

Faith in Work – a glimpse into experience.

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Abstract: A group of sixteen people from a wide range of professions responded to the invitation to reflect, in writing or by interview, on their faith journey, with stress on how their faith was related to and shaped by their work life. The article attempts to draw out, under a number of headings, 'Roots and Shoots', 'the *Cantus Firmus*', 'Spirituality', features of their experience. Some attention is given to how their faith/work self-understanding relates to their experience of 'church'. The final paragraphs suggest that this is a small but key contribution to the contemporary interest in 'ordinary theology' and workplace chaplaincy.

1. Introduction.

This small and loosely structured project stemmed from a conversation between two of the authors, longstanding friends, on the terrace of an Italian holiday apartment. Thinking back over the years, the question arose as to how one, an engineer and manager and academic, with experience in industry and public service, had sustained his Christian faith. This led them to wondering, especially in a strongly secular society, where religion is marginalised, what it means to be a person of faith as a professional (taking that in the widest sense) today. On returning home, these thoughts were shared with the third author. It was agreed to see whether there was any mileage in enquiring more closely into the question. Initial conversations with a number of acquaintances found an enthusiastic response, suggesting that this was indeed a matter both of personal interest to those contacted and of possible theological and pastoral importance.

Rather than setting up a formal structured project, it was decided, within the resources available, to follow a more informal approach. Individuals with the relevant kinds of experience were asked to reflect on their experience in writing. A short introduction to the project was prepared, the key sentences of which were:

The place of religion in western society has been highly contested. Yet many, not least in professional circles, have a strong Christian faith which must have, in some way, have been integrated into their engagement in the public sphere through work and wider social activities. However, this has been a neglected theme and little is known about how faith has been worked out in this context. Yet surely it is of interest, not only for a greater understanding of how religion works out in the contemporary context, but also pastorally and practically in the community of faith.

We are asking you to describe your faith journey in relation to your life story and how your religious life has enhanced and/or been challenged by experience.

The respondent was asked to react to the following questions, with an indicative word count, aiming at +/- 3,000 words in total.

Who and what shaped your values and faith? (500)

What have been the significant episodes in your work life? (500)

What differences have your faith/values/spirituality made to you and how, in the public sphere, you have approached the work roles you have undertaken? (1,200)

What difference has the workplace etc. made to your faith/values/spirituality and any religious allegiance you may have? (1,200)

Respondents could, if preferred, be interviewed by one of the authors. Three so opted. Contributions, while covering the areas indicated, tended not to be over shaped by the questions but by individual experience and style. Similarly, while length was broadly adhered to, some were somewhat shorter and others a tad longer.

A list of possible contacts across a range of professional groups and similar activities was drawn up. While there was an attempt to have as representative spread as possible, the approach was through personal contact, whether direct or indirectly, and therefore reflects the immediate circle of the authors, despite efforts to counteract that. It was clear that this was never going to be a calibrated sample, only a 'straw vote'; but one that might be expanded on in the future. Some two dozen persons were approached. Thirteen responded positively, which with the three authors, made sixteen in all, covering a surprisingly wide spectrum of professional interest, even if there are some obvious omissions.

A – engineer, historian, museum curator.

B – academic secretary, historian, volunteer/advocate for mental health.

C – social worker.

D – conservationist scientist in a statutory body.

E – academic theologian.

F – housing manager, campaigner, local politician.

G – administrator/producer in the media, chair, national/regional arts councils.

H – child psychiatrist.

I – entrepreneur, environmentalist, academic.

J – engineer, entrepreneur, academic, healthcare management.

K – academic lawyer.

L – barrister, high court judge.

M – minister, spiritual director.

N – local government housing.

O – social worker in agency.

P – CEO of charity.

Four female; twelve male.

This produced a rich and fascinating collection of personal reflections, giving a glimpse of how issues that have engaged church and society have, or have not, had impact on actual people, a brief insight into the life of faith in our time. What follows is an attempt to draw out how these personal spiritual biographies illuminate and fit into the wider scene, which may suggest themes for further research and reflection.

2. Roots and Shoots.

(i). Almost without exception, the respondents pointed to their early connection with and regular participation in a church community, usually as part of family practice. One was born into a vicarage.

Church worship, then, was as natural as walking and breathing. It gave shape to the week. It was balm in troubled times; it gave me the sense that my small life was a part of a greater process. (F)

I was brought up in a Christian family and went to a church school, sang in the choir, was confirmed and carried the cross. (I)

But there were exceptions.

My parents were a great influence on me and they were good people. [but] definitely not religious believers. My mother was indeed quite anti-Christianity, her own parents having, as she saw it, abandoned her in order to care [as missionaries] for 'little heathen children'. (H)

My Christian life began On my first visit to church, other than weddings and funerals, since my mother sent me to Sunday School whilst she cooked Sunday lunch. (N)

This, broadly, reflects a time, whether positively or negatively, when 'church' was a normal factor of life. Things are different now and raises the question as to how and when such faith connections are made today. One respondent ruefully remarked:

I think of my grown-up children. Their personal values are strong and closely aligned to my own. Yet religious faith plays no part in their lives, as far as I can see. (F)

(ii). As the respondents moved away from home and out into higher education and their careers there were, not unexpectedly different stories to tell. This, of course, was increasingly normal in the post-war generation with its expansion of universities and colleges and greater physical and social mobility. This was a challenge to faith practice,

opening up greater choice and loosening family and community bonds. For some it was a kind of wilderness experience, losing touch with the faith community, or searching, like Noah's dove a place where to come to rest.

When I grew up, I sort of went through various stages, I suppose, for quite a long time. I sort of let it all lapse. (K)

In my youth I sought to find a church that I felt comfortable with, but never found one that I could call home. My faith was reshaped by a personal encounter with God in 2001. This had a profound impact on my life, including the deep desire to know the Bible in all its glory. (N)

I was exposed to aspects of life I never dreamed existed. My old ideas no longer worked. I didn't feel equipped to do what was required, but was supported by colleagues to acquire skills. (C)

For others, however, there has been a continuity and constancy in their faith experience wherever life took them.

I was brought up in a Baptist family and never had any real doubts about the faith. (A)

The church has been the very fabric of life. I've never stopped talking to God or listening. (D)

(iii). There were, of course, many references to those people and events that proved decisive over the passage of time. Frequent reference is made to those who were influential in early adolescence. These could be relations and family friends, but also include Sunday School teachers and clergy, school teachers and personal friends. For some evacuation in World War II was a formative experience.

This continues into later life. Colleagues, mentors, friends, ministers, and the opportune encounter with Christian leaders or leading lights in their chosen field, opened up new horizons and supportive companionship through example, preaching and teaching, or spiritual challenge or guidance. Two things, however are noticeable.

There is comparatively little indication of the ecclesial context in these formative years of the fifties and sixties, a time of considerable renewal in the churches. This is the height of the ecumenical movement at home and abroad, of new community life, such as Taizé, the Iona Community or Focaltare, of liturgical and missiological renewal, as in Parish and People, and the exploration of new theological perspectives. There are a couple of references to Bonhoeffer and John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1962), and to Industrial Mission. This underlines an ever-present factor in Church life. It's too easy for the currents of change, such as the Ecumenical Movement, to exist apart from the everyday Church life, or, at best, for them to be absorbed almost subliminally and anonymously by osmosis. It also points to the fact that, while one's own pilgrimage can have its coherence and pattern, it is in fact totally dependent of the chance of our circumstances, where we are placed and such opportunities are thrown at us, receiving them as both chance and gift.

However, the present context, not surprisingly, dominates the narratives. There is considerable interest in spirituality, whether it be cast in evangelical terms or the post-charismatic expressions such as Holy Trinity, Brompton, or through the rediscovery of the classic Christian traditions: Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Augustine of Hippo. There is also widespread acknowledgement of the imperative to social justice and 'God's option for the poor', the debate about human sexuality, personal rights, and the reality of the environmental crisis.

(iv). Once away from those early roots finding a spiritual home can prove difficult. Growing away from formative expressions and understandings and exploring the faith for one's self in new contexts means searching for a matching fit.

For some, however, there has been a simple consistency.

My family had a firm and longstanding religious background with importance attached by my mother to church attendance on Sunday, a practice that has remained with me all my life. (L)

Finding, in a new locality, a welcoming fellowship which can provide new roots.

I sing in a church choir, something which gives me spiritual refreshment and a sense of connectedness with the rural community to which I now belong. (F)

Others, however, are looking for a church that meets their personal and intellectual needs at any given point in their pilgrimage, where they can feel accepted and acceptable. This can range from:

Having grown gently into faith, I was not altogether comfortable in a church where lack of dramatic conversion made one feel a 'second class citizen'. (B)

Though, as we have seen, there is also a strong evangelical and charismatic element running through a number of the contributions.

However, the move away from a more dogmatic and prescriptive faith also came through quite widely.

I'd clearly identify myself as a kind of liberal Anglican, but with a very grounded knowledge of the Bible. My current church is easily the most liberal I've been to, as it is explicitly inclusive, openly gay friendly. (K)

To my sorrow and anxiety I see that the thriving churches in terms of numbers, particularly young people, are the Pentecostal/evangelical ones, almost all of whom have a fundamentalist, literal belief in the Bible. This strange view, imported from America and barely part of our churches in the UK when I was young, is intellectually dishonest and impossible to condone for anyone who respects scientific method and knowledge. (H)

He [a minister] and his generous wife, who fed me my first curry suppers and supported my passionate struggle against ideas of penal substitution and the blood-soaked views of the Atonement. (G)

There were occasional criticisms of churches, usually their leadership, either taking the form of a discrepancy between the minister's teaching and the assumptions found in the congregation:

Then I remember going on a church away-day where we spent a lot of time talking about gay marriage; and I realised that, though everyone respected the vicar, all his young people at the church just basically didn't buy it. (K)

Or a hiatus between church life and the day to day experiences of the congregation.

I have often regretted how little interest ministers took in the working lives of their people and how little understanding they had of the pressure on their daily lives. (A)

3. The *Cantus Firmus*.

How then, do the respondents understand their faith in relation to their work? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (p.303f.) takes an analogy from Bach's fugues of the *cantus firmus*, which underlies and shapes the variations and counterpoint of a fugue, sometimes absent or hidden, at other times dominant. Faith is that fundamental reality that gives coherence and pattern to our lives, even in the business and responsibilities of every day. In some form or other this *cantus firmus* is found in each personal story.

(i). At one end of the spectrum, faith is essentially a personal matter which informs the individual but is only indirectly related to the work place.

One's personal history must affect where one is and how one acts in the world of work, as in every part of life. It is who I am ... a lens through which everything else has to be viewed. (A)

Does faith mean anything more than being a generally decent person, honest, helpful and considerate, who applies 'New Testament' principles in dealing with others? (B)

I do not see faith as necessary for the work I do. All kinds of people give themselves to serve society in this way. Yet one's personal history must affect where one is and how one acts in the world of work, as in every part of life. (C)

(ii). More reflectively, some were able to point to key themes and commitments that have consciously shaped their approach to the tasks in the work place.

From these (sic) formative commitments, to the quest for knowledge and insight and the pursuit of the Good Society or Kingdom of God, came the guidance that kept me reasonably on track through my career. (G)

The theology of the 'ministry of reconciliation' that captured me in the early days of faith has run through my life as a thread in all my varied roles. (J)

In recent years I have come more and more to see every encounter with another human being, every moment of the day, as opportunity to live out Christ's command to love one another. Love, not as feeling, but as a flowing out of the Spirit, an attempt at generosity of heart and action. (H)

Christian faith is about forgiveness. Or again, there has to be the recognition of privilege, of accepting the responsibility of the incredible blessings of living in the West and the imperative of social justice. (K)

(iii). It is assumed, almost unanimously, that the kind of career represented here has its own validity in contributing to the common good in a society whose fundamental values are shaped by the Christian tradition. This is most clearly exhibited by the law.

What deserves emphasis is the extent to which the system had arisen and has still substantially Christian values. The importance of truthfulness, the value of straightforwardness, the need to treat all people equally and with respect, qualities valued in the Gospels, are central to the attitudes of the Courts and those who practice in them, to issues coming before them. (L)

Social work, similarly, sees itself as strengthening society by supporting the poor, the handicapped and the excluded.

It is interesting that within social work there are so many who profess the Christian faith. Indeed, social work has its roots in the work of those who saw their calling working with the poor in the industrialised cities of the nineteenth century, a heritage that persists despite all the changes within both the profession and society. (C)

Similarly, wise management, overcoming conflict and changing attitudes allows the essentially worthwhile project to move forward.

The values stemming from Christian belief have been at the core of the change projects I have championed – values such as diversity, equality, dignity and respect for the individual – every person being a loved child of God. The process of change is often painful and there is a clear need to learn to feel for people affected and to demonstrate empathy, love and compassion. (J)

(iv). But there is another strand that comes out more strongly in a few cases. Working for the Kingdom is more radical, demanding fundamental change, new patterns of thought and social renewal.

My role has increasingly been to inspire students to make a difference to the world. I have come to realise that 'mindsets' need to change based on three sub-scales: empathy, compassion and connectedness to nature. We still need the creativity of entrepreneurs and their ability to take calculated risks. However, we now need, more than ever before, individuals that are commercially astute plus socially and environmentally convicted (I)

While we have to accept that our economic life is complicated and global and highly specialised, my understanding of the faith is that we now need to make better connection between the parts and the whole. In a world where we are worshipping financial capital while destroying nature and human capital – that thankfulness for Creation – along with an urgent desire to sustain it is a vital and central part of our faith. (F)

In Mark, Jesus actually talked about faith and the Kingdom of God as he did his outreach. ‘If that were the kind of outreach Jesus modelled,’ I reasoned, ‘then I have to do things the way he did them.’ [A charity which would] aim to place the Church at the heart of social action in this country and allow it to be the nest which fosters renewal and restoration for the homeless. (P)

(v). This leads to the notion of ‘vocation’, a concept that has largely been lost in the context of secular professions, though it is assumed that clergy have ‘a calling’, both personal and formal. There two elements in the notion of vocation. First the sense of attraction to a way of life, rather than to a ‘job’; this is ‘what I want to be’. And secondly, that it is a way of service to others. There were clear indications among the respondents of this idea of calling, both as an initial decision and, more frequently, and usefully and indeed properly, in relation to transitions throughout a career.

I have not had a sudden conversion or a clarion call to service or dramatic encounters with God. Rather, it has been a matter of quietly going through an open door, of finding the path opening up, of accepting a task or opportunity, and – even when declining an invitation – of finding it to be the Lord’s will for that time. (E)

In God’s universe, what matters is obedience. It is clearest when God shout loudly. Sometime when God directs me there is a pattern of events which is like a tide; it sweeps along. Sometimes things shift so quickly it can make me uneasy. Sometimes it is slow, like continental plates shifting, and the movement is only perceptible to me after much time has passed. (O)

Again, I believe God had a plan. Within a week of my decision to leave [X] a head hunter rang me (J)

4. Spirituality.

Our respondents represent a wide range of spiritualities; that is, how they understood the reality of God and experienced their relationship with him.

For each God provides the structure and focal point of existence. Faith makes sense of the world and our places with in it. There has to be an intellectual credibility. For some, however, this is the prime factor, especially for the more academic.

Studying theology is a core of spiritual discipline. It has the dangers of being weighted in an intellectual direction but, through reading, teaching and research one is challenged to recognise new spiritual insights, grapple with the problems and issues of faith and be led deeper into the mystery of God and creation. (E)

Christian faith inculcates a particular 'wisdom', a stance that, hopefully, governs one's outlook on life. (K)

For others, however, the more immediate, personal experience of God is the key factor. These experiences can be found at various points in one's spiritual pilgrimage, at key points or as a continuous presence.

All my life – probably starting at the age of three – I have had a 'knowledge' of the existence of another realm of uttermost love and a Being who gave and received it. These are the important forces which have shaped my whole life. (H)

It can be cast in charismatic terms.

Sometimes when I pray I use a technique I was taught of speaking in tongues. This helps when I can't articulate a problem, only the hurt and the confusion. (O)

Or in evangelical terms, with its emphasis on conversion and subsequent walking with God.

The encounter was highly personal but gave me the instant realisation of the fundamental truth that Jesus lived, died and was born again and lives today. These encounters [with people] taught me to pray in a way I had not prayed before. (I)

What was the understanding of God that informed their faith? The overwhelming core of faith was in a God of absolute and boundless love that willed the good and fulfilment of his creation. God's love motivates the desire for social justice, pastoral care and community. This is anchored in the person of Jesus and expresses the Biblical teaching.

I bumble along, as I always have, trying to do my best for the God who has shown me such undying love and acceptance and Jesus, his example on earth. My working life has indeed been blessed over and over again, pressed down and running over, from the actions of the Holy Spirit. (H)

[I] focus more on the cross, not so much in terms of salvation from sin as in valuing the divine experience of human suffering. Jesus' cry of dereliction penetrates the depths of human wretchedness. There are times when that is what one needs to hear, with the related assurance that God is still there, even when hidden behind the cloud of suffering. (B)

The need to breakdown some of the hard barriers that sometimes taint Christian theological and moral stances has been noted already. This freedom also brings with it an inclusivity which recognises the importance of collaboration with those on other faiths or none.

These various involvements I have had have taught me that there is always something more to learn from others. This has inspired and encouraged my ecumenical and inter-faith work in later years. (J)

My immediate feeling on arrival was of the walls of that great city [Jerusalem] weeping at the grief and atrocities that have been committed in His name by the three Abrahamic religions. I was drawn every morning to rise early to stand

praying with the Jews at the Wailing Wall and drink coffee in the Souk with the Palestinians. (N)

Faith is a journey into the unknown, opening vistas of which we are hitherto unaware.

God can only be known through love. To love God is to un-know all that we use to describe and interpret God. The cloud of unknowing is completed by the cloud of forgetting. In other words, to love God we must let-go all that we treasure in the maintenance and construction of being a person of faith. (M)

5. Concluding reflection.

This small exercise has produced a wealth of personal story. Setting them side by side, it has been possible to see how they relate to the experience of the wider faith community. Each, too, makes their own peculiar contribution as to how the faith is worked out in both the contemporary Church and the economic and professional spheres. The first thing, therefore, to say is that it has been a privilege to be able to hear these particular voices. Each such story is of importance, though too often they are lost in the corporate reality of being church, except, possibly, when the subject of personal pastoral concern. But the corporate life of the Body of Christ does not simply stand over/against the individuals involved but is made up and made real in the lives of countless individuals.

This has been the concern of the so-called ordinary theology; to articulate and recognise the reality and importance of the everyday beliefs and experience of 'ordinary' Christians. Ordinary theology has been defined as 'the theological beliefs and processes of believing that finds expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education'. (Astley, 1; see Astley and Francis) That is, it attempts to articulate the active faith and practices of the believer (and this surely includes the theologically articulate) as they respond to the reality of the revelation and presence of God in and through life's journey in the fellowship of the Church. There is a dialectic here; the faith of the Church as received, usually through the official media, and the affirmed faith reality of the believer. There is a constant dialogue, at every level, shaping and exploring what the faith means and where the Spirit is taking us today, both at the Church's structural level and for each individual or group. The *consensus fidelium* is very much part of the theological arena. The gospel has to be articulated afresh in every time and place.

The primary concern of the project was to look at the relation between faith and one's profession. It would seem, however, that this concern is on the margins of the Church's perspective, though it has been very much at the heart of post-war Industrial Mission (now referred to as Workplace Chaplaincy), especially in the era of rapid de-industrialisation in the eighties. (see: Brown and Ballard; Ballard; Torrey) Interestingly only two of the respondents referred to chaplaincy work as influential in their experience and there were hints that church life and daily work are too often separated experientially. If, however, work can be defined as our formal contribution to and support by society then it is at the heart of our self-understanding. Indeed, we are often defined by 'what we do'! It is, therefore, an essential dimension of the Church's ministry, to be aware of and supportive of those embedded in the pressures and opportunities of work, not least professional work,

and to listen in order to discern the Spirit's working in society. In fact there is an upsurge of interest in chaplaincy work, mainly as a means of extending the pastoral ministry, which should be taken seriously by the wider Church; and for those so engaged to be able to articulate something of the riches and challenges of serving Christ in the economic structures of society.

So, what we have here is the contribution of a small group of professional people, the majority of whom have for the first time been asked to tell of their journey of faith. They deserve to be heard and to be drawn into the wider theological debate.

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