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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the first issue of *Roots & Wings* for 2023. This publication, sent electronically free of charge to members of the Professional Society, appears quarterly. It contains regular features as indicated in the Contents table alongside with one addition to the issues in 2022. 'Festivals' will provide information anticipating a major religious festival.

Members are encouraged to send material for future editions. What might you send?

- Lesson ideas or plans
- Reviews of useful materials such as books, magazines, videos or websites
- News from your school's RE Department
- Short articles of interest to religious educators
- Adverts for RE posts in your school

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REFLECTION

Longing at the Centre

(Ron Rolheiser)

At the core of experience, at the centre of our hearts, there is longing. At every level, our being aches and we are full of tension. We give different names to it – loneliness, restlessness, emptiness, longing, yearning, nostalgia, wanderlust, inconsummation. To be a human being is to be fundamentally diseased.

And this dis-ease lies at the centre of our lives, not at the edges. We are not fulfilled persons who occasionally get lonely, restful people who sometimes experience restlessness, or persons who live in habitual intimacy and have episodic battles with alienation and inconsummation. The reverse is truer. We are lonely people who occasionally experience fulfilment, restless souls who sometimes feel restful, and aching hearts that have brief moments of consummation.

Longing and yearning are so close to the core of the human person that some theologians define loneliness as being the human soul; that is, the human soul is not something that gets lonely, it is a loneliness. The soul is not something that has a cavity of loneliness within it; it is a cavity of loneliness, a Grand Canyon without a bottom, a cavern of longing created by God. The cavern is not something in the soul. It is the soul. The soul is not a something that has a capacity for God. It is a capacity for God.

When Augustine says: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you," he is, of course, pointing out the reason why God would have made us this way. And, as his prayer indicates, the ultimate value of longing lies precisely in its incessant nature, by never letting us rest with anything less than the infinite and eternal it guarantees that we will seek God or be frustrated.

But beyond its ultimate purpose, to direct us towards our final purpose, the experience of longing has another central task in the soul. Metaphorically, it is the heat that forges the soul. The pain of longing is a fire that shapes us inside. How? What does the pain of longing do to the soul? What is the value in living in a certain perpetual frustration? What is gained by carrying tension?

Superficially, and this argument has been written up many times, carrying tension helps us to appreciate the consummation when it finally comes. Thus, temporary frustration makes eventual fulfilment so much sweeter, hunger makes food taste better, and only after sublimation can there be anything sublime. There is a lot of truth in that. But the pain of loneliness and longing shapes the soul too in other, more important, ways. All great literature takes it root precisely in this, how carrying tension shapes a soul. Longing shapes the soul in many ways, particularly by helping create the space within us where God can be born. Longing creates in us the stable and the manger of Bethlehem. It is the trough into which God can be born.

This is an ancient idea. Already centuries before Christ, Jewish apocalyptic literature had the motif: Every tear brings the Messiah closer. Taken literally, this might sound like bad theology – a certain quota of pain must be endured before God can come – but it is a beautiful, poetic expression of very sound theology: carrying tension stretches, expands, and swells, the heart, creating in it the space within which God can come. Carrying tension is what the bible means by "pondering".

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin left us a great image for this. For him, the soul, just like

the body, has a temperature, and for Teilhard, what longing does is to raise the temperature of the soul. Longing, restlessness, yearning, and carrying tension raise our psychic temperatures. This, a raised temperature, has a number of effects on the soul:

First, analogous to what happens in physical chemistry, where unions that cannot take place a lower temperatures will often take place at higher ones, longing and yearning open us to unions that otherwise would not happen, particularly in terms of our relationship to God and the things of heaven, though the idea is not without its value within the realm of human intimacy. Put more simply, in our loneliness we sizzle and eventually burn away a lot of the coldness and other obstacles that block union.

Moreover, this sizzling, longing, brings the messiah closer because it swells the heart so that it becomes more what God created it to be – a Grand Canyon, without a bottom, that aches in lonely inconsummation until it finds its resting place in God.

REFLECTION

The Rejected One As Cornerstone

(Ron Rolheiser)

"There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in." Whatever else Leonard Cohen had in mind when he coined that phrase, it says something about how wisdom, compassion, and morality seep into our lives.

There is a crack in everything. Our culture, of course, is no exception. Despite great technological progress and even some genuine moral achievement, all is far from well with the world. People are falling through its cracks and it is these persons – the sick, the unattractive, the broken, the handicapped, the untalented, those with Alzheimer's disease, the unborn, and the poor in general – who are the crack where the light is entering. They give soul to our world. What does this mean?

In our culture there are some whose lives, for whatever reason, are considered inferior and deemed not worthwhile. Moreover we are convinced that we may on occasion even snuff out the heartbeat of these persons. Euthanasia, abortion, and various kinds of mercy killing are being promoted precisely in the name of compassion, open-mindedness, and human dignity. Those in favour of these things have, for the main part, been able to claim both the moral and intellectual high ground. To support euthanasia, abortion, and mercy killing is to be seen as enlightened, to oppose them is to be seen as morally and intellectually backward. In Canada, for example, the reaction to the death of Tracy Latimer (a severely-handicapped, young girl who was killed by her own father) provides ample evidence of this. The intellectually elite, for the most part, contend that this was a morally enlightened act. Abortion is viewed similarly.

Thus, we are moving ever more towards a mindset that sincerely believes that wisdom, compassion, human dignity, and morality can be served by snuffing out the heartbeat of someone whose life is not deemed worthwhile or who is living in such pain that this is judged to be sufficient cause to warrant death as a mercy. Is this wisdom and moral progress? Hardly. As Rene Girard puts it: What is anthropologically marginal is spiritually central. This is an academic expression for what scripture

means when it says that the stone rejected by the builders is the cornerstone for the building. In simple terms, this tells us that those whom the culture marginalizes and sees as unimportant, those whom it deems disposable – the sick, the aged, the severely handicapped, the dying, the homeless, and the unborn – are in fact, spiritually, the most important people in the world. They are where the light gets in. How we value them is the true measure of our wisdom, compassion, and morality.

Imagine how soulless would be a world within which only the strong, the young, the healthy, the physically attractive, the intellectually bright, and the achievers have a place! Imagine how soulless would be a world that views the handicapped, the unborn foetus, the physically paralyzed, and the dying as having nothing to offer! Such a world would be able to recognize neither the birth nor the death of Jesus because, in both of these, compassion, morality, and wisdom seep in precisely through what is helpless and marginalized. Our present culture is drawing ever nearer this soullessness.

Too often, even in our churches, we no longer stand where Jesus stood, where the cross stood, namely with the helpless. We stand instead where vested interest stands, be that the vested interest of the business world, the academic world, or the pop culture.

A world that sincerely believes that killing someone, anyone – be it Tracy Latimer, an unborn foetus, or a criminal on death row – can be an act that enhances human dignity has let its compassion be co-opted and commandeered by vested interests. We will never admit this of course, but it is true. The reason we do not see value in the lives of the severely handicapped, the terminally ill, those plagued by Alzheimer's disease, and many of the other poor in the world is that these people precisely stand in the way of someone's comfort, someone's efficiency, someone's rationality, someone's supposed enlightenment, and someone's limited compassion. Better they should die than that this should be disturbed! In both the world and the church today we are becoming blind to one of the deepest truths that Jesus taught us in the crucifixion, namely, that what looks useless and meaningless has the deeper value. Inferiority builds soul.

Those who fall through the cracks of the culture are indeed the crack where the light gets in. If our world has any real soul left, if indeed we still even understand the words wisdom, compassion, and morality, then it is because someone who has no power in the culture, someone who has been marginalized and rejected, has shared a gift with us.

TALKING ABOUT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Religious Education into the Second Century

(Sharon Warner)

Abstract: Following the 100th anniversary of Religious Education[1], Warner looks at religious education into the second century. She also offers several hopes for what religious education, both as discipline and as this particular journal, might contribute to faith communities, academic communities, and the public in the next century.

[1] The journal of the Religious Education Association - REA | Religious Education Association

In the moments of today are the seeds of tomorrow. As we stand on this precipice following the 100th anniversary of Religious Education looking "into the second century" it is appropriate to take a moment to ponder, given our past and present days, what our years of tomorrow might be. In a proverb attributed to Marcel, "hope is the memory of the future." All our reflections upon what might be are extensions of the seeds planted by those who have gone before us and those who presently work among us. And although it is a vulnerable undertaking to characterize the future, I do offer several hopes for what religious education, both as a discipline and as this particular journal, might contribute to faith communities, academic communities, and the public life in the next century.

Several years ago Edna St. Vincent Millay captured the social and political scene of her day and of our own.

Upon this gifted age in its dark hour,
Falls from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts... they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric.

Is it possible for religious education to be a loom upon which the fabric of spiritual truth and wisdom is woven? I think so. The seeds of that possibility are already planted. Religious education is a movement of holism. It has and is crossing many boundaries. In this movement (and journal) all ages are addressed and engaged; the scope of our concerns encompasses persons from birth to death. This movement draws from all religious disciplines: theology, Scripture, ethics, intra and inter relational knowledge, history, worship, actions in the world, and life practices. It draws from many denominations and from at least two religious traditions; it crosses national boundaries. Through research and collegial conversations religious education is constituted by both theory and practice. As a loom religious education takes what is distinctive and seemingly separate and weaves them together into a whole fabric.

We live in a world that, despite all its technological sophistication and globalization, is paradoxically becoming more boundary conscious. Tribal and religious violence, culture wars, retrenchment of denominations into parochial concerns, clutching of resources for local use, emphasis on "my rights" at the expense of the common good, all portray narrowing interests and concerns. The postmodern accent on perspective shaped by particular and contextual positions, although a helpful counter to modernity's claim to universal truth, aligns with this boundary consciousness and can, if not nuanced with a healthy sense of epistemological humility, further entrench parochial life.

The contribution of religious education in the coming century is to offer to faith and academic communities, as well as the public square, a place where insights into truth are born from the loom of holism. Religious education needs to stretch itself to be a place where a multitude of voices converse with each other, where the cultivation of blurry lines is raised to an art form. Resisting the pull toward increasing parochialness (even among ourselves as seen in the return of emphasis on denominational organizations focused on their own concerns and agendas), religious education needs to attend vigorously to the processes of seeing and learning truth in the other. This will mean pushing edges and encouraging each other to move into spaces where we are not at home; it will mean increasing our diversity and changing some of our practices. But in a world where home is still the deepest metaphor for being, it is the challenge that faces us. In the vibrancy of this work religious education becomes leaven through which the church, academy, and even the public square might "see the world whole."

Religious education s work toward "seeing the world whole" will increasingly be a work of engaging otherness and learning to see truth there. From the work of James Fowler and others we have learned that this posture is a deepening of the faithing experience. But

"seeing the world whole" will need to push beyond the deepening of individual experience. We need to find ways to embrace the whole without losing the particular.

One of the questions V. Peter Pitts asked children in his book *Children's Pictures of God* was "where does God live?" Children answered by drawing pictures of God on a cloud, by a mountain, sitting with Jesus way out in space, out among the stars, and in a heart. One child drew two arrows forming a broken circle with "God?" at the top. Pitts interprets the drawing, God lives "in between everything else" (1979, 33). In "seeing the world whole" religious education needs to intensify its cultivation of the "in between." We need ways to look for truth not so much in our own traditions or in the traditions of the other, but in the space between them.

In Between (Kenneth Laugen)

What would religious education from the position of the "in between" look like? What would it look like in faith communities or in theological schools? From the wisdom of Parker Palmer we are challenged to the radical nature of truth found in the "in between" (1983, see chapter 4). In a world fundamentally shaped by pluralism, religious education needs to explore more deeply how to learn such truth. Our challenge is both to counter the present tendency to embrace pluralism through an uncritical tolerance of "all persons have a right to their own opinions" and to find ways to engage the truth of the "in between." Truth emerging from the space "in between" is not a product of uncritical tolerance. Unraveling the difference and finding practices that keep us in the rigor of disciplined truth seeking will be a major issue for faith communities, theological schools, and certainly the public square in the second century.

Loren Meade captured the paradigmatic change in our world several years ago. He noted that in the mechanical paradigm of the Industrial Revolution you find a problem, focus on the problem, and fix the problem. But "when you go into my office on Monday morning," he said, "you don't find a problem; you find a mess."1 In many ways, life in this second century will increasingly be experienced as a mess, as a bunch of tangled threads, intertwined complex issues. But intertwining is one of the strengths of religious education. In the coming century may we use that strength to change the tangled threads into a woven fabric of seeing the world whole, a fabric that is held together by virtue of the truth between us.

Footnote

1 Loren Meade, Lecture at Lexington Theological Seminary, June 6, 1995.

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Palmer, Parker. 1983. *To know as we are known*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Pitts, V. Peter Pitts. 1979. *Children's pictures of God*. Schenectady, NY: Character Research Press.

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CLASSROOM PRACTICE (CPTD) [2]

Synodal virtues: valuing and extending theological education

Thinking outside the box

(Thomas O'Loughlin)

We have to go into new places, though doors we have never before entered!

Theology is not a bundle of facts. It is the possession of a Christian skill which can enhance life for the individual and the communion of which that person is a member. It has a vital role to play in a synodal church.

I have tried to look at this in various ways in previous articles, now I want to conclude these meditations by looking at how it can change the way we see ourselves and our discipleship.

Repetition

Repeat anything often enough and not only will people believe it – hence the constant repetition of adverts and why so much energy goes into 'building brands' – but, eventually, people will forget that there are completely different ways of thinking about a problem.

One of the duties of theology is to stop us in our tracks when those tracks have become ruts. It should get us to look afresh at reality, our place in it, and what it is all about. Here I want to consider just two situations where this applies.

Situation 1: Living in a post-religious world; are people really not "religious"?

One of the most significant cultural developments of recent decades across the developed world is the number of people who reject any recognized form of religion, who say they do not believe in God or a god, or who ignore organized religion in their lives with the simple statement: "I'm not religious!"

Christians respond to this situation in a variety of ways. One obvious reply is to try to "convert" them to accepting the traditional language, vision and practices of Christianity. After all, this is the basis of all missionary plans when missions were sent out in areas that had never heard of the Christ and there they "won" many new people for the faith. So why should they not view the society around them as "a new pagan land" and preach to such people?

While it is true that Christians must always proclaim Jesus as the Lord's Christ, addressing fellow citizens does not seem to have the same impact as missionaries had in parts of Africa in the last two centuries. Part of the reason for this is that the languages and practices of Christianity appear to many post-Christian societies as simply an appeal to go backwards.

This is a point that was made in a different way recently in La Croix by John Alonso Dick when he wrote about "changing the conversation" and quoted T.S. Elliot's poem "Little Gidding":

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[2] Read this article for CPTD points. See Page 23.

> For last year's words belong to last year's language.
>
> And next year's words await another voice.

Christianity - at least in its traditional language and practice - is explicitly that from which many are running away (and often for very good reasons); and they cannot abide the notion of returning. Inviting people to "come home" to Christianity is equivalent to saying they should love the technology of the early twentieth century, outmoded social views such as the restrictions on women of the nineteenth century, or the religious clashes and bitterness of even earlier.

The situation is that they have tried Christianity and found it wanting. Moreover, the history of clerical abuse has destroyed the credibility of the Catholic Church as a witness to anything noble in the eyes of many. Clerical pomposity and attempts to influence public policy make Catholicism something that people reject with disgust.

It is so easy to imagine that this post-Christian situation is the equivalent to being a-religious, as so many claim. But this, for those who believe in God the creator, would be a great mistake. Post-Christian does not equate to being without religious longings.

Are they godless?

But does that mean that they are godless, that the great questions do not trouble them, or that for this generation Augustine's claim that every heart is restless until it rests in God (Confessions 1,1,1,) is no longer true?

If it is true that they are truly godless, then it must be a case that now, for the first time in history, there are hearts and minds in which the Holy Spirit is no longer speaking. To say they are godless is tantamount to saying that God has gone away.

But part of the good news of the creation is that God never goes away and in every heart his Spirit is somehow active. It means that the quest for God is taking new forms, finding different expressions, and the challenge facing Christians is twofold.

First, for themselves to recognize these new expressions of God's presence in human life and work – and not assume that God only speaks in the older language with which they are familiar.

Second, to help their fellow citizens recognize for themselves these divine stirrings, the deep human need for the Infinite, and to forge with them a new language – a language and religious culture and practice – that belongs to today and tomorrow (rather than being that of yesterday spruced up for today).This view of the situation of modern women and men was elegantly summed up in this way at the Second Vatican Council nearly sixty years ago:

> For since Christ died for all, and since the ultimate destiny of all humanity is the same, namely divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers all of us the possibility, in a way known to God, of being made partners in the Paschal Mystery (Gaudium et spes 22.5).

But finding this new "language" is very difficult – it is even more difficult than learning a foreign language because we do not know its grammar – and then we have to translate our older "language" into it.

In this task of translating the Christian past into the human situation of today and tomorrow, theology plays a crucial role. So every study of theology is intrinsically an act of mission – and no explicit missionary act can take place without theological reflection. Put bluntly, the more people say, "I'm not religious," the more those who profess faith need the skills of theology.

Situation 2: Making God in our own image – what are the limits of tolerance and mercy?

One of the depressing aspects of being a Christian is that whenever one hears of narrow-minded intolerance, one often finds that this intolerance is backed up by people who are loud in their professions of their Christian faith.

I met a gentleman recently who was not only homophobic, but who also saw all contemporary tolerance of homosexuality as misguided and inviting divine wrath to come upon society for "putting up with it". He summed up his basic view with this phrase: "It's against the law of God!" And in the conversation I could hear two other hidden assumptions: laws need a penalty if they are to have any bite; and just as human legal systems punish "accomplices", so God must punish those who "connive" with those who break his law.

Around the same time Pope Francis was reported as "changing Church teaching" by saying that the death penalty was incompatible with Christian teaching. In response, a news program interviewed a US-based Catholic who said that this was all part of the slippery slope of the "Church losing its way and going soft on sin". For this person, God was the final policeman and creation was a kind of police state with God watching everything and biding his time before releasing his vengeance.

When we see a crucifix we might ask a theological question: do we think of God as power or as love?

As I watched that interview – and I have heard the same sentiments often over the years --, I wondered just where the message of love fitted with this answer. Perhaps love is not what it's about, but power? Certainly, both the man I met and the other I heard on TV would have seen divine power as more "real" than divine love.

But while we can argue about whether or not "the bible" is for or against homosexuality, or whether or not the death penalty is needed and permitted, in both cases such arguments are only addressing the presenting level of the problem.

I suspect that there is a deeper problem. We think about the world around us, we have views on "justice", law and order, and the role of power in human relationships. And then we build a god in our own image, a god who ought to work as we would work ourselves (if only we had a chance).Here is a basic question each of us as Christians must answer: is the fundamental aspect of God towards the creation one of POWER or LOVE? This is one of the hardest questions in all of theology. It is also where the whole three thousand-year history of our theology intersects with one's personal outlook on life.

If we think of God as love, we might better appreciate the prayer for homosexual couples recently published by some Dutch bishops, and why a Jesuit theologian, Jos Moons, called having such a prayer "actually quite Catholic".

Faber's answer

The nineteenth century hymn writer Frederick Faber (1814-63) proposed this very different vision to that of God-as-power, which seems to come to the very heart of the issue:

There is a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven.
There's no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.
For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind.
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we would gladly trust God's Word,
and our lives reflect thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.

What a wonderful piece of theology, though -- alas -- it is a hymn we hardly ever sing!

God's love is broader that the measures of our human minds, and so we must be wary of ever presenting anything but mercy and gentleness lest we betray the God we claim to serve. But this level of mercifulness is not just a human trait nor a psychological or social disposition: it is the very challenge of discipleship. Such a level of forgiveness and tolerance, the level the world needs if there is to be peace, can be seen on reflection to be itself a gift, a grace, and so something for which we must be eucharistic.

In formal theological jargon what those two men who wanted a god of vengeance had done was to assume that justice was a univocal concept in the human and divine spheres, and so drew god down to their own level. What Faber did was to say that if you can imagine the widest reality you can – for him it was the sea and for us is might be the light-years that separate the galaxies – then that is less than the "wideness" of God's affection for us.

Theology is not a body of ideas, nor the ability to provide the exegesis of doctrine, nor knock-down arguments to those who challenge Christian beliefs. It is an invitation to imagine beyond our imaginations' bounds. I have responded to those too-human-bound images of the divine with a piece of poetry, because theology is, in the final analysis, more like poetry than prose.

Theology and theologies

Theology is not just about knowing "what you are about". It's more a matter of having the skills to think about what you know and do, to clarify what is obscure and confused, and to then help others in their quest.

God's infinity, *Deus semper maior*, is most truly recognized in God's mercy; but appreciating the range of that mercy and seeing what response it calls forth from human beings is a most complex challenge – and skill in theology is one great facilitator in this task.

In these five articles on the study of theology as a help towards a synodal Church I have worked outward in a series of circles:

- religious questions that concern me as an individual;
- religious questions that concern me as a member of the Catholic Church;
- religious questions that concern the Catholic Church in relation to other Christians;
- religious questions that concern Christians in relation to other religions;
- religious questions that concern 'religious people' – those who believe in the Transcendent with other human beings.

- religious questions that concern every human being – though many would not see themselves as asking religious questions.

We all inhabit each of these circles simultaneously because each of us is the centre of a world whose outer reaches (and they might be just next door or even among our closest friends) interact with the whole of humanity.

Being a believer in this world – exploring my own doubts and questions, working with other Catholics and other Christians, encountering others every day of every religion and none – calls on us to think through our choices, what it means to follow Jesus's Way of Life and to reject the Way of Death, and to bear witness to hope and love.

This vocation is neither easy nor straightforward. We both follow a well mapped route which our sisters and brothers have travelled before us and have to explore new routes and carve out new paths. On this journey being well-skilled in theology is like having a compass as well as a map.

Read more at: https://international.la-croix.com/news/world/synodal-virtues-valuing-and-extending-theological-education-part-v/16774

PORTRAIT

Wole Soyinka's life of writing holds Nigeria up for scrutiny

(Abayomi Awelewa)

- Lecturer in African and African Diasporan Literature, University of Lagos

Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka, known simply as Wole Soyinka, can't be easily described. He is a teacher, an ideologue, a scholar and an iconoclast, an elder statesman, a patriot and a culturalist.

The Nigerian playwright, novelist, poet and essayist is a giant among his contemporaries. In 1986, he became the first sub-Saharan African, and is one of only five Africans, to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature. This was in recognition of the way he "fashions the drama of existence".

His works reveal him as a humanist, a courageous man and a lover of justice. His symbolism, flashbacks and ingenious plotting contribute to a rich dramatic structure. His best works exhibit humour and fine poetic style as well as a gift for irony and satire. These accurately match the language of his complex characters to their social position and moral qualities.

His works have such impact that some of them are used in schools in Nigeria and some other anglophone countries in West Africa. Some have also been translated into French.

Life and activism

Soyinka was born into a Yoruba family in Abeokuta, southwest Nigeria, on 13 July 1934. His parents were Samuel Ayodele Soyinka and Grace Eniola Soyinka. He had his primary education at St Peter's Primary School in Abeokuta. In 1954, he attended Government College in Ibadan, and subsequently University College Ibadan (now the University of Ibadan) and the University of Leeds in England.

He was jailed in 1967 for speaking out against Nigeria's civil war over the attempted secession of Biafra from Nigeria. Soyinka was also incarcerated for taking over the radio station of the disbanded Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Ibadan to announce his rejection of the 1965 Western Nigerian election results.

He joined other activists and democrats to form the National Democratic Coalition to fight for the restoration of democracy in Nigeria.

He now lives in Abeokuta.

Themes and style

My first contact with Soyinka was in secondary school when we were made to read his play *Lion and the Jewel*. Some of my classmates then felt he was difficult to read and assimilate. I later found out *Lion and the Jewel* was actually one of the simplest titles.

Soyinka's works often address the clash of cultures, the interface between primitiveness and modernity, colonial interventions, religious bigotry, corruption, abuse of power, poor governance, poverty and the future of independent African nations. His themes have remained constant over time and many African states are still grappling with issues he has raised since the 1950s.

Through his works, I discovered that he has deep knowledge and understanding of his mother tongue, Yoruba. For instance, in *Death and the King's Horseman* and other plays, we see Yoruba wisecracks, philosophy and proverbs translated into his language of communication, English. These enrich his writings.

I find the changing forms of his creative works interesting in spite of the unchanging content of the narratives or drama. Read *King Baabu* or *The Beatification of the Area Boy* and *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* to observe the change in Soyinka's style.

Forms of writing

Soyinka's plays cut across diverse socio-economic, political, cultural and religious preoccupations. *A Dance of the Forests*, one of the most recognised plays, was written and presented in 1960 to celebrate Nigeria's independence. It reflects on the ugly past and projects into a blossoming future.

His 1965 play *Kongi's Harvest* premiered in Dakar, Senegal in 1966 at the first Negro Arts Festival. The lead character, Kongi, was played by Soyinka himself. It deals with themes of corruption, ego and paranoia. The lead character, Kongi, is the

archetype of dictatorship globally. He suppresses all voices of reason, revelling in his illusion of power and thinking no one can stop him – until he meets a tragic end.

Other plays depict clashes of culture between white influence, colonial values and black African orientations. Soyinka never blames but dramatises the evil people do through characters with impact, strong plots, accurate settings and language.

Soyinka has written only three novels: *The Interpreters* (1965), *Season of Anomy* (1973) and *Chronicles from the Land of Happiest People on Earth* (2021), which came almost 50 years after his last. The novels focus mainly on Nigeria and its many ills, including corruption, religious bigotry and inept governance.

The characters in the first two novels have dreams which are sometimes dashed through a tragic truncation of their lives. The latest captures contemporary Nigeria, the Nigerian diaspora and the myths of an ever-crawling giant. It paints a picture of things going wrong for the country.

Certain poems stand out among Soyinka's collection. These are *Telephone Conversation* and *Abiku*. The former uses humour to talk about the serious issue of an African experiencing racism as a new student in a British university. The latter comments on Nigeria's inability to develop; the poet explores the futility of life.

Soyinka's non-fiction includes *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972), his autobiography, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981), *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* (1990), *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years* (1989) and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006). In these works he has narrated how the story of his life and his family intertwines with the fate of Nigeria.

As an essayist and intellectual, he has highlighted the specific failings of individuals in the Nigerian polity. Soyinka is not afraid of mentioning names of people he writes about, nor the wrongdoings he is accusing them of.

These works include *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (1988), *The Black Man and the Veil: Beyond the Berlin Wall* (1990) and *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996).

They are essays that have contributed to Soyinka's status as a global intellectual.

Wole Soyinka's life of writing holds Nigeria up for scrutiny (theconversation.com)

WEBSITE

The Guardian – Down to Earth

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Down to Earth is a newsletter featuring an exclusive weekly piece from our top climate crisis correspondents, as well as a digest of the biggest environment stories – plus the good news, the not-so-good news, and everything else you need to know.

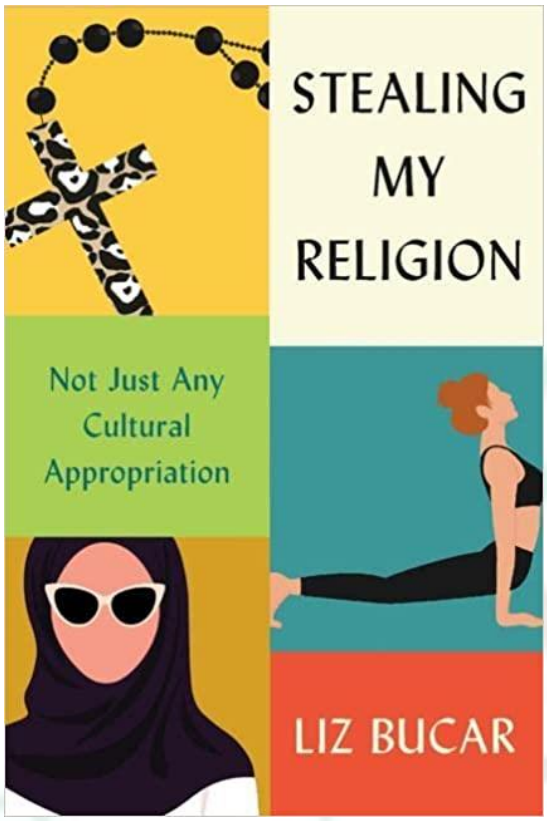
BOOK REVIEW

Stealing My Religion

(Liza Bucar)

Religious seekers, or cultural thieves?

Review by Katherine Lucky



When I first moved to New York for graduate school, I started doing yoga: an unoriginal choice for a young white woman, but my choice, nevertheless. Yoga was relaxing and affordable. Between newcomer packages and free Saturday classes, I could exercise for less than the cost of a gym membership. I borrowed studio mats and wore ratty t-shirts. I couldn't do a handstand, but still managed a workout.

Yoga was also, some teachers implied, something more than exercise. It was an awakening. A practice—a spiritual one. And this I struggled with. I welcomed the silences surrounding each session, but some classes also had gongs, chanting, incense. Many had mantras we were asked to repeat. Teachers told us we were awesome; they told us to find light and power within; they asked us to tap into energies so we'd be balanced and peaceful—and also, it was implied, hotter. Our classes finished with a namaste as reverent as amen, but without explanation of who or what we were addressing.

As a Christian, I wasn't afraid of yoga: these classes were more woo-woo than witchcraft. But I did feel a little dishonest. It felt odd to lay a creed—even one as innocent as love yourself—over a workout class I was paying for.

A similar uneasiness pervades Liz Bucar's *Stealing My Religion*, a book-length study of what she calls "religious appropriation." Cross jewellery, meditation apps, and secular seders might seem innocuous. But using religious iconography, customs, and rituals outside of their original contexts, Bucar says, risks "instrumentalizing religion for political, educational, or therapeutic goals." Worse, it can "communicate contempt for the deeply held values of religious communities." Any form of appropriation—defined as a "dominant culture" stealing from "marginalized communities" in a way that causes "harm or offense"—is blameworthy. But religious appropriation is uniquely harmful, dealing not just with cultural artifacts like food and hairstyles but "ultimate concerns" and sacred truths.

Religious appropriation and undermining the religious meaning

Bucar, a professor of religion whose past work has focused on Muslim women's dress, takes "solidarity hijab" as her first example. Worn by non-Muslims to signal progressive politics, solidarity hijab might appear on a protest poster, in a fashion

show, or in a profile picture of a liberal woman speaking out against Islamophobia. But even when well intentioned, these attempts at support are also acts of religious appropriation. They bypass the pious virtues associated with the hijab—"modesty, shyness, humility, obedience" before God—and make it a costume. This transformation risks "undermining the religious meaning of hijab for Muslim women who choose to wear it."

And, of course, that wearing is indeed a choice; Bucar finds solidarity hijab troublesome in part because many Muslim women don't wear the covering. To make it a symbol of Islam is to exclude these women from their faith, she writes, "neglecting the diversity of the Muslim community." She has other criticisms, too: solidarity hijab "co-opts inclusivity in the form of a superficial allyship," "functions as virtue signalling rather than addressing actual injustice," and "de-centres" Muslims in the aftermath of Islamophobic violence.

These criticisms, though valid, aren't novel: just the familiar problems of tokenism and slacktivism, white feminism and orientalism. As Bucar walks readers through harms related to race, gender, and ethnicity, she slips into academic jargon. Her central claim—it's the religious nature of hijab that makes its appropriation really bad—is fresher and more interesting. Unfortunately, it doesn't get enough space. There's only one paragraph for Quranic verses on hijab, just a page about its implications for personal piety. I wish Bucar had offered more—perhaps a fuller reading of the Quran or other Muslim commentaries, perhaps more interviews with women about their devotional experiences, and certainly more analysis of hijab's private, pious meaning.

Yoga isn't so obvious a theft. But it's a theft all the same. It's problematic for lots of other reasons, too, Bucar reminds us: poorly paid teachers, anti-vax sentiments, gurus who sexually assault their students. Yoga can be "orientalist and racist and classist," creepy and exploitative. Fair. But again these critiques, even when correct, obscure Bucar's more provocative "yoga as religious appropriation" argument.

Belittling beliefs?

That appropriation, she writes, happens during "respite yoga," any yoga performed for health and wellness rather than devotion. With its mantras and haphazard Sanskrit, its token oms and namastes in between squats and planks, respite yoga is "marked as vaguely spiritual and yet requires no religious commitments," no adherence to the "Eastern devotional systems with which it is associated." "Devotion becomes respite, salvation becomes health," belittling the beliefs of those who practice yoga as an inherited spiritual tradition. During a training course, Bucar notices that a fellow classmate—an Indian woman who grew up practicing devotional yoga—is finding herself the odd one out. The woman struggles through unfamiliar postures and eventually curls up for a nap. "Although this yoga supposedly came from her homeland," Bucar writes, "it was unfamiliar and uncomfortable."

Even as Bucar argues for yoga's religious roots, she acknowledges that connecting yoga and religion is controversial. Yoga may have arisen in "Hindu contexts," but it is "not a Hindu practice," instead "the result of interaction between multiple South Asian traditions, nationalism, imperialism, capitalism, and globalization," influenced by Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, brought to America by Indian celebrity teachers. "Devotional yoga" can require "fidelity to beliefs, such as cosmologies and metaphysics," but not always. Vedanta, Tantra, the Vedas, yamas and niyamas…Bucar only briefly explains some of yoga's associated texts and philosophies. And even as she does so, she questions our ability to ever define what an "authentic" or "ancient" yoga even looks like. Yoga's fluid relationship to religion makes it hard to understand what exactly is being stolen, and who's doing the stealing.

Despite these complexities and reservations, I agree with the thrust of Bucar's argument. Really, I've felt her argument. Being sold something ancient and reverent for the sake of your "wellness," just as you'd be marketed a skin cream, is weird. The yoga videos I watch on YouTube abound with self-care slogans covered with

foreign words and empty affirmations. The transcendence on offer is superficial, more about making money than cultivating souls.

So what's the yogi to do? Bucar doesn't propose "de-religioning yoga," "scrubbing" our classes of Eastern words, gestures, and beliefs. Instead, she opts to educate, trying to "acknowledge her indebtedness to forms of devotional yoga" in the classes she teaches. She calls postures by both their English and Sanskrit names. She begins classes with quotes from the Bhagavad Gita. She doesn't say namaste (a "fetishization").Solidarity hijab is never okay. But yoga? Bucar uneasily continues to teach, moving through postures with all her caveats and contextualizations. Why? Well, yoga helps with her back pain. And there's something else, too. Sometimes, in spite of her secularism, her practice "dips into devotion."

Exploration, borrowing, and sharing

If the inward, mysterious nature of religious belief makes its appropriation wrong, it also makes it powerful. Bucar gestures at this in her introduction. Secular people arrogantly think they can "engage in borrowed spiritual practices without necessarily 'becoming religious'", she writes: "Since we are only adopting the bits that 'work for us,' without buying into doctrines, dogmas, or values, we can safely remain outsiders." But "for many religious traditions, correct practice does not necessarily come after belief." Religion compels. Sometimes it even converts, turning outsiders into insiders, thefts into testimonies, and rituals into faith. A quiet moment on a yoga mat at home becomes a genuine meditation. A cross necklace, purchased on a whim, prompts a thought about Jesus. Religion is tricky that way. Often expressed through tangible things, it is itself intangible, liable to surprise.

No religious communities want their objects and practices desecrated. But exploration, borrowing, and sharing, whether explicitly for evangelism or as a simple act of welcome? That's often fine, even encouraged.

That perspective doesn't come through in the book's weakest case study, in which Bucar writes about the popular study-abroad trip she organizes along the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Bucar's course covers history, religion, and art; the students get blisters and take bad directions and eat pastries and confess secrets. Not all of them are Catholic. No problem. The Catholic Church, which issues certificates of completion called Compostelas, "promotes the route as an opportunity for personal spiritual reflection for those of any faith".Bucar's students, appropriately, sign up for her class with different motivations. They want to encounter "the better parts of religion, such as taking time to think." They want to connect with "anything greater than me." They want to process grief. They want to do something physically difficult. During the walk, change occurs. One student, a self-described atheist, says the Cathedral of Santiago "made him feel like 'the Lord is bearing down on you.'" Some attend Mass. Others "wrestle with their demons." A few are moved.

But in hindsight, Bucar isn't proud of these trips, which she now considers religious appropriation. She worries that many of her students were "considering religious ritual merely something to instrumentalize for personal growth." She's concerned about the "existential risks" such a trip creates, the "crises of faith" it might precipitate even for Catholics. "I created and led a program that encouraged students not just to observe religion, but in a very real way, to do religion," she frets.

Not thieves, but seekers

To me, that sounds lovely, different in kind from a hijab worn for politics or yoga done for nice abs. Even if these students don't have full theologies worked out, at least they're genuinely curious about the things of heaven. For Bucar, it's all very stressful, and she considers the power dynamics problematic. Of this, I just wasn't convinced. Even if lots of Protestants go on pilgrimage, the Catholic Church in Spain is hardly a minority culture being exploited by a majority, especially by another group

of Christians looking at holy sites with the same reverence. Plus—whether motivated by good publicity, more money, or a genuine spirit of invitation—the Church did say, "Come one, come all!"Bucar argues that it's not the institutional Church so much as individual lay Catholics who are victimized by other students—even other Christians!—on pilgrimage. She reserves special condemnation for a small group of Evangelical students, dubbed the "God Squad" by their peers. These students do sound obnoxious. They want to take Communion at Mass. They openly express their criticisms of Catholic relics and rituals, perhaps more frankly than they should. But Bucar comes down too hard on them; she reads them as solely sinister rather than at least somewhat sincere. Is the God Squad "planning to participate in the Eucharist to colonize Christianity"? Or are they genuinely confused about why they can't have access to a religious symbol that matters to them, too? When one of the Protestants says he is encouraged by "how much in common all Christians have," is that really, as Bucar puts it, an attempt to shut down conversation—or is it ecumenism? A few Catholic students offer other perspectives. The dialogue reads as a real educational opportunity, just what the trip was intended for.

"I'm not sure where the humanistic teaching of religion ends and a devotional trip begins," Bucar proclaims: "But I have no interest or competency in leading the latter." Unfortunately, "religion is not so easily controlled," and "I could not guarantee that the experience of the Camino for a Christian student would only be a case of humanistic learning." But why should it be? Bucar falls into the trap she accuses other secular liberals of springing, assuming that she can remain an outsider before the bones of saints, on the dusty paths, in the lofty sanctuaries.

Her students, no matter their pre-existing beliefs, presume no such thing. Maybe, as in my yoga class, they're just coming for a good time, for drinking and flirtation and a trip to Europe. But I don't think so. To me, they seem eager and aware of implications, ready to engage with something or someone beyond themselves. They're coming not to steal, but to seek.

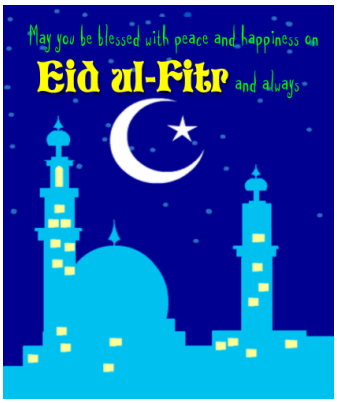
Read more at: https://international.la-croix.com/news/culture/religious-seekers-or-cultural-thieves/17317

FESTIVALS

Pesach (Passover)(6-12 April 2023)

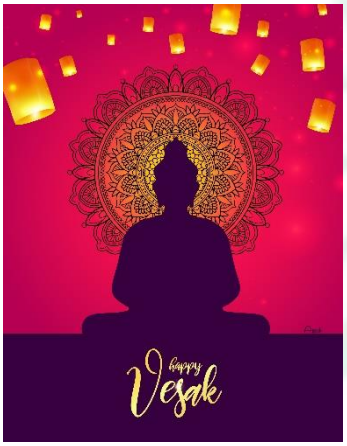
With Tabernacles and Pentecost, Passover (Pesach) is one of Judaism's three pilgrimage festivals on which, in biblical times, all Israelite males were obligated to appear at the Temple in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16). Passover commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, described in the first fourteen chapters of the biblical book of Exodus. Particular emphasis is upon the unleavened bread eaten by the Israelites as a result of their hasty departure from Egypt (Exodus 12). Passover is celebrated for seven (in the Diaspora, 8) days, the first and last day (in the Diaspora, two days) of which are holy days and the middle days of which are in the status of Chol HaMoed (the secular days of the festival). On the first night (in the Diaspora, two nights), the events of the Exodus are relived through a ritual meal called a Seder, at which the text of the Haggadah is read. During the entire duration of the Passover, Jews are forbidden from consuming, or even possessing, leavened products.(Alan Avery-Peck in Orlando Espin & James Nickoloff (eds.). 2007. *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*. Dublin: Columba Press, 1008-1009)

Eid-al-Fitr (22 April 2023)



Eid al-Fitr, (Arabic: “Festival of Breaking Fast”) is the first of two canonical festivals of Islam. Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, and is celebrated during the first three days of Shawwāl, the 10th month of the Islamic calendar (though the Muslim use of a lunar calendar means that it may fall in any season of the year). As in Islam’s other holy festival, Eid al-Adha, it is distinguished by the performance of communal prayer (ṣalāt) at daybreak on its first day. Eid al-Fitr is a time of official receptions and private visits, when friends greet one another, presents are given, new clothes are worn, and the graves of relatives are visited (Britannica.com).

Vesak (2 June 2023)



Vesak is the most sacred holy day of Theravada Buddhism. Also called Visakha Puja or Wesak, Vesak is an observation of the birth, enlightenment, and death (parinirvana) of the historical Buddha.

Visakha is the name of the fourth month of the Indian lunar calendar, and "puja" means "religious service." So, "Visakha Puja" can be translated "the religious service for the month of Visakha." Vesak is held on the first full moon day of Vesakha. There are diverse lunar calendars in Asia that number the months differently, but the month during which Vesak is observed usually coincides with May.

Most Mahayana Buddhists observe these three events of the Buddha's life at three different times of the year, however, the Mahayana celebration of the Buddha's Birthday usually coincides with Vesak.

For Theravada Buddhists, Vesak is a major holy day to be marked by a rededication to the dharma and the Eightfold Path. Monks and nuns meditate and chant the ancient rules of their orders. Laypeople bring flowers and offerings to the temples, where they may also meditate and listen to talks. In the evenings, there are often solemn candlelight processions. Vesak observances sometimes include the release of birds, insects, and caged wild animals to symbolize the liberation of enlightenment (Learn Religions.com).

LOCAL & INTERNATIONAL NEWS

COP15: honouring the commitments

A last-minute agreement in favour of biodiversity is signed in Montreal on the final day of a major UN summit

A banner outside of the Montreal Convention Centre in Canada on December 17 where the second phase of COP15, formally known as the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, took place from December 7-19.

(Photo by Lian Yi / Xinhua News Agency/ Newscom/ MaxPPP)

(Dominique Greiner)

The 196 members of the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) have committed themselves to a roadmap that aims to protect 30% of the planet by 2030.On the final day of the so-called UN Biodiversity Summit, which took place in Montreal (Canada) from December 7-19, the parties also agreed to increase the annual aid for biodiversity in developing countries to 30 billion dollars.

The agreement was welcomed by heads of state and environmental NGOs alike. Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, emphasized that it "complements" the Paris Agreement from Dec. 12, 2015. But one must note that, seven years on, the international community has still not kept the promises that were made in that deal to help developing countries fight climate change.

"Everyone will have to rise to the occasion to prove that this one is not an agreement just on paper," said France's minister for ecological transition, Christophe Béchu, of the pact signed in Montreal. This will only be verified when the Parties actually make good on their promises to pay.

Biodiversity is worth 30 billion dollars a year. And on a global scale, it's not an exorbitant amount... as long as the richest nations honour their commitments.

Read more at: https://international.la-croix.com/news/editorials/cop15-honoring-the-commitments/17066

Cradle of early Christianity largely destroyed by earthquake

The city of Antioch, where the believers were first called Christians, has been all but wiped out by the recent earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria.

Buildings demolished by the earthquake in Antioch. Turkey experienced the deadliest earthquake of this century in the border region with Syria, February 6, 2023. (Photo by IBRAHIM ONER/ ZUMA PRESS/ MAXPPP)

As the death toll continues to climb beyond 37,000 victims from the recent massive earthquake in Turkey and Syria, people in the Turkish city of Antioch – one of the oldest places connected with the spread of Christianity – are staring at a pile of rubble.

"Antioch is experiencing an enormous disaster," Bishop Paolo Bizzeti told La Croix. The 75-year-old Jesuit is head of the Apostolic Vicariate of Anatolia, of which Antakya (as the city is called in Turkish) belongs.

The current inhabitants of this ancient city in south-central Turkey, which dates back to 300 B.C., continue to search for any remaining survivors from the 7.8 magnitude quake that struck their country and neighbouring Syria on February 6. Antioch's two Latin Rite priests are alive, as well as some 60 Catholic families, but about 70% of the city was razed to the ground.

"Some relatives of our friends died beneath the rubble," explained Bishop Bizzeti. "Unfortunately, we do not yet have the total number of victims," he said.

It is hard to imagine this ancient city in ruins, both for its inhabitants and for the country's Christians, who represent only 0.1% of the Turkish population. In the first century, Antioch was home to St. Paul and St. Barnabas, who followed the call of Christ to evangelize the surrounding areas.

"Barnabas then left for Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. And it happened that they stayed together in that Church a whole year, instructing a large number of people," we read in the Acts of the Apostles.

"It was at Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'. While they were there some prophets came down to Antioch from Jerusalem," Acts tells us (11, 25-27). "The Church as we know it today was born in Antioch," noted Father Jean-Marie Humeau, episcopal vicar of the Ordinariate for Eastern (Rite) Catholics in France. Indeed, along with Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was one of the first patriarchates established in the first century. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, its third bishop, was the initiator.

The centre of Hellenistic Christianity

First century, Antioch was a place where Greeks and Syrians lived side-by-side. It quickly became the centre of Hellenistic Christianity, while turning towards the East. St. Paul settled in Antioch for several years, using it as the base for his apostolic travels throughout the Mediterranean region.

According to Church tradition, Peter (also known as Cephas) joined Paul and became the first bishop of Antioch before going to Rome. One of the two apostles' quarrels is recorded in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. "However, when Cephas came to Antioch, then I did oppose him to his face since he was manifestly in the wrong" (2,11).For historical, political and religious reasons, several churches have arisen over the centuries. Today, Antioch has five different patriarchates: the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church and the Maronite Church. However, none of them has its seat in Antioch itself.

Despite the different rites, a strong ecumenism is lived among the Greek Orthodox and Latin Catholics. Greek Orthodox residents sometimes even attend the city's Latin Church of Saints Peter and Paul. Bishop Bizzeti said the church suffered massive damage in the recent earthquake.

Antioch's historic Jewish quarter, where the apostles lived and where the main stories in the New Testament took place, was actually spared by the quake – just as it was during the most devastating earthquakes in its history (in the years 115 and 528).

Read more at: https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/cradle-of-early-christianity-largely-destroyed-by-earthquake/17303

National Homeless Conversation #1 – Hearing From Other Cities

The National Homeless Network emerged from the first 'National Conversation about Homelessness' which was convened in Pretoria in 2017. One of the key goals of the Network is to provide a forum for sharing experiences and best practices among different cities. The value of this was clearly demonstrated during lockdown in 2020 (when the Network connected via Zoom every week), and it continues to be shown through our regular forums.

For the first time since 2019, we were able to have a big national face-to-face conference and it was the turn of the Johannesburg network to host. They worked closely with their Municipality who assisted by providing a venue and some of the logistics (though that did mean that there were more political speeches than have happened at these gatherings in the past!). There were 170 people signed up, clearly a lot of them from Gauteng (Jo'burg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni) but also from further afield with delegates from Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Pietermaritzburg and the eight of us who travelled from Durban.

We heard two very insightful stories from Johannesburg. One was of a successful court injunction brought against the Municipality when they tried to move a group of homeless people without following due process. The court ordered that compensation be paid to the homeless for the loss of their belongings and also cautioned the city against using such illegal methods in future. SA courts continue to be a defence of the ordinary citizen against the over-reach of Government.

At the same time, it was also good to hear an example of co-operation with local government. The Johannesburg Inner City Partnership is focused on improving the CBD. They described to us some of the ways in which they were working with the homeless, seeing them as part of the solution and not simply as the problem. The irony was how similar this was to the public-private initiative that we spent months planning with eThekwini earlier this year, only for it to be pulled at the last minute.

Perhaps the saddest learning for the Durban group was to discover that – having led the country during lockdown – we are now falling further and further behind. Most other Metros, and some Provinces, now have properly formulated policies on homelessness. Apparently, one is being prepared for Durban: let us hope that they actually consult the people who understand the problem and not just the ones who tell politicians what they want to hear.

The process of shared learning continued afterwards with Hassan Khan, the CEO of The Haven (pictured above on the left) which runs 15 shelters in partnership with Provincial government in the Western Cape. He was travelling through Durban and Pietermaritzburg and agreed to deliver an informative session in each city with the local networks. It is great to know there is such a wealth of knowledge and experience to access.

Photo: Kelly Kropman (far right in white), the attorney who successfully led the Albert Farm case against the city of Johannesburg, leads a workshop at the National Conversation.

National Homeless Conversation #2 – Hearing From The Homeless

One feature that was really different about the 2022 Conversation was the significant and active participation by homeless people themselves who accounted for about one third of those present.

Many of them had come from a city-run shelter – appropriately located opposite the Constitutional Court: the approach of the shelter shows that they understand, for everyone to enjoy the rights promised by the Constitution, active steps need to be taken. The shelter does not just provide a safe (and comfortable) building for someone to sleep in, but also a programme led by trained social workers to help the person reintegrate into society. As one of the participants said: “We are not in the shelter because we are happy in the shelter; we are in the shelter because we want to build something for our own lives.”

A highlight was a ‘fishbowl’ exercise in which 50 homeless people sat in a big circle to talk to each other; the rest of us – NGOs workers, Government officials, church leaders, members of the public, academics – sat in a wider circle so we could listen in without disturbing them.

What was so impressive was the desire of the homeless men and women present to build up each other and also to challenge each other. One talked about how important it had

been for him to learn to be at peace with himself. Another – from the LGBTQI community – stressed how much it mattered that they as homeless people were accepting of each other and not judgemental. Another talked about the importance of constantly asserting for himself what he could do rather than focusing on what he could not. A perfect example of this was a young woman who had been homeless: she explained how a social worker had helped her understand what her potential was and that she was now herself training to be a social worker.

Photo: the two circles that were part of the 'Fishbowl' exercise.

Our Durban delegation included three people who have themselves been homeless: the testimonies they shared were especially powerful. Eric Makalo – well known because of his book-selling at the Botanic Gardens – is really committed to instilling a culture of reading. He talked about how he had turned his life around and encouraged the other homeless people present to read books to improve their lives. "It's all about the power of the mind. You can't just blame the government for everything. Instead you have to invest in yourself. I have learnt not to waste my time, my money or my thoughts. That way I can progress every day."

Mxolisy Mavimbela, another bookseller, was also passionate. "What can I lose to become positive, guys? All of us have dreams, even Street guys have dreams. NGOs can provide services but if we don't change our mindsets nothing is changed."

For many people, this fishbowl exercise was the highlight of the National Conversation. We are very grateful for all who participated. We plan to host similar opportunities at the Denis Hurley Centre for homeless people to speak out for themselves in a safe and supportive way.

CPTD

Synodal virtues: valuing and extending theological education

Read the article for CPTD points and record you response to the tasks found at the end of each article.

Professional Development Points Schedule

https://www.sace.gov.za/Documentation/PROFESSIONAL%20DEVELOPMENT%20POINTS%20SCHEDULE.pdf

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