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FINDING GOD IN OTHER CHRISTIANS



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SPCK

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*For the students of Cardiff University chaplaincy,
past and present*

All names have been changed and certain details of
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in order to preserve confidentiality

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Introduction

Christians often end up doing the one thing they least expect. In my case, it is writing a book about reconciliation. I am someone who runs a mile the minute there is the slightest rumble of disagreement in the air, especially when it involves other Christians. I would rather contentious topics were quickly resolved, or even avoided. But I have also learned that people who simply don't like arguments have to be very clear about why they want the argument to end, or not to happen at all. Is it a matter of anything for a quiet life? Or is there a real yearning for reconciliation? The two are not the same thing. The quiet life amounts to having as little meaningful exchange with other people as possible. It leads eventually to isolation and loneliness. Genuine reconciliation is about reconnecting with others in a more truthful way because it allows trust to get re-established and builds on what has been learned in the conflict. So Christians have to decide which of these two scenarios they really want.

Writing this book has revealed to me that reconciliation happens when warring factions want it for the right reasons, so if we are going to have disagreements, they ought to be productive. They ought ultimately to be a source of enrichment for all parties. Bland confidence that a state of equilibrium will happen by itself, or that the situation can somehow be managed away without anyone getting hurt, never works. Wanting to resolve disputes out of a desire that peace should prevail at all costs entails further risks. Everything depends on what kind of peace we are looking for. Is it the kind which ignores the realities of injustice or betrayal? This is what Jeremiah accused the false prophets of doing, declaring peace when there was no

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peace (Jer. 8.11). Or is it the kind of peace which comes with the renewal of friendship or genuine understanding and empathy? This is the kind of peace in which we learn trust, or learn how to recover trust when it has been lost or damaged.

Trust is the ability to be vulnerable, first to God and then to others. It is only really learned through being able to receive love and return it without fear of betrayal. Trusting God and trusting other Christians are two sides of the same coin. We can't learn to trust others if we don't first trust God, and we can't experience what it is to trust God if we are not willing to find ourselves eventually trusting those Christians with whom we think we have nothing in common. Where there is anxiety about other Christians, or about the kind of God we say we believe in, it becomes very hard to establish peace.

Conversations I have had with people in the course of my ministry as an Anglican priest have revealed that the kind of trust which leads to real peace only happens when we *experience* God and his grace. But experiencing God does not guarantee a quiet life. We engage with him with all our human faculties and this can turn our lives upside down, especially with regard to how we relate to other Christians. Experiencing God and his grace also obliges us to experience being the Christian we feel uneasy with, or just dislike, so it entails great personal risk. Experiencing God means wanting reconciliation between Christians in the way we want God himself. John writes, 'Those who say, "I love God", and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars' (1 John 4.20); we can't have it both ways.

John's words have been embedded in my own consciousness ever since I came to adult faith. I have never been able to stop dreaming of reconciliation in the Church, and by Church I mean all those who formally, or informally, call themselves Christians. I have tried telling myself that peace between Christians is unachievable this side of eternity, but somehow the words have a hollow ring to them. This is because they are inherently untrue, as St John says in his letter. If those who

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claim to follow Christ cannot be reconciled, it implies that Christ's coming to us, and involving himself so intimately with the human predicament, was a wasted effort and that human beings and the Church itself are a waste of God's creative energy and love. While I recognize that there are people who may think like this, and have given up on the Church altogether, I know that every moment of goodwill between Christians, every quarrel resolved, every good or kind action done in defiance of distrust and hatred, is a sign that God's grace is still at work and that he does not view the Church as a wasted effort. For this reason, I also believe that Christians can and must be reconciled if their work of mission and evangelism is to be at all credible, and it is in this spirit that the book came to be written.

I am not suggesting that all Christians should agree and like one another simply because they are Christians. That would be to introduce the notion of duty, and duty in the context of reconciliation is a denial of the kind of love which God has for human beings. Christ did not embrace the human condition out of a sense of duty. He did so out of love, the kind of love which invites the same uncomplicated and unconditional generosity in response. This is the kind of love which two people who have quarrelled feel in the split second of realizing that the quarrel has to end because they love each other – a kind of 'let's not do this any more' thought which flashes between them and which allows reconciliation to begin. God's love is an eternity of 'let's not do this any more' when it comes to the way his relationship with human beings is marred by conflict. Christians are invited to hold on to this moment of wanting to be reconciled, both with God and with one another, and to build on it. So I have written this book as a way of exploring how we might get ourselves into a place, in our minds and hearts, where this would be possible.

Each of the eight chapters looks at ways in which Christians can experience God in Jesus Christ by rediscovering him in

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their relationships with other Christians. In writing this book, I have found myself walking down paths which I hope others will discover, paths towards a more contemplative experience of what it really means to be a Christian community, to be the Church. But this is not a book which gives instructions. Instead, I hope that it will help readers know that it is God himself doing the work of peace-making. So it is a book for people who want a different kind of Church, a Church which takes risks and is prepared to move forward into a deeper relationship with Christ, a Church whose members are prepared to learn each other's faith language so that Christians can begin to have real conversations, the kind which foster understanding and through which everyone learns instead of one or other party simply winning the argument.

Much of the discussion turns on the notion of hospitality, God's hospitality to us in Christ reflected in the way we learn to pray and work together. Being open to the hospitality of God teaches us to be hospitable to one another, to be willing to go out to meet the other Christian long before he or she arrives on our doorstep. This involves going to the very limits, to the very edge of our individual faith universe. It takes us to the peripheries of human life in relation to God, to where holiness is learned.¹ Holiness comes with taking risks for the sake of love, so it embodies the will for reconciliation. Those who are considering coming to church for the first time, or who may be returning to their faith after a prolonged absence, will be looking for signs of this kind of holiness because they will be looking for reconciliation with God. They will be attracted to people who remind them of God's love for them, not because of the things these Christians say, but because they are a certain kind of people, a reconciled people, who remind others of Christ.

The book is also written for people who are journeying on in the Christian faith. Anyone who is asking questions, and wanting to look at issues which have the potential for bringing

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us closer together in new ways, is journeying on in faith. I myself have journeyed from being a Roman Catholic to becoming an Anglican. The hospitality of Anglicanism rescued me from the bleak agnosticism of early adulthood and remains the bedrock on which I continue to build and rebuild my own relationship with God and with other Christians. People who are journeying across denominational borders, or between different churchmanships, are not journeying away from their faith but looking for new ways of understanding it, ways which will give meaning and substance to their relationships with other Christians and to their lives now. They show the Church that movement in the Spirit and experience of God are still possible, so they are torch-bearers for reconciliation.

Christians inspire confidence when they are unselfconsciously like Christ in being fully themselves in their relationships, both with God and with others. This book explores how we can reconnect as a Christian community with one another with integrity and truthfulness and so become the kind of people we are meant to be, the people Christ sees from the vantage point of the cross. It is a book for those who want to experience the kind of peace which is found through friendship with the God we see in Jesus, and with other Christians, and who want to see the Church become what it really is, the ultimate place of reconciliation and belonging.

1

Can't see – won't see



I knew a dog once, called Tonto. Tonto was a hefty Alsatian who lived in a rather cramped flat in Madrid. He had only one way of dealing with people or situations which he didn't like, which was to position himself so that he couldn't see them, either by facing the wall or by standing under the nearest table. The fact that he was fully visible seemed not to bother him. He would just stand there with his back turned pretending that the situation did not exist and that whoever was shouting at him would give up and go away. Tonto's logic worked on the principle that if he wasn't making eye contact, he couldn't be seen.

There is something Tonto-like in the way Christians are going about their life together. We seem to have developed a way of telling ourselves that we can't see the Christians who we don't understand. But we know they are there and they make us anxious. Being in a room with someone who makes us anxious means we find it hard to start a conversation because anxiety makes it difficult to understand or relate to what is said. In the case of the Christian community this inability to connect with other Christians has one very serious consequence. It makes us wonder if we are all worshipping the same God. How you relate to God will depend on the direction you're coming from, and there are all sorts of ways of approaching him, usually with their own built-in customs, which are foreign to some, or terms and conditions, which are reprehensible to others. But other Christians are there. It is no use pretending they will go away if ignored. So it would be good if we

could understand them better and grow together, rather than apart.

The 'other' Christians are those who think differently about God and what it means to be a Christian at all. For those who resent the inevitable restrictions which come with trying not to offend other people, the difficulty in engaging with these others lies in pretending that their own questions about God and his real meaning and purpose for their lives today are irrelevant, so shouldn't be asked. Stifling doubts and questions makes the room feel even more cramped, so the solution is to find a different room where, hopefully, greater allowance is made for honest questions about God, and where there is more space in which to grow spiritually. After a while, this room also begins to feel cramped because although initially its general layout offers a certain freedom, or at least a change from the overfamiliar, the people in it are facing the wall – a different wall, but a wall all the same.

In their different groupings, Christians are hiding from each other. They feel mutually threatened because the way one group or churchmanship worships, and the way it thinks, questions the other's views, or their ways of approaching God in prayer. Those who feel alienated by liturgy or formal prayers, and by teaching which is not overtly scriptural, ignore or resent Christians who they fear might be 'unsound'. Others find charismatic worship which is without a sacramental focus shallow and wordy, despite its fervour and sincerity, and the teaching in these churches narrow and out of touch. The shock comes later when everyone discovers that God is at home in both these contexts. God makes himself at home with us in whatever church environment we happen to be, in the abiding Spirit of Jesus Christ, because God's nature is to be hospitable. There is a hospitable ethic at work in the three persons of the Trinity and this ought to inform the way Christians pray and how they relate to one another. For the time being, however, I want to focus on the fact that everyone, in order to grow into maturity, needs to turn

away from the wall, or come out from under the table, and let God lead them – possibly to a different room altogether.

Moving into another room

I recently met a former Roman Catholic who had left the Catholic Church because he felt that the Church was beginning to obscure his view of God. He needed to move to a room where he could see God more easily. As a university chaplain I welcomed a number of Christians who had become disillusioned with their church or denomination because of the politicization of its life, either through issue-driven agendas which judged and thereby excluded certain people, or because the energy it needed in order to deepen its spiritual life was being diverted into committee-driven approaches to problems raised by lack of resources and general low self-confidence. Many of these people no longer go to church but are becoming increasingly attracted to a more contemplative approach to thinking about what it means to be Christian community in the world of today. There is a yearning right across the church spectrum for a deeper, more contemplative life. People still want the sense of belonging which a church or fellowship can give, but they want greater depth, the space in which to discover a deeper meaning to their faith so that they can address the uncertainties and difficult choices which life presents with steadiness of heart and with confidence in their ability to make choices which derive from a living relationship with God.

According to figures quoted in the *Church Times*, 95 per cent of people who are 'unchurched', those who like Jesus and his teaching but distrust or dislike the institutional Church, would want to be part of a community in which they could feel loved and where they could experience a sense of belonging.¹ The article goes on to say that the largest group of Christians in the UK consists of those who do not formally belong to any one denomination or attend any particular church. They are the

'de-churched', those who once were part of a formal church setting or wider church group. They too are searching for deeper meaning in their faith journeys. They want their Christian faith to connect with their lives in a way which is honest and relevant. These people, and those who are already part of lay contemplative or semi-contemplative communities, are people of integrity.² All of them, whether or not they are members of new Christian communities, are seeking God. Some will be picking up the faith of their childhood in a desire to make sense of it in their adult life. Others will be beginning again, or at least venturing further afield in a faith journey which has been uninterrupted for a number of years. These are courageous forward movements into a deeper life of faith, into another room in God's house (John 14.2).

Here I want to be clear about what I mean by faith. I do not mean clinging to what has been learned in the past, in whatever church context that may have occurred. The faith of one who needs to move on is essentially dynamic. It moves forward. It is not about standing still and facing the wall in a Tonto-like way, but about turning around in order to see God better. 'Turning around' in order to face God is also the root meaning of repentance in the Bible. Repentance, or change of heart, begins with looking at other Christians and oneself with a degree of compassionate detachment and then journeying on together. Christians are on a journey of compassionate repentance, so they need that detachment for two reasons. It obliges them to be kind to themselves, so that they can learn to forgive themselves as well as one another. It also prevents guilt and fear from getting in the way of beginning the journey at all.³

Moving on in faith means sitting light to the things of the past, but it does not mean shedding the old faith like a worn-out set of clothes, even though old ways of thinking and living the Christian life may feel ill-fitting or dated. Jesus likens a person's faith journey to a householder who is having a good

clear-out of the attic. The householder does not throw out everything that is old. She keeps only what is fit for purpose. On the whole, this doesn't mean that the things thrown out were never of any use, or that things ought to be kept because they are new and have never been used, like unwanted Christmas presents. The householder is simply reviewing the changing needs of the household.

The Christian community is a household on the move. Its needs change, so it too must change if it is to thrive and serve in a changing world. Over the centuries the Church has undergone enormous theological changes. In her book *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle describes how these theological clear-outs occur roughly every five hundred years.⁴ While history may not be so tidy, we should expect change and look to change ourselves, in order to keep moving on within our faith journeys. But first I want to be clear about why I think movement and change are so important to a healthy faith. People who move across boundaries in their faith journeys are acknowledging the fact that they can learn from those around them. They are moving on from the security of being surrounded by those who think in the same way, and towards others in a desire to understand and learn from them. Timothy Radcliffe writes, 'Because of the deep insecurity of our society, we seek the assurance of the like-minded. But no community of the like-minded is a sign of the kingdom of God.'⁵ There is no such thing as a self-sufficient solitary Christian, so Christian community not only needs all its members, but thrives on diversity and forward movement.

We are involved with other Christians and, for that matter, with all people of faith. Unlike Tonto the dog, the journeying Christian is facing away from the wall and into the room. Two important things emerge from this; the first, that in turning away from the wall, we are acknowledging the fact that we belong in a space which we share with others, and the second, that we also know that the other people in the room want the

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