalisation and the



*The Revd Canon Professor Martyn Percy
(From www.rcc.ac.uk, the website of Ripon College.)
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like. At the height of the Industrial Revolution in Victorian Britain, church attendance stood at record levels. In post-war Britain, new denominations and new religious movements have flourished.

Defining the term. Although the term 'secularisation' has lapsed into popular usage, the proper definition lies in a cluster of prior sociological understandings. Technically speaking, Bryan Wilson argues that secularisation relates to the diminution in the social significance of religion. In other words, its application covers such things as: the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies; the shift from religious to secular control of various of the erstwhile activities and functions of religion; and the general decline in the proportion of their time, energy and resources which people devote to religious concerns; the decay of religious institutions; the supplanting, in matters of behaviour, of religious precepts by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria, and so forth (Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 1982).

Similarly, Larry Shiner argues that there are six characteristics that identify the process of secularisation. First, the *decline of religion*: 'previously accepted symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and influence. The culmination of secularisation would be a religionless society ...'. Second, *conformity with 'this*

The aims of the Society are:

- to help others to give their lives to God's service
- to share in the mission of the Church
- to study and meditate upon the meaning of the Christian Gospel

world: 'the religious group or the religiously informed society turns its attention from the supernatural ... the culmination of secularisation would be a society totally absorbed with the pragmatic tasks of the present and a religious group indistinguishable from the rest of society ...'. Third, the *disengagement of society from religion*: 'society separates itself from the religious understanding which has previously informed it, in order to constitute itself as an autonomous reality and consequently to limit religion to the sphere of private life'. Fourth, the *transposition of religious beliefs and institutions*: 'knowledge, patterns of behaviour and institutional arrangements which were once understood as grounded in divine power are transformed into phenomena of purely human creation and responsibility ...'. Fifth, the *desacralization of the world*: 'the world is gradually deprived of its sacred character as man and nature become the object of rational-causal explanation and manipulation. The culmination of secularisation would be a completely 'rational' world society, in which the phenomenon of the supernatural or even of 'mystery' would play no part ...'. Sixth, and finally, a *movement from a 'sacred' to a 'secular' society*: 'this is a general concept of social change, emphasizing multiple variables through several stages ... the culmination of secularisation would be a society in which all decisions are based on rational and utilitarian considerations and there is complete acceptance of change' (Shiner, 1967, pp 207-20).

Comment. Several objections can be raised against the secularisation thesis. First, apparent religious decline (in terms of formal attendance at a place of worship or belonging to a religious organisation) must be measured against other voluntary organisations or associations. Granted, less people belong, formally, to a Christian denomination when compared to the inter-war or Victorian periods. But most forms of association have declined steeply since those days. There are fewer Scouts and Guides, Trade Union membership has waned, and there are now less members of the Conservative Party than there are Methodists. Recreationally, there are fewer people in our cinemas and football grounds than seventy years ago – yet no-one can say these activities are in decline. Indeed, it is a sobering thought that in an apparently secular Britain, there are still more people in church each weekend than watching a game of football.

Second, there is reason to doubt the idea that fewer and fewer people are turning to official or mainstream religion. For example, the Victorian period saw a revival of religion and religious attendance that lasted for about forty years. Yet the beginning of the 18th and 19th centuries was the very opposite of this: church attendance was, on the whole, derisory. The evidence for church attendance during medieval times is contestable, with some scholars asserting that religious observance was strong and others arguing that it was at best patchy.

Third, this haphazard, semi-secular, quiet (but occasionally rowdy and irreverent) English Christianity continues well into successive centuries. James Woodforde's *Diary of a Country Parson* provides an invaluable window into the life of the clergy and the state of English Christianity in the 18th century. Again, a close reading of the text suggests that whatever secularisation is, it is not obviously a product of the Industrial Revolution. Woodforde clearly thinks it is reasonably good to have 'two rails' (or thirty communicants) at

Christmas or Easter, from 360 parishioners. Such figures would be low by today's standards in some rural communities. Woodforde tells us that the only time his church is ever full is when a member of the royal family is ill, or when there is a war on. Generally, the context of his ministry is one where he baptizes, marries and buries the people of his parish, but the week-by-week Sunday attendance is not something that would get many ministers of his age into a frenzy of excitement.

Fourth, statistical surveys continually support the thesis that Europe is a place where the vast majority of the population continues to affirm their belief in God, but then proceed to do little about it. So church attendance figures tend to remain stubbornly low. Yet this is not a modern malaise, but is rather a typical feature of western societies down the ages. Granted, there have been periods of revival when church attendance has peaked. But the basic and innate disposition is one of believing without belonging; of relating to the church, and valuing its presence and beliefs, yet without necessarily sharing them. Or, as the classic aphorism puts it, 'I cannot consider myself to be a pillar of the church, for I never go. But I am a buttress – insofar as I support it from the outside'.

Contemporary Perspectives. Scholars are divided on how to interpret contemporary society and its apparent secularity. Sociologists such as Peter Berger have effectively repented from their predictions of the 1960s and now argue that Western society, with all its capitalism and consumerism, remains religious. Historians can now show that increased church attendance may be a response to social unease and dislocation. The Industrial Revolution and the re-settlement of post-war Britain both saw a rise in church attendance that may be viewed as a reaction to social upheaval.

Other scholars such as Callum Brown have argued that secularisation is neither a product of the industrial revolution nor of enlightenment thinking, but is in actual fact a rather more recent phenomenon. In *The Death of Christian Britain* (2000), Brown argues that the cultural revolution of the 1960s has broken the cycle of intergenerational renewal that was so essential to Christianity's survival. The rise of popular culture has done more than any other thing to marginalize Christianity (and religious observance in general) and provide people with other arenas for absorption and entertainment.

Similarly, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) shows that the rise of popular culture in the USA has had a deleterious effect upon many different types of association and voluntary societies. Putnam's thesis demonstrates that 'negative social capital' has built up to such an extent that religious affiliation may ultimately be affected. In a country where church-going is a normal activity – as many as 50% of the population attend on a regular basis – Putnam's thesis may point to some interesting future trends.

That said, Danielle Hervieu-Leger's (2000) work suggests that religious memory still persists in societies that are apparently acquiring religious amnesia. Although the cycle of inter-generational renewal may be distorted by the invasiveness of popular culture, her work suggests that religion only mutates under such conditions. It may be pushed from the public sphere to the private realm, but it still appears to be able to shape society at critical

points. Far from turning its back on religion, modern societies seem to be perpetually absorbed by it – something argued more than a quarter of a century ago by David Martin (1978).

But, lest this sound too complacent, it is important to remember that there is *something* in secularisation. True, whatever that process is supposed to describe, it can probably never do justice to the intrinsically inchoate nature of religious belief that characterised the Western European landscape and its peoples long before the Enlightenment, let alone the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century and the cultural revolutions of the 20th century. ‘Standard’ secularisation theories are weak and unconvincing because they tend to depend on exaggerating the extent and depth of Christendom. They assume a previous world of monochrome religious allegiance, which is now (of course) in tatters. But in truth, the religious world was much more plural and contested before the 20th century ever dawned.

So what, exactly, has changed? Despite an understandable reticence to accede too much ground to proponents of secularisation theses, it can still be readily acknowledged that the 20th century has been the most seminal and challenging period for the churches in all of time. Leaving aside its own struggles with pluralism, post-colonialism, modernity, postmodernity and wave after wave of cultural change and challenge, the biggest issue the churches have had to face up to is, ironically, a simple one: choice. Increased mobility, globalisation and consumerism have infected and affected the churches, just as they have touched every other aspect of social life. Duty is dead: the customer is king. It is no surprise, therefore, to discover churches adopting a consumerist mentality, and competing with one another for souls, members, or entering the marketplace itself, and trying to convert tired consumers into revitalised Christians.

Thus, fewer regular or frequent churchgoers now attend church twice on a Sunday, which was once normal practice. For most, once is enough. Many who do attend on a regular basis now attend less frequently. Even allowing for holidays and other absences (say through illness), even the most dedicated churchgoer may only be present in church for 70% of the Sundays in any given year. Many clergy now remark on the decline in attendance at Days of Obligation (i.e. major saints’ days, or feast days such as the Ascension). The committed, it seems, are also the busy. The response to this from amongst the more liturgical churches has been to subtly and quietly adapt their practice, whilst preserving the core tradition. For example, the celebration of Epiphany may now take place on the Sunday nearest to January 6th and not on the day itself. A number of Roman Catholic churches now offer Sunday Mass on Saturday evenings, in order for Sunday to be left as a family day, or for whatever other commitments or consumerist choices that might now fall on the once hallowed day of rest.

Added to this, we also note the rising number of ‘new’ spiritualities, their range and volume having increased exponentially in the post-war era. Again, choice (rather than upbringing, location, etc.) is now a major factor in determining the spiritual allegiances that individuals may develop. Moreover, it is not easy to discern where the boundaries now lie between leisure, exercise and spirituality. As the consumerist-individual asserts their autonomy and right-to-choose, clear divisions between

religion and spirituality, sacred and secular, and church and society are more problematic to define. Thus, consumerism and choice simultaneously threaten but also nourish religion and spirituality. Spiritual self-help books and other products, various kinds of yoga and meditative therapies, plus an ample range of courses and vacations, all suggest that religious affections and allegiances are being transformed in contemporary society rather than being eroded. ‘Secular’ society seems to be powerless in the face of a curiously stubborn (and growing) social appetite for inchoate religion and nascent spirituality, in all its various forms.

Conclusion. Whilst it is true that any in Western Europe are turning from being religious assumers to religious consumers and are moving from a culture of religious assumption to religious consumption, in which choice and competition in the spiritual marketplace thrive, there may be little cause for alarm. Three reasons come to mind.

First, even in the most modern societies, there is still demand for religion that is public, performative and pastoral. Furthermore, there are thousands and thousands of private spiritualities and beliefs that flourish in modernity, demonstrating that faith does not wither and die in our culture. Many churches have seen a rise in numbers since the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. Religion mutates and continues to live on.

Second, religion is remarkably resilient in the modern age. Much of our ‘vernacular religion’ – such as the celebration of Christmas – reveals a nation that still enjoys its carols, nativity plays and other Christian artefacts that long ago moved beyond the control of the church to become part of the cultural furniture. Religion is still in demand, and where it is absent, it is more often than not created, or the gap filled with new forms of spirituality. In the absence of religion, people tend to believe anything rather than nothing, and the task of the church must be to continue to engage empathetically with culture and society, offering shape, colour and articulation to the voices of innate and implicit religion.

Third, the churches can respond to the challenge of an apparently faithless age with a confidence founded on society (yes, society), which refuses to leave religion alone. Often, the best that churches can do is to recover their poise within their social and cultural situations and continue to offer a ministry and a faith to a public that wishes to relate to religion, without necessarily belonging to it. With rare exceptions in history, this is what all clergy have had to work with most of the time: it is both an opportunity and a challenge.

In short, the statistics for church attendance, if read crudely, retell one of the great lies of the modern age, namely that secularisation is ‘real’. It is, rather, a sociological and interpretative construct that is placed upon select data. Secularisation theories tend not to take ‘implicit’ or ‘folk’ religion that seriously; and neither do the theorists pay much attention to the rising interest in spirituality. Equally, the appeal of fundamentalism and new religious movements in the west, to say nothing of the explosive growth of Christianity and Islam in the developing world, are also dismissed.

Ultimately, crude readings of church attendance or membership figures say very little about the faith of a nation; believing and belonging should not be confused. In contemporary Western society, very few people choose

not to relate at all to the church, or to mainstream religion. In any secular age, there is space and demand for religion, faith and spirituality. This is important, for it reminds us that religion provides enchantment within modernity, and that churches are often the only bodies

that provide public and open places within a community for tears, grief, remembrance, laughter and celebration.

¹*Clergy: The Origin of Species* by Martyn Percy, pub. Continuum, 2006.

SUDDENLY I FOUND MYSELF BACK IN AUSTRALIA

by Colin Griffiths, SSM

Life was great. I was enjoying my work as an interfaith worker at the Well and doing other things in spiritual direction, as well as a bit of preaching. I had also just been elected Provincial of the European Province of SSM, which came as quite a surprise to me, but I was looking forward to the opportunities which the election facilitated.

Then, suddenly, my residence permit in the UK was not renewed. This was, in part, my own fault. I had not filled the forms in correctly. However, in addition SSM needed to be registered as a sponsoring body with the UK Border Agency. So we began the process immediately, but this was to take longer than expected.

I arrived back in Australia towards the end of May last year. At that stage, I was caught up in a number of conflicting emotions. I was glad to be back in Australia and to have the opportunity to have an extended time with family and friends, but I was also shocked to leave the UK so suddenly, because I felt that I had not finished what I wanted to achieve.

At first I had a week with my sisters, Barbara and Jenny, in Sydney. I was still in a state of shock and cried myself to sleep at night. I quickly realised, however, that this was a waste of emotion: this was what I was faced with and the optimum way to respond was to show faith and deal with the situation in the best way possible. I found this to be quite a transforming moment. Quite a number of people said that I had been brought back for a purpose, so I started to think that perhaps God could be in all this. Rather than dwelling in self-pity, I could redeem the situation and think what I could be doing in my new, unexpected situation.

After the week in Sydney, I moved on to Canberra to stay with my sister, Robin, in South Tuggeranong, and with my niece, Belinda, and her very energetic family. Another nice coincidence was that I visited the local parish of St Mary's in the Valley, which SSM had started in 1983. Although I had not worked there, I knew some of the people of the parish. At one of the services, during the peace, someone came up and said "I was one of your parishioners in Alice Springs when you were Rector there some years ago". So immediately I felt at home and welcomed by this loving community.

The following day, I took my niece, Belinda, out for lunch. She had had a difficult time of it recently. Her

eldest son was battling Groins Disease, which was taking a lot of attention, as well as being quite draining. I encouraged her to have faith in her own abilities and not to lose heart. When she got home that night, she saw an advertisement in the school newsletter looking for people to help in the school canteen. She applied and had the job within a few days. She had not had a paid job for quite a few years.

In mid-July, I went over to Cootamundra to stay with my sister, Carmel, and her husband, Colin. By this time, I had decided to keep up my regular pattern of the daily offices, as well as my reading. I set up her coffee table as a makeshift altar, along with a little votive candle. When I had been in Canberra, I had joined St Mark's Library and had borrowed a large tome by Hans Küng on the development of Islam. This book answered a lot of questions which had occurred to me in my encounter with Islam. Küng's thesis was that Islam had developed from an ancient form of Jewish-Christian practise, which had



Fr Colin (left) in Lesotho, with Br Barry, SSM and Br Clark, Minister General, SSF.

still survived in the Arabian peninsular. I was glad that I had the time to devote to this large and complex book.

By this time, it was obvious that I was not going back to the UK anytime soon, so I made arrangements to attend the Provincial Chapter of the Southern Province, to be held in Melbourne, and then I went on to Adelaide for a week or so. It was good to catch up with all the members and to hear what was happening in their Province. The only sad part was that my friends Philip and Joy Freier were, in fact, in England expecting to visit me in Willen.

By the end of July, I was getting frustrated about how long the process was taking, so Fr Jonathan, the acting Provincial, suggested that I go to Lesotho, to Maseru, and help out with the work of the priory there. I was booked and on a plane to South Africa within hours of his suggestion. The great thing about being in Lesotho was

that it took my mind off what I was not doing, and I quickly became immersed in the life and work of the brothers there. I helped one of the members with his reading. I took a number of services and went out to Masite and helped the S.P.B. sisters, who have a contemplative convent in the hills of Lesotho. I was also able to join the brothers for their retreat and chapter, which was led by Br Clark, the minister general of the Franciscans.

Finally my papers came through, and I returned to Willen towards the end of October. Once safely back in England, I tended to see the experience in a more positive light, as a wonderful time with family and friends.

I once again have a 3-years entry visa, which I trust will be renewed in three years time – God willing, that is!

ICON OF JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

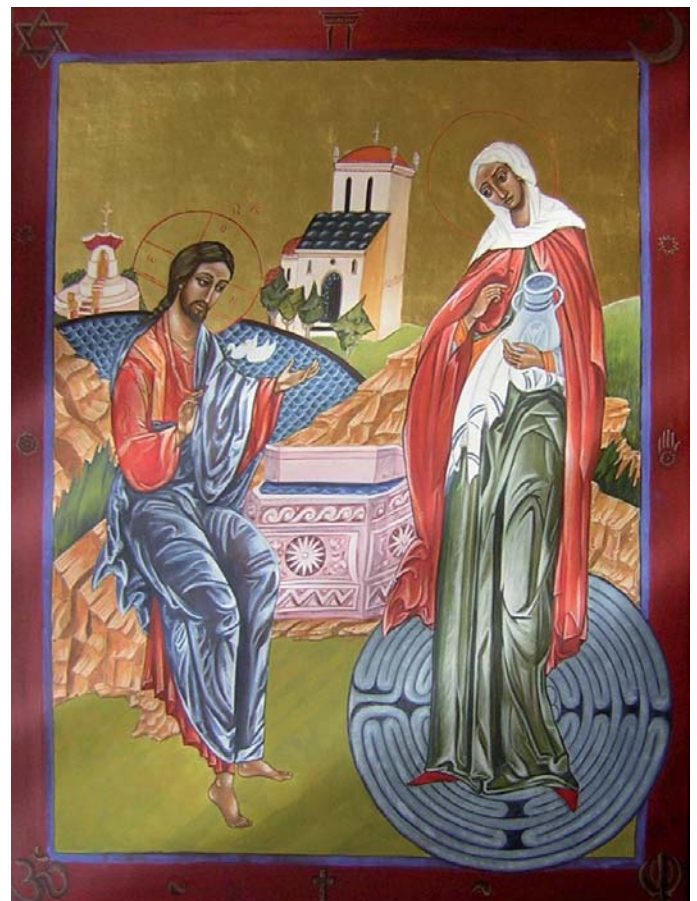
by Constantina Wood

Constantina Wood, artist and iconographer, who regularly leads quiet days and retreats, has produced a beautiful new icon to grace the entrance hall at the Well. She has written the following piece to explain the depth of her thinking.

The very beautiful and intimate icon of Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman, reminds us of his ability to talk to anyone, no matter what the prevailing beliefs and prejudices of the day.

The two figures are poised in the foreground, almost as if what is behind them does not exist. Jesus reaches out his left hand towards the Samaritan woman, and his hand is aligned with the highlight on her robe that is like a zig-zag – a very powerful symbol of light and energy often seen in robes in icons, especially of angels. It is as if his hand is sending his power to her as she points to the vessel she has brought to fill. Instead of ordinary water, she wishes to have the water of life he speaks to her about, the water that lasts forever. She cradles the urn in her left arm, ready to receive this great gift. The Samaritan woman is long and willowy, fluid, like water herself. There is a graciousness about her, despite her past and the many husbands, of whose existence Jesus is aware. None of this matters. It is the current discourse between herself and Jesus that is important. Indeed, gazing at the icon, it is as if this were happening in the present moment; a continuous opportunity to receive from this divine well that he is offering us.

Her undergarment is the colour green, representing serenity and the earth: the plants, the flowers, the trees, that which gives us oxygen and earthly life. She has a waistband and cuffs of vibrant orange, signifying the Holy Spirit, that which vivifies us and gives us eternal life. She wears an over garment of red, like Our Saviour's



Icon of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the well.

robe. This signifies her acceptance of Christ's love and salvation, as he bestows it upon her. Finally, she wears a scarf of pure white as a covering for her head. This is a symbol of her ultimate success at overcoming the passions, in order to live a life in Christ. The towel carries two blue bands and is a representation of the Jewish faith. She stands at ease atop the labyrinth, a symbol of the mind of man and the path of contemplation. Although at ease, she is poised to receive more from Our King. Overall, she is a dynamic yet peaceful receptacle for the Holy Spirit.

Christ sits lightly atop the rocks. The two groupings of rocks are representations of Mount Sinai and Mount Tabor, where the Law and the Transfiguration are received respectively. Christ's feet enlighten the grass and his manner is open, yet vital. His right hand is set in the sign of peace, and his left hand is open and stretched towards the woman. His red undergarment is the symbol that he has come from Heaven, and the orange sash is his authority as given through the Holy Spirit. The blue outer garment is symbolic of his willingness to become human and be born on earth, yet it is like flowing water and light. The two bend their heads towards each other in their willingness to listen and to communicate with one another. Both figures have faces of utter calm and peace, but also of purpose.

The well sits between the two, the symbol of life for all the Old Testament tribes of Israel as they wandered through the land. Most significant mystical happenings were often sited near, or at, a well. Stars, zig-zags and scrolls adorn the well, representing the energy and vibration of all life throughout the cosmos. It contains a glimpse of water, just as our own perception of Truth is but a glimpse of the total reality of existence. The lid is ajar, inviting us to enter.

Behind Jesus is a small lake representing Willen, with a couple of white ducks swimming happily on the water that is choppy, as if blown by a strong breeze. This is another symbol of the coming of the Spirit, that sounded like a loud rush of wind when the disciples received it at Pentecost. On the left, at Christ's shoulder, is the Peace Pagoda guarded by golden lions in this instance. Not only a symbol for Milton Keynes, but also a symbol for the entrance to the Garden of Eden through the attainment of peace for our own souls in our journey on the path to Zion. The church, traditionally set in this position on the

icon, is also based on Willen church, with the little pineapples on the roof, but here there is a vestibule adorned with stars as an indication of the entrance into the greater cosmos when going into the church of our hearts. The four trees in front of the church are symbols for the four evangelists leading us to the entrance.

Drawing a line around the lake and through the well, and then around the labyrinth, will trace the symbol for eternity that underlies the whole icon. The perspective of an icon is often converse. We, the onlookers, are at the vanishing point, the smallest space. The icon draws us in to Heaven, wide and limitless. Figures and angles are drawn in particular ways, not to convey the visible form, but the invisible and unknowable, that which is beyond our current perception.

The sky is gold leaf and the traditional symbol for heaven in an icon. The border is red ochre, and is a holy colour going back through all peoples to the earliest cave dwellers. It is a symbol of the Old Testament, and the foundation for what is to come. There are symbols of a number of faiths around the edge (Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Baha'i, Jainism and Shinto), as the Well at Willen is committed to openness and dialogue between faiths. Indeed, all the wisdom and knowledge we need is contained in all the holy writings, if we could overcome our passions and allow it to enter us. Take heed from the Samaritan woman, who stepped lightly and was, at first, in awe and then most willing to allow the Truth to enter her life.

May all who stand before this icon and gaze at its beauty be filled with the closeness of a relationship with the Divine, the personal and simple surrender to a journey through the cosmos contained within the simple actions of conversing, listening, giving and receiving with openness and willingness.

On behalf of The Well at Willen, Liz Baker writes: we are delighted that Constantina has produced such a lovely, eye-catching icon for us, which visitors are welcome to come and view. The icon will be dedicated by Bishop John Pritchard, our Visitor, when he comes to see us in the autumn. Icons are expensive to produce, so donations to help with the cost of £2,500 would be greatly appreciated. Donations may be made payable to 'The Well at Willen Charitable Trust' and may be gift aided. For the Well's address, see Intercessions leaflet.

TOGETHER IN MEDITATION

by Paul Golightly

This was an idea born out of a desire for an on-going contemplative prayer experience at St Antony's Priory, Durham.

Over the years, a number of evening groups of a Julian style have come and gone. My feeling was that there were a good number of people who would welcome a flexible opportunity to meet in shared silence. So we began a two and a half hour session. This starts at 10.00 a.m., with a break after an hour for refreshments. At that

point, half the people usually leave, and others join us for the second hour, beginning at 11.30 a.m.

The format is a short input, then a lead into silence for twenty minutes. Then there is time to stand up and stretch, followed by a further twenty minutes of sitting. The 'stretch' can be in the form of a body prayer/movement to a prayer mantra, or sung chant lasting just a few moments.

From day one, the response has been very good. The average attendance across the morning is thirty people, and we are 'growing' the number of leaders who are gently holding the reins in the sessions. The teaching element comes from the ancient and modern writers about contemplative practice, rooted within the Christian tradition. It is the most ecumenical thing we do, with take-up from Catholics, to members of new churches and all in between. There are also several who would not call themselves Christian; indeed one or two Buddhists come regularly to share the sacredness of silence. A number of younger people join us, rather than our normal demographic of forty-plus year olds. Some of our regulars travel over 30 miles to join us month by month.

When we meet in silence, there is a unity in prayer beyond words and concepts, and it feels very hopeful for the future. This meeting in meditation is not for very 'advanced' Christians, but is for all those sensing and seeking something of the divine that draws each of us beyond our normally word-based prayer and worship. It is amazing to meet so many people who have some form of contemplative practice.

We have been going for nearly two and a half years on the second Saturday of the month, and it looks as if we might be around for a long way into the future.



The Chapel, St Antony's Priory, an excellent place for meditation.

ASH WEDNESDAY QUIET DAY ADDRESS

by Jonathan Ewer, SSM

'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

A bit over a year ago, Margaret (Moakes), Marcus (Armstrong) and I started a local branch of *Spirited Exchanges*. *Spirited Exchanges* was founded by a New Zealander, Jenny McIntosh, specifically for people who had left their churches but felt the need to continue to explore questions which might come generally under the label of *Spirituality*. We meet every six to eight weeks, usually in the library at the Well, sitting in comfortable chairs, talking together about whatever comes up.

We usually have someone introduce a discussion, and there are ground rules like hearing people out without interruption and certainly without censure. You are encouraged to say whatever you think or feel, but respecting others with divergent opinions. It is not the place of the group to find answers; we simply create a place and a time to give voice to the questions.

Though *Spirited Exchanges* was originally set up for those who have left or who are on the verge of leaving their churches, we found that – at our first meeting, to which a dozen or so people came – half the people there were professional Christians, either ordained clergy or licensed ministers of some sort. That was interesting.

As the meetings have gone on, we have discovered that almost all of us who come to this particular meeting have not left our churches and really have no intention of leaving. But we feel we are on the fringe, and being on the inside of the fringe can be very uncomfortable.

The topic of our last meeting was prayer. Here again, we all said how uncomfortable we were. We knew what we were supposed to do, we knew what folk expected us to do, but some of us just couldn't do it. We couldn't manage it. Some of us have tried umpteen times to compile lists of people and things we feel we should pray for, but we let things slip ... you know how it is ... so we feel loads of guilt because we are not up to the mark, we let the side down.

This is reinforced by what people seem to expect from us. Will you pray for me, or Johnny, or Isobel, or whoever ... expecting us to provide a miracle. It smells of superstition, and it sometimes makes us feel we are putting the Lord to the test. I felt for the Dean of Christchurch, New Zealand, on Radio 4 recently, urging us to pray for the people there. Yes. Of course one wants to identify with the people involved in the tragedy of the

earthquake and other tragedies – but pray for what? It is so difficult.

Nevertheless, we, the people at the *Spirited Exchanges* meeting, were not about to give up. For all of us have had experience of the effectiveness of prayer. We have been involved in healing experiences. Frequently, when we have been praying, and especially in a group, something happens for good. Prayer does work. We are also aware of times when we have rung up, or emailed, or just called in on someone for no reason that we could think of – it seemed we acted on an impulse – to be greeted with an astonished look: ‘How did you know? How did you know I needed to see you?’ And there are those occasions when we say things, again seemingly on impulse, which are more significant for the hearer than we could have known.

But here we are moving away from intercessory prayer to something a little different, and this is where our *Spirited Exchanges* group felt a little more comfortable. It is the discovery that prayer is not always about shopping lists; it is more about listening, listening for that Word which proceeds from the mouth of God. The word may be oral, or it may be an idea or an insight, or it may be a deeper feeling of being at one with those around us, at one with the universe. In such moments, matter and spirit come together and we are aware that God is in control. The Word which created is still creating. Prayer becomes a way of discovering what the Word is doing. Prayer is less about getting God to change his mind; it is more about discovering what he is up to.

We must live as if God is in control, not in a hoping against hope sort of way, as if our faith is a fantasy for those who need that sort of thing. We must live as if God is in control, because he is in control. That is the truth. To ask God to intervene in the running of the universe, especially to make life more comfortable for us and our friends, gets pretty near putting the Lord to the test. Giving people the impression that we know how to do it, that God listens to us, that we can guarantee results, puts the Lord and everything we stand for to the test. It sets us up for failure.

It’s worse than that. People who research these things are now telling us that hostility to the church and to the clergy is much less prevalent than it was. Nowadays, many people do not and have not come into contact with the church at all. It is not part of their experience. Some of them believe they would not be welcome in the church,

because they are not good enough. Some of them have grave doubts about the goodness of those who are churchgoers, so there is the suggestion that we are hypocrites.

Nevertheless, for the most part there seems to be a residual belief in some spiritual force with which it is a good thing to be in tune or in contact. But church is not part of that. The Bishop of Lincoln calls it ‘ABC spirituality’: anything but church.

How is it that we give people the impression that the Church is interested only in stopping people from enjoying what they want to do? Why do people see us as rule bound and very unfree when the opposite is the case, or ought to be the case? I think it is partly because we are listening to the wrong voices.

The great moments of the history of salvation are moments of new adventure and freedom: Abraham and Moses, David and Solomon, the return from Babylon. Inevitably, though, the new adventure has to be organised; the institutionalisation of charisma, it is sometimes called. It happened in the history of the church: you begin with the whoopee of Pentecost, but it can’t last, and you end up with General Synod. It happened with the Franciscan movement: there’s a touch of it in all the experiments in living in community such as ours here at the Well. We begin with the new adventure and liberty of throwing off all the baggage of ordinary society, but we discover that it can’t last unless some structure is put in place.

It’s a delicate balance, this business of having just enough structure to enable the freedom of the adventure. The key to the balance is listening, listening with respect to the Word, the Word which comes from the tradition, the written tradition, the stories. It comes through prayer, and it comes through the voices of those around us – even the voices who don’t seem to be sympathetic. To ignore the voices is to go it alone, and that is to put God to the test. To try to go it alone, or with a group of like-minded people, is to climb the parapet to a lonely, isolated place, tempting God to save you if you fall off.

The temptation about putting God to the test relates to the vow of obedience: listening to ‘every word that comes from the mouth of God’.

We are grateful to Fr Jonathan for allowing us to use this reflection, being the second of a series of three reflections on the temptations of Christ.

REMEMBERING PRECIOUS FRIENDSHIPS FORMED THROUGH SSM

by Michael Johnson

The following tributes to two former Kelham students were written with the kind assistance of David Hunt. Ian Harrison died in 2009, and Jack Hawkins died in 2010.

A spell of ministry in the North East during the 1990s brought me into pastoral contact with Annie Harrison, a life long admirer of SSM, thereby enabling me to rekindle

a friendship with her son, Ian. Known to all associated with Kelham by his immortal nickname ‘Wetherby’, much was done by Ian to promote SSM, not just its Old



Ian Harrison when at Kelham.

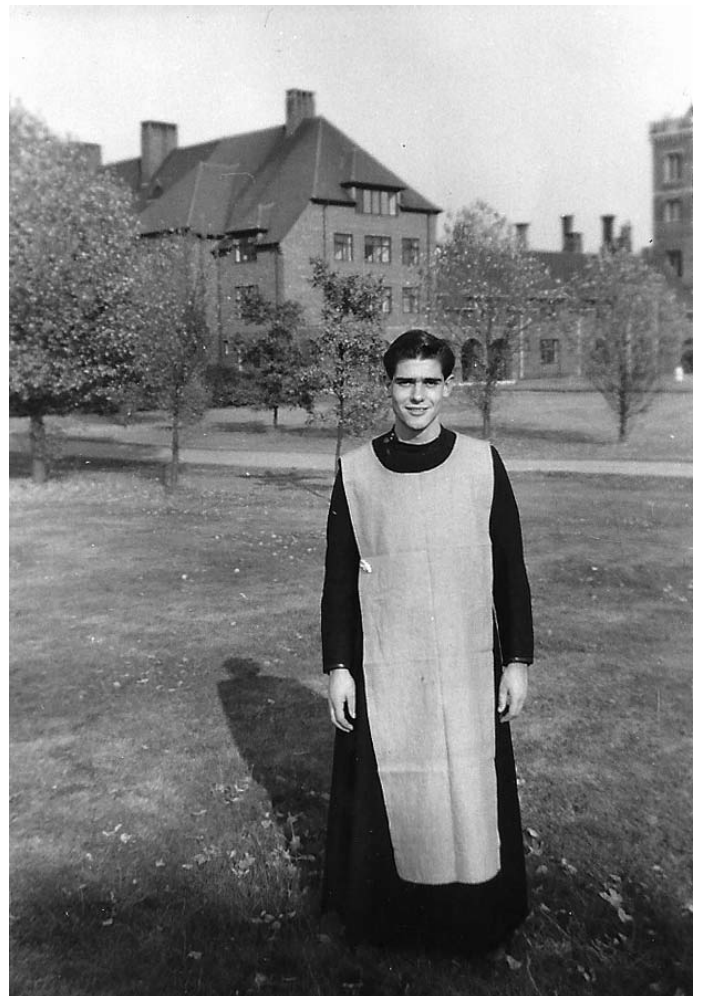
Students' Association as chairman for many years, but the whole vision of community life which has given us so much over the years. Many of us will recall the Centenary Eucharist for SSM at Southwell Minster on June 5th 1993, for which Ian worked so hard to organise and plan the music – not least playing the organ in the Cathedral and bringing his excellent choir from St Anne's, Leicester to lead the singing.

His close friend from Kelham days, David Hunt, who gave the very moving tribute at his funeral in Leicester on June 29th 2009, spoke of Ian's great capacity for friendship and fun. I quote from that tribute as follows: "At college, Ian was the organist for several years, and a crucial part of his role was providing discreet accompaniment to psalms and canticles, sung to plainchant by everyone at daily evensong and compline on Saturdays. On Sundays and Festivals, for the music of the Eucharist, Ian's playing – in the wonderful acoustic of the great domed chapel in its simplified Byzantine style – was skilled and inspired. ... Moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, I have the happiest memories of contributing with Ian to end-of-term revues, singing daft duets with him and playing the piano for him, as he sang in rich mock-contralto *Rule Britannia*, dressed as for the Last Night of the Proms, and introduced to the audience as *Constance Brakeblock!* Ian could be full of fun and nonsense, and he could – and did – use this gift in his ministry too. The warmth and welcome that Ian engendered in the churches where he served, and his loving care and support for folk, helped bring new life. So thanks be to God for Ian, a faithful, warm and loving

friend to many and a loving husband and father. ... May he rest in peace and rise in glory".

It was my privilege to deliver the tribute for another friend and Kelham contemporary, Jack Hawkins, at his Requiem Mass in Norwich on August 26th 2010. We entered the 'Cottage' together in September 1961, and were ordained together in Coventry in December 1969. While Ian glorified God through music (and others at Kelham through study and sport), Jack preferred more unusual pursuits – like conjuring tricks and magic! These gifts and skills were to delight many a Sunday School audience over the years. Like many of us, Jack's career CV would not appear particularly spectacular. He was never interested in preferment or that sort of thing. Nevertheless, there were moments of 'greatness', such as when – as a curate in Coventry – he rescued a child from the canal and, by giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, saved the child's life. Greatness was also revealed in his ability to use his own life-long struggle with suffering and eventually terminal illness, to create opportunities to instil strength and hope into others, including those who cared for him and ministered to him. His Bishop was to comment that "when visiting him, I sometimes wondered who was ministering to whom".

He was also a very practical man. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than – with paint pot in hand, a fag in the corner of his mouth and the thought of a glass of whisky to complete the task – he'd paint a place from top to bottom. These skills, which go right back to his years at Kelham, he tried to use to the greater glory of God in his ministry. As I reflect on this, I'm reminded of our SSM mentor, Father Kelly, who although he was the founder,



Jack Hawkins when at Kelham.

we're told delighted in being mistaken for the gardener – perhaps like someone else in the Easter story, who was once mistaken for the gardener, and who wasn't ashamed to work as a labourer at a carpenter's bench! So much of Jack's approach to life and priestly ministry seems to resonate with that unique and somewhat indefinable style of 'theological formation' which was, and is, the gift and bequest of SSM to the Church. For that unique 'vision', so many of us will be eternally grateful.

"Blessed is he who has here lived well and come happily to his end" are familiar words to all who have been privileged to come under the auspices of SSM. Whether in community in a religious house, or out in the hurly burly of the concrete jungle where Ian and Jack exercised the whole of their ministries, the same holds true. We thank God for their faithfulness to this vision and pray that they may rest in peace.

LIBRARY UPDATE

by **Barbara Merrifield**

After our appeal in last May's magazine, we were overwhelmed by the response that we received. The November edition of the magazine promised details, and our librarian has written the following update.

This article begins with a heartfelt thank you to everyone who responded to our 2010 appeal for funds to develop the library, including putting the catalogue online. Our target figure was £5,000 and – thanks to the generosity of SSM friends and supporters (including a number of former Kelham students) – the target was not only reached, but exceeded, and the appeal fund total stands at £6,099.20.

Now that the funding has been secured, preparation for the online catalogue is underway. *Heritage*, the library software management company we use, has been contacted to discuss the library's requirements, and we are aiming for the online installation to be carried out in June. In the meantime, a series of software upgrades, needed prior to the installation of the online module, has been installed, and library web pages have been drafted for inclusion in The Well at Willen's website. The online catalogue will be accessed via these pages.

Another library development for this year will be the launch of *Friends of Willen Library*. The idea is to bring

together library supporters to help with future fundraising and with raising the profile of the library. 'Friends' will be asked for a yearly subscription and, in return, will be invited to an annual meeting, which will include afternoon tea and a lecture. They will also receive a regular newsletter. There will be more about the 'Friends' scheme later in the year, with maybe an inaugural lecture in September.

A final piece of library news is that – following the suggestion that patrons could benefit the profile of the library by putting their names to the organisation – three have agreed to do so. We are delighted that the Revd. Dr. Marcus Braybrooke, Sr Joan Puls, OSF, and the Rt. Revd. John Pritchard are our patrons. Each of them will be invited to the library within the next twelve months.

Meanwhile, we have a number of their books on display in the library.

COMPANIONS' DAY

by **Margaret Moakes**

Address given on 7th May, the annual Companions' Day 2011, when the Reverend Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga was made a Companion of the Sacred Mission.

Although this is a day for SSM as a whole, it is happening at Willen, and we are shortly going to adjourn to the Well for lunch. I think, therefore, it is entirely appropriate to preface this address with a quotation from the Well's original statement of intent.

"The Well creates community; it makes for encounter". These are amongst the words written for us by Fr Frank Green, and formed when the Well community was taking shape. I would want to go further than this, however, and

say that the Society of the Sacred Mission is a place of encounter. I personally have known the Society for the past 38 years only, when it's stage of pilgrimage brought it to Willen. It coincided with my own family's pilgrimage, because just a few months before, we, too, had unexpectedly arrived in this place. So I only know of the SSM years at Kelham from hearsay, and from a brief visit to Kelham Hall in centenary year. Nonetheless – in my 38 years – I have observed and I have experienced.

In talking about encounter, I should say that my first encounter was not with a human member of the Society, but with a line of Khaki Campbell ducks, solemnly parading through the centre of the tiny village which was then Willen. Very grand they looked, but somewhat incongruous. The villagers stood with mouths agape, scratching their heads at this strange phenomenon. Some 24 hours later, the ducks were followed by an anxious-looking Br Bertram Walker, enquiring after these feathered friends that he had so lovingly brought from Kelham. Unfortunately, the story had a sad ending. The River Ouse, which flowed past Willen, had rapidly turned his ducks' allegiance!

Those of you who remember Br Bertram, will remember a man of gentleness and concern. He was the first of many SSM figures that I went on to encounter, a privilege which has been repeated for me numerous times



Outside Willen Church, after the Companions' Day service. Left to right: Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga, Margaret Moakes and Fr Colin Griffiths.

since then. My latest new encounter has been with Br Samuel from Lesotho, who is currently staying with us for a few months, and who has brought news of that beautiful mountain kingdom and its struggle with the Aids pandemic. In getting to know SSM over the years, I have come across priests, theologians, spiritual directors and teachers, as well as accountants, cooks, gardeners and poets. I have met some very well-travelled individuals like Fr Ralph, and I have met others like the late Br Jimmy, for whom Kelham was their central pivot and remained so until the end. I have met jokers, humanists, questioners and carers. I have met some who strode forward and others who hung back. I have encountered those with their minds in the clouds and others who were nothing if not down-to-earth. I have met people from across the world, Australians, South Africans, Basuto, Japanese and others. In recent years, with the advent of Associates, I have met Anglicans, Methodists, Quakers, former Catholics and a combination of all these. The list is endless. In every encounter of members of many-years standing or newcomers, of men or women, I have felt blessed and privileged.

But this isn't something new and extraordinary. On several occasions recently, when savouring words from the Gospels, I've been struck by what a wide circle of friends and followers, from all walks of life, Jesus had.

Yes, there was the inner core of those who were later called Apostles, but just as a stone tossed into water makes wider and wider circles, so Jesus' outreach went in ever-widening circles. Remember the 72, whom Jesus sent out "two by two ahead of him, to every town and place where he was about to go" (I quote from Luke)? Remember the wider band of disciples, who would seem to have been pretty numerous? Think of the loyal group of women often in Jesus' company. Over and above these, there were enquirers, people who had received healing, those who had appreciated his teaching, those of a non-Jewish background like the Roman centurion, who had been attracted by his charisma. Then there were those – like St Paul – who never knew him in his lifetime, but who were overwhelmingly attracted by what they had heard of him.

Reading a book recently by Fr Peter Ward – a Roman Catholic redemptorist priest and missionary – I found words that put this all in context. He says "our difficulty in describing a disciple of Jesus is that there was no set pattern of life for disciples. There were many different groups and their ways of following Jesus were different". But there were some elements that helped them coalesce. He goes on to say "being a disciple meant making a commitment... it meant acceptance of the vision and, of course, accepting that vision was a slow, painful growth". I wonder whether any of these elements could also be related to followers of SSM? We are different groups, with professed, associates and companions, former Kelham students and friends of SSM. We do not have set patterns of life, and we have different ways of following. However, we do make a commitment and we do accept a vision.

Many of us in or close to SSM never knew Kelham in its heyday – just as St Paul never knew Christ – but that doesn't matter. Yes, there are the faithful, but slowly dwindling ranks of former Kelham students; there are long-term companions, as well as companions who have recently joined. What holds us all together, the members, the companions and the former students is the SSM ethos. And this ethos can be seen in our mutual respect and love for one another.

The book I quoted from just now, the book by Fr Peter Ward, is very appropriately entitled *The God of Welcomes*¹. Today, we have a new Companion joining us, Ernesto, whose work is based to a large extent around the Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes city centre. I first met Ernesto at a Quiet Day he led, when he used his book *Five Stones and a Burnt Stick*² (a copy of this is in our library) for the basis of his reflections. It was a very thought-provoking day. Ernesto, I am told, has many other qualities and interests. He has a keen interest in art, and a great concern for social justice, and I think he will find, amongst the ranks of SSM, many for whom these subjects are also pivotal. This is what I want to say to Ernesto, as he joins our fellowship today, "Welcome to SSM, welcome to our ranks and welcome into the shelter of our love, in the name of the Christ who inspires and unites us all. Enjoy the encounter".

¹*The God of Welcomes* by Peter Ward, C.Ss.R., pub. The Columba Press, 1996.

²*Five Stones and a Burnt Stick* by Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga Steele, pub. Strategic Book Publishing (New York), 2009.

SSM PROGRAMMES 2011



St Antony's Priory, Durham

www.stantonypriory.co.uk

Quiet Days and Workshops

Generally
10.00 am – 4.00 pm

Saturday, 28 May

Dancing our Prayers

A day of sacred dance as the language which unites body, mind and soul. No experience needed.

Saturday, 11 June

Together in Meditation (see article p.6)
and Tai Chi (led by an experienced teacher).
followed, in the afternoon, by
Crafts at the Priory

Saturday, 18 June

Retreat on the Streets

Praying in both the busy and the quiet places of Durham City.

Monday, 20 June

Midsummer Celebration

Evening celebration of the shortest night of the year.
Begins at 7.00 pm

Saturday, 9 July

Together in Meditation (see article p.6) **and Tai Chi**

Saturday, 23 September

Autumn Equinox

An opportunity to reflect on the streams running through our lives as we pass the equinox.

Saturday, 26 November

Pearls of Great Price

As Advent approaches, an opportunity to identify and reflect on those pearls in our lives that we seek and treasure.

Retreats

*Monday, 1 August to Friday, 5 August or
Monday, 1 August to Sunday, 7 August
and Monday, 8 August to Friday, 12 August*

Individually-guided, ecumenical retreats at Shepherd's Dene, led by members of the Priory. An opportunity for participants to engage deeply with God, in an atmosphere of silence and prayer.

**For information and bookings contact 0191 384 3747,
e-mail: durhamstant@aol.com**



The Well at Willen, Milton Keynes

www.thewellatwillen.org.uk

Quiet Days and Workshops

Generally
10.00 am – 4.00 pm

Saturday, 18 June

The Peace of Wild Things

Focused on the garden, this quiet day is based on the poem of that name by Wendell Berry.

Friday, 24 June

A Labyrinth Walk for Midsummer

An opportunity to walk the labyrinth in the cool of the evening. Begins at 7.30 pm.

Saturday, 17 September

Running a Creative Quiet Day

A training day in partnership with the Retreat Association.

Saturday, 24 September

Rumours of Angels

A Michaelmas day, exploring angels and how we regard them today.

Saturday, 15 October

Journeys

Exploration of our journeys through life and faith. Nicholas Buxton, leader, explored his faith on *The Monastery* television programme.

Saturday, 22 October

An Introduction to Mindfulness

Workshop to introduce mindfulness to demonstrate its power.

Saturday, 12 November

Quaker Spice

Exploration of the Quaker testimonies of Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community & Equality.

Saturday, 19 November

Homecoming

A preparation for Advent, exploring the sense of arrival.

Retreat

1 August to 5 August

An icon-writing retreat with Constantina Wood (see article p.5). Reflect and create your own icon.

**For information and bookings contact 01908 242190,
e-mail: bookings@thewellatwillen.org.uk**