UNIVERSITY OF CHICHESTER

Theology

Volume 1 of 1

A Tourist Theology: The Spiritual Experience of Visitors to Rural Churches

*

Mark John Betson

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2019

Abstract

THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Theology

*

A TOURIST THEOLOGY:

THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF VISITORS TO RURAL CHURCHES

Outside of normal worship and community activities there are a significant number of people who visit churches. For some the visitor numbers exceed the numbers at normal worship. However, little in depth research has been conducted on the experience of these visitors, particularly their spiritual experience. Therefore, no substantial or authoritative theology has been developed to support them and those responsible for the church they enter.

This study focuses on visitors to rural churches, where existing research in Rural Theology has called for there to be more detailed studies with visitors. To do this the use of language by the visitors to describe their experiences has been advocated as the most fruitful area of study. Responding to this, we have used semi-structured interviews with self-selected visitors to key rural churches, who have produced more detailed material for theological reflection.

Given that the most commented on feature of the church buildings was their association with people, and that some degree of English culture featured in the language used; the theological reflection was undertaken from a sociological basis using particularly the work of Zigmunt Bauman, on the post-modern character to suggest a theology that may underpin the spiritual experience of visitors.

Based on Bauman's identity of the tourist as a post-modern approach to living, a 'tourist theology' has been developed that takes the idea of the tourist as someone who is perpetually looking for new and attractive destinations; but for whom there is the need that

they proceed from a home, the safe and comforting environment that in reality may not exist for them.

These rural churches provide the image of that home in the community they imagine, one that is a safe and comfortable place to be, and for the visitor generates an experience of deep and profound peace. As well as having a positive effect on the visitor, this experience offers the opportunity for the Church to have an engagement with a wider range of people than just those that come on a Sunday morning.

Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Accompanying Materials

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Mark John Betson

declare that the thesis entitled;

A Tourist Theology: the Spiritual Experience of Visitors to Rural Churches

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University

- Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated

- Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed

- Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work

- I have acknowledged all main sources of help

- Where the thesis is based on work done by myself and jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself

- None of this work has been published before submission, or [delete as appropriate] parts of this work have been published as: [please list references]

Signed: …………………………………………………………………..
Date:…………………………………………………………………….

Acknowledgements

Definitions and Abbreviations

1. Introduction

> We in England live in the chill religious vapours of Northern Europe, where moribund religious establishments loom over populations that mostly do not enter churches for active worship even if they entertain inchoate beliefs. Yet these establishments guard and maintain thousands of houses of God, which are markers of space and time. Not only are they markers and anchors, but also the only repositories of all embracing meanings pointing beyond the immediate to the ultimate. They are the only institutions that deal in tears and concern themselves with the breaking points of human existence. They provide frames and narratives and signs to live by, and offer persistent points of reference. They are repositories of signs about miraculous birth and redemptive sacrifice, shared tables and gift-giving; and they offer moral codes and exemplars for the creation of communal solidarity and the nourishment of virtue…they celebrate and commemorate; they are islands of quietness; they are places in which unique gestures occur of blessing, distribution and obeisance; they offer spaces in which solemnly to gather, to sing, to lay flowers, and light candles. They are – in Philip Larkin's phrase – serious places on serious earth.[1]

This is how Grace Davie describes church buildings in England from her book on *Religion in Britain Since 1945*. Her words sum up the importance these buildings can hold for individuals and communities, even if they do not regularly participate in worship within them.

However, even in the chill religious vapours of Northern Europe, 85% of the population of England will still visit a church in any given year.[2] People come with beliefs and expectations; often not shaped by contemporary worship, but formed through their own past experience and encounters with churches in communicated culture.[3] They remain serious places on serious earth as is evidenced by the reaction to any attempt to close one of these buildings down.

---

[1] G Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 189-190
[2] *Telegraph View* 'It wouldn't be Britain without the Church' 23 December 2012 https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/9762521/It-wouldnt-be-Britain-without-the-Church.html (accessed 8th December 2018)
[3] A Lees-Smith, 'Ordinary Theology as Mother Tongue' in J Astley and L J Francis, (eds), *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 27-29

While Davie's words apply to churches in any context across the country, the iconic image of a church in England is usually one depicted as part of a bucolic country scene. Two thirds of all the Church of England's 15,000+ churches are in rural areas. Thus reflecting the historic association of churches with all settlements.[4] However, probably more important than this statistic is their continued depiction as necessary for identifying the English rural landscape. If you wish to test this assertion simply use a search engine to look up 'images of the English countryside' on the internet. This will demonstrate how many of these depictions contain churches. These buildings are one of the markers of English village life and as part of that have served for centuries the communities of villages in the role set out by Davie.

Contemporary visitors to these churches are often only noted if they leave a comment in a visitors' book. By their nature these are often very brief with few words, often descriptive such as 'beautiful' or 'peaceful'.[5] These visitors are not yet counted in the numbers recorded who utilise these buildings. While it is difficult to get an accurate number, they may match or on occasion exceed the numbers who regularly use them for worship.

This is a significant number of people who use these buildings, while little remains known about their theological motives. Work has been conducted on trying to establish some of the rationale behind these visits. This includes attempts to explore the theology expressed by visitors in their comments in visitor books and on prayer cards.[6] However, there has not been a detailed study of the spiritual experiences of visitors to these buildings. The research contained in this thesis is aiming to go some way to addressing the understanding of what theology could underline the experiences of visitors, and by doing so, better support them and the churches they visit.

Several areas of theology have already touched on the experience of people who come to rural churches. This includes specifically rural theology and a theology of place and pilgrimage. All of these have valuable insights to offer in considering the

---

[4] Report of the Rural Affairs Group of General Synod, *Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church* (London: Archbishop's Council, January 2015), 7

[5] N Morris, L Burton*,* 'The Kneelers are the most Impressive: Reflections on Reading a Visitors Book' in L J Francis, M Robbins (eds), *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 56-60

[6] For example see: T ap Sion 'Ordinary prayer and the Rural Church' in L J Francis and M Robbins (eds), *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 64-79

experience of visitors, but the aim of this study is to go beyond what these have already stated. This research will examine in greater depth the visitor who may or may not have a Christian faith, and who may or may not live in or have experience of the countryside.

Davie's description points to the fact that these buildings have a cultural significance for those who do not explicitly share the beliefs of those who worship there. With this in mind, and in noting the focus of this study is on people, the starting point for reflecting on the visitor comes from a sociological perspective rather than a biblical or systematic standpoint. The research will also extend outside the range of the Church or Christian community, and reflect on the experience of visitors more broadly. Their experience will undoubtedly be influenced by the Christian tradition and own memories and assumptions. These have always been places where people have brought their hopes and fears, traditionally with a Christian faith that encouraged them to be offered in prayer. The contemporary visitor is no different in bringing their own hopes and fears to these places – whether they choose to offer them in prayer or not. Their experiences will in part be shaped by the pressures and concerns in their lives, as much as by the heritage represented in the building.

Given that those who visit churches do not do so as part of an organised tour, but instead visit on an ad hoc basis, there is a necessity for understanding individual experiences. For any theology to be more broadly applicable, the reflection needs to link these experiences with common themes that are found in several examples. To reflect more broadly on what the visitor encounters, the focus of this study is direct engagement – of asking visitors about their experiences.

The comparison between sociology and the visitor experience, has helped to determine some cultural themes that permeate the language used by visitors to describe their experiences. These themes have theological significance as they describe an event that the visitor themselves also identifies as spiritual. It is unusual for a visitor who does not practice a recognised religion, to have a well worked out system of belief that accounts for their experiences. However, reflecting on the common cultural themes in the light of sociology can provide possible theological motives for these experiences.

This rationale has led to the development of a 'tourist theology,' thus proffering a new approach in understanding the experiences of visitors. It is a 'tourist theology' because it is based on a sociological reflection of a culture of visiting. Thus

recognising the 'tourist' as an identity that can be adopted as part of a post-modern character. It is not the seeking after the new and exotic, which in that reflection is identified as the goal of the tourist that informs the theology surrounding visits to these country churches. The necessary corollary for doing that in the life of the tourist is that they have a place of safety, a home from which to proceed in looking for the new and exotic. It is the need for a home, or at least to believe that home exists, which lies at the heart of the great sense of peace encountered in these churches.

The root of that sense of safety and home is in the permanence of these places in the life of a community. As noted by Davie they are anchors in space and time that mark the lives of generations. For the tourist, it is not necessary that the community represented there is a community they belong to for the experience; it is enough just to know that one can exist. This is highlighted by the sociological commentary on the postmodern condition, where the likelihood that people have the experience of community life, for any length of time, is decreasing.

This reflection on the experience of visitors can then present the opportunity to reinforce the idea of community for them, and look to encourage them in seeking community. For churches are the community of faith that established and maintained them across generations, and into which they invested their hopes and fears through prayer. The peace of these places is a source of comfort and hope, that is based on the strength found from looking to the community of the past who have enabled these places to endure.

2. Literature Review

The subject of this research is the people who visit rural churches and the theological role these places may play for them. The question being asked is: which theological ideas support and underpin the role of rural churches in the lives of the visitors? These visitors make up a significant proportion of the people who cross the threshold of a church building during a week. A submission by the National Churches Trust regarding an inquiry on rural tourism in England; undertaken by the Commons Select Committee on the Environment and Rural Affairs; gave a figure of 40 million visits to churches in 2008; an average of 700 – 4,000 visitors to each parish church.[7] A figure comparable to the number of worshippers on a Sunday.[8]

Given this significant number of people, the theological resources to support them have been underdeveloped. The theology associated with rural churches has evolved as a distinctive contextual theology over the last 30 years[9]. It specifically focused on the marginalisation of rural communities, and on supporting the worshipping communities in these locations. In addition, there has been substantial work over a longer period on the role remote places play in the Christian practice of pilgrimage. For these visitors to rural sites the theology that supports them is grounded in centuries old devotional practice. Although there has been a rise in the numbers who now embark on pilgrimage, the theology that supports them is not addressing those whose visit, which is not part of established devotional practice.[10] These visitors to rural churches come mainly as tourists, as visitors first and foremost, whose reasons for visiting may be complex or simply because of the interest the place generates. What is also apparent based on existing work, is that whatever their reason for visiting, they can have a significant spiritual impact on visitors or be incorporated into part of their individual spiritual practice.

---

[7] Rural tourism in England Enquiry: Response from the National Churches Trust, The National Churches Trust,
www.nationalchurchestrust.org/sites/default/files/National%20Churches%20Trust%20Rural%20tourism%20inquiry%20response%20%20FINAL.pdf (accessed 23rd July 2018)

[8] The 2011 Statistics for Mission published by the Church of England give average Sunday attendance in 2008 as approximately 800,000, or 41.6 million people attending Sunday worship over a year. See: Resources, Publications and Data, Church of England,
www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/2011statisticsformission.pdf (accessed 23rd July 2018)

[9] A notable beginning of this work in the UK is with the publication of Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, *Faith in the Countryside* (Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1990) and before that, works such as A Russell, *The Country Parish* (London: SPCK, 1986) have begun to identify this as a separate contextual theology.

[10] See C Bartholemew, F Hughes (eds), *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*
(London: Ashgate, 2004) for a commentary on the theology and practice of Christian pilgrimage today.

The aim of this research is to develop a theology that better supports visitors to rural churches. Therefore, the areas of theology and literature this research focuses on can be divided into two parts: firstly, rural churches and what Christian theology already says about these locations: secondly the literature around the expectations of visitors. The second area includes literature about the popular perception of these buildings beyond that of the worshipping community of the church. Furthermore, how does contemporary society view these sites and what are the motivations and preconceptions of those who visit them?

2.1 Existing Studies of Visitors to Rural Churches

While the theology to support visitors has been relatively underdeveloped, there have been several empirical studies regarding visitors to rural churches; several of which have been published in the *Journal of Rural Theology,* and subsequently compiled in the book *Rural Life and Rural Church*[11]. Of these, the main approaches have been characterised by the interpretation of comments made by visitors in a 'visitors' book', or from the prayer requests left by visitors on prayer cards/boards; by analysis of the results of questionnaires left or given to people visiting churches and by the method of interviewing. A summary of these studies is given below.

In a study of visitors' books spanning a period of 12 years from St Mary's, a small medieval church located in a valley on the Welsh boarder, Morris and Burton analysed approximately 2000 records. According to the authors 29% contained some spiritual elements, while the remainder were mostly connected with the church building and its contents. Of the spiritual elements the overwhelming majority expressed their appreciation for the tranquillity of the building and the environment. However, the authors did not think that the contents of the visitors' book were a good method of exploring the ordinary theology of the visitors; but commended the examination of the prayer cards/boards as being a better approach.[12]

Their rationale for this was that the focus of the visitor comments were mostly generalisations about the building itself; either generally for example, 'a gem of a church' or something specific regarding it, 'the kneelers are most impressive', and did not contain much 'God-talk'. Hence provided little information about the ordinary theology of visitors. They contrast this with studies by Brown and Burton and ap Siôn which consider people's entries on prayer boards; where although the number of entries is smaller compared to those in

---

[11] Francis, Robbins, (eds) *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*
(Sheffield: Equinox, 2012)
[12] Morris, Burton, 'The Kneelers are the most Impressive: Reflections on Reading a Visitors Book' 52-63

visitors' books; the focus of the entries were on personal concerns rather than the building. Therefore proffering a much greater insight into the individuals 'God-talk'.[13]

In a further study by ap Siôn, she examined 1,067 prayer cards in one rural church over a sixteen-month period, utilising a framework for analysis that she developed from the 2007 Hidden Britain Survey. The framework distinguished between three elements defined as intention, reference and objective. The notion of 'intention' is applied to distinguish among ten key areas in which the individual authors were concerned: illness, death, growth, work, relationships, conflict or disaster, sport or recreation, travel, open intention and general. The notion of 'reference' is applied to distinguish between four key foci in which the individual authors were concerned: themselves, other people who were known personally to the authors, animals which were known personally to the authors, and the world or global context. The notion of 'objective' is applied to distinguish between two effects which the individual authors envisaged because of their prayers of intercession or supplication in terms of primary and secondary control. In primary control, prayer authors explicitly suggest the desired consequences of their prayers. In secondary control, prayer authors place prayers and their consequences entirely in the hands of another.

Ap Siôn's analysis of the 1,067 prayer cards and the 1,370 individual prayer requests they contained, revealed 1,022 were of an intercessory type prayer mostly concerning the illness or death of another known to the author. The comments left were usually short such as, 'Please pray for [name] as they go into hospital.' Although the author is positive about the potential for this methodology for further study of the concerns and beliefs of ordinary people for the Church and Academy; the short format of the responses in general does not give much material to understand the concern or belief behind it. She recommends that further comparable studies be conducted across a range of rural churches, using this analysis technique to highlight specific areas for more in depth study.

The methods for further in-depth study require active engagement with visitors to the churches. Of the studies previously conducted, paper based questionnaires have commonly been employed. These have usually made use of well constrained answers that

---

[13] T ap Siôn, 'Listening to Prayers: An Analysis of Prayers Left in a Country Church in Rural England', *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 29, (2007), 199-226, and A Brown, L Burton, 'Learning from Prayer Requests to a Rural Church: An Exercise in Ordinary Theology', *Rural Theology*, 5, (2007), 45-52

require a simple positive or negative to a suggested set of responses, such as with a five point Likert scale.

An example is the work of Williams et al. with visitors to the remote rural cathedral of St David's in West Wales. In the questionnaire they employ, the visitor is first asked for some personal details including questions involving age and distance travelled. They are then given a number of statements to agree or disagree with. An attempt was made to distinguish between regular attendees at churches and how often they visited. The visitors experience was assessed by the use of four sets of seven items concerned with four domains. 'Overall impression', 'spiritual and religious', 'aesthetic and historic' and 'commercialisation'. Each of the items was assessed via a five point Likert scale ranging from 'agree strongly', 'agree', 'not certain' and 'disagree', to 'disagree strongly'. The questions utilised were, 'I found the cathedral uplifting', I felt a sense of God's presence from my visit', 'I found the information leaflets useful' and 'I visited the cathedral shop'.[14]

There were 514 responses to the questionnaire which were then subjected to rigorous statistical analysis through specialist software. The results provided demographic information on visitors to the cathedral and their experience in broad terms covering items from: 'I found the cathedral spiritually alive', to 'I felt a sense of Welsh culture', to 'product prices are reasonable in shop'. However, the scope for theological reflection was limited because of the lack of 'God-talk' in the responses. Again, the results pointed more in the direction of where further in-depth study was needed particularly in the area of secular tourists.

In further surveys employing questionnaires the number of responses ranged from 107 – 765, although 12,757 were obtained from a national visitors survey conducted over 163 churches. This was part of the Church Tourism Association and written up as a report for the Archbishops Commission for Rural Affairs (ACORA).[15] Use of the Likert scale enables the results obtained in this way to be subject to statistical analysis (as in the example from St David's Cathedral above), but the relevance of this analysis is still subject to the cautionary note of Astley, that it depends upon the quality of the questions being asked.

The study above highlights the danger that in using simple questions with very limited responses, such as with the Likert scale, the subsequent analysis of the responses is also

---

[14] E Williams et al. 'Visitor Experiences of St David's Cathedral: The Two Worlds of Pilgrims and Secular Tourists' in L Francis M Robbins (eds), *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, 208
[15] L Francis, J Martineau, 'Rural Visitors' (ACORA, 2001)

restricted. The call is for more refined studies to probe deeper into the visitor experience beyond what has been possible with the responses to the study.[16]

A methodology that restricts answers through constraints on responses such as with the utilisation of a five point scale, will necessarily restrict the freedom of visitors to explain their experience of visiting. Opening up the responses to questions, means giving the respondent greater freedom in how they wish to express their answer. Therefore, in doing so, potentially encapsulates more of the theology that lies behind it, through for example, the idiom of the language used. The assumption made in this case is that the truth claims by individuals have some relevance for the truth claims in theology, and that their theology is imbedded in the language they use.[17]

However, there is another cautionary note relating to this approach through the results of one of the surveys mentioned above; where an analysis was performed on the 765 questionnaires from the 12,757 from the national survey which included additional comments.[18] In this survey, of the responses obtained, only 518 were useful in not containing generalised or personal comments but were directly related to the church. Of these the responses were only broadly categorised because of the range of comments made (as might be expected with a non-directive additional comments section), hence any detailed conclusions were not possible; although in this study no detailed analysis of the language used in the comments was presented.

The work done in analysing the theology expressed by visitors to rural churches, as highlighted above, gives both an indication of the numbers of visitors involved, and that there is a need for more detailed work on the theology that supports their experience in these locations. Relatively simple questionnaires as part of an empirical study does not seem to be enough to gain much of an insight into that theology.

The theology of these visitors however, does not stand alone in relation to the context of these places; they have become significant locations for visitors because of their

---

[16] E Williams et al. 'Visitor Experiences of St David's Cathedral: The Two Worlds of Pilgrims and Secular Tourists', 212

[17] For example see: J Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 105 and D. Cupitt, *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech* (London: SCM Press, 2001)

[18] K Littler, L J Francis and J Martineau, 'I was Glad: Listening to Visitors to Country Churches' in *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 180 – 187.

history and purpose as places of worship. This has been formed in the prevailing theology that underpinned the actions of the community that has cared for them.

2.2 The Origins of Theology in and Around the Rural Church

Before and around the theology of visitors, is the theology that has underpinned these places in their creation and evolution as places of worship and cultural significance. In medieval Britain through to the Industrial Revolution the rural church would have been a feature in the lives of the majority of the population. People were intimately aware of the landscape around them, its dangers, productivity and seasons. Much of the language used in both the Old and New testaments assumes a knowledge of rural life by its listeners. Wealth and power were expressed in terms of numbers of animals and of the size of a harvest (e.g. Gen. 26:12-16, Luke 12:16-19), and metaphors using agricultural terminology are common. The role of the Church formed a common point in most people's lives with a host of local saints and traditions that embedded it in the community and the place.

However, the Reformation wrought a change which was to see a purge of these localised traditions. At the beginning of the Reformation the main difference to village churches was the change from ecclesiastical to secular authority by the local landowner. Furthermore, following the publication of Cranmer's Prayer Book in 1549, and its subsequent promulgation, a hither-to unknown uniformity of worship was imposed on the whole church. The effect on the rural church was most notable.[19]

A particularly detailed account the effect the Reformation had on the rural church in England, is given by Eamon Duffy in *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village.*[20] In this account Duffy uses the extensive writings of Sir Christopher Trychay a priest in the small Devon parish of Morebath. The account tells of both the nature of the devotion of the people prior to the introduction of the Book of Common Prayer, and the other institutions of the Reformation and their reaction after. It is clear that the community devotions were centred to a greater extent around the space and decoration of the church

---

[19] E Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*
(London: Yale University Press, 2001), 128
[20] Ibid, 65

beforehand, especially on the saints Mary and Jesus. Local saints were highly regarded as giving a sense of regional identity.[21]

The uniformity of the newly established Church of England in terms of worship and tradition, placed it one step apart from the local community and their practices. It did begin a national inculturation of the Church, in which the Prayer Book and most notably the Authorised or King James Bible from 1611, were both formed distinctively as a National Church, and which in turn formed the culture and language of the nation.

Shortly after this, notable figure George Herbert came into prominence shaping the image of the national and particularly the rural church. George Herbert cannot be underestimated in terms of his impact culturally on both the Church of England and the nation.

George Herbert was from a wealthy family background and did exceptionally well at Cambridge University with a likely place at the Royal Court. Instead he chose to be the parish priest of Fugglestone and Bemerton near Wilton outside Salisbury. He served a rural population of about 300.[22] Of this new position for George Herbert, Anthony Russell writes, 'There, for a little over two years, this tall emaciated man of such lovable gentleness and dignity, lived the life of a country parish priest and created a pattern of virtue and good practice which has done much to shape the Anglican parochial ministry'.[23]

George Herbert's reflections on his experiences are contained in the book *A Priest to the Temple or the Country Parson: His Character and Rule of Holy Life*. Theologically the work showed both high value placed on the authority of the parish priest, and high expectation on the standards of devotion and parochial practice exhibited by the priest. This theology is enshrined in a tradition that arose from the rural context of Herbert's parish experience, and has remained a model of ministry both in the countryside and for the Church of England as a whole. The image of the country minister it presents has also done much to shape a romantic image of rural churches in the popular imagination since.

This subject has been provocatively taken up by Justin Lewis-Anthony in his book *If you meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him: Radically Re-Thinking Priestly Ministry*, where he

---

[21] Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, 73
[22] A Russell, *The Country Parish* (London: SPCK, 1986), 204
[23] Ibid, 204

describes how the expectations created by the tradition of ministry inspired by George Herbert have done much to damage modern clergy. [24] In looking at the origins of this tradition, Lewis-Anthony believes that it is in Herbert's poetry that its roots lie. He quotes the introduction given in a 1907 collection of Herbert's work:

> Here as the cattle wind homeward in the evening light, the benign, white haired parson stands at his gate to greet the cowherd, and the village chimes call the labourers to evensong. For these contented spirits, happily removed from the stress and din of contending creeds and clashing dogmas, the message of the gospel tells of divine approval for work well done…And among these typical spirits, beacons of a quiet hope, no figure stands out more brightly or more memorably than that of George Herbert. [25]

The romantic image of the village parson is unmistakably conjured by such eulogies. It is attractive not least for the Church itself in depicting a golden age of the countryside and the place of the Church in it. As Lewis-Anthony concludes in his chapter on Herbert's life:

> The beauty of George Herbert's work, setting aside the beauty of his language, lies in the romanticism of his story, the bucolic vision described by Waugh in 1907. His story is a triumph of the mythos of the Church of England, the story we tell ourselves, to root ourselves in the soil and the society of England, to show that despite all the vicissitudes of the centuries, reformations, dissolutions, indolence, decay, revivals, disputes and decline, we are both the Church of England and the Church of England. This is our land, and George Herbert is the guarantor of our title to it. [26]

As suggested by Lewis-Anthony, this is a theology that has taken root within the Church of England and within the culture of the nation. The model of ministry proposed by Herbert has been extended to any context in the expectations of the parish priest, rural or urban. The imagery, which is at the heart of the romanticism of the model remains rural.

---

[24] J Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him: Radically Re-Thinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009)
[25] Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him,* 9, quoting A Waugh, *Introduction to George Herbert: Poems.* Quoted in T. S. Eliot, *George Herbert,* 20
[26] Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him,* 22

It is this parochial theology modelled and codified in his *Country Parson* by George Herbert, which has dominated rural theology until relatively recently. One of the key drivers for this change has been the increased mobility of people with improved transport. Firstly with the advent of the railways and then by car, which has enabled much greater access to and from the countryside. Rural populations have changed considerably, particularly since the 1960s with more access by more of the population to cars, and then in the 1980s with an accelerated move by people with means to do so to the countryside.

The main effect of these changes has firstly seen visiting and tourism become a mass activity, with those not from the local community or from the surrounding countryside to access rural churches. Secondly it has seen a radical change in the make up of the local community as more people chose to move from urban and suburban areas to villages. The rationale for this change were for reasons such as quality of life, beauty, and the image of the rural idyll that characters such as George Herbert have been used in the promotion of. In the 1980s changes in the property market also made it attractive for people to invest in rural locations that were sought after as tourist destinations. Furthermore, for being particularly well suited for commuting to major centres of commerce. The result has been an exclusion of traditional residents of these communities through high property prices, and an influx of people from differing backgrounds looking to retire with higher incomes. Equally an influx of people who will commute or who are looking for a second home.

Secondly, another change impacting the church is the provision of rural clergy over this time. Declining numbers in congregations and difficulties in finance have seen the number of parochial clergy in the countryside fall considerably. Stipendiary clergy have increasingly been asked to look after more churches in the countryside. This is now where the multi-parish benefice of several churches is by far the most common parochial situation. Lewis-Anthony states that while a romantic image of the eccentric and ever-present vicar in every village, whilst still a commonly held vision of ministry, does not reflect the reality of the vicar of a multi-parish benefice or a congregationally focused priest.

The theology practiced in and around rural churches has moved on in recognition of this. As increasing urbanisation pulled people from rural communities into the cities, then increasing mobility enabled those who could afford to do so to work in the city and live in the country. The result being the makeup of rural communities radically changed. There became

a clear disparity between the relatively poorly off indigenous population, and the wealthier individuals who chose to live in villages.

Following a movement in the 1980s, British theology looked at the application of liberation theologies from South America to increasingly obvious disparities in British society. The theology produced around rural churches sought to put rural theology alongside the theologies of liberation, 'in which experiences of oppression, vulnerability and marginalisation have led to a sustained reflection on the Christian tradition.' [27] Those marginalised in the countryside through poverty, lack of transport and services, through lack of understanding, and a voice to raise their concerns became the focus for the theology developed for rural areas.

As a continuation of work done as part of the ground breaking report *Faith in the City*, [28] the Archbishop's Commission on Rural Areas (ACORA) was formed and published *Faith in the Countryside* in September 1990. [29] This report led to a renewed interest in rural faith, the particular challenges the countryside was facing, and focused theological thinking towards situations of vulnerability and marginalisation in the countryside.

The report was magisterial in its scope covering all areas of rural life including the environment, the economy, social makeup, and education. Furthermore, it incorporated difficulties specifically around faith issues such as spirituality and worship, as well as mission and evangelism. The Commission was made up of a broad range of people including not only academic theologians and clergy, but representation from the National Farmers Union, experts in rural planning, a banker and a representative from a trade union.[30] Its output was summarised in 47 recommendations concerning rural areas; 16 of these recommendations were aimed at tackling injustices in the rural economy. This specifically incorporated services and environment, and the remainder were directed at the Church with the theme of reforming the organisation with regards to resources, training, support and buildings. The emphasis was clear regarding the guidance directed at the Church from recommendation 19. It preceded the majority of the recommendations specifically aimed at the Church stating, 'Dioceses should

---

[27] For example see: S Bergmann, *God in Context: A Survey of Contextual Theology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 8 and C Rowlands, *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), xiii
[28] Church of England, 'Faith in the City', www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/community-urban-affairs/urban-affairs/faith-in-the-city.aspx (accessed 9th May 2012).
[29] Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, *Faith in the Countryside* (Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1990)
[30] Ibid, iii-iv

pay particular attention to the need for the Church's mission and ministry to be focused in the world as well as within the Church.'[31]

The overall theme of the theology contained within *Faith in the Countryside* is one of liberation. It focuses on issues of injustice, vulnerability and marginalisation in rural communities and in the rural environment. It recommends that this approach should be the main focus of rural churches as well. With regards to the church building itself, it states that:

> A growing number of church people are actively trying to rearrange their church building through some process of reordering. We were impressed by those churches which did not leave this at the worship level but reviewed the use of the church building in broader community terms…Some of the most successful schemes we saw had clearly been designed so that the church could be used for a number of more secular activities. The best took into account the fact that the needs of the young, aged and handicapped are the same in social activities as well as worship.[32]

The above quote is a good illustration of the liberation emphasis throughout the report; the primary aim of the Church is seen to be to help those who are disadvantaged in the community. It also illustrates what impact that theology can have on the shaping of the building of the church.

With the focus that *Faith in the Countryside* gave, rural theology became more defined and additional work was added to the canon of rural theology. Rural theology became more accepted within a wider theological output of contextual theology. [33] An example of work which has gone further in developing rural theology in the UK is *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*. [34]

The book highlights some of the issues faced by rural communities, such as the changing makeup or even loss of the community in rural areas, which were also noted in *Faith*

---

[31] Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, *Faith in the Countryside,* 315
[32] Ibid, 246
[33] For an indication of the recent history of rural theology it is insightful to look at the history of the Rural Theology Association: The Rural Theology Association (RTA), www.rural-theology.org.uk/about-us/history (accessed 10th October 2011).
[34] J Martineau, L Francis and P Francis, *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues* (Norwich: SCM/Canterbury Press, 2004)

in the Countryside. Its theme remains similar to *Faith in the Countryside*, as illustrated by Jeremy Martineau in his introduction to *Changing Rural Life*:

> Ever since the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the changes to the once pastoral and agricultural countryside have been the subject of concern, with a generally muted response from government.
>
> Maybe it was the loss of men from towns and villages across the nation in the Great War of 1914-18 that forced the change in the pastoral scene most suddenly. Or was it the depression of the 1930s, or the near starvation of the 1939-45 war, or the advent of cheap and popular motoring in the 1950s, or the introduction of the Common Agricultural Policy in the 1960s, or the increase in global tourism, or the health scares of BSE or Foot and Mouth Disease, or the use of digital telecommunications in the first decade of this century? The response of the Anglican Church has been to maintain its fundamental structure expressed in the commitment to the parish as the basic building block for impacting on the lives of people.[35]

The rural context is one seen where radical change has been wrought but not acknowledged by those in authority. The Church (particularly as noted above through the parochial system) is viewed as a standing structure amid these changes from which critical observations can be made, and actions taken against the injustices these changes create. The theme is clearly one of liberation of the marginalised in the countryside.

To evidence this marginalisation, it often requires the use of sociological techniques and data to highlight the changes and inequality which are the seen as the sources of the injustice, and validate the response of the Church. Examples of other works which utilise these techniques include *Church and Religion in Rural England* and *Ministry in the Countryside*.[36]

The theology of this approach is generated by the Churches interaction with the people affected by these changes; the observations of the church are interpreted through a

---

[35] Martineau, Francis and Francis, *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues,* 1
[36] Ibid, and A Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside: A model for the Future*,
(London: Continuum, 2003)

biblical and theological lens through which a response is also generated. [37] In this approach, the function of the rural church as a place is to focus on the needs of the marginalised and the vulnerable in the immediate community; the prayers and the worship held there reflect these concerns, and the building itself is to be adapted and modified in response to them. [38]

2.3 From Liberation to Mission in Rural Theology

In the background to developments in rural theology discussed so far, there has been a progression in theological thinking around the rural church. From it being a common and embedded part of the fabric of people's lives, to responding to a realisation that the context around it has changed, and it requiring a renewed focus on justice and the marginalised people in the community.

More recently the theology around these places has changed again in response; not to changes in society but as a response to falling numbers attending worship at churches and to a more challenging financial situation. This has led the emphasis to fall on the evangelisation of communities being the prime concern of the Church, and the buildings needing to support this or be modified to do so. Otherwise they will become redundant.

Developments in the wider Church have focused this response in terms of the mission of the Church. Mission as a response by the Church in *Changing Rural Life* is seen as a 'witness' to Christ in the community through the pastoral concern it offers. However, the view of Church as witness to God's work in the world is insufficient in terms of its mission where it does not seek to build up or create a worshipping community. [39] This recognised in part by the authors in *Changing Rural Life,* and particularly by Rowan Williams in his theological reflection that concludes the book, where he states this regarding mission and evangelism in the rural church:

> Part of what I have been suggesting, and part of the whole thrust of this book, is
> that so far from our living in the afterglow of rural piety which has characterized

---

[37] Examples of the techniques used in pastoral theology can be found in the works of a number of authors, such as: D Willows and J Swinton, *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care* (London: JKP, 2000), K Litchfield, *Tend My Flock* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006) and P Ballard and J Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action* (London: SPCK, 1996)
[38] Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside: A model for the Future,* 224
[39] For a discussion of this please see W Richebacher, 'Missio Dei: the Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path' *International Review of Mission*, Vol. 92 Issue 367, (2003), 593, and D Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 78

the greater part of Christian history, it would be more accurate to say that rural faith is still finding its distinctive voice.[40]

As illustrated by the quote from Rowan Williams, rural theology has moved in response to this challenge. It has focused more on evangelism than on issues of marginalisation within rural communities.

Sally Gaze is an example of a theologian who articulates this reasoning concerning the rural Church. In her book *Mission Shaped and Rural* she is critical about the church for not wanting to grow in terms of its worshipping congregation, but simply being content that it remains.[41] She uses a farming analogy to illustrate this:

> The Church of God however, has not yet completely filled its main purpose. There are plenty of people who have not tasted God's word. The Church's problem is not that we have produced too much fruit – but that the soil is stony, the predators and the weeds are prolific. When being fruitful is hard, it is easier to find some sort of sense of achievement by changing the focus away from harvest to keeping the 'farms' going.[42]

This theological approach is still aimed at the local community, but unlike one that seeks to align itself with the vulnerable and marginalised; it seeks to reach out to the whole community with the specific aim of inviting them to be part of a Church community. A gathered community set apart from the rest of the community through biblical study and worship.

Gaze's argument is that, as she sees it, the passive Church in these communities is failing in its Christian calling of discipleship. The existing structures of worship and potentially of the building of the church, which have previously typified a national culture, she identifies as not reaching the community and culture that exists now:

> We need to stop starting with the Church and focus instead on God's mission. Instead of existing forms of church providing the limits and the shape that

---

40 R Williams 'Theological Reflection' in Martineau, Francis and Francis (eds), *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*, 255
41 R Jeffrey, 'Theology of Mission' in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*,
(London: SCM Press, 1969)
42 S Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 3

Christian mission can take, we need to discover the part of God's mission to which each Christian community is called and let God's mission limit and shape our churches. [43]

Mission is therefore seen as the founding principle of the Church and hence its theological focus. Gaze describes the pattern of mission as following the pattern of Jesus' ministry in being incarnational and 'dying to live'. [44] The incarnational element means that churches in the countryside need to enter their rural context. The 'dying to live' element means that the churches should be prepared to give up their current form, and re-form according to the needs of their current mission context. [45]

As this approach criticises a rural theology that does not prioritise evangelism, which could be argued of the liberation focused theologies; a criticism of this approach is found in the analogy of the farm from Gaze in relation to the rural Church. If this analogy is applied further following the experience of contemporary farming, the search for bigger yields in terms of the harvest has seen the ending of many small family farms in favour of more industrialised agriculture. Transposed back upon the Church, the logical conclusion is a focus upon more urban contexts as there are more potential people to reach there, and the effective transfer of resources and closure of many small rural churches. This idea has been noted by several commentators looking towards the future, particularly of the Church of England.[46]

A criticism of this theology is that it undervalues the other aspects of the Church in these locations in being a witness to the marginalised, and as pointed out in Jeremy Martineau's introduction about the history of the Church being a continual presence.

Some recent works published on rural theology take up this theme of re-forming the rural church to meet the needs of the current context, but have expressed this from a perspective where evangelism is not the sole guiding principle. In *Re-shaping Rural Ministry* the editors give a further important principle from Luke Chapter 10:

---

[43] Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, 3
[44] Ibid, 14
[45] Ibid, 10-11
[46] See G Fraser 'We Must do to our Churches what Beeching did to the Railways' *The Guardian*, 15th October 2015 (accessed 30th July 2018) 2018)
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/oct/15/we-must-do-to-our-churches-what-beeching-did-to-the-railways

The Luke 10 passage begins by recognising that mission arises from *relationship* with Christ and *being received* by the community. In this example, without relationship with Christ and reception be the community, mission cannot happen. Luke 10 suggests a further important principle for Christian mission: that for the sake of its integrity, faithful presence appropriate action should precede words. Let us not talk of the rule of God before we have demonstrated it.' [47]

Re-shaping Rural Ministry clearly links the liberation emphasis, given by *Faith in the Countryside's* recommendation for the Church to concentrate on the needs of the world, and not just the Church. Furthermore, the requirement for mission that seeks to evangelise as well. They look at the mission of the Church in the countryside in terms of rural evangelism. Moreover, they also stress that the rural areas are in the most danger of marginalisation in national life, and the role of the Church in being 'a prophetic voice to address the issues facing the countryside' bridging the gap between theological aspects. [48]

The argument they draw from Luke 10 is that for the Church in the countryside to be seen as authentic in its mission, it needs first to recognise and respond to the needs of the whole community. It is only then that the community will respond to the message of the good news of Jesus Christ that is at the heart of evangelism, and come to gather in worship.

2.4 A Theology of Place

The above discussion has run through the history of rural theology. Its first incarnation was shared more universally with the Church, as it fitted with the lives of most of the population who lived in rural areas. It became codified and mythologised in the parochial ministry illustrated by George Herbert that fitted with the popular view of the rural idyll. This parochial view was not notably challenged, until significant movements of people into rural populations set up disparities in communities that the Church was called to respond to. Its response was to develop a contextual theology, where rural theology became a separate strand that focused on the situations of injustice and marginalisation this disparity created. In the latest move, paralleling developments in the wider Church, the need to refocus on evangelisation has become goal of rural theology. Developing a theology which is context specific, and which is

---

[47] J Bell, J Hopkinson, and T Willmott (eds), *Re-Shaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), 3-4
[48] Ibid, 25, 95

aimed at the effective discipleship of rural communities, means that the trend of numerical decline in the congregations of rural churches can be reversed.

However, all of the rural theology discussed above has been developed to support the local community or the worshipping community. Little emphasis has been given to visitors to church buildings, what attracts them to these locations and their experiences. These are largely seen as irrelevant to the needs of either, but as illustrated by the numbers who visit churches, compared to the worshipping congregation, visitors are numerically significant for rural Churches. A different strand of theology which has taken the importance of visitors and their experience seriously has been a theology of place.

It has long been recognised that there is a sacred aspect to church buildings, they are viewed as the space in which God is experienced and has been experienced in the past. This theology is explored by John Inge in his book *A Christian Theology of Place. A Theology of Place* calls for the recognition of the history and tradition of a location in people's experience of God, recognising the 'sacramental' nature of the place.[49] Various authors set this theology of place within their own theological perspectives, such as Sally Gaze setting it within the mission imperative of the rural church[50] and others in its role with the local community.[51]

They are places where prayer has been valid, and where important rites of passage have been performed (baptisms, marriages, etc) creating an association with them by those who visit. While other authors seek to incorporate this theology of place within their own theological perspectives, there is relatively little concentration in rural theology on the theology of place from the perspective of the experience of the visitor.

In the focus on the worshipping congregation the importance of these church buildings has been largely overlooked in terms of their significance as local *shrines* – places where God is encountered in and outside of worship.[52] David Brown argues in his book *God and the Enchantment of Place,* that church buildings and their environment have been seen by more recent Christian theology only in terms of their instrumental or utilitarian value.[53] The quote commending church reordering that focuses on the utilitarian value of the church

---

[49] J Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 115
[50] Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, 89-95
[51] Bell, Hopkinson, and Willmott (eds), *Re-Shaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook*, 48-50
[52] Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place,* 114
[53] D Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2

building from *Faith in the Countryside* above is illustrative of this view. However, he and other authors suggest such places can act to mediate an experience of holiness through the perception of God relating to human beings and their world.[54]

Tim Gorringe has written on the sacred quality of buildings and their relationship to people in his work on the built environment.[55] His work tackles issues of justice, empowerment and redemption as expressed in the constructed environment, and theologically critiques the way that it is built. He argues that theology has tended to ignore the small world of the individual and their daily lives, and instead focuses on the greater work of eternal salvation; thus overlooking the importance of where and how people live. He argues that there can be no distinction between the sacred and the secular in a Trinitarian theology, which sees God in all things and effectively imbues all places with sacred quality.[56] In relation to the current Christian view on buildings, he quotes from Nicholas Wolterstorf that, 'We have adopted a pietistic-materialistic understanding of man, viewing human needs as the need for a saved soul plus the need for food clothes and shelter. True shalom is richer than that.'[57]

Gorringe tracks the movements in Christian thinking about place from the medieval idea of needing to find God apart from the structures of everyday life. From finding architectural expression in the concept of sacred space, to the Reformation movement towards the house again becoming the church.[58] However, as he cites from Mircea Eliade, it seems that the distinction between the sacred and the profane will not be eliminated, as human beings find the sacred in something wholly different to what they consider to be profane.[59] Gorringe also puts forward that Christianity is wedded to the 'little tradition', after Robert Redfield[60], where it is not in the grand architecture where the sacred is found but in the work of unknown craftsmen in every village town and city.[61]

The relationship between the Church and its buildings was reviewed for the Church of England in 2014/5 by a group chaired by John Inge the author of *A Theology of Place*. In the

---

[54] D Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*, 24 and P Stanford, *How to Read a Graveyard: Journeys in the Company of the Dead* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), vii

[55] T Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[56] Ibid, 9

[57] N Wolterstorf, *Art in Action* (Carlisle: Solway, 1997), 82

[58] Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 10-11

[59] Ibid, 11

[60] R Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), Chapter 3.

[61] Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 9

beginning of the report the group highlights the significance of this issue for the Church of England using some statistics:

> Some 78% of the Church of England's 15,700 churches are listed. Over 57% of churches are in rural areas, where only 17% of the population lives. 91% of rural churches are listed, compared with 63% in suburban and 55% in urban areas. The Church of England is responsible for around 45% of the grade I listed buildings of England and almost three-quarters of these are in rural areas.[62]

The principle remit of the group was 'To consider what functions need to be exercised nationally to advance the mission of the Church of England through its use and stewardship of church buildings, and how they might best be carried out.' The comments about population in the statistics given above highlight that the report primarily considers church buildings in relation to local communities and congregations, not visitors, otherwise those figures would be irrelevant.

The report has highlighted issues that have been known for some time, in rural areas: 75% of churches have attendance of fewer than 37 people, half fewer than 19, and a quarter fewer than 10. Nationally, a quarter of the 16,000 churches have weekly attendance below 16. Also 75% of churches in rural areas are Grade I or II listed buildings. The response suggested in the report was to look at reducing the number of services at less well attended churches to only major festivals, but to keep the churches open with the help, preferably, of the local community.[63]

The highlighting of these issues has provoked a number of reactions in the press. Notably in Giles Fraser's blog for *The Guardian* which called for a 'Beaching style' cull of rural churches to release the Church from the burden of them.[64] However, there have been a number of other comments particularly in response to Giles Fraser that highlighted the value of these buildings. For example: 'I would like to emphasise that Christian faith for most is not a set of abstract propositions, but is intimately allied to place and identity, which is to say the

---

[62] J Inge, *'Report of the Church Buildings Review Group'* Church of England, September 2015, 1, http://www.churchcare.co.uk/images/church_buildings_review_report_2015.pdf (accessed 2nd August 2018)
[63] Ibid
[64] G Fraser, 'We Must Do To Our Churches What Beeching Did To The Railways' *The Guardian*, 15th October 2015 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/oct/15/we-must-do-to-our-churches-what-beeching-did-to-the-railways (accessed 30th July 2018)

parish church.'[65] 'Surely those 10 people in the pews in rural areas should not be cast out of their stunning buildings where, just maybe, even one of them finds a deep peace and sanctuary.'[66]

Simon Jenkins in his blog responded to Giles Fraser commenting how much today Beaching's cuts seem to be lamented, and that his response would be to take the religion out of churches, and instead turn them over to Parish Councils as community buildings.[67] He comments, 'Like millions of people, I don't go to church, but I do go to churches – 85% of the public visits a church every year. We regard them as the community's ritual forum, its museum, its art gallery, its concert hall, its occasional retreat for peace, consolation and meditation.'[68]

Giles Fraser's view of the encumbrance of small churches is not new. In his 2004 book *Re-Pitching the Tent,* Richard Giles looks to the example of the supermarket. He compares the Church of England situation to that of owning numerous corner shops in comparison to major (particularly food) retailers who invested in large out of town supermarkets:

> It should be noted that the 'corner shop' approach of established churches such as the Church of England, is diametrically opposed to that not only of major retailers but also of other Christian traditions, such as the Roman Catholic and Pentecostal Churches, which have adopted the 'supermarket' approach of fewer and bigger centres. Centralisation of this kind is also more likely to engender a readiness to view buildings as disposable items in an overall mission strategy.[69]

The conversation in the blogs and in the quote from *Re-Pitching the Tent* illustrates different theologies which value these places in different ways. The blog by Fraser does not value these buildings as part of the mission of the Church, but does sees them as an encumbrance on the people who worship there. Giles also sees these places to be of limited

---

[65] Response to Giles Fraser blog by Edward Condry, Bishop of Ramsbury, 'Rural Churches still Perform a Vital Role' https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/16/rural-churches-still-perform-a-vital-role , 16th October 2015, (accessed 30th July 2018)
[66] Response to Giles Fraser blog by Gordon Cooper of Flackwell Heath, Buckinghamshire, 'Rural Churches still Perform a Vital Role' https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/16/rural-churches-still-perform-a-vital-role , 16th October 2015, (accessed 30th July 2018)
[67] S Jenkins, 'England's Churches can Survive – but the Religion will have to go', *The Guardian*, 22nd October 2015 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/22/churches-survive-church-of-england-religion-buildings (accessed 30th July 2018)
[68] Ibid
[69] R Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent: The Definitive Guide to Reordering Your Church*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), 75

value in situations where they are not able to be reformed to suit a mission strategy that focuses on large congregations. The comments to Fraser's blog illustrate the high local and individual value these places can have in community and personal spirituality. Simon Jenkins' response in his blog provides yet another aspect in theology where he values the building as a spiritual place above any association it has with the institutional Church.

These theologies surrounding church buildings have their origin in a wider debate about the mission of the Church (as discussed above), and cultural and sociological debates with theology. The change in the public debate as reflected here, is that the Church sees itself as much more of a gathered community, set apart from the public as a whole, but with the right to speak into the public sphere. The counter to that as illustrated by Jenkins, is that by doing so the Church makes itself less relevant to the greater public debate.[70]

In addition, as was the case with the use of a farming analogy by Gaze in relation to rural theology, the analogy used by Giles of the 'supermarket' relating to the building of the church in the theology of place, can be critiqued because it does not hold up under scrutiny. For example the out-of-town supermarket model is now seen as outdated by retailers, with many abandoning plans for future buildings, and cutting the numbers they already have. Instead:

> The weekly 'big shop' is becoming extinct, as time-poor shoppers become more
> impulsive and less organised, preferring to 'shop for now' by grabbing things as
> an when they are needed from local retailers.[71]

It is not that 'shoppers' do not visit these supermarkets, but that they are much more gregarious in their habits. The retail expert Clare Bailey describes this move thus:

> Where a customer might have been happy a few years ago to trudge around a
> massive supermarket and put everything in their basket from one place, our

---

[70] See the discussion in S Bruce, *Politics & Religion* (London: Wiley, 2003) around the relevance of the Church in British public debate, Chapter 1.

[71] L Ridley, 'British Shoppers Have Fallen Out Of Love With Supermarkets - And Here's Why', *Huffington Post* 10th September 2015 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/09/10/morrisons-tesco-supermarkets-closing-shopping-habits_n_8115464.html (accessed 30th July 2018)

behaviour has shifted…We are comfortable with doing a basic shop in Aldi and a top-up shop in M&S, for instance.[72]

If the analogy made by Richard Giles is continued, then the suggestion is that people may be more gregarious in their religious habits as well as their retail ones – visiting multiple churches of different sizes and flavours, as well as other spiritual sources. Hence, it can be seen that the theology behind this analogy of the big congregation church being relevant to more people, is one that does not take into account visitors or tourists who will not find all their spiritual needs met in one place.

In the review of the Church of England's churches, John Inge tries to encompass the theological views that inform Fraser and Giles on the one hand, and Jenkins on the other, for example:

> …there remains within the Church, 'a spectrum of views ranging from a conviction that stewardship of so many of the country's finest community buildings is a precious opportunity for mission, and the pursuit of the beauty of holiness to a view that the stewardship of buildings is at best a distraction from the work of making disciples and potentially a temptation to idolatry.' This tension is a theological as well as practical one.[73]

His language seeks to place the role of the buildings within the religious context into which he is speaking with this report, the contemporary situation of the Church of England. In taking two extremes of a spectrum he cites one extreme; that these places are sacramental, as coming from the likes of George MacLeod founder of the Iona Community. He describes Iona as a 'thin place' where the material and the spiritual come close together. He does not cite a particular example of the other extreme of this perspective, but simply notes that it does exist as he describes above. The suggested position of Giles Fraser from his blog would be towards the alternative of George MacLeod, while Jenkins would possibly be closer. However, Jenkins clearly disassociates the spirituality of the building with the institution of the Church.

The position of Richard Giles is less certain in this spectrum. While he rejects reverence for the building, his book about re-ordering the space used for worship and

---

[72] L Ridley, 'British Shoppers Have Fallen Out Of Love With Supermarkets - And Here's Why', *Huffington Post* 10th September 2015 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/09/10/morrisons-tesco-supermarkets-closing-shopping-habits_n_8115464.html (accessed 30th July 2018)
[73] Inge, *Report of the Church Buildings Review Group,* 25

hospitality, clearly indicates the importance of that space in mission. He sees the interior of the church as key in emphasising welcome and hospitality. Furthermore, all too commonly encounters buildings that, as he sees it, proclaim an antiquated view of Christianity that has nothing to do with the current community that worships there.[74] Giles clearly does not see the stewardship of buildings as a distraction from mission – quite the opposite, he sees that not enough attention has been paid to buildings by their congregations, and that they have been allowed to ossify, and in doing so hinder the mission of otherwise successful congregations.

Maggie Durran in her book on *Making Church Buildings Work* states this point of view as well, but from a financial perspective as well as missional one:

> In a difficult financial climate, in the process of finding ways to make our [church] buildings sustainable – that is, to find ways to pay for repairs and maintenance so that the building is there for future generations – many churches seek to establish additional uses for their building, so it can earn its living every day and not just on Sundays.[75]

Durran's work continues to prioritise the use of the building for worship on a Sunday, listing developments in worship and the shape these dictate in church structure:

> In our present age there are great movements in liturgy and worship. Focus is not just on the numinous but also on the immanence of more than the transcendence of God. And in the wide spectrum of current patterns of worship, whether maintaining the Anglo-Catholic (often in Victorian neo-Gothic cathedral sized parish churches) or establishing a charismatic community of the gathered church, diversity and change are rife.

The movement in worship and in the general usage of the church building suggested in her book, indicate that a more flexible multi-use space is desirable in churches today. She does emphasise due thoughtfulness concerning the history of the church building, and how successive generations have left the architectural stamp of their faith there. However, the

---

[74] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent: The Definitive Guide to Reordering Your Church,* 8
[75] M Durran, *Making Church Buildings Work* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005), 4

approach taken in the book is indicative of developments that see a utilitarian view of buildings within the Church, and a move towards encountering God in the gathered community.[76]

What the difference between Giles and MacLeod seems to be, is a difference between 'sacred space' and a 'sacred place'. They both agree on the importance of a particular space, but there is more to this concept than the beauty and ordering of the buildings that inhabit that space.

In Giles' book his concept of re-pitching the tent, although in the text he speaks of place, could be argued as treating the church building as space instead. Ideally the church building is a completely collapsible feature that can be located anywhere, and with a format suitable for the current group of worshippers. It is free from the hierarchical practices and tradition of previous generations.[77]

In trying to understand this difference, Walter Brueggemann has provided one of the most significant reflections on the importance of place in his work, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. In this, he explores the theological importance of place to ancient Israel in the Old Testament, and how that carries through to the New Testament. In trying to clarify place, somewhere rooted in a particular location, as different to space, Bruggemann offers the following reflection:

> 'Space' means an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free from pressures and void of authority. Space may be imagined as a weekend holiday, a vacation, and is characterised by a kind of neutrality or emptiness waiting to be filled by our choosing. Such a concern appeals to a desire to get out from meaningless routine and subjection. But place is a very different matter. 'Place' is space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that

---

[76] Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*, 5
[77] Giles, *Re-pitching the Tent: The Definitive Guide to Reordering Your Church*, 43-44

our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.[78]

In this definition it is clear that Giles' interpretation of the church building is one of a sacred space more than one of a sacred place, advocating a detachment from the history which has formed its structure. This is completely at odds with Jenkins' interpretation that the sacredness of the building is wholly because of its historical connection to where it is.

The detachment from place that Inge suggests as one theological standpoint, does not seem to be something sustainable for a Church, as a recent report by the Centre for Theology and Community concerning the London Borough of Islington has pointed out. In the preface to the report (also shared with Bishop John Inge) Bishop Dr Joe Aldred reminds us of the importance of place – a home – for all people:

> 'Widespread refusal of use of church and school halls spurred Caribbean, and African worshippers on to acquire - by sacrificial self-financing - their own buildings. Such acquisitions became symbols of migrant communities establishing themselves in their new homeland, and of independence - now being able to determine the use of their own buildings to suit their spiritual, social and cultural experience and practices. [79]

The research carried out for the report indicated that the churches in the borough today, of those that rent premises, every single one would rather own their building. The significance of owning your own place as a church remains an aspiration for worshippers without distinction.[80]

In the discussion above, the issues a theology of place draws out have been highlighted. A theology of place calls for the recognition of the history and tradition of a location in people's experience of God, marking out somewhere sacred to people.[81] As pointed out by Gorringe the sacramental nature of these places is not defined necessarily by what is grand or what inspires awe, but by the meaning it has for people.[82] However, the concept is

---

[78] W Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gifts, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 4.
[79] T Thorlby, *Assets not Burdens: Using Church Property to Accelerate Mission*, Centre for Theology and Community Report, January 2017, Preface.
[80] Ibid, 41-42
[81] Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place,* 115
[82] Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*, 9

not without controversy as the blog by Giles Fraser demonstrates. The value of a place to people is an emotive subject, as what is sacramental about its nature is not universally accepted. History and tradition remain important for some, while what is present and pressing, in terms of need, override these things for others. This controversy highlights the difference between 'sacred space' and a 'sacred place', where one can be constantly reshaped, without reference to location, and one that is rooted in the history of a particular location.

2.5 Shrines and Pilgrimage

As commented on by David Brown these local places of sacramental value have significance to people as shrines, that is the building itself mediates a connection with the spiritual. [83] The place of a shrine has a history in Christian theological thinking. In Brueggemann's book on *The Land* he points out the biblical precedent for this spiritual connection to a place from the Old Testament. For example, he cites the incident where Jacob dreamed at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-22):

> Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

In the quote above, Bruggemann highlights the connection seen by Jacob between the place and God; in this place he had dreamt of a ladder connecting heaven and earth which gave it spiritual importance, and marked it out as the 'gate of heaven'. In the New Testament Bruggemann notes, that the same importance can be attributed to the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ, who lived and went about in a particular place and at a particular time.[84] For example, take the gospel account in Luke of Jesus' birth:

> In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she

---

[83] Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place,* 114
[84] Ibid, 51

gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.[85]

It can be seen in the text how specific the author has been about the time and location of Jesus birth, with the governorship of Syria and the place of Bethlehem. The importance of these places associated with Jesus' life, death and resurrection in Christian theology and practice, can be traced back to the fourth century; where the elevation of places such as Jerusalem and the Holy Land were justified theologically by the incarnation.[86]

These places became the first 'shrines' in the Christian tradition, and in search of an encounter with God the first Christian pilgrimages visited these sites.[87] Later in the middle-ages the location of shrines broadened to other places where God had been historically encountered; places commonly associated with saints and martyrs, such as Rome and Canterbury. [88]

Medieval spirituality suggests that there are three main ways of pursuing Christian life: through practical service, developing our inner relationship with God and through visiting special places and experiences. All of which are not necessarily distinct or exclusive in individual lives, but woven together in different proportions depending on the individual.[89]

Bartholemew and Hughes in *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* explore the roots of this practice. In relation to the development of medieval pilgrimage they comment that the aim of all true pilgrims was not in the final analysis to see Jerusalem but to see Jesus:

> Each Jerusalem, whether interior, earthly or heavenly, was only of importance as
> the setting in which God could be encountered and it is that encounter which we
> need to pursue. The God of the Bible is a God who interacts with real people in
> real geographical settings. Remembering and revisiting places which have
> witnessed such events is not necessarily wrong. What is vital is that such acts of

---

[85] Luke 2:1-7

[86] Bartholemew, Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage,* 87

[87] Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place,* 93

[88] J Sumption, *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God* (Mahwah NJ: HiddenSpring, 2003), Sumption catalogues in his book the development of pilgrimage in the medieval period and the broadening of sites where pilgrims travelled.

[89] Bartholemew, Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage,* 106

recall lead to an ever-increasing awareness that the God who has acted 'somewhere' is to be encountered everywhere.[90]

In Britain, following the example of the Desert Fathers, Celtic Christianity sought out wilderness places to found communities, and the monasteries they created quickly became sites of pilgrimage.[91] Philip Sheldrake notes that Celtic Christianity was unusually influenced by monasticism, of a type characterised particularly by asceticism, and by numerous hermits living in wild and isolated places. He quotes Richard Morris in describing the originators of this type of monasticism:

> Christian monasticism…originated in the kingdom of the scorpion and the hyena: a world of rock and heat. Several centuries later the biographers of holy men in north-west Europe depicted their subjects as seekers after landscapes and environments which were correspondingly forbidding.[92]

Conversely these sites were also generally accessible often not being too far from local settlements, or being on major travel routes. There was a tension between these sites being secluded and the accessibility for pilgrims, often both being facilitated by being located on an island or near the sea so that access by boat was a possibility.[93]

In selecting sites, Celtic Christianity considered both practical and spiritual factors and in addition the nature of the place itself had significance. Places were sought out where for some reason the boundaries between heaven and earth were brought close. Some were traditional places from pre-Christian times such as woodlands or wells, or at burial sites where by their very nature the boundary between the material world and the spiritual world were brought close.[94] Celtic Christians were heavily influenced by kinship relations, where ancestry was important and also linked the people to a particular place.[95] Often, subsequent Christian writings concerning the founding of these sites, glossed over the traditions behind their selection, focusing instead on saintly or angelic guidance placing them there.[96]

---

[90] Bartholemew, Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage,* 107
[91] P Stanford, *The Extra Mile: A 21st Century Pilgrimage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 35
[92] P Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London: DLT, London, 1995), 22 quoting R Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London: W&N, 1989), 104
[93] Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds*, 22-30
[94] Ibid, 30
[95] Ibid, 35
[96] Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds*, 31

Sheldrake comments that overriding these practical, spiritual and traditional factors it seems that the Celtic pilgrims had a belief in one particular place; their 'place of resurrection', that they determined was nothing less than their doorway to heaven.[97] Celtic pilgrims could be very counter-cultural for their context in departing from 'home turf', the place of their kinship relationship to find this special place.[98] So in addition to the tension between accessibility and seclusion there was an additional tension. This being in the selection of sites of sacred significance between traditional places, and those of particular significance as a place of resurrection for the wanderer from their home.

In addition to Celtic Christianity, the Christianity which entered into England from Europe with the arrival of St Augustine, brought the beginnings of a cult of saint worship, which developed a more political aspect in the location of a holy place. The cult of saint worship had its origins with the martyrs of the early church, whose graves became focal points for religious devotion. In contrast to Roman funeral practices of the day, the devotion offered, extended beyond any affection due to kinship, and encompassed a whole community.[99]

> It is clear from the testimony of early Christian writers that what impelled the devout to visit these holy graves was a belief that in some mysterious way the saint, though dead in body, continued to maintain contact with the earthly sphere through the physical remains that he had left behind. The bones provided a channel of communication, a 'holy hot-line', between earth and heaven. Furthermore, the relics of a saint were a source of spiritual power which could be used, for example, in healing infirmities; this power was accessible at the grave of the saint. Indeed by the end of the fifth century, perhaps much earlier, the saints were conceived as actually dwelling at their tombs, as well as being present in heaven.[100]

From the end of the third century, beginning in the east and progressing to the rest of the Roman Empire (although not in Rome where the practice remained largely prohibited),[101] a new practice began that saw the movement and fragmentation of the remains of the deceased saints. If the sanctity associated with the saint was believed to be associated

---

[97] Ibid, 31
[98] Ibid, 64
[99] J Crook, *Medieval English Shrines* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), 4
[100] Ibid, 5
[101] Crook, *Medieval English Shrines,* 25

with their body, then movement of that body to another place also conveyed that sanctity. Also if this is the case, then their sphere of influence may be increased by the distribution of parts of their body to different sites, and yet further by the belief that objects the saint touched or were associated with their martyrdom became holy; thus increasing the number of objects that can convey the power they are believed to have.[102] Where this fragmentation of the body was not practiced, or where it remained largely intact, then the location of the body became the focus of travel for the devout as pilgrims to the site.

The practice of venerating the body of a saint may have been executed in England before the arrival of St Augustine,[103] but became more common afterwards following patterns from the continent notably from medieval France. These patterns saw the development of local saints (as noted in Morebath), and subsequently of more elaborate tombs for these saints with decoration looking back to sixth-century Rome.[104]

The cult of the saints reached a high point in the late 13th Century and early 14th Century, where tomb-shrines for saints were located at most major centres of worship.[105] Since this time, the act of pilgrimage and the concept of a shrine as a destination for this journey have been intrinsically linked. However, the practice of pilgrimage and the concept of a shrine suffered during and after the Reformation following their association with indulgences.[106] In England from about 1538, the lights before the images of the saints were extinguished, their shrines were despoiled and pilgrimages were banned.[107]

But despite the Reformation, there remained within the church in England the view of the church building being a sacred space. The first statement to this effect being made as part of the second *Book of Homilies* published under Elizabeth I. The homily on 'The Right use of the Church, or Temple of God, and of the Reverence due to the Same,' acknowledges that God does not dwell within temples made by our hands. That the true Church is the community of Christians, but it goes on to assert that a church is rightly to be understood as the house and temple of the Lord.[108] The view of the Church being from the beginning of the 17th

---

[102] Ibid, 6-16
[103] Ibid, 45
[104] Ibid, 71
[105] Ibid, 258
[106] Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place,* 98
[107] E Duffey, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400 – c.1580* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 511
[108] J Davies, *The Secular use of Church Buildings* (London: SCM Press, London, 1968), 99-100

Century; that a church is a house of God; it is a holy place; it is primarily for worship; it should be preserved from profanation by not being put to secular use.[109]

In summary, the history of Christian pilgrimage has its origins in the biblical placement of the incarnation, which enabled devout believers to walk in and touch the places where Jesus had walked, talked, died and was resurrected. These shrines mediated an experience of God in the lives of the faithful, and were destinations visited by pious believers who were the first pilgrims. As Christianity spread, more locations achieved the status as a shrine. In the United Kingdom, there were two influences in the creation of these local places that mediated a connection with God: A Celtic tradition, heavily influenced by monasticism, that sought out wilderness places after the model of the Desert Father's, and a cult of saints that came over from continental Europe venerating the location of relics from iconic leaders of the faith. Both of these traditions to some extent also made use of pre-Christian centres of spirituality such as woodlands, wells and burial grounds that were already venerated by local people.

While the tradition changed in relation to the nature of pilgrimage in the life of the devout believer following the reformation, sites of religious significance were still set apart as places where people were to come in worship of God. Churches continued to be places of spiritual importance, and many were located on historic sites of pilgrimage.

In recent years the tradition of making a pilgrimage has returned to protestant Churches, including the Church of England together with others exploring their faith.[110] The theology that delineates the purpose of the pilgrim has remained the same however, in a desire to encounter God, the God who has touched places in a physical sense through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.[111]

For those who set out explicitly to visit churches to encounter God, in this sense are following in the footsteps of the first pilgrims that journeyed to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. However, pilgrimage has become a much more complex journey in terms of the individual spirituality that underpins each traveller.

---

[109] Ibid, 103
[110] Stanford, *The Extra Mile: A 21st Century Pilgrimage,* 4
[111] Bartholemew, Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage,* 107

In his book on 21ˢᵗ Century Pilgrimage Peter Stanford states in his introduction that whenever he visits the church of Waterden he makes a pilgrimage:

> I use the word 'pilgrimage' deliberately. This is not just a ramble into the countryside, or the opportunity to inflict on my children (who often come along) a lecture on Jesus or ecclesiastical architecture. Waterden is, for me, a sacred spot; a verdict I reached instinctively long before I tried to analyse what it really meant.[112]

When he does try to analyse the experience Stanford identifies three features that for him mark out Waterden as a sacred place. Firstly the silence he encounters there, secondly the mystery of the lives and history of the people of the parish, and finally, 'walking in the footsteps of people of faith from ages past, of joining a human chain that draws me towards…well, towards their faith.'[113] Stanford's book chronicles his travels to a number of sites of pilgrimage in the UK as a result of considering his experience here, and in a desire to explore faith. He takes his inspiration from T. S. Elliot's poem *Little Gidding* in launching into this endeavour in not trying to verify the existence of God, 'but simply to kneel where prayer was once valid'.

Stanford's explanation and chronicles of pilgrimage illustrate how the modern concept is in some way removed from medieval practice. Where it was the devout of faith who chose to undertake the task, and now many more are undertaking it as a way of exploring a faith that they are not committed to.

The theology of pilgrimage illustrated in this overview is helpful in supporting those who are visitors to churches, and for whom it forms part of their Christian devotional practice. It does not however support those visitors who do so not out of explicitly spiritual motives, or for whom it is not part of Christian devotional practice.

2.6 New Pilgrims and Visitors

---

[112] Stanford, *The Extra Mile: A 21st Century Pilgrimage,* 1
[113] Ibid, 3

The changes highlighted by Stanford reflect movements by people in recent times. Grace Davie, in her work *Religion in Britain since 1945,* attempts to trace some of the movements in religious practice. In reference to changes for rural churches she states:

> Traditionally, the rural church has been to focus of largely unspoken corporate belief. Local people assume that they are members of this church unless proved otherwise. Their relatives are, more often than not, buried in the churchyard, and there is little reason to doubt that the same resting place will be theirs when their time comes. There is no need, in the meantime, to display church membership through specifically religious activity, though social events will often be very well supported. So too will appeals for the church building, which assumes considerable symbolic importance. Belief or membership is, essentially, experiential; it is not based on regular religious practice. This long-standing unquestioned arrangement has, however, been overtaken by events in many places. Demographic shifts in contemporary society are leading to a changing rural population, as the large industrial conurbations decline in favour of the small towns and villages. As a consequence of this shift, a significant number of those arriving in the villages come equipped with habits – including religious habits – acquired in suburbia. The resulting clash between two styles of belief (rural and suburban) centred on one Anglican Church (the parish church) and can be very painful indeed. Articulate, often rather energetic religiosity sits uneasily alongside the largely unexpressed – or, to be more accurate, differently expressed – emotions of the rural community. [114]

What Davie is stating is the change in the worshipping congregation of the rural church and in the parochial community it serves. One of the major impacts of this change, is the value placed on the history and tradition that is connected with the church, in part reflected in the debate regarding the theology of place above. In the moves described by Davie, the sacred nature of the building is being eroded by changes in the worshipping congregation, and being replaced by the utilitarian worship space discussed by Giles and Durran.

Stanford's explorations into 21st century pilgrimage point towards a recovery of interest in these buildings as sacred places, particularly by those who are not part of a

---

[114] Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945,* 109

worshipping congregation.[115] Arguments for the recovery of the sacramental nature of church buildings, and their place as mediators of the connection between the world, God and humanity, have also been made by Gorringe and Brown as stated previously.[116]

In addition Martin Palmer's work on sacred land, which in part echoes Stanford's personal thoughts on the sacred nature of Waterden church, identifies four types of place that today could be considered sacred. The first is the community centre of worship, the local church that will retain the community's identity in relation to God. The second is a place whose nature inspires awe and wonder – a raging sea, a giant redwood forest or a stream reflecting a Kingfishers wings. The third, 'a place has been made holy by history or legend, and the forth is specific to individuals with a particular attachment to a particular place.'[117]

This is also noted by Stanford, who additionally observes that for the churchyard at St Margaret's, Burnham Norton, Norfolk:

> It is a spot that remains…for now at least, a meeting place for the community,
> even in our secular and sceptical times. It may not quite rival the local shop,
> pub, or postal office, but this classic English churchyard continues to serve the
> community of the living as well as the dead.[118]

There is a popular theology which undergirds the significance of different church buildings, expressed by visitors or members of the community who are not necessarily members of the worshipping congregation.

Simon Jenkins, who was introduced through his response to Giles Fraser's blog, is a good example of someone who espouses this theology; which as for Stanford remains un-worked through but which he is willing to leave as a mystery. An example of his thoughts in this respect comes from his introduction to the book on *England's Thousand Best Churches*, reflecting on his feelings after having completed the work:

> Many people have asked me whether I, not a practicing Christian, really see a
> church as no more than that, a museum building in which a few people choose to

---

[115] Stanford, *The Extra Mile: A 21st Century Pilgrimage,* 3

[116] See: Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption,* 36, and Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience,* 350

[117] M Palmer, *Sacred Land* (London: Piatkus, 2012), 4-5

[118] Stanford, *How to Read a Graveyard,* 78

worship. Are these churches just so many historic buildings? Could I not sympathise with Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*, 'You are not here to verify, instruct yourself, inform curiosity or carry report. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid'? Could I not understand Iveson Croome's cry, on his memorial in North Cerny (Gloucs): 'Lord I have loved the habitation of Thy house and place where honour dwelleth'?

I would once have given a simple answer, no. I could not understand the meaning of these words. I could not see in a church that quality believers call holiness. I could respect and honour it, but could not share it. Now at the end of my journey, my response is more muted. Late one summer, I found myself outside the little church of Up Marden, a place of delicious remoteness in the Sussex Downs. The evening was warm and the gloaming was rising from the valley beneath. Through a churchyard hung low with trees I could sense the air filling with the ghosts of villagers climbing up the hill to that tiny building. I sensed their coming for a thousand years. As they arrived they hurled their hopes against those walls, wept on altars and filled rafters with their cries. That shed called a church had received their faith, and offered in return a humble consolation. Now mute in death, these people communicated to me as they did to Eliot, 'tongued with fire beyond the language of the living'. I could not be immune to the spirits of such a place.[119]

Jenkins' response is very similar to Stanford's, both using Eliot's poem of *Little Gidding* to explain in part their experience. Noting that the experience is beyond an appreciation of the architecture, and entering into a more spiritual arena, in which the importance of the past generations associated with the place are an important facet. However, the details of the experience are left vague – a situation they are both comfortable with.

Those who have tried to explore sacred places and pilgrimage more thoroughly have denoted that the experience relates to the identity of the people. For example, Sheldrake states that the value of a place depends on people's relationships and memories with it, as much as physical features.[120] Bartholemew and Hughes relate this to the practice of pilgrimage where the site of pilgrimage is somewhere that has emerged through historical or dramatic process,

---

[119] Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Churches* (London: The Penguin Press, 1999), xxviii-xxix
[120] P Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 8

by which a people remember and renew its history in a specific location. They comment that an account of human identity emerges in dialectical relation to this consideration of place:

> The identity of any human social group cannot be grasped except by way of that group's construal of place in which its history, social relationships and location are active. If place, as suggested here, indicates an identification with a specific environment together with attention to the quality of a community's relationships, and the retelling of a community's history, then the community's performance of place is also a point of access to the identity of a community. To be in a place is to be a particular people with a particular identity.[121]

Place constitutes our identity as a summary of interactions between community, land and memory. It may be a place where their ancestors lived their lives, and in the case of churchyards, took their rest in death. It is a point of connection which affirms their relationship with the past. It may be that the place has a shared memory for members of the community – specific events (Stanford remembers particularly Christmas services in the church at Waterden for example[122]), or where major milestones of life were celebrated, such as weddings and funerals.

Churches thus hold particular resonances for people, either because of a personal association or because of memories and images it triggers for them. Often it is the apparent timelessness (in terms of intergenerational connectedness) of the location which offers a point of connection. They possess a history of prayer, a place as in Eliot's poem quoted above, 'where prayer has been valid'[123] into which visitors can enter and share in the identity of the community of those who have come to this place, adding their own prayers to those which have gone before.

The journeys of Stanford and Jenkin's are not part of devout faith, but point towards a new type of pilgrim and a more distinct visitor away from the Christian tradition. Stanford describes his journey as an exploration of faith, while the experience of Jenkins is much more incidental while writing his guide, which in itself is aimed at the church tourist.

---

[121] Bartholemew and Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, 158
[122] Stanford, *The Extra Mile: A 21st Century Pilgrimage,* 2
[123] T S Eliot, *Little Gidding* 1942,
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html (accessed 26th January 2019)

2.7 Contemporary Experience of Religion and Churches

The memories and perceptions of churches are defined by the expectations of those who come to visit: expectations that in the past were likely to have been generated through personal experience, but now may be more influenced by popular culture. As figures for church attendance continue to decline, both on a regular Sunday and for the special services, and occasions such as Easter and weddings; the level of personal experience of churches is diminishing – particularly for younger age groups.[124] Popular culture though, continues to use the image of the church in depicting scenes historically and pastorally.

In portrayals of churches there are those where the institution, usually typified by a person wearing a clerical collar, has a central or significant supporting role in the story being told. Examples from television where this is the case are the *Vicar of Dibley,* and the *Father Brown Mysteries.* Comparably there are also significant films such as *Heavens Above!, Four Weddings and a Funeral, Love Actually and Calvary.* These are not all positive images of the Church (the Rowan Atkinson clerical figure in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* is inept), but they all generate a level of expectation of the institution located particularly around this individual in the collar.[125]

In addition to the explicit portrayals of the Church as institution there are those where the image of the church is used, even if only moments to set a scene. It could be argued that it is a prerequisite element in setting the scene for village life, particularly but not exclusively in an English context. The buildings commonly feature in crime fiction such as Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* and *Midsomer Murders,* and in period dramas such as those based on the novels of Jane Austen. They also form part of the background in television series such as *Darling Buds of May* and *Last of the Summer Wine*, whilst only very fleetingly. More recently the church plays a significant part in the Sky television series *Delicious,* where it becomes a place of safety and reflection for one of the main characters played by Dawn French.

This sense of identity of course could also be argued for other features of the geography of these places such as pubs and greens, but the connotations that are associated with churches give them particular meaning. One of the most obvious places where this is

---

[124] D Voas, A Crockett, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology,* Vol. 39, No. 1 (2005), 11–28

[125] S Sorensen, *The Collar: Reading Christian Ministry in Fiction, Television and Film*
(Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 86-87

seen is the use of the village church in the images on Christmas cards. The classic stock image most commonly used is that of a snowy village church, usually at night with a warm open door and members of a choir proceeding in or lined up outside. There are a number of variations on this, but similar images continue to appear each year as popular cards. In addition to these traditional images a number of more contemporary designs have appeared which continue to feature prominently the village church.

Fig. 1 Traditional and more contemporary Christmas card designs

Christmas is a Christian festival and hence some connection with this heritage may be expected, even if the celebration now goes far beyond its religious significance. The use of these specific scenes point towards something else that overlays the story of the nativity upon which Christmas is built. For some people this scene must indicate what the celebration of Christmas means. A Gallup poll from the United States in 2008 indicated that despite the poor economic condition of that time, most Americans were more optimistic that their Christmas that year would be better than last. The main reason given for this was getting together with family and friends.[126] The relationship/community aspect of Christmas, at least in part, is something that these images add to the bare nativity story. The church building becomes the gathering place for the community, and in the pictures, that gathering resonates with warmth and joy

---

[126] F Newport, 'In the U.S., Christmas Not Just for Christians' *Gallup*, 24th December 2008, *www.gallup.com/poll/113566/us-christmas-not-just-christians.aspx* (accessed 2nd August 2018)

through the glow from the windows and the children playing outside as in the examples above.

Even outside of Christmas the importance of these places for relationship and community remain, as noted by Grace Davie in her work on the state of religion in Britain at the end of the 20th century:

> We in England live in the chill religious vapours of Northern Europe, where moribund religious establishments loom over populations that mostly do not enter churches for active worship even if they entertain inchoate beliefs. Yet these establishments guard and maintain thousands of houses of God, which are markers of space and time. Not only are they markers and anchors, but also the only repositories of all embracing meanings pointing beyond the immediate to the ultimate.[127]

Davie's description of churches resonates with the descriptions of the experience of the authors previously mentioned in coming to these places. Where for both, there is recognition of the role they have in marking space and time and as pointing beyond the immediate to the ultimate. While Davie is talking about the institution of the Church, the resonance is felt in the descriptions surrounding the buildings; she goes on to suggest why this is the case:

> They are the only institutions that deal in tears and concern themselves with the breaking points of human existence. They provide frames and narratives and signs to live by and offer persistent points of reference. They are repositories of signs about miraculous birth and redemptive sacrifice, shared tables and gift-giving; and they offer moral codes and exemplars for the creation of communal solidarity and the nourishment of virtue. They are places from which to launch initiatives which help sustain the kind of networks found, for example, in the inner city; they welcome schools and regiments and rotary clubs; they celebrate and commemorate; they are islands of quietness; they are places in which unique gestures occur of blessing, distribution and obeisance; they offer spaces in which solemnly to gather, to sing,

---

[127] Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945,* 189

to lay flowers, and light candles. They are – in Philip Larkin's phrase – serious places on serious earth.[128]

It is likely that all of the elements, combining personal experience with encounters with churches vicariously in books, film and television, have a greater or lesser influence on the experience of individuals who visit rural churches.[129] Davie points towards the positive intentions and permanent presence that is associated with churches, both of which form a frame of reference for people who may not be active as part of the institution.

However, as fewer people are actively involved in the institution, the church tradition and practice that has formed the church over time, its interior and its environment may not be familiar to individuals who visit. Their perceptions of this may be influenced by the representations of churches as discussed above, but are also drawn from their own likes and tastes. This is perhaps more varied today than it has ever been in the past with a diverse range of options available, and the trend in society towards individual cultural pursuits.[130]

Some of the variety of cultural perspectives can be seen to be at work in the way people look at churches. One perspective is seen in works such as Simon Jenkins' *England's 1,000 Best Churches,* which focuses on the aesthetic and historical elements in its descriptions. This encourages the visitor to appreciate the place in history and the architecture represented in these buildings. Jenkins' work follows in the tradition of the original guide to the architectural quality of these buildings by Nikolaus Pevsner. Pevsner from 1951-74, published his work *The Buildings of England,* which encouraged many visitors to seek out buildings such as churches with a particular view to appreciate their aesthetic appeal over all others. Pevsner's philosophy was neatly summarised in his work *An Outline of European Architecture*, where he states, 'A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal. This aesthetic approach requires discernment on the part of visitors and such discernment is viewed as a product of learning and taste'.[131]

---

[128] Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945,* 189-190
[129] Lees-Smith, 'Ordinary Theology as Mother Tongue', 23-29.
[130] T Dunn, A Castro, 'Postmodern Society and the Individual: The Structural Characteristics of Postmodern Society and How They Shape Who We Think We Are', *The Social Science Journal*, Vol. 49, No.3 (2012), 352-358
[131] N Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: Pelican Books, 1972), xix

However, Pevsner's view of learning and taste are not universal. His view of discernment represents a particular cultural approach to appreciating buildings, which is not shared by all or even necessarily the majority of people. The approach of Pevsner and Jenkins in their work, is to appeal to a strand of popular culture which places a high value on the aesthetic characteristics of buildings. This is not the only approach and other strands of popular culture hold different values.

Gordon Lynch quotes from a collection of essays on popular culture in America by Forbes and Mahan, contrasting popular culture with other forms termed high culture and folk culture:

> To employ suggestive examples from the realm of food: high culture is a gourmet meal, folk culture is grandma's casserole, and popular culture is a McDonald's hamburger. All three are forms of "culture," which is intended here as a neutral term that includes the whole range of human products and thoughts that surround our lives, providing the context in which we live…The distinction between the three classifications of culture (high, folk and popular) have to do especially with the size of their audiences, and perhaps also by the means by which they are transmitted. High or elite culture, often transmitted in a written form (a literary magazine, the score of an opera, a gourmet cookbook), has a limited audience by its very intention, and is addressed to persons who are perceived to have superior backgrounds or more sophisticated taste. Folk culture, often transmitted orally (family recipes, local legends, regional marriage customs), also has a limited audience, because oral communication is roughly limited to the more immediate family, community or other local or regional group. Popular culture might be communicated in many ways, but it most often becomes widespread, and thus popular, through mass media… As its very name implies, popular culture is marked by its larger audience.[132]

Jenkins and Pevsner's works are clearly aimed at the high cultural end of the spectrum of church appreciation. The folk culture surrounding churches largely comes from people's remembrances of them. As mentioned above, the levels of church attendance in England have been in decline since the 1950s, which has meant as a proportion of the population, people's experience of current life within a church community has also fallen.[133] There are more people

---

[132] G Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 8-9
[133] Staff Writers, 'Christian Research Data Defended, but Church Decline Continues' *Ekklesia*, 9th May 2008, *http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/7112* (accessed 20th January 2014)

who are 'de-churched' – people who regularly attended a church earlier in their life but do not do so now; or who have had no experience of church life outside of possible connections through schools, weddings, funerals, baptisms and carols at Christmas. These experiences form a backdrop which colours people's perception of churches, through emotions and memories of the times when they entered into the life of one.

The folk culture surrounding churches may also arise as a result of the stories surrounding them, stories of events which took place there passed on by the local community, and often highlighted in guide books and other literature aimed at tourists.

The examples above also highlight that the cultural perceptions of high, folk and popular culture have very permeable boundaries. Literature aimed at tourists, may aim to convey local information in a way that is aimed at a high level for those with an interest in history or architecture (as seen in *England's 1,000 Best Churches*), or may do so to reach a mass market and thereby be aimed at popular culture. Reading one of the novels by Jane Austen may be deemed high culture in engaging with literature, but watching one of the television adaptations would be regarded as popular. Overall the perception of an individual encountering a church will have a cultural background with a proportional input from all of these categories informing it. Demographics may give an indication of what the relative proportions of these cultural inputs are likely to be, but will not be conclusive.

In addition to these specific cultural factors, there are also the broader trends in culture which affect people's perceptions and expectations in encountering a church. One example of this comes from the National Church Visitors Survey where there was a small but significant number of visitors to churches who were surprised by the lack of a gift shop. This suggests that they expected something of the experience could be purchased.[134] This could reflect the rise in consumer culture as a part of popular culture and a need to own something of the experience.[135]

In addition, the ideas of place and of the rites of passage commonly associated with Churches in baptisms, weddings and funerals have changed in people's thoughts, with greater opportunities for travel and the multitude of choice now available for celebrating rites of

---

[134] Littler, Francis, Martineau, 'I Was Glad: Listening to Visitors to Country Churches' 185
[135] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture,* 58

passage. Despite a continuing downward trend in the celebration of rites of passage such as baptism's and weddings they continue remain significant for people.[136]

Funerals are a ubiquitous rite of passage, but these have also seen huge diversification both in terms of practice and belief surrounding them. Zygmunt Bauman examines in his book *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies,* modern societies views of death and dying. Bauman identifies two different approaches to mortality. Firstly, a modern approach where the insoluble issue of death is translated into several specific problems of health and disease that have the potential to be solved. Secondly, a post-modern approach that deconstructs immortality, so that life becomes a constant rehearsal of 'reversible death'.[137] Reversible death is practiced in the reinvention of personal identity. It is first seen with actors and celebrities reliving their identities through engaging with recordings of them, and now more popularly through the ubiquity of self-recording or being recorded. The permanent termination of life is replaced by a pause in the life recorded while a new identity is constructed. These perspectives on people's approach to death give a potential insight into their perception of rites of passage as observed in churches, either as part of the rite enacted or as a passive observer of memorials and gravestones.

In referring to these two approaches Bauman identifies the modern approach with a Protestant world-view, in which each day was viewed as a step towards an ultimate heavenly goal. Furthermore, how every sacrifice now is seen as a deposit for your ultimate heavenly treasure, marking out a 'pilgrimage through life'. The postmodern approach however, he identifies with the concept of nomadic travel:

> Postmodern nomads, unlike Protestant 'pilgrims through life', wander between *unconnected* places. It is on this that they differ - not in the concern with *establishing* and *preserving* their identities, a concern which they share with their pilgrim ancestors… Where the nomads and the pilgrims differ, and differ rather sharply, is the *disconnexity* of the time/space in which the identity of the nomads is plotted, as against *connexity* of the time/space canvas on which the pilgrims' identities are woven.

---

[136] For an example illustrating this trend see: Office for National Statistics bulletin Marriages in England and Wales: 2015 *https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2015* (accessed 6th September 2018)

[137] Z Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 175.

Pilgrims select their destination early and plan their life-itinerary accordingly. We may say that they are guided throughout by a 'life-project', by an overall 'life-plan'. Nomads, on the other hand, hardly ever reach in their imagination beyond the next caravan-site…Nomads do not bind the time/space, they move through it; and so they move *through* identities. [138]

This nomadic postmodern view is also reflected in the concept of place:

The urge of mobility, built into the structure of contemporary life, prevents the arousal of strong affections for places; the places we occupy are no more than temporary stations. The progress in life is measured and marked by moving homes and offices…Nothing seems to be 'for life', and none of the things in life are approached and embraced and cherished as if they were. Skills, jobs, occupations, residences, marriage partners – they all come and go, and tend to annoy or bore or embarrass when they stay too long.[139]

The polarities suggested by these approaches to place, life and death, between modern and postmodern, are not necessarily played out in individuals lives. Some interchangeability is inevitable through personal development, experience and age. Plus the folk culture passed on from generation to generation, even if there is a radical shift in popular culture. In asking the question 'Is popular culture bad for your health?' Gordon Lynch concludes that to assume we are fundamentally influenced by the content of media, is to suggest that human agency is very limited and that individuals and groups do not have the capacity to resist what is presented to them.[140]

A phrase evoking this resistance is voiced at the conclusion of the first episode of the BBC television series, *Pagans and Pilgrims: Britain's Holiest Places,* where one of the reasons why people come to ruins of the past is to recover something that they have lost.[141]

That sentiment is carried into popular culture in the evocation of a past world through the iconography of a rural church. The hankering after something lost is a quest for a world part remembered, part-constructed which is thought better than the current one. A

[138] Z Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, 166-167.
[139] Ibid, 188-189
[140] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture,* 91
[141] I Glyn, *'Pagans and Pilgrims: Britain's Holiest Places'* BBC Four November 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01r6z2d (accessed on 19th January 2014)

person's life history may govern what they have personally experienced, or what has been passed down to them as folk history communicated through family and community. The remainder is constructed through the popular history presented in the media. Even the more recent depictions of churches set within today's world tend to have them as oasis of quiet, and a place set apart for individual reflection compared to the world outside. Take the encounters had within these places in films such as *Quartet,* and television series such as *Delicious*. They are places where people pray and feel able to speak of their deepest emotions and fears.

In contrast to the postmodern view as outlined by Bauman these places are accepted as permanent, unchanging and raise strong affections in people. This is identified in Peter Stanford's comments at the conclusion of his book *How to Read a Graveyard: Journeys in the Company of the Dead*. A book that was influenced by his visits to a local graveyard whilst walking his dog:

> But we don't have to limit ourselves to social studies or historical investigation when in the company of the dead on a visit to a cemetery…I plan to keep on visiting, first of all for the dog – that is certainly what I tell the children – but really for me, for that reassuring sense my walks give me that I am part of a human chain, going through the cycle of birth and death as those who came before, and will come after me.[142]

As a measure of the affection these buildings are held in, by communities and people, you can observe the reaction to a proposal to close any one of them. Not just from regular attenders and long-term village residents, but also the newly arrived and unconnected. However that affection does not translate into regular attendance at worship or support in kind such as with finance or volunteering.[143] Such an association with churches has been termed by Grace Davie as believing without belonging, or vicarious religion where association with a faith is taken for granted without the need to fully practice that faith.[144] Davie sees this as an inevitable move from a 'culture of obligation' to a 'culture of consumption',

> For it is tempting to see believing without belonging, or the prevalence of unattached religion in contemporary society, as a typical form of postmodern

---

[142] Stanford, *How to Read a Graveyard*, 241

[143] For example see *ITV News 'Church faces closure just after its 150th anniversary'* 29th December 2016 *http://www.itv.com/news/granada/2016-12-29/church-faces-closure-just-after-its-150th-anniversary* (accessed 7th September 2018)

[144] D Pollack, D Olson, *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 165

behaviour; one, that is, that enables the believer to select at will from the religious goods on offer and to mould these into personal packages that suit a variety of lifestyles and subcultures (the phenomenon known as supermarket religion – the culture of consumption). Such an assumption seems reasonable enough, given the analysis so far suggested. It becomes, however, a conclusion increasingly difficult to sustain, the harder one looks at the evidence. For in reality believing without belonging rarely represents a consciously selected personal package. It reflects instead the fall-back position acquired by British people when they simply do nothing. It becomes, in other words, not so much a choice, but the backdrop against which other decisions are made. Hence the notion, already hinted at, that it represents the residue of the past (what is left of pre-modern religion after the toll taken by both industrial and post-industrial developments), rather than the emergence of a postmodern future.[145]

David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, have very vehemently argued against the concept of believing without belonging, citing research on religious belief across Europe. Firstly they discount religiosity as something that increases with age or with family formation; instead they point to the research as stating religious behaviour is something passed from parents to children. As the number of parents involved in religion falls, so too does the number in future generations leading to what they call for Britain, a religious half-life (taking the metaphor from radioactivity), naturally decaying over intervals of generations. In the current situation they concede that the only form of believing without belonging which is pervasive in British society is 'a vague willingness to suppose that there is something out there'.[146] This is accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be:

As soon as one focuses on belief in the teachings of the church, one finds belonging to go with it. Few people fully believe and yet stay away in defiance of doctrine; such a disjunction would indeed be noteworthy. Between the extremes of full faith and noncommittal assent there is naturally a middle ground of more or less Christianized belief, but the passivity of so-called 'believers' is itself a sign of religious decline.[147]

---

[145] Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945,* 199
[146] G Davie, *Believing Without Belonging: A Persistent Paradox* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), Kindle Edition, 7
[147] Voas, Crockett, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging,' *Sociology,* (2005), 11-28

Voas and Crockett cite what might be termed an Enlightenment argument; that British society is set on a consistent trajectory away from supernatural attachments, in a critically rational direction in their research to argue against believing without belonging. They state that in order for claims about 'the persistence of the sacred', that some kind of non-rational spirituality remains as strong as ever, then three things would seem to be necessary for religious (or quasi-religious) belief:

1. It is as widespread as before

2. It is as personally significant as before, or

3. It is as socially significant as before

They do not note that any of these propositions holds true for Christianity in Europe at this time, and discount again any suggestion that this form of belief is being replaced by unorthodox belief though privatized alternative spirituality. This is simply because the numbers of stated adherents do not add up. In their conclusion they indicate the value of the sacred, at least in terms of religion, is something worthy of study, but for contemporary European society it is rapidly entering the history books:

> Let us be clear. Religion is still much in evidence and highly worthwhile as a subject of study. Few forms of thought and action are as common, have the same life-shaping potential, or (at least at some times and places) are as important socially. Explaining why faith survives and sometimes thrives in an age of science deserves attention. Our point is simply that the crucial fact about religion in modern Europe is decline; the rest is commentary.[148]

The dismissal of the prevalence and persistence of a non-committal Christianized belief by Voas and Crocket, does not tackle the question of the beliefs of those it rules out. However, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead have actively engaged with those who have sought an alternative spirituality to regular Church attendance in their study on the town of Kendal. In this study they point to the apparent move in spirituality from what they term 'life-as' spirituality, to a subjective turn which focuses on self-reflection as the principle spiritual authority. In their research question they set out that: life-as spirituality is the traditional form

---

[148] Voas, Crockett, 'Religion in Britain, 11-28

of spirituality practiced in churches, where a life image is presented that sacrifices individual wants and concerns to conform to an ideal:

> Authority in the congregational domain lies outside rather than within, and with 'the same' rather than 'the unique'. As a consequence, life-as roles are privileged over subjective-life uniqueness, and 'what I should be' over 'what I am'.[149]

In turning to the question of this study, at face value the church visitor experience would be one that was very much located in the subjective turn; where the visitor chooses to go to the church and individually interpret the environment they are in. Their interpretations are made on their own preferences and from their own experiences, and as such are controlled by them. Hence authority is located in the individual and not outside.

This view can be challenged reflecting on the iconic nature of the building and the community associated with it. The church building is not free from potential associations people may make with it. Certainly it provides more of a context for these associations to be made than many other venues. Other venues which either have too general a context to tie down specific associations – such as walking through a field or on a hill top – or, too specific associations that would not be relevant to a large number of people's experience, such as with a large country house. The images the rural church evokes touches on a significant number of people's lives through personal experience of churches and their commonplace image in popular imagination.

This iconic image of the rural church can also contain a number of life-as affirming stereotypes, located in the traditional roles envisioned for people in the imagined community associated with it. Following the discussion before of how the English rural church is perceived in popular imagination, one possibility is that the spirituality of the individual is constituted in the permanence, and the after image of community and identity (both individual and national) that the building evokes.

Having a place in that community is seen as something attractive, especially if you do not feel you are part of a community currently. As Bauman comments:

---

[149] P Heelas, L Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution, Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 14

'Community' conveys the image of a warm and comfortable place, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day. Out there, in the street, all sorts of dangers lie in ambush; in here, in the community, we can relax and feel safe. 'Community' stands for the kind of world we long to inhabit but which is not, regrettably, available to us. Today 'community' is another name for paradise lost – but for a paradise we still hope to find, as we feverishly search for the roads that may lead us there.[150]

The freedom of spiritual self-determination places the onus on the individual to find, discern, and reject as need be, a structure of belief. Community, particularly one which the individual is in some way familiar with, is one way of letting that burden go in the affirmations of shared relationships. It is this search for 'paradise lost' that may be the significant part of the individual's experience, and can lead us in a particular direction in terms of their theology. The idea of recovering paradise lost is something that speaks of salvation from present misery and places visitor's experiences in the realm of soteriology.[151]

The review of more recent popular views of religion and churches has highlighted that both the institution of the Church (or religion in general), and the buildings associated with it, retain a significance for people in general. However, the level of this significance and its form is a much more complex issue. The popular concept of the Church and the rites and ceremonies associated with it is influenced by a number of factors, not all related to the institution and direct contact with it; popular culture and personal history can also have a major role. Add to this the general trends in society involving a movement from modern to postmodern attitudes, with a desire for more personal choice and movement. The result is potentially a much more divergent range of individual concepts of Church, and churches underly the significance in which people hold them.

---

[150] Z Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (London: Polity, 2000), Back Page.
[151] Astley, *Exploring Ordinary Theology,* 2-3

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to uncover more of the spiritual experience of visitors to rural churches. The review of literature around visitors to rural churches has illustrated the historical roots of the churches. This is seen in both terms of the theology of the Church that formed them, and the theology of place that marks their significance as buildings to people. It has also attempted to illustrate the contemporary theological environment surrounding them, again in terms of the Church that continues as steward of these places. Furthermore, the significance these buildings hold for people beyond just the regular worshipping community. The discussion around the comments on culture by Grace Davie, Gordon Lynch and Zygmunt Bauman, serves to highlight the variety of possibilities that each encounter by individuals with these buildings, may contribute to any spiritual significance for their visit.

Within this study, in order to access the individual theology as well as make any general theological statements around the experience of visitors to rural churches, the methodology needs to take into account the variety in people's spirituality. While the work in rural theology, the theology of place and the theology of pilgrimage will cover some of the visitor experience, they are unlikely to be sufficient to support what is a much broader group of people who visit churches. Some of whom will not have the local connections or Christian faith presupposed in some of these theologies.

Some work has already been conducted to look at this variety, the most significant study has been the work of Heelas and Woodhead in Kendal. Their work gives some further insight into contemporary individualised spirituality through the study of the spiritual habits of the people in the town. Their research indicates a turn by the generation of people, at the time of the study, in their 40s and 50s, to an internal spirituality that is self-guided and given authority from within, which they term the subjective turn:[1]

> 'The turn' is shorthand for a major cultural shift of which we all have some experience. It is a turn away from a life lived in terms of external 'objective' roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards a life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic). If, for example, I have slotted myself into the role of a dutiful daughter and a loving and caring

---

[1] Heelas, Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 132

wife and mother, and tend to disregard my own feelings of exhaustion, unhappiness and periodic disgruntlement because that is not what I (in the role I occupy) ought to be feeling, then I am living according to external expectations. But if I choose to heed those subjective states, to listen to what they are telling me, and to act on their prompting by altering my life in ways that better suit my own unique needs, desires, capabilities and 'relationalities', then I am turning away from life lived according to external expectations, to life lived according to my own inner experience. The subjective turn is thus a turn away from 'life-as' (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to 'subjective-life' (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation).[2]

They conclude, following their study, that this subjective turn is a phenomena that will only increase (with the consequent increase in breadth of individual belief), and successful areas of spirituality will be those that cater for the individual and relational needs of people.[3]

A study of visitors to churches by the Churches Conservation Trust in 2006, indicated that 85% of the visitors to their churches are over 45 years old, 94% white British, and 48% retired. Comparison of these figures with the results of the work in Kendal points towards visitors to churches being of a generation and heritage where a turn to individualised spirituality is common. They will be looking to their own internal authority to define what that spirituality is, which does not necessarily conform to traditional religious norms.

To gauge the potential spiritual content of people's visits to churches in the countryside it is necessary to look at the individual experience, which may indicate common themes that have theological significance related to these places. This is a more empirical approach to theology that begins with information about individual's experience, and looks for patterns in those experiences rather than a more systematic or biblical approach. Without this approach it is difficult to see how a study could cover the range of individual belief structures.

---

[2] Heelas, Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 2
[3] Ibid, 149

The examples of existing studies of visitors in the literature review have all used an empirical approach. In these, the predominant methodology has been to use a questionnaire, or more passively to gather data from existing evidence from visitor books or prayer cards. In all of the examples it was commented that these approaches do not yield enough information, because there is an insufficient amount of 'God talk' in the evidence – that there simply is not enough information in what is recorded by the visitor to give an insight into their theology.

The key to more evidence seems to be encouraging the use of language by the visitors to help reveal their thoughts on their experience. Don Cupitt has been one proponent, that individual theology is revealed in the use of everyday language by people. His belief is that the ordinary language used by people is sufficient to describe their theology:

> In our post-metaphysical age few people think that the traditional 'natural' or 'rational' theology can deliver anything, so in order to replace it I am proposing ordinary-language theology as a descriptive study of the common religious philosophy that is built into everyday speech and thereby belongs to us all…Over the years I have struggled to express new ideas, I have repeatedly found that I have got there rather late, because *ordinary language says it already*, and says it as pithily as one could ever hope to say it oneself. Ordinary language, for example, is highly perspectivist: 'That's the way you see it, but it's not the way I see it.' Ordinary language already knows about anti-realism: 'Life's what you make it,' it says. Ordinary language is the best radical theologian, for it has already largely reinterpreted religion in purely this-worldly terms.[4]

Going one stage further, *Ordinary theology* has been developed as a concept by Jeff Astley to study these popular theological perceptions:

> Ordinary Christian Theology is my phrase for the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind. 'Ordinary' in this context implies non-scholarly and non-academic; it fits the dictionary definition that refers to an, 'ordinary person' as who is without exceptional experience or expert knowledge.[5]

---

[4] D Cupitt, *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech*, 1-2
[5] Astley, *Ordinary Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 56

Astley argues that to engage with this theology requires both empirical study and theological reflection. He offers these words of caution though:

> In both areas of research, the nature of the questions that are asked is crucial. Many questionnaire studies in religion continue to suffer from a lack of intelligence and discrimination in posing their questions, a weakness that frankly sometimes renders them incapable of supporting the sophisticated interpretative structures built on their foundations. The excuse is often made that the questions need to be simple and straightforward, so that they are capable of being understood by respondents across a wide range of intelligence and linguistic ability. But a wooden application of these maxims can sometimes lead to worthless data, even nonsense-on-stilts.[6]

Astley gives the example from the 2001 Census data of the population of Britain that approximately 70 per cent of adults believe in God; but other more sophisticated research indicates over half of this group understand God as some form of impersonal spiritual force or power, rather than the traditional understanding of a personal God.[7] He also comments on the danger of confusing 'believing in' and 'believing that', confusing positive attitudes towards something such as trust, commitment and devotion, with affirming the unconnected existence of something. As another example 'quotes a survey by Ipsos MORI where the interviewer asked the question did the interviewee believe in, 'God, life after death, a soul, the devil, hell heaven, sin, astrology and opinion polls.'[8] Thus conflating the different definitions of 'believing in' and 'believing that' in a single question. The danger then in empirical study is in the collection of 'data', where the quality of the information collected is very much influenced by the questions being asked.

There is also a note of caution from Zygmunt Bauman about the information provided by the language people use concerning spirituality, which comes out of the beginning of his essay on postmodern religion. In speaking about the postmodern condition's acceptance of religion, he states:

> It also accepts the fact that all too often experience spills out of the verbal cages
> in which one would wish to hold it, that there are things of which one should

---

[6] Ibid, 101
[7] Ibid
[8] Ibid

keep silent since one cannot speak them, and that the ineffable is as much an integral part of the human mode of being-in-the-world as is the linguistic net in which one tries (in vain, as it happens, though no less vigorously for that reason), to catch it.[9]

The note that Bauman's assertion sounds, is one about the limitations of language to express faith. If we try to define someone's faith by what they say we will fail because their words cannot capture the whole of what they believe. He also later, in the same essay, notes the marginalisation of religion through the development of the modern condition, and its focus on the man-made constructed and designed. Where faith is something relegated to a leisure pastime which 'bear only a marginal impact on the way the day-by-day and serious life activities are organised'.[10] As such, an individual's language may not give us insight into their faith because not only can it not capture their belief, they may not know what they believe because they have never given it any serious thought.

Astley's approach with *Ordinary Theology* addresses the subject of the research question directly, by asking people what their theological views are. However, while the approach is direct, the methodology in obtaining and interpretation of results are critical in determining the value of what is produced. It is also possible, accepting what Bauman states, that it is simply not possible to elicit responses from non-theologically trained respondents, with enough theological content that any degree of reflection will reveal much to the academic theologian.

In either case, that questions may be posed which reveal theological insight or the case that questioning will only yield an inconclusive result when asked of visitors to rural churches; it is Astley's empirical approach which most directly answers the question of this research. It is to this methodology we turn to in trying to answer it.

3.1 The Limits of Ordinary Theology

Ordinary Theology relies on two components for it to be successfully employed – the collected data, and the theological reflection on that data. However, because of the weighting

---

[9] Heelas, *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 55
[10] Ibid, 63

in the interpretation on the data collected, it presents a particular element of risk in the theological reflection. The two main cautionary notes are: firstly that the information collected is too limited to reveal anything substantial about the theology of the people concerned,[11] and secondly that the content of what respondents have said is spiritually vacuous.[12]

Astley also warns that the responses from an empirical study of individuals may not be a logical or complete theology which is systematically consistent:

> Instead an ordinary theology which is wholly anecdotal, figurative, inconsistent or even logically confused may still work as a personal expression of religious belief. Its salvific, meaning making function involves a psychological/spiritual change in a person, which (theological realists insist) depends on transcendent facts about God's structuring of the human heart through nature and grace, so that is restless until it rests in him.[13]

However, despite the lack of a systematic approach by individuals in developing their own theologies, Astley argues the study of their beliefs is still theologically valid, because:

> Ordinary theology in some sense 'works' for those who own it. It fits their life experience and gives meaning to, and expresses the meaning they find within their own lives. It is highly significant *for them* because it articulates a faith and a spirituality, and incorporates beliefs and ways of believing, that they find to be salvific – healing, saving, making them whole. Ordinary theology helps people spiritually and religiously.[14]

Ordinary Theology depends on the depth possible, both in the empirical responses and in the theological reflection. The potential exists in the exercise of attempting to gather as much information as possible to produce a very broad and shallow result. For example, a large sample size, and a consequent large data set may have more statistical significance. Conversely, if the questions asked do not tackle the anecdotal, figurative and inconsistent

---

[11] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 101
[12] Heelas, *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, 55
[13] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 2-3
[14] Francis, Astley, *Exploring Ordinary Theology*, 2

elements that create the framework for people's ordinary theology, it will not give much insight into what constitutes it. However, what Astley's warning above also implies is that even if the questions open a door into the ordinary theology of people; we are still unable to go through if the theological reflection fails to link the elements as they make sense to the people that hold them.

This is a further risk, beyond just the data - a theological reflection will access only a fraction of what may be possible from the information if it is not sufficiently constructed to ask the question 'why' from the perspective of those it is investigating. For example, Walker uses a data set of 1,151 participants of cathedral carol services to highlight the practical considerations necessary in organising a carol service for occasional church attendees. Questions concerning the origin and background of these attendees, or the construction of their theology, is not addressed beyond the statistics this data set produces. The questions asked of the data collected are: What is the ordinary theology of occasional churchgoers attending the cathedral carol services? What are their understanding and beliefs about Christmas and the Christmas story? What are their motivations for being present at the service, their wider attitudes towards significant or contemporary issues of Christian doctrine, and their moral stance and their attitudes towards the place of Christian religion in public life? The questions cover a lot of areas in which detailed analysis would be required, but because of this the reflection is only able to skim the surface and offer a basic analysis of what is being asked. In addition, the analysis assumes a very Anglican bias in its understanding behind the perspective of those attending these services (as seen in the literature cited), and consequently the conclusions reveal only a narrow perspective on the theology it seeks to address.[15]

The theological reflection from the Church perspective, is also often narrowed by the urgent issue of church attendance. The decline of which has focused thought into building the attractiveness of a church for people to enter, specifically on a Sunday morning for worship. The theology used can be narrowed again by the Church's insistence on retaining authority over individual's ordinary theology, as illustrated by Helen Cameron commenting on churches which pragmatically react to the world around them:

> They can readily – and too easily – identify with that strange blend of community
> values and individualistic values that is characteristically post-modern. And

---

[15] Francis, Astley, *Exploring Ordinary Theology*, 137-145

theology can capitulate just as easily. It can give up on any claim for the truth of faith, and rest content with being simply expressive, a mere paraphrase of human-spiritual experience.[16]

As stated by Astley above, the elements which constitute an individual's theology, may not be consistent with the truth as constituted by the Church. Again, the challenge is in the content of the questions asked and the degree of freedom permitted in respondent's answers.

For the empirical study the quality in terms of richness in 'God talk,' and the quantity of individual responses are a determining factor in how useful the data is. For the theological reflection, as the second part of the process of Ordinary Theology, there are a range of approaches that are possible. A too narrow an approach that ignores a broader spirituality than what would be expected by orthodox Christian theology, may not see general trends in what is being said.

It is making the connections between elements which at first glance, may not seem logically consistent, but work for individuals in the construction of their theology. The dangers the academic theologian is faced with in drawing conclusions from this inconsistent set of beliefs, is that in doing so they are limited to either vague surficial statements such as 'a peaceful place is important to people,' or they run the risk of making artificial correlations reflecting their own bias.

3.2 The Methodology for this Study

The above discussion has both outlined the approach which has been the basis for previous studies of visitors to churches, and highlighted the challenges this approach contains. The method of Ordinary Theology has been selected as offering the most information on visitor's experiences, and is conducted in two parts: the empirical collection of data and the theological reflection on that data. Following this approach, data was collected on visitors to selected rural churches. These churches have been selected by a combination of indicators about visitor numbers and personal experience suggesting they are well visited.

---

[16] H Cameron et al, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 10

The data collection is a two-step process, firstly by use of a questionnaire and secondly by follow up interviews of visitors who opted to participate. The aim of this approach is to directly respond to the issue highlighted by the other studies of the lack of 'God talk' available from the survey information collected. While a survey was found to still be necessary to reach a significant number of people, and to enable volunteers to come forward to be interviewed.

The questionnaire was successful in reaching a significant number of people, but because of the limits of the responses being asked for, only very broad theological interpretation was possible. The interviews have been designed to give more critical information about people's experience for theological interpretation. The results of the interviews can yield more information about the experience, and may indicate that for many people it has a spiritual content. However, while they may be able to identify a specific spiritual experience, the interviewees may not be able to give an account of that experience.

This inarticulateness has been noted by a number of other researchers as commented on in the studies reviewed in this section, and means it is difficult to reach any theological conclusions. In response to this an approach is required in which we can address this lack of words by the interviewees to explore their experiences. Key themes in their responses will need to be identified, in order to constrain a theological reflection that directs us towards the type of theology that may underpin their experiences.

Before discussing in detail the construction of the questionnaire and the selection of the study churches and the interviews, it is has been helpful in the process of developing these, to review and critique two detailed studies of religious experiences in England; both in terms of their empirical data collection and their theological reflection. One is by Ann Christie that explicitly uses Ordinary Theology to look at the Christology of churchgoers in four rural churches in North Yorkshire. The other is the study by Heelas and Woodhead in the market town of Kendal, which examined the religious practice and trends of the people there. In this case they do not explicitly use Ordinary Theology, but they do use a combination of interview and questionnaire on which to do their theological reflection.

3.3 Ordinary Christology

The first study is that by Ann Christie on Ordinary Christology. Her methodology also wrestles with the challenges of eliciting a significant response from people engaged as part

of the study, in such a way that it reveals elements of their Christology. She chooses to engage via an interview that allows respondents to enter into a conversation with her, so that they can be given every chance to explain their responses to a particular question. In her study, she adopted a methodology that concentrates on the qualitative rather than the quantitative end of empirical research for the following reasons:

> A small-scale qualitative approach necessarily sacrifices the 'hard' data made available by a large-scale quantitative study, but it gains in 'digging below the surface and revealing the texture of religious feeling and experience which surveys miss altogether'. Empirical theological research through quantitative methods is generally considered to be unsuitable 'if one wants to penetrate to deeper levels of consciousness'. It is widely acknowledged that qualitative methods offer the best chance of acquiring depth insights into the character and shape of a person's religious beliefs and believing.[17]

Christie tries to acquire this depth of insight through interviews with the churchgoers in her rural churches in which she records their comments in their own words. The responses they give are examined by reflection on how they compare to what is understood through both Christian orthodoxy (creedal statements), and academic theology. She acknowledges her own bias at the beginning of the work as having a background in Evangelical Anglicanism, but now she sites herself firmly in the liberal tradition. In describing the congregations she is addressing she calls them 'middle of the road'; which we can take to mean as congregations which do not exhibit strong preferences towards clearly defined ecclesiologies (such as Evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, Charismatic), although a number of the interviewees she identifies as having an evangelical background.

In her follow up to the interviews reflecting on their content, Christie finds that those she has interviewed have not seriously engaged with Christological questions such as the divine nature of Jesus Christ, and were only able to give quite formulaic answers at best. She notes however that they had given more thought to questions of salvation except for the crucial issue, as she views it, in conventional academic theology relating to salvation in

---

[17] A Christie, *Ordinary Christology Who Do You Say I Am? Answers from the Pews?* (York: Ashgate 2012), 17-18 quoting G Ahern, G Davie, *Inner City God: The Nature of Belief in the Inner City*
(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 12, G Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains*,
(trans) Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 232, and B Martin*, 'Beyond Measurement: The Non-Quantifiable Religious Dimension in Social Life', in P Avis, *Public Faith? The State of Religious Belief and Practice in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2003), 2-3

Christology. That of atonement and the cross. For a third of all those she interviewed she states:

> They cannot articulate a theology of the cross at all, questions about the cross eliciting little response beyond the repeating of set formulae. They have what I will call a traditionalist soteriology. This label is borrowed from Robert Towler, who identifies a particular type of Christian religiousness that he calls traditionalism. The very essence of traditionalism is 'unquestioning acceptance'. Traditionalists 'believe in everything conventionally included in the Christian religion', but cannot explain 'what they believe or why they believe it'.[18]

Robert Towler's use of the term traditionalism is not directed at a particular denomination of Christianity, and can equally cover adherents of Catholic or Anglican traditions. This explains the responses given but not how they were inherited.[19] The danger in this approach is that while the traditionalists cannot give theological explanations about what they believe, their beliefs should not be dismissed. They can strongly hold to the belief that they inherit without feeling the need to be able to explain it.

For the other two thirds of respondents, she identifies two other forms of soteriology depending on how they viewed Jesus' sacrifice, exemplarist and evangelical. The defining elements of these, being Jesus as martyr to his cause, and the substitutionary theory of atonement respectively. She notes that only the evangelicals explicitly link Jesus' death on the cross with forgiveness for sin in their explanations of salvation, otherwise Jesus' death was seen as unfortunate and cruel but not necessary.

As a whole however, Christie does see in the responses of the interviewees, a common connection with the story of Jesus' life as being important in their own understanding of salvation. It is in Jesus' teaching and the impact that has on how people live their lives today where most of the respondents view salvation as being located. In trying to find a common thread between the soteriologies of the respondents Christie concludes:

> Having said all this, what the data does show is the intimate connection between the story of Jesus and salvation. As we have seen, it is as believers engage with

---

[18] Christie, *Ordinary Christology: Who Do You Say I Am?* 101
[19] R Towler, *The Need for Certainty: A Sociological Study of Conventional Religion* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1984), 80-94

the Ordinary Christology story of Jesus that salvation can occur. Or putting it another way, the story of Jesus is salvific as it grasps people or impacts upon them in ways that bring healing, wholeness or new life.[20]

This she suggests as a method for reaching out to people beyond those in congregations through the narrative of Jesus' life, believing that the story has the most resonance with people's lives:

Ordinary soteriology teaches us to do the same. It invites us to tell new stories of how Jesus saves – stories that are on a par with peoples' lives and that enable storied connections to be made – so that Christianity can once again be heard as 'good news' in our contemporary context.[21]

In her analysis of the interview results, she also points to the likelihood that the difference in belief between those in the pews on a Sunday morning, and those outside, as not being as great as perceived by the Church in general:

Traditional Christianity has generally downplayed natural religion, viewing it as a prolegomenon to revealed religion. But the results from this study suggest that natural religion, rather than revealed religion, may be the main story by which at least some people live their everyday lives. The data indicates that churchgoing theism, like much popular spirituality today, pays little attention to the doctrines of the tradition. Like popular spirituality, it says, 'I am more of a spiritual person than a religious person', and like popular spirituality it feels close to God 'in the garden', 'walking along the hilltop', 'looking up at the stars at night and wondering', 'walking on the beach', 'listening to classical music'. In natural religion and popular spirituality the encounter with God is mediated via creation and not through Jesus. In other words, salvation comes through encountering God in and through the created world; it does not come explicitly through Jesus. Nature mysticism also apprehends God in and through the natural world, and examples of nature mysticism can be found in the work of the Romantics. Wordsworth, in one of his poems, calls nature mysticism 'natural piety', differentiating it from the piety derived from reading the Bible. As we have

---

[20] Christie, *Ordinary Christology,* 182
[21] Ibid

already seen, the majority of the sample do not spend time reading the Bible, but they do happily spend time 'walking the dogs' or 'out in the garden' (and going to worship, of course) and this is where they 'find God'. Natural piety as opposed to scriptural piety seems to be the preferred option for many and their belief in God appears to be grounded largely, but not exclusively, in natural religion…[22]

Natural religion as described by Christie seems in part to be confusing natural religion, and natural theology; one is claiming that nature itself is divine and the other argues for the existence of God on the basis of natural facts. However, philosophically they both appeal to using the cognitive faculties that are 'natural' to human beings, reason, sense-perception, and introspection—to investigate religious or theological matters. [23] In addition to the position of natural religion her interpretation, although not explicitly stated by her, also places nature in a sacramental position – one of revealing God's presence and grace. The comment about contemporary spirituality fits with the work conducted by Heelas and Woodhead (discussed below) about the spiritual turn by people they spoke to in the town of Kendal, reflecting a turn away from traditional forms of authority to an internal bias.[24]

In relation to the interview results from Christie's study, her interpretation of natural religion holding sway does not differentiate the respondent's experience of God as they view it whilst in the garden, on the hilltop or in church. Instead it contrasts their experience with biblical revelation.

This interpretation of the interviews could reflect Christie's acknowledged bias in the liberal tradition and origins in the evangelical tradition. She does not explore the potential sacramental elements of people's experiences, or the contextual relationship in the sense of asking the question; is your experience of God in the garden the same as your experience of God in church. As was noted in the literature review Tim Gibson for example, sees how God is experienced in rural churches through the sacramental life of the community. John Inge argues for recovering a sacramental view of the history and tradition of the experience of God in a particular place.[25] In addition to this, while Tim Gorringe argues all places are imbued with a sacred quality, Rowan Williams warns about elevating everything into a

[22] Christie, *Ordinary Christology,* 185
[23] A Chignell, D Pereboom, 'Natural Theology and Natural Religion' in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,* 6th July 2015, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/natural-theology/ (accessed 17th August 2017)
[24] Heelas, Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 14
[25] T Gibson, *Church and Countryside: Insights from Rural Theology* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2010)*,* 41, Inge, *A Theology of Place,* 115

sacrament – a symbol of God's grace – indicating that the experience of the garden or the hilltop, while sacred, is not necessarily the same experience as being in a church.[26]

Interviewees may have a clear distinction (even if they are unable to describe what the distinction is) between their spiritual experience in the garden, and their spiritual experience in church. The questions in this study are intended to be about if the experience of visiting the church was like being on a mountain top or out walking. Then more specifically if the experience was different between visiting the church and visiting another building of similar age and significance, such as a country house or medieval castle. As noted above, the element of community may be a significant element in this distinction. The experience in church can be one of community as compared to the solitary experience of the mountain top, or the exclusive experience of the country house. What is also a possible differentiating aspect of this image of community is the association of that community with a general aspiration to be a 'good person'. Compare this with what Christie comments about English Christianity:

> In Richard Hoggart's study of working-class culture in the 1950s, he reports on the working-class identifying Christianity with morals. Doing your best to be an 'ordinary decent' person is what Christianity really means. This corresponds closely with Edward Bailey's more recent studies of the folk religion of English people, where 'Christianity'…is a way of life that is readily (if anachronistically) summarized as 'the Ten Commandments', or 'the golden rule' or (now, only occasionally) as 'the Sermon on the Mount', or by the oft-repeated paradigm of 'helping a little old lady across the road'. It has been suggested that this identification of Christianity with 'a rather undemanding type of kindness' may be a particularly English form of Christianity. Identifying Christianity with morality in this way also means that 'you can be a Christian without going to church', since 'being Christian' means 'being good'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are many in the parishes who consider themselves to be Christian but do not go to church, and my data shows that some churchgoers do not consider churchgoing to be an essential part of being a Christian either. 'It is how you live your life is being a Christian'. What matters is 'being morally a good person …

---

[26] Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 9, Williams, *On Theology*, 201

that is much more important than how often you go to church'. 'Going to church is nothing'.[27]

In Edward Bailey's work that Christie quotes, he describes the English understanding of being 'Christian' as holding to a particular creed. He describes this creed, including Christie's quote above, as follows:

'Christianity,' then is a spirit. It is an important, perhaps the major, manifestation of whatever 'Divinity' is. It represents 'true religion.' Belief in it is the 'established' religion of the English: empirically, psychologically, existentially, morally, culturally. Christ, God and the Church are its three main forms, its faces, its *dramatis personae*. It is a way of life that is readily (if anachronistically) summarised as the 'Ten Commandments,' or the "golden rule" or (now, only occasionally) as 'the Sermon on the Mount,' or by the oft-repeated paradigm of 'helping a little old lady across the road.' Thus the second commandment of Christ is the first commandment of 'Christianity.' Yet this way of summarising it is sometimes chosen simply because it is quantifiable (although dominical authority could also be claimed for it): such moral behaviour is seen as a signor sacrament of an otherwise inward and invisible grace.

The creed has other elements. These include the right of everyone to make up his own mind; the need for, and inevitability of, values; the desire for religion to be relevant to real life, and yet to keep out of politics (understood as quarrelling); the opportunity to go to Church, but the non-necessity of it; the moral duty of taking pastoral care for one's self (for which English has no word expressing approval); the belief in 'fair play,' and 'helping the underdog,' in democracy and freedom. Yet all of these other elements are subsumed, more or less consciously or coherently, in the opening statement of the creed. They are the values implicit in that 'Christianity' which is confessed, as being 'believed in.'[28]

Although the ethos (being a good person: love thy neighbour as thy self) of the creed set out by Bailey agrees with Christie's summary, the final comment about 'Church is nothing' taken from one of her respondents is not consistent with Bailey's creed. Church is

---

[27] Christie, *Ordinary Theology,* 145-146
[28] E Bailey, 'The Folk Religion of the English People' in P Badham, *Religion, State and Society in Modern Britain* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, 1989), 155

something important according to the creed, its presence and influence on the community are considered essential. It is attendance at worship or to study the Bible which are not considered to be essential. Even in this, Bailey notes that there are important times of worship included in this creed; summarised by him as the occasional offices and the major folk festivals of Remembrance Sunday, Christmas, Mothering Sunday and Harvest.[29] There has been tacit acceptance of this by the Church of England in the building report recently published, which included the proposal for 'festival churches': church buildings where only these services were to take place.[30]

Christie's interpretation of the results of her interviews, leads her to distance the role orthodox Christian doctrine, and academic theology plays in the ordinary theology of people. However, the idea of a community and that being 'Christian' means 'being good' remains important in her interpretation of the ordinary theology of her congregations, and in that of Edward Bailey about English folk religion. In the responses of her interviewees, Christie determines a theocentric focus in understanding challenging the contemporary definition of Christian worship as 'whenever people gather around Jesus'[31]

> As we have seen already, the majority of the sample have a theocentric not a Christocentric faith. God is at the centre, not Jesus. These data therefore challenge the a priori assumption that for Christians, Jesus is the central object of worship, adoration and wonder.[32]

She goes further, and states that the results of her interviews indicate that the theology held by those people in her study churches, largely put all religions together into a common religious experience that all people can access but is not exclusively Christian:

> The assumption here is that religion is a basic human constant, that the various religions are different expressions of a common religious experience and that this experience is the main reason for belief in God. These assumptions are the foundation for Christian theology in the liberal tradition presented by such as Wiles, for whom 'Christianity has roots in a religious sense of awe and wonder that seems to be a fundamental aspect of almost all human experience'. This

---

[29] Ibid, 149-151
[30] Inge, *Report of the Church Buildings Review Group*, 14th October 2015, 34
[31] Fresh Expressions, https://freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/proper
(accessed on 1st October 2016)
[32] Christie, *Ordinary Christology*, 187

assumption has come under criticism in the academy, but it is alive and kicking here in rural Anglican religion.[33]

Christie's conclusions in summary are that the congregations in her study churches exhibit a theology which, is not wholly consistent with Christian doctrine that places importance on salvation by good works and is theocentric. It locates the divine in other places than scripture and does not hold that the divine is exclusively Christian.

Christie's interpretation is in part also seen in Grace Davie's latest work reviewing her famous 'believing-without-belonging' thesis to describe much of religion in Britain.[34] Despite a continued decline in the number of active members of the Church of England, the number claiming to be members is still approximately a third of the population. They claim membership despite there being little pressure for them to do so. Her notion is that this group vicariously hold up elements of Anglicanism as desirable; but there is a continued movement away from 'orthodoxy' and a 'personal God' to something much more amorphous. This view is shared by Voas and Crockett in their work on religion in Britain today, but pointing even more away from Christianity and its doctrine's by the majority of nominally self-determined Christians.[35] Davie's view of this type of belief is influenced strongly by a study in the 1960s by Abercrombie et al. in Islington. It was specifically regarding the response of one person who when probed with the question, 'Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth? to which they replied, 'No, just the ordinary one.' She is challenged by this concept of an 'ordinary' God as to if it represents religious belief or not, and if it is not belief how does it relate to orthodox religion.[36] In response she quotes part of the conclusion to the Abercrombie study:

> The analysis in the section above suggests the tentative conclusion that religious belief, when not associated with active membership of a church, tends to be associated with superstitious belief while church attendance tends to be antithetical to superstition. Moreover, we have some evidence that for those people who do not go to church, yet say that they are religious and pray often,

[33] Christie *Ordinary Christology*, 186
[34] Davie, *Believing without Belonging,* Kindle edition.
[35] Voas, Crockett, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', 11–28
[36] Davie, *Believing Without Belonging,* 77

religious belief has moved quite far from the orthodox position and is really much closer to what would normally be called superstition.[37]

What she also comments is that the beliefs of this group of people, while generated by individual choice, are not wholly random or inconsistent. Their beliefs often follow patterns which have been formed by the individuals cultural heritage.[38]

What all of these results point towards is a set of beliefs, an Ordinary Theology which is not governed by Church doctrine in the sense that the focus of the individuals faith is not the same as that taught by the Church. Duncan Dormor's interpretation of the interaction of Cambridge students with Christianity may be instructive here. What they yearn for is wisdom and to be good. What they are told by the Church to desire is to be saved and to be obedient.[39]

However, although it is possible to determine from these studies and bodies of work that Ordinary Theology commonly differs from that of orthodox Christian theology; furthermore from Christie's study that the concept of salvation through good works is important, the nature of that theology has not been fully explored. Part of the reason for this is the level of inarticulateness about the faith of the people involved. There is not an obvious doctrine that these people can point to in conversation that outlines what they believe. Although naming yourself as a Christian and not feeling it is essential that you attend a church every Sunday is not only an English phenomena; the spirituality particularly in terms of community described by the interviewees does appear to have a common idea behind it.

The element of folk religion may be important when you consider the cultural heritage mentioned by Davie, and the superstition suggested by Abercrombie for which Bailey quotes the former Archbishop of York, John Habgood's, description of:

> One of a number (of terms) used to describe various aspects of something so amorphous that a single clear definition is impossible. I use it here, in an English setting and with experience of ministry in the Church of England particularly in mind, as a general term for the unexpressed, inarticulate, but often deeply felt,

[37] N Abercrombie, J Baker, S Brett and J Foster, 'Superstition and Religion: The God of the Gaps' in D Martin, M Hill, (ed) *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain 3* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 124
[38] Davie, *Believing Without Belonging,* 77
[39] D Dormor, J McDonald and J Caddick, *Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity* (London: Continuum 2003), 2

religion of ordinary folk who would not usually describe themselves as church-going Christians yet feel themselves to have some sort of Christian allegiance.[40]

Although any allegiance to this type of religion may be considered (not least by the Church) to be waning based on church attendance figures; that is not supported by the number of people who continue to tick the box as being Christian and specifically Church of England. In a recent study by Stephen Bullivant he indicates that the number of the population that call themselves Church of England has risen from 16.3 % in 2013 to 17.1 % in 2015.[41] This small increase, after a significant period of decline he puts down to an increase in patriotism. In an interview about his work he states, 'People see Christianity as an expression of Englishness. There has been more rhetoric around Britain being a Christian nation.'[42]

Although this association is made, which parallels the interpretation of 'folk religion' by Habgood and Bailey, the nature of this relationship is not explored in the study reported. In the study by Christie and in this study around rural Anglican churches, the specific elements of salvation and community are important elements for those interviewed. In the same interview reported with Stephen Bullivant, The Rt Revd Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool, is quoted as saying, 'In Liverpool, where I am bishop, we say that we want more people to know Jesus and more justice in the world - a message of personal relationship and community action. In my experience that message remains attractive to people in this increasingly self-centred and lonely world'.[43]

The study by Christie highlights some important features in employing Ordinary Theology as a tool for theological research. More specifically her study is relevant to this research because of the rural context in which it is conducted. Her methodology takes into account the problems of relying only on paper-based questionnaires in order to make serious inroads into individual's theological understanding. Equally interviews which limit respondents answers to a binary yes/no, or to picking values on a scale. Her interviews reveal two main features in relation to her research question about the Christology held by people

---

[40] Bailey, *'The Folk Religion of the English People'*, 149

[41] S Bullivant, 'The "No Religion" Population of Britain', *Catholic Research Forum Reports*, 3, Benedict XVI Centre, St Mary's University, Twickenham, London 2017

[42] O Rudgard, 'Anglican Church Congregation Numbers Have Stabilised' *The Telegraph,* 14th May 2017*,* http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/13/anglican-church-congregation-numbers-have-stabilised/ (accessed on 17th August 2017)

[43] Rudgard 'Anglican Church Congregation Numbers Have Stabilised' *The Telegraph,* 14th May 2017

in the pews; that for the majority the relation to the orthodox (as interpreted by Christie) Christian theological view of their perspective is tenuous, and that God and not Christ forms the central focus of most people's strongly held beliefs. The following question of: If not an orthodox Christ centred theology then what is their theology? is touched on by Christie. She relates it to the 'golden rule' and a generalised God is equally accessible while doing the garden as when in worship. She returns to her research question in noting what is commonly held by her respondents, is a belief that Jesus was essentially a 'good and wise man' communicated through the gospel stories of his life. This point she suggests, a way of communicating the Christian message (in terms of a more orthodox theology) is through this narrative being more creatively employed.

The research question in this study is not as theologically specific in not centring on Christology, but more driven by context. It is the theology touched on by Christie that is not orthodox or necessarily centred on Christ that is the subject of research when experienced in a particular place. Noting this has implications for the methodology and for the nature of the interview questions, but also for the tools employed in reflecting on the responses. Whereas Christie turns to comparison between the responses and Christology in the academy, we need to look at respondent's answers in a broader perspective that covers the generalised term of spirituality. The lens which helps constrain that view is the relationship of that spirituality to the specific place – what is it about that place which influences the theology of those who chose to visit there.

The role that Christianity has is that theology is one of the subjects discussed by Heelas and Woodhead in their study of the spiritual revolution examining the specific situation in the town of Kendal.

3.4 The Spiritual Revolution

The work of Heelas and Woodhead is quoted in a number of places above. This in relation to the spirituality that the people interviewed in this study and by Christie may be trying to describe. Their work focuses on the move away from organised religion and towards a self-determined spirituality. However, the methodology they employ in conducting their research is not described as Ordinary Theology although it does have a strong empirical component. We now turn to that research and compare the methodology used and results obtained; to

both the methodology used in this study and that of Christie's research into Ordinary Christology.

The aim of the study by Heelas and Woodhead was to explore the claim of the 'spiritual revolution' where people, particularly in the West, are turning away from traditional 'religion' and instead are describing themselves as 'spiritual'. The key to this research was coming up with a distinction between religious and spiritual, which they make by identifying the different sources of authority that each turns to. Religion locates authority in a higher power and life is lived in concordance with that authority. This is 'life-as' in which there are roles and institutions into which individuals fit into. Spirituality locates authority in the individual, turning to the individuals own sense of direction to define their belief. The 'subjective turn' as they describe it – is utilising their own feelings, memories and emotions:

> The subjectivities of each individual become a, if not the, unique source of significance, meaning and authority. Here 'the good life' consists of living one's life in full awareness of one's states of being; in enriching one's experiences; in finding was of handling negative emotions; in becoming sensitive enough to find out where and how the quality of one's life – alone or in relation – may be improved. The goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to have the courage to become one's own authority. Not to follow established paths, but to forge one's own inner-directed, as subjective, life.[44]

The spiritual revolution claim states, that since the 1960s people have increasingly sought their own authority rather than that of a God or of the Church. This theory is not new and has been noted before by a number of researchers. Alan Coates Bouquet, in 1978, explains this subjective turn in part on the failure of teachers of religion to pay the mystical experience of people sufficient attention:

> The result is that many persons have developed independently, and I think quite justifiably, a mild mystical attitude of their own in relation to their work, and perhaps have been more successful in doing so than if their friends and pastors had helped them in that direction. [45]

---

[44]Heelas, Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 3-4
[45] A Bouquet, *Religious Experience its Nature, Types and Validity*
(Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 27

To test this claim Heelas and Woodhead plus their research team focus on the town of Kendal. They identify Kendal as suitable because of a number of factors. Distance of travel for the researchers; its size and relative boundedness (being a significant distance from other major towns that might attract worshippers away from Kendal), and its relatively homogeneous population without significant difference in the ethnic makeup of the town.

Their study spans a two-year period and sought out two groups of research subjects: congregational – essentially Christian worshipping communities, and alternative or holistic subjects. These included those that engaged in acupuncture or other alternative therapies plus group activities such as yoga and dance with a spiritual aspect.

The researchers conducted interviews with the members of the congregational domain and with practitioners of the holistic spirituality – individual participants in the spiritual activity were not interviewed because of the need for anonymity of the practitioner's clients. These interviews were usually in the congregational member's homes, and in the practitioner's home/place of work, and were either unstructured or semi-structured, recorded then transcribed. This was accompanied by background research into the history of the numbers attending the churches, and anecdotal evidence such as by the number of practitioners offering their services, indicating the numbers engaging in alternative activities.

It was only after the interviews that paper questionnaires were developed for both the congregational and the holistic domains. This was because the researchers wanted to frame their questions correctly to address particular questions that had come out of the interviews. The two questionnaires shared some questions, but differed somewhat in their nature and purpose. Whilst the holistic questionnaire was designed to provide information about the milieu as a whole, the main purpose of the congregational questionnaire was to provide information about the four main varieties of Christianity in Kendal.[46]

The questionnaires were substantial documents being 16 and 14 pages respectively, and were made up of mostly well constrained responses to questions – either yes/no or select from a list of options – but with the option to include the respondents own option in some of the questions.

---

[46] Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution,* 153

The response rate was significant in getting returns from 36% of the 512 people they determined were part of the congregational domain, and 42% from the 600 people they determined were potentially part of the holistic domain. The work of the researchers in observing and interviewing the subjects, is likely to have enabled the significant rate of return of the questionnaire. Equally this overcame many of the objections in the surveys mentioned above, concerning the length and complexity of the questionnaire. The language and the type of questions were selected to match the observations of the two groups and hence should have been readily accessible for them.

Criticism of the methodology employed by Heelas and Woodhead focuses on the selection of Kendal as an appropriate research subject, and on the initial premise of the spiritual revolution.[47] The relatively isolated rurality which makes Kendal attractive in terms of its boundedness, and the homogeneity of its population, also make any conclusions drawn from it not representative of the much wider situation nationally. The initial hypothesis of the spiritual revolution depends on identifying secularisation as impacting on religion, and identifying spirituality with holistic practices and sacralisation – creating the sacred.[48] What is contested is that the holistic domain is a reflection of sacralisation, rather than a form of secularisation, that sees it as a consumer choice that does not connect with the scared.[49]

The question above of the methodology employed by Heelas and Woodhead in the Kendal Project is; Can it be defined as Ordinary Theology? Ordinary Theology as defined by Astley requires empirical data collection of the practices and words those without specific theological training use.[50] The Kendal Project collects a substantial amount of data through both interview and questionnaire which is reflected on in the light of the research question – has there been a spiritual revolution in Kendal? There is a question of how much the language of the participants was reflected on for its theological content, because while observation and interviews inform the questionnaire, the questions posed are from the academy to address the hypothesis. This study would argue this research methodology is not what Astley proposed as Ordinary Theology; since the theology is defined by the researchers in the research question and is not, in substance, modified by the content of the data acquired

[47] C Philo, L Cadman and J Lea, 'The New Urban Spiritual? Tentative Framings for a Debate and a Project', *Working Paper*, University of Glasgow (2011) http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/96750/1/96750.pdf, (accessed 18th July 2017), 8-9
[48] Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 10
[49] Philo et al, *The New Urban Spiritual?* 12
[50] Astley, *Ordinary Theology,* 1

by them. It is difficult to see in the results presented a new theology which has been informed by the participants responses.

One benefit of this approach is that it is not limited by the theological inarticulateness of respondents, which is to be reasonably expected of the non-specialist theologian despite the claims by Cupitt of the content of ordinary language.[51] In both Christie's and this study, the challenge presented by the collected interview data is the absence of comment in key theological areas. In Christie's for example there is the issue of explaining a theology of the atonement.

The essential risk regarding the approach of Ordinary Theology is that there is simply not enough material from ordinary people for the theologian to reflect on. Without specific detail the theologian is left to interpret the absence of information, a type of negative theology which recognises the limitations of human language.[52] However, unlike negative theology, the object of negation may or may not exist in the consciousness of those whose lack of words are being interpreted for. Therefore, we can interpret their experience as being spiritual, Christian, or even secularist with equal validity based on what we construct around the absence in their explanations.

The approach of Heelas and Woodhead does not encounter the same risk, as the preposition is prepared in advance of the empirical data collection. Furthermore, through the well constrained nature of the subsequent questionnaire, the space into which multiple interpretations can be placed is reduced to answer a more definite theological question – in this case the spirituality of individuals and where they locate authority for that spirituality.

From the perspective of Ordinary Theology what their approach does not do is let the responses of the interviews lead the research. The focus of the research is defined by the academy rather than the option being there for the responses to lead in a completely new direction. For example, the natural theology highlighted by Christie as being prevalent amongst her congregations, was not something she envisioned in her original research question concerning Ordinary Christology.

3.5 Spiritual Experience

---

[51] Cupitt, *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech,* 1-2
[52] J Bowker, 'Negative Theology' in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions,*
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81

One of the key differences between this study and the two discussed above is the spiritual experience of the visitors. While Christie discusses questions of where her respondents encounter God; which includes places outside of worship in the Church, her set of interviewees are defined by the congregations of the Churches she is working with. For Heelas and Woodhead they are looking specifically at worshipping groups in Churches and spiritual practitioners in alternative groups. In this study, the group under scrutiny are not defined by being part of a Church or another spiritual group, but on an individual basis that has both elected to visit a church and to participate in the study. As such the experience being investigated is an individual spiritual experience, and the form of that experience is not constrained by the practice of an explicitly spiritual group. Without that constraint it is potentially open to question if the visitor's experience can be classified as spiritual or not?

At the outset of this research the assumption is made that the experience is spiritual and classified as such by the individual who experiences it. However, to justify this assumption more qualification is necessary to explain the term 'spiritual experience' to better define the type of experience being discussed.

It is not the intention of this work to debate the definition of 'spirituality' as a term other than to use it in the sense that John Swinton and David Pattison have done:

> …the diffuse and controversial meanings of this term that has come into play with its relatively recent conceptual separation from religion. Our argument is not that God does not exist or that religions are nothing but socially constructed systems. Likewise, we do not intend to argue that spirituality as a human phenomenon does not exist…Although it may not denote things or essences within the world or persons, similar to the symbolic concept of money, it can denote areas, absences and quests that have real and appropriate effects upon societies, institutions and individuals.[53]

In this sense the experience of visitors is treated as a spiritual experience and not treated from a psychological or sociological perspective. As Bouquet states, 'we can never hope to understand religious experience merely by studying religious psychology'.[54]

---

[53] J Swinton and S Pattison, 'Moving Beyond Clarity: Towards a Thin, Vague, and Useful Understanding of Spirituality in Nursing Care', *Nursing Philosophy,* 11, (2010), 226-237
[54] Bouquet, *Religious Experience Its Nature, Types and Validity*, 27

As Swinton and Pattison mention above, the term 'spiritual' has only recently been separated from religion, where religion remains as just one facet of spirituality.

The pioneering work on religious experience was realised by William James in his study of 1902, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he points towards people's experience of something beyond the conscious self which has a real effect on their lives:

> Taking creeds and faith-state together, as forming 'religions,' and treating these as purely subjective phenomena, without regard to the question of their 'truth,' we are obliged, on account of their extraordinary influence upon action and endurance to class them amongst the most important biological functions of mankind.[55]

Alister Hardy proffers a list of James' contemporaries who provided much of the initial study of religious experience such as Edwin Starbuck's *The Psychology of Religion* (1899), and Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911).[56] However, he cites a lack of interest following this time in religious experience in part due to the perception of religion as elements of superstition, and wishful thinking making it difficult to reconcile it to the materialistic interpretation of life he sees as prevalent.[57]

The modern emergence of spirituality has been considered either as a transmutation of the religion present in James' experience, or an expression of something new and original.[58] In either case, as pointed out in the conclusion by James in his work, the spiritual experience is personally affective.

In Bouquet's study on religious experiences he discusses their validity, and in examining the value of individual experiences, he notes the comments made by St Teresa of Avila in examining her own experiences:

> …what leaves such peace, calm, and good fruits in the soul, and particularly the following three graces of a very high order. The first of these is a perception of

---

[55] W James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1907), 506
[56] A Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979), 4
[57] Ibid, 7
[58] See for example see the Introduction to J Carrette, and R King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) and K Flannagan and P Jupp, (eds.) *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), Chapter 4.

the greatness of God which becomes clearer to us as we witness more of it. Secondly, we gain self-knowledge and humility from seeing how creatures so base as ourselves in comparison with the Creator of such wonders have dared to offend Him in the past or venture to gaze on Him now. The third grace is a contempt for all earthly things unless they are consecrated to the service of so great a God.[59]

This description indicates, for St Teresa whose experiences are regarded highly within the Christian tradition of Roman Catholicism and elsewhere, that she sought to differentiate the value of her experiences according to their orientation and intensity.

The valuing of these experiences is not limited to the Catholic tradition. It is also valued in the Protestant Puritan tradition where intense experiences of knowledge of sinfulness, and thankfulness for forgiveness help validate the presence of a salvific grace in the person. It has also been suggested by Colin Campbell that these experiences may be stimulated by individually selected iconography:

Whilst in Roman Catholicism symbols also served to arouse (and allay) powerful emotions, their control was kept firmly in the hands of the priesthood, and hence situationally located in the communal ritual. In Protestantism, by contrast, not only was there no one to act as mediator between the individual and the divine, but both 'magical' ritual and the use of idols was proscribed. The consequence of this was that those symbols which did serve to arouse religious emotion were of an abstract and general character. Death and mortality, for example, which were commonly regarded as evidence of man's inherently sinful state, could be represented by a wide range of objects and events in the world, from coffins, graves, churchyards and yew trees, to sickness worms and church bells, with any one of these acting as the 'trigger' for emotional experience.[60]

He goes on to link these emotional experiences through sentimentalism and romanticism, to modern patterns of pleasure seeking and consumption. In this journey though, as can be seen from the above quote, the individual finds great freedom to

---

[59] St Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle or the Mansions* (New York: Tan Books, 2011), Chapter 5, 12

[60] C Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 74-75

experience when not directed by tradition but by a self-reflection as noted by Heelas and Woodhead. In origin this self-reflection was underpinned by religion; but when this underpinning is eroded or taken away through a decreasing contact with, and belief in the relevance of religion, other values have greater importance as the loci around which reflection can take place.

In Campbell's work there is no indication of the process of experience moving away from religion being reversible, but it does place the origin of experience with religion, and as such can echo those origins in the thoughts of those with a religious upbringing.

John Maltby and Liz Day have examined the relationship between religious orientation and schizotypy, a measure of how disposed someone is towards being schizophrenic.[61] They predict that intrinsic religiosity would be negatively associated with schizotypy, and religious experience and extrinsic religiosity would be positively associated with schizotypy. Although, as stated before, this project is not looking at the psychological condition of the people visiting churches, just their experience. However, as part of their work they required an indicator of religious experience, and these indicators provide a valuable tool for comparing the type of experience described by the visitors to these churches and other types of spiritual experience.

To create an indicator they constructed a scale from Greeley's descriptors of religious experience.[62] This scale is headed by the statement, 'Religious worship encompasses many behaviours and practices, such as private prayer, public prayer, attending a place of worship, reading the bible or talking to God. Whilst engaged in religious worship, please indicate how often you have experienced the following feelings or thoughts'. Respondents were then asked to consider the following 18 items and respond on a 5-point scale; (1) Never,(2) Seldom,(3) Occasionally,(4) Often and (5) Frequently:

- A feeling of deep and profound peace
- A certainty that all things would work out for the good
- Sense of my own need to contribute to others
- A conviction that love is the centre of everything
- Sense of joy and laughter

---

[61] J Maltby and L Day, 'Religious Experience, Religious Orientation and Schizotypy', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, Volume 5, No. 2, (2002), 163-174

[62] A Greeley, *The Sociology of the Paranormal* (London: Sage, 1975), 65

- An experience of great emotional intensity

- A great increase in my understanding and knowledge

- A sense of the unity of everything and my own part in it

- A sense of new life and living in a new world

- A confidence in my own personal survival

- A feeling that I could not possibly describe what was happening to me

- The sense that all the universe was alive

- The sense that my personality has been taken over by something much more powerful than I am

- A sensation of warmth and fire

- A sense of being alone

- A loss of concern about worldly problems

- A sense that I am being bathed in light

- A sense of desolation

They report that these items form a sufficient measure of religious experience in comparison with other measures of religiosity.[63] In Greeley's original study of 1,460 respondents from across the United States, 30% of those interviewed reported that being alone in a church was a trigger for a religious experience.[64] This result gives more credence to the description of the experience of the visitors to churches as a spiritual or religious one.

Of the above descriptors, overwhelmingly it is the first one a feeling of deep and profound peace, which captures the general tone of the type of spiritual experience being discussed by the visitors, as will be evidenced in the study results.

What the above discussion highlights is that the use of the term 'spiritual experience' is valid for the experience of the visitors to the churches in this study, and that it fits within what existing work there is on the subject.

3.6 Researcher Bias

[63] J Maltby, 'Religious Orientation and Religious Experience', *The North American Journal of Psychology*, 1, (1999), 289–292

[64] Greeley, *The Sociology of the Paranormal*, 64

In examining the potential sources of error or bias in this study the researcher's personal bias is also a key consideration. In the study by Christie it is acknowledged that her roots in Evangelical Christianity, and her current more liberal position may influence her interpretation. Furthermore, in the above discussion it was indicated where this may have been the case. In the study by Heelas and Woodhead the influence of this bias may be more apparent in the formulation of the questionnaire that they modify according to the interviews with the residents of Kendal.

Throughout this study although every attempt is made to consider the information through a number of lenses, my own personal bias is from the perspective of an incumbent of two rural churches, and as the Rural and Environment Officer for the Diocese of Chichester. The result of my bias is likely to be an over favourable interpretation of the value of rural churches, particularly with respect to their potential to provide spiritual experiences. I do not have significant experience of visitors to urban churches (excluding cathedrals), and am thus unable to comment personally on the contrast. I am also likely to make assumptions concerning a general knowledge of the countryside present in the population being constantly exposed to people living in that context. This must at least make any generalisations based on that experience representative of only a part of the population.

I have spent most of my life living in rural villages in Kent, Cornwall and Sussex, and in my early 20's entering into the Church of England, and being ordained at 29. Prior to that I had been an environmental scientist working for an agricultural consultancy. My early experiences of Church were from a Conservative Evangelical tradition, but in the process of discernment I was put forward for and trained at a Liberal Catholic college. My subsequent training was in the Anglo Catholic tradition. The parish in which I am currently incumbent has a history in the Anglo Catholic tradition, but we currently operate with a more Liberal Catholic one.

My role as Rural and Environment Officer has enabled me to travel widely across the Diocese of Chichester (Sussex) and beyond, to visit rural churches and talk with those in the rural community. I also have regular opportunities to compare my notes with those of other rural officers, particularly from neighbouring diocese but also from those much further afield in the country. These conversations have formed my understanding of rural ministry which have been compared and contrasted with my own experiences; both growing up in the countryside and also now being an incumbent of a rural parish. This is the understanding

in which the research into rural church visitors has been conducted, and which is likely to bias my interpretations of the interviews, and which will have generated the literature that resources this research.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

In engaging in any empirical study of a given group of people, I need to be aware of being accountable to those people. Of how the information they provide will be used, and in the case of an interview, that it will be conducted in a way that safeguards them and the interviewer. Respecting the rights of participants in social studies has long been recognised in the research community, and a number of ethical guidelines and rules of conduct have been produced. These include:

- The British Sociological Association's (BSA) Statement of Ethical Practice and Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct
- The Social Research Association's (SRA) Ethical Guidelines
- The British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles for Conducting Research
- The British Society of Criminology's Code of Ethics for Criminological Research
- The British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines
- The Association of Social Anthropologists' Ethical Guidelines for Good Practice
- The Market Research Society's (MRS) Code of Conduct [65]

All the guidelines have much in common in their recommendations and reflect the general principles upheld within the Social Science research community. These guidelines are meant to inform members about the ethical judgements they need to make rather than to impose standards. The ultimate responsibility for ethical decisions relating to a research project has traditionally been placed with the researcher. Researchers are expected to protect the well-being of participants in addition to maintaining the integrity of their profession. Research should, as far as possible, be based on participant's freely volunteered informed consent. This implies a responsibility to explain fully and meaningfully what the research is

---

[65] L Corti, A Day and G Backhouse, 'Confidentiality and Informed Consent: Issues for Consideration in the Preservation of and Provision of Access to Qualitative Data Archives', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Art. 7, (2000)
www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1024/2207#gref (accessed 5th August 2017)

about and how it will be disseminated. To obtain a participant's informed consent they should be told or given the following information:

- A brief description of the purpose and procedure of the research, including the expected duration of the study
- A statement of any risks or discomfort associated with participation
- A guarantee of anonymity and the confidentiality of records
- The identification of the researcher and of where to receive information about subjects rights or questions about the study
- A statement that participation is completely voluntary and can be terminated at any time without penalty
- A statement of alternative procedures that may be used
- A statement of any benefits or compensation provided to subjects and the number of subjects involved
- An offer to provide a summary of findings[66]

The University of Chichester's Research Ethics Policy set the framework by which research is conducted in the name of the university. The framework is based on six principles of ethical research adopted by the university: research integrity, effective provision of information, voluntary consent and freedom to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity, maximising benefit and minimising harm, and independence of research.[67] The governance of the research conducted by members of the university is through the University Research Ethics Committee. They review proposals for research and have the right to withhold consent if a programme of research is not in compliance with the Research Ethics Policy, or the ethical guidelines that have been agreed by the Research Ethics Committee. It also holds powers to investigate breaches in ethical practice and recommend further investigation in line with the university's disciplinary policy.

A clear set of guidelines and example documents are provided for applying for approval, and for obtaining informed consent from participants. Approval was sought for the two proposed phases of research in this study, the paper questionnaire and the interviews.

---

[66] L Newman, *The Basics of Social Research*, (Boston: Preston 2007), 55
[67] University of Chichester, *Research Ethics Policy,*
www.chi.ac.uk/about-us/policies-and-statements/policies-0 (accessed 8th August 2017)

In the first phase, informed consent was obtained from the incumbents of the parishes in which the study churches were situated, in the second it was obtained from each of the interview participants. In each case a sheet of information was provided which set out clearly the nature of the project and the rights of the participants. These information sheets and the consent forms used are given in the appendix.

In addition to the statutory procedures relating to this type of research which are required by the university, further research was undertaken to ensure good practice during the interviews and for the welfare of the participants. For example, the interviewees may not have had the opportunity to raise issues of their experiences while visiting churches previously, and this may also raise issues with them of faith and their past which can generate strong emotions. If this is the case and the interviewee appears distressed the interviewer and the information sheet will suggest on-going sources of support. [68]

3.8 Initial Empirical Data Collection

Ordinary Theology requires there to be a body of information collected from the study subjects on which a theological reflection can be attempted. In this study we are looking at visitors to selected churches and in the first instance we needed to find out who these visitors were – where did they come from, and why were they visiting. As seen from the literature review around how people value these buildings and with the renewed interest in pilgrimage; it is important from a spiritual perspective to understand people's reason for visiting. The other key question to approach in this data collection is that of the visitors experience in the church itself.

From the methodologies adopted in the existing studies above, the use of visitor books and prayer cards have revealed some insights into the ordinary theology of visitors, but have ultimately proved to be unsatisfactory in revealing more of the visitor theology. They were unsatisfactory because the amount of information in terms of personal narrative by the visitors was insufficient for the theological reflection. Paper questionnaires that are

---

[68] See for example: R Weiss, 'Issues in Interviewing' in *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 121-150

well constrained with the use of Likert scales for example, produce data that is more open to statistical analysis and comment over interpretation of language.

The output from the questionnaires is dependent on the construction of the questions; where there is a balance between the complexity of the question and the individual's ability to understand it as written without a great deal of explanation. There is also a question of the validity of the questions posed where bias can be inherent in the question selection; by choosing questions that reflect a particular theological background and understanding for example, without the option for respondents to explain their own understanding.

An attempt has been made to learn from these studies in approaching the empirical data collection for this study. Overall the composition of a questionnaire suitable for an empirical study of the experience of visitors to rural churches, needs to consider the likelihood of obtaining a response to the question. Furthermore, how well is the answer constrained (very well if a Likert scale is employed), and what are the opportunities for theological reflection on the answers presented. The potential tension as outlined by Astley, is in sacrificing opportunities for theological reflection by the effective 'dumbing down' of questions to aid communicability and people's likelihood of responding. In practice this is a tension involving the language used in the questions and how constrained are respondent's answers are.

The use of elements such as visitor books and prayer cards seem to be discounted in the conclusions of two of the studies above by Morris and Burton and ap Sion. The questionnaire is the preferred approach for most of the other studies, but with much variation in the length and composition of the questionnaire. The approach of Christie in using an interview to obtain the depth of insight necessary for ordinary theology is also noted, and a two-stage approach has been conducted in this study to use both a questionnaire and interviews in order to get a range of responses and some in depth studies.

The questionnaire employed is given in Appendix A. Its construction reflects both the simplicity required to obtain a high response rate – the easier the questionnaire is to complete the more likely people are to participate – but still yield some information on the nature of the visitor and their experience. The questionnaire also contains the option for visitors to agree to participate in an interview for the more in-depth studies.

The first four questions (about how far the respondent lives from the church, are they a regular worshipper at a church and how often they visit) are well constrained, and intend to discover if the respondent is a visitor. Equally, if they are someone who visits churches regularly (particularly the church being visited on that occasion) and if they are a practicing Christian.

The subsequent four are questions attempting to obtain a personal response from the visitor indicating something of their experience of the church. The language used is deliberately simple with the intention of obtaining a response from any visitor, and the Likert scale is used in this case to constrain people's answers and to enable them to complete the questionnaire as quickly as possible.

The design of the latter four questions is to endeavour to gain some indication of the motivation of the visitors for coming, and the nature of their experience while in the church. These questions are intended to yield some basic information concerning visitors; for example that there was a spiritual component to their visit, but not to capture anything detailed about their experience. It is the final option to volunteer for further research which is intended to open the opportunity to explore deeper a person's experience of the church through an interview.

3.9 Selecting the Study Churches

For this investigation we are limiting the number of rural churches being studied to those who are known to attract visitors at times other than when general worship takes place. Unfortunately there are no centrally based records of visitors to churches, with only some evidence kept by individual churches through comments made in visitor books, or through prayer cards completed as noted previously.

Therefore, to identify possible churches a degree of self-selection is necessary where church buildings are identified by their congregations as having high visitor numbers. In my role as Rural Officer for the Diocese of Chichester I have the benefit of visiting several rural churches across the diocese, and speaking with incumbents and members of the Church and community about their churches. The number of visitors the church has is a common topic of conversation and provides some guidance as to which churches may be suitable.

Another method for identifying potential study churches is through a church identifying itself as a 'tourist attraction' – a place to highlight for visitors to the area. The first

step in identifying these churches was to constrain the possible options through only looking at those listed in the document *Sussex Churches: Open in West Sussex.* This document was jointly sponsored by West Sussex County Council; The Open Churches Trust; and Sacred Sussex; the local organisation linked with the Churches Tourism Association in 2004. It describes the churches it lists as, 'a selection of the most beautiful and interesting churches to visit in West Sussex – all of which are open on a regular basis'.

One of these churches, St Michael's in Up Marden, is mentioned in Simon Jenkins' introduction to his work examining *England's Thousand Best Churches* which had particular spiritual significance for him.[69] This church would then seem a good initial candidate. In addition, this church belongs to a single benefice of eight churches known as the Octagon Parishes. Three of these are mentioned in the *Sussex Churches: Open in West Sussex* document, and in conversation with the incumbent the benefice does have a particular emphasis on visitor ministry. Therefore, locating questionnaires in the churches within this group for the case studies may be both appropriate and practically convenient.

One other church has also been selected as a case study away from the Octagon group situated in East Sussex near Rye. St Laurance is a 10th century church situated on the edge of the village of Guestling. It is not listed in *England's Thousand Best Churches,* but sits in a beautiful rural setting at the confluence of three well used footpaths, and my personal experience of the church is that is receives a significant number of visitors. This case study will act in part, to see if the emphasis on visitor ministry by the Octagon parish has an impact on visitor perceptions.

Below are images of all the case study churches (Figures 1 – 8). The image of the church is an important evocative element in the visitor experience. The pictures below illustrate the type of churches the study buildings are, and give an impression of them when considering the results of the study below.

---

[69] S Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Churches*, Introduction

Figure 1; St Mary's, Compton

Figure 2; St Peter's, East Marden

Figure 3; Christchurch, Forestside

Figure 4; St Laurence, Guestling

Figure 5; St Mary's, North Marden

Figure 6; St Peter's, Racton

Figure 7; St Mary's, Stoughton

Figure 8; St Michael's, Up Marden

3.10 The Interviews

Phase two of the survey comprises of the interviews of those respondents who have agreed to participate in further research. This presents an opportunity to elicit the type of information about individual perceptions that provide a wealth of detail concerning individual experiences, and enable the ordinary theology of the visitor to be explored.

A range of interview styles are available to the researcher to acquire this information. David Silverman has placed the types of information obtainable through interviews into three categories: the positivist approach, the emotionalist, and the constructivist. Essentially the positivist approach sees the information to be primarily 'fact' generated through a standardised set of interview questions, the answers to which can be

easily tabulated. The emotionalist approach sees the interviewees as being able to construct their own narrative and generates information that gives 'an authentic insight into people's experiences'. [70] The emotionalist approach is best facilitated through unstructured and open-ended interviews which normally follow an in-depth study of the subject. Finally, the constructivist approach sees that interviewees and interviewers are actively engaged in constructing meaning. This would be considered as endangering the truth of the information recorded as facts or experiences by positivists or emotionalists, but to the constructivist the mutually constructed meaning becomes the subject of the researcher's analysis.

Although it may seem obvious that for the purpose of this research, an emotionalist approach would be preferred in the style of interview, it is not as straightforward as it seems. The positivist approach is seen in the questionnaire, but the information sought by the interview is the individual's own narrative of their experience which cannot be obtained by a yes/no answer. However, it is unlikely that each individual has a narrative ready constructed of their visit, and is able to articulate it to an interviewer. In attempting to unlock such a narrative an interviewer may evoke, 'words and phrases that may have some vestige of theological significance, but not explicit; "empty bromides" used for the purposes of maintaining relationship through conversation rather than to make a theological point.'[71]

The difficulty then, is that we need to get interviewees to explain their experience of visiting the church in question, and not just explain to the interviewer what they think they want to hear. One way to do this is to adopt more of a constructivist approach where the interviewer plays a more active role in generating the narrative of the interviewee. James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium describe an 'active interview' thus:

> Respondents' answers and comments are not viewed as reality reports delivered from a fixed repository. Instead they are considered from the ways that they construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer. The focus is as much on the assembly process as on what is assembled…The goal is to show how interview responses are produced in the interaction between interviewer and respondent, without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that condition the meaning-making process. The analytic

---

[70] D Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction,*
(London: SAGE, 2001), 86-87
[71] Lees-Smith, 'Ordinary Theology as Mother Tongue' 27

objective is not merely to describe the situated production of talk, but to show how what is being said relates to the experiences and lives being studied.[72]

For the interviews in this investigation the interviewer is aiming to work with the interviewee to find a narrative that describes what their experience visiting the church was. A 'crib sheet' was designed for the interviewer which gives suggested questions to use that are intended to engage and guide the interviewee in looking at their experience – to give ideas that the experience may be compared with or to disagree with. A list of the suggested questions is given in the index. The interviewees were given the option of where they would like to meet for the interview and most opted to have the interview in their homes. The length of the interviews varied between approximately twenty minutes speaking on the telephone to one hour forty minutes with the longest face-to-face interview.

These questions were selected to give some personal information about the interviewee, such as their religious background and what drew them to visiting the church. Specific items about what they did as part of their visit, their experience of the church and contrasting that experience with other encounters with nature and old buildings. Finally, questions on if they would want to change anything about the church, and if they have thought much about their experience at the church since visiting.

These questions are to be used as part of a conversation and not used in a question – response format. Not all of the questions need to be used in each interview as the interviewee responses will not be bracketed according to the questions. The only purpose of the questions is to help in producing a narrative of the interviewee's experience in visiting the church.

The methodology used by Heelas and Woodhead would not be appropriate for this study, as the initial research question is not trying to distinguish between two potential theologies (holistic and religious in their case). It is to identify what theology may lie behind visitor experiences in rural churches. This research question requires a more open-ended response, one that enables the respondents to explain their experiences of visiting in their own narrative.

---

[72] J Holstein, J Gubrium, 'Active Interviewing' in Silverman, (ed.) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, (London: Sage, 1997), 127

However, there remains the problem of the inarticulateness of the general public concerning questions of theology; which leaves the researcher guessing at meaning or only able to say what they have not said about theology. In response to this problem, the use by Heelas and Woodhead of their interviews to frame their research question is a useful tool in reducing the space created by this inarticulateness. For example, in the questions suggested for use within this study, they sought to understand if there was a clear differentiation between the experience of visiting a church, a hilltop or another historical building. The intention of this is to differentiate the experience in the light of the nature theology mentioned by Christie.

From the literature review it is clear that place is significant for people. Instead of the reference to spirituality used by Heelas and Woodhead, or the reference to orthodox Christology used by Christie, it is in reference to place that the results from this study will be compared. From the literature review there is a strong indication that what people associated with the building, current, past and imagined is important.

It can be theorised that these churches form places imbued with significance that enable self-reflection to take place. The Christian heritage of the building forms a backdrop for this process as will the individuals experiences of churches in their past; but also it could be argued from the research of Heelas and Woodhead, and Christie and Davie, that the role of contemporary religion in this process is much diminished if not irrelevant.

This type of analysis helps to constrain the view of the interview responses relating them continuously to place, the church, and what it represents both culturally and in terms of individual experience. The result will hopefully point in the direction of what might be a theology relevant to these visitors in explaining their experiences.

In constraining the view, what seems to be more relevant than contemporary religion is the folk religion discussed above; something that a significant number of people consciously or unconsciously would assent to. However, as also noted above, this type of religiosity has largely been dismissed by the theological academy and mainly researched as a sociological phenomenon. While not researched this phenomenon is acknowledged to be

important to a large number of people in Britain, in fact for far more people than can be found in churches on any given Sunday.[73]

Taking Bauman's view about community as sought after but an elusive commodity in contemporary society, and Davie's view that this group practice a vicarious type of religion; the argument can be made that for many in this group they have a sentimentalised view of the past history of the church; a history in which emotional solace has been sought by individuals and communities through worship and prayer. This is where the locus of the very nature of community has been found in the events surrounding the church. This is sentimentality understood in its 18th century form, where feelings are a guide to truth rather than the more modern interpretation of excessive and uncomplicated emotion.[74]

It is potentially the identification with community that a difference can be found between the experience of visiting a church set within the English countryside, and a visit to a site of natural beauty, a significant ancient monument or buildings of great grandeur. Connectedness is stressed where there is a link between the visitor and the people who have come here through the ages. Taking Bauman's insight again, there is something familiar and comfortable about the images which come to mind concerning the church, its history and families, and ordinary people regularly visiting. It is not something very removed from people's own experience at some point in their lives, so in some way they have a shared experience with the people who have come before.

What must be asked based on the interview results is 'are these spiritual experiences' based on the critique of both Heelas and Woodhead's work and Ordinary Theology? The secular argument is that people are choosing to indulge in sentimentality which has no spiritual content. There is also the critique from the other side that these are not religious experiences, as they do not conform sufficiently to any orthodox creeds to count, or conform to other examples of religious experience.

Following the methodology of Ordinary Theology, after obtaining the information from both questionnaire and interview, the theological reflection needs to address these points. As stated above the focus of that reflection will be to look at the responses in the

[73] L Woodhead, 'Nominals are the Church's Hidden Strength' *The Church Times*, 26th April 2013, available from: https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/26-april/comment/opinion/nominals-are-the-church-s-hidden-strength (accessed 13th March 2019)

[74] S Serafin, A Bendixen, *Encyclopedia of American Literature* (London: Continuum, 1999), 1014

light of the relevance of the particular place to the individual's experience; as Christie compared her respondent's answers to orthodox understandings of Christology, and to try to link common themes. The potential limits created by the inarticulateness of individuals are noted, and the need to address the space this can create will form a point of discussion following the results.

4. Findings

In this research we set out to examine the spiritual experience of visitors to rural churches. The questionnaire provided some quantitative information but more importantly enabled us to recruit volunteers to be interviewed about their experiences in detail.

The information collected supported the results from previous research that identified peacefulness as the strongest characteristic of the visitor experience. Furthermore, through the interviews we were able to examine the experience further and add more information about it in relation to these places.

The idea that churches are peaceful places is strongly supported both by the questionnaire and the interviews, but the interviews described this peacefulness as 'stillness' and 'timelessness' in contrast to the world outside. The descriptions were all very similar regardless of religious identification – the respondents from a Baptist minster to an atheist all described their experience in similar terms.

The language interviewees used to describe their experience, focused on the relationship with people to the building, but not on any existential presence as part of their experience. There was very little direct experience of the actual people that used these places for worship, most of the images of these people were imagined by the visitors. The images that the interviewees described were romantic ideas of intergenerational communities with strong bonds with one another. There was also the suggestion of associating these communities with cultural stereotypes and a patriotic wistfulness about a lost England that these buildings held a connection with.

A further challenge was regarding the association with an image of England, and with the spiritual role of the building through its Christian heritage; some of the respondents argued that the concept of God cannot be associated with these buildings; only with the worshipping congregation or that God was a subjective term and not open to all. However, several did make the association with heritage of the building and all of the respondents still affirmed their experience in the building was a spiritual one.

It will be argued that the visitors have encountered a spiritual experience on visiting these churches, which was strongly provoked by a romantic view of the people that have used the building. The experience itself was of deep and profound peace.

4.1 Results

The questionnaires placed in each of the selected study churches provided the first set of information on the experience of visitors, and were collected through the months of August and September in 2013. In total 148 completed questionnaires had been received in the following proportions by the church:

Compton	20
East Marden	8
Forestside	5
Guestling	15
North Marden	25
Racton	10
Stoughton	24
Up Marden	41
TOTAL	148

Table 1

Of these 148 responses 16 said that they would be willing to participate in further research and gave contact details. 6 of these were in relation to the church at Up Marden and 5 for North Marden. 47 of the questionnaires included comments, 39 related to question 5 about why they visited that day. These comments were mainly to offer a more specific reason why they visited such as to see a particular grave or memorial, or to combine reasons that had been suggested in the questionnaire.

From the responses to the survey 55 % of the visitors came from more than 10 miles away suggesting most visitors came some distance, but by no means all. Of the reasons why people came to the church most (30%) did so on impulse, 27% did so for spiritual reasons, and 22% did so because of the architecture. Of the additional comments, 5% also stated they came there on impulse and another 5 % also wanted to include the architecture for why they came.

Some visited as part of an outing with friends judged by comments such as, 'for physical exercise, historical interest, good fellowship, appreciation of countryside,' and 'in conjunction with a walk with friends specifically to visit the church.' Two notes wished to emphasise the peacefulness of the place as a reason for visiting, 'because it is beautiful and quiet' and 'part of a peaceful walk'.

There were some comments that indicated the connections people made with the place which were above and beyond the reasons suggested in the questionnaire:

- '…mostly because of the memorial plaque to the young man who died in the Japanese camp'
- 'Previously came here during a walk with friends and always remember this church as a very special place. There is a feeling of love and spirituality here. Yes, plus just so admire the memorial plaque to Sarah Phipps and remember it fondly.'
- 'for the architecture and the gravestones'
- 'memories of past and its past'

When asked to rate how peaceful the church was on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 indicating very peaceful), the average score was 9.5. In rating the church as a spiritual place on a scale of 1 to 10, five people commented that they did not understand the question or left it blank, however of the remaining respondents the average score was 7.8.

In all, 16 questionnaires were returned where the respondents had asked to be contacted to talk about their experience further. Of these, one set of contact details proved to be incorrect and it was not possible to contact them. Another had misunderstood the offer to be contacted expecting it to be from the parish about the church rather than an independent researcher.

Of the interviewees five were female and nine were male also incorporating a range of ages, but all were uniformly white and from a British background. They varied in their professed spirituality. Two interviewees were atheists, one was agnostic, there were members of both United Reformed Churches and Baptist churches, including a Baptist minister. Eight were in some way connected with the Church of England, four were active including a reader and a curate, and four were not currently regular attenders at worship.

Despite the variation in spirituality the conversations in the interviews revealed common themes: That their experience of the place was spiritual, that it was distinctive from other similar experiences, such as walking in nature and visiting a place of similar age, and that there was a sense of comfort to the experience.

Each of the interviewees has been ascribed a number to identify their quotes in these findings. The numbers are listed in the appendix alongside gender, approximate age, spiritual background, and the church they visited and completed the survey in. The categorisation of the interviewees is not an attempt to define them, but instead to give some measure of the diversity of the responses. While there is some gender balance in the responses the ethnicity is uniform, and despite there being one younger respondent most respondents are in the older age range. The spirituality categorisation, is estimated based on self-definition by the respondents. None of them identified as presently practicing any faith other than Christianity. Most of the interviewees responded after visiting St Michael's in Up Marden, St Mary's in North Marden, and the remainder incorporated the other churches in the survey.

Comparing the survey responses of those who volunteered for interviews, they appear to be a representative sample of the total number of people who responded to the survey; there is no clear correlation in their responses or differentiation between them, and the other survey respondents. For example, in their reasons for visiting the church six did so for architectural reasons, five for spiritual, two on impulse, and one for family reasons. Although this does not completely match the proportion of the total survey responses for each of the categories, the proportion of the interviewees who put down that they visited for spiritual reasons is very similar. Thus indicating the interviewees are not specifically a subset of the total number of respondents who visited the churches for spiritual reasons, despite their interviews identifying a spiritual element was present.

4.2 An Experience of Peace

The following are some examples of how the interviewees described their experiences. All stated they have had similar experiences in churches before, either the same one where they completed the questionnaire or another:

Had similar experience in a church in a field near Winchester following a troubled time. Feeling does not come from within but outside. If you are up it

steadies you, if you are low it comforts you, but the sensation does not last and is not 'game changing'. … …I always have a great sense of peace – 'be still and know that I am God' – that's the adjective that best describes it. It was very moving on entering the church – it affects you emotionally. (2)

The above quote identifies the nature of the experience as being externally generated and distinctive enough to be noticed in its absence. It is also interesting that the interviewee used a scriptural reference to describe the experience, but identified themselves as an atheist. The experience was equally described as being positive:

I have a sense of calm when I go there. I would prefer to be on my own when I visit as other people do not necessarily see it as I do… …I want to hug the church to myself. (11)

There is a sense of comfort and embrace in the above quote, not dependent on active religious participation as the above respondent identified that they no longer attended church services. The quote below from an agnostic interviewee also reflects this:

At first of all I was a bit disconcerted by it, but I sat still and took it in. Sat quietly. And slowly it worked its spell on me from there on. It induced contemplation in me. It made me want to sit still – I didn't want to move around. I have a lot to think about in my life at the moment…I feel uncomfortable praying because I feel a fraud. But I do sit and think. It just helps to arrange my thoughts. And I suppose there's some residual superstitious feeling to that in any places God might be he might be in one of those places – it certainly feels right. But I don't pray I just sit down and think. And I'm glad of the solitude as well. (7)

Compare these with the experience of the Baptist minister, who equally identified the source of the experience as being externally located in the building:

You know the purpose of a church. It has a spiritual guardianship – a sense of God's presence in the memorials in the church. Great sense of peace – that's the main adjective I would use. Be still and know that I am God. (8)

The descriptions of how the church building affected them emotionally, that it worked its spell and had a sense of God's presence, suggest that the interviewees encountered a spiritual experience. As stated previously, the results from the survey questionnaires support this more broadly for the visitors to the churches.

One of the most interesting features of the above quotes are in the first and the last where both a self-confessed atheist, and a Baptist minister use the same phrase to describe their experience of the place, 'Be still and know that I am God.'

The most surprising thing might be considered the atheist using this phrase as it is a piece of biblical scripture (Psalm 46:10), but in conversation with him he noted he had a Catholic upbringing and it may be surmised from that where the phrase was taken from.

The context of the phrase in Psalm 46 is that the psalm is a song of confidence in God's protection of his people in times of trouble, which would suggest a comforting peace as part of the experience of these places. However, it is difficult to know if the content of the psalm had any conscious or subconscious role in the selection of the phrase; or if instead the word 'still' was more important in its selection, where others (including in one of the other quotes above) have used stillness as a term to describe the peacefulness of the building.

Although the reactions of the interviewees suggest they encountered a spiritual experience, the argument against this is how limited these experiences were in not producing stronger sensations. There is no sense in the responses that their experience overwhelmed them in any way, which might be expected in the case of some spiritual experiences. It was commented before that using Greeley's 18 descriptors of religious experience only a 'sense of deep and profound peace' would rank as something commonly encountered by the interviewees. It is possible to interpret other descriptors as potentially being part of individuals experiences from their responses in the interviews (although they were not asked to respond to the individual descriptors and rate them as part of their experience), but they are not universal to the experience in the same way as peacefulness is and do not appear to be dominant features of them.

The fact that a number of the respondents did not understand the question about how spiritual the place was, and that the average score was 7.8 compared to 9.5 for peacefulness, indicates that spirituality as a concept is not well understood and application of the term by interviewees (or use of a term such as God) may be misplaced.

What the interviewees may be undertaking is a period of self-reflection, that in the same way as meditation can focus the mind, and which can create the circumstances for a spiritual experience but does entail a spiritual experience of itself. The descriptions of being still, arranging thoughts, and a great sense of peace, could be interpreted in a meditative way. This may have very positive effects in terms of their wellbeing as has been noted by a number of studies, but would not constitute a spiritual experience according to the religious descriptors above.[1]

4.3 An Experience of Place

However, the argument made here is that beyond the ability of these places to help focus visitor's attention, they enable a spiritual interaction. To confirm this, it is necessary to go beyond the description of peacefulness and understand more about their experiences. From the difference in the score between the peaceful and spiritual nature of these places, it can also be caveated that not every visitor who experiences the peacefulness of these places also has a spiritual experience of them.

In attempting to break down the experience of peacefulness to look at the elements that help construct that sense, there are a number of potential factors. The architecture was seen by some as being the source of the peacefulness of the buildings:

> The church had that peculiar round end to it, which I felt generated an extraordinary sense of stillness that struck me really. I don't know why the round end generated that stillness – still don't know really. Perhaps it muted your voice in there? (4)

As noted, the adjective 'stillness' was often a description of the peacefulness they encountered. It is contrasted with the outside, even if the outside has its own significant qualities:

> From outside the church it's very striking because you've got the countryside background. When you get inside the church, you haven't got the same qualities, well it just gives you that feeling that it's timeless. Beautiful place. (10)

---

[1] R Davidson, J Kabat-Zinn, J Schumacher, M Rosenkranz, D Muller, S Santorelli, F Urbanowski, A Harrington, Bonus, J Sheridan, 'Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation' *Psychosomatic Medicine*, Vol. 65, Issue 4, (July 2003) 564–570

The countryside setting, is seen by some as a significant factor in the peacefulness of the experience, but it is the interior of the church that seems to feature more highly in the descriptions. The contrast between the outside of the church and inside seems important, that the two are not separate but work together as part of the experience:

> St Michael's – I don't believe in consecrated places but do find St Michael's special. Can't easily explain why. Simplicity helps. The walk to the church helps – I get there prepared, the fact it is in the middle of nowhere makes it somewhere I can come to and be prepared to be in God's presence. Nothing special about the building, other than it has been set apart for a special purpose for eight centuries. It leaves a presiding presence of God. (8)

The comment above by the Baptist minister indicates something of the theology of pilgrimage as it is for him, the journey to the place that is integral in the experience. The nature of the location is significant in contributing to the distinction and the stillness. The church is somewhere in the middle of nowhere, but even then the building itself is nothing special.

Stillness and simplicity are contributing factors to the experience at St Michael's, and have the effect of helping reflection and concentration according to the interviewees above. The Baptist minister could be argued as being predisposed to having a spiritual encounter in these places. However, in his words above it is clear that given his background, there are still features of the experience that surprise him and are related to the building. They are features that are not easily described – even for someone theologically trained. This is a feature with many of the respondents in the interviews, that they struggle to articulate the nature of their experience beyond describing the peace and stillness that is intrinsic to it.

For the Baptist minister, the surroundings form part of the experience in that they lead up to it as an element of the preparation through encountering them on the journey to the place. For him, the building even though in itself is nothing special, has been set apart for a particular purpose, and it is that which marks it out as a place of encounter with God. Although not mentioned above, in his prior quote he also mentions the importance of the purpose of the place, and sees that purpose denoted in the memorials on the wall of the church.

Despite his theological training his description of the elements that provoke the experience are very similar to other interviewees without that training (as noted in his use of the quote 'Be still and know that I am God'). The evidence of the past people who have used this building denotes its purpose and gives it a significance beyond the building itself, and is ultimately what provokes the spiritual experience.

Other interviewees also relate their experiences to physical elements of the buildings. These were in some cases again connected to the peacefulness of the place and their effect on the interviewees. Particularly for the churches of Up Marden and North Marden, there is an overwhelming sense of peace that the simplicity of the building generates:

'The smell of the church. Damp and age and old wood and I love it. Then the gloom, and you get used to it. Then turning to face the altar the bareness of it. The bareness of it that's it'. (7)

'Struck by simplicity. Cleansing effect from a life with interest in material things, such as antiques, collectables etc. Honesty'. (2)

'The architecture was important, particularly a buttress that seemed out of place'. (11)

'Held by the curve of the nave'. (1)

In these cases, it is apparent that the structure of these buildings is important. Both churches are small and intimate, they are in possession of some but not many memorials, and otherwise little in the way of decoration. In the above quotes it is clear the interviewees have noticed elements of the churches and incorporated them into their experiences. 'Timeless' was another word used to describe the peacefulness in the churches, as well as stillness, the idea of these places being outside of time in contrast to the world outside that was mentioned explicitly by interviewee 10. However, age is obviously important as noted by interviewee 7, in the sense the place generates - that it is old and shows signs of age.

The cleansing effect of the bareness of the interior is also commented on. This is mentioned in contrast to material things and in particular an interest in them – suggesting in this place they are not valued because of their absence. The interviewees clearly see that as a positive attribute, and one which at least for their time in the church wish to adopt. The

sense of honesty suggests truthfulness and the lack of interest in material things suggests these places represent values that lie in something other than the physical.

This disinterest in physical things does not necessarily mean that they are places of spiritual encounter; as the absence of material things does not necessarily mean the presence of anything else; but what it does say is that the non-physical is what is valued in these places. The non-physical does not have to mean the supernatural but could equally be attributed to value in emotions, relationships, wisdom, experience or other qualities that have no physical form.

What the interviewees comments highlight is the importance of particular elements in helping them to find focus in these places: the smell of old wood, the buttress that was out of place, the curve of the nave. In the same sense that a candle is often used in meditation and prayer as a source of focus, these elements could fulfil a similar role. In the quote concerning the last element, the curve of the nave, the interviewee also has a sensation of comfort generated by it reinforcing the positive effect of the architecture, and the positive nature of the experience.

4.4 The Experience of Community

While the building creates the focus, the thoughts of the interviewees are not of the building but of the people who have used it, predominately in the past. The evidence of human interaction with the building provides the stimulus for these thoughts. The wear of use was noted, hollows in stones, uneven floors through centuries of use, and wood worn smooth on pews. There were more obvious signs of interaction written largely upon the memorials and monuments in the church designating who had been associated with it. In addition, there was the evidence of use such as hymn books, notices, kneelers, children's games and activities:

> The pews have years of use and – and I suppose love…there is a sense of the people's involvement…curious chancel arch – you feel that it has been kept going there…the pulpit is outrageous, it's so crisp and clean, everything else is almost make do and mend – but the pulpit tells you about the love and care put into the place. (14)

Sometimes it is the general use of the building, as with the pews above that mark out the place of people in the visitors experience; sometimes it is more specifically related to individuals, such as in the words recorded on memorials:

I like the memorials and the wording, I think the wording, sometimes the wording is so special on some of them and you feel the people have been really loved and appreciated in their lives and by their relatives and that people have actually expressed that feeling in the words…It is memorials I like to see a lot. (3)

Sometimes it is a combination of things, but it is the evidence of people that is important for the visitor's experience over and above the architecture:

It's a combination of factors. I'm interested in architecture, but that's not the main thing…they're concentrations of prayer and love and grief, all those people's lives over centuries and is kind of distilled out into every stone almost. More than any other building – more than any other building that is open. (5)

Of the three interviewees above, their experiences are all linked by what they interpret as the love and care which has been expended in these places. They are the non-physical elements that give it value. The elements in the building on which this interpretation is built are at a very human level; they are not incredibly grand or incredibly other, but are within reach, can be touched and experienced.

For some the more obvious signs of use were important in generating the experience, and for others it was the lack of these and the subtler signatures that contributed to it. In both cases the evidence of human interaction was integral to the description of their experiences. What the above descriptions also signify is the emotional interaction with the building, made by the people the interviewees imagine have formed it. The impression is given that the building is formed by the love and care of those who inhabit it, and it can accept their emotions and hold on to them in the evidence of their interaction with it.

The interviewee's interpretation however is subjective and different churches encourage different experiences for them. For one the church in Racton held a particular significance:

Quiet contemplative church. You can just sit there and soak it up. Spend the day thinking about spiritual things. It's a cosy church…The general aura of the place. If you compare Racton to Compton. Compton is a nice church but it just doesn't have the same aura as Racton. Compton's a nice church but it doesn't have that all embracing feeling. If you go to Up Marden…it is quite plain and quite bare and doesn't have the same cosy feeling as Racton. You have that feeling that for 100's of year's prayer has soaked into it. (14)

Again, the impression is given of comfort and a positive experience as the building is described as 'cosy', that it has an 'all embracing feeling.' The interviewee finds solace in this place in contrast to others – others which different interviewees hold in equal regard as being places of particular significance. For another the churches that were not ornamented by monuments to significant families, such as Up Marden, spoke more of a communal place:

They [monuments] attract as they help to fill in the story. It detracts where everything seems to be related to one family and it gets in the way of seeing anything else. It's simplicity and the feeling that people have been worshipping there for some time. I think it's different because it doesn't have knight so and so all over it. (13)

The simplicity also points for another to 'something they have lost', which suggests the place is something different to a more complex world outside:

You don't get that feeling from Up Marden. It's a different feeling you get there, it's a feeling of peace. Because it's so remote…it's like finding something you thought you had lost. I suppose it's because it doesn't have electric light and is all fairly primitive. You walk up to it from behind and you don't see it till you come over the hill and that makes it a bit special. (6)

However, for another it was the family monuments that provoked the experience and the dedications written on them,

Well I know that a lot is written and said about the Victorians and how they ruined the churches, but I don't think they really did, I am sure they just really added to it and a lot of the time I like the Victorian feel and the sentimentality and the way they expressed their feelings in words. (3)

The individual nature of these impressions suggests that the experience is not universal in its construction, where each person finds the building speaks to them differently depending on the features they value. They recognise the features of the other buildings as important but focus on the few that are significant to them. In the above quote some of the key words are 'sentimentality' and 'feeling' in relation to the memorials, and it is the words expressed that help generate the overall experience of the place. The depth of the experience will depend on how deeply the words are felt by the individual in relation to the context in this case, where in another the example is given of the dampness, the smell of old wood, and the bareness of the church that build into their experience.

The product however of these elements, and the focus they give is consistent between the churches and individuals, in generating a sense of peace and comfort within the buildings. The question remains if this experience of peace and comfort constitutes a spiritual experience or if it is a different type of experience, such as purely an emotional one or is it a social one reflecting culture? The key characteristic of a spiritual experience compared to these other examples is that it involves some awareness of transcendence, a sense that the experience has taken them beyond themselves and their normal experience.

In the quote from interviewee 6 the comment about 'finding something you thought you had lost' seems significant – something primitive and predating the modern world, yet something that remains significant. That comment also suggests something deeper than just a sense of peace and comfort, something which connects the interviewee with the past. For some of the other interviewees the experience also produced some strong feelings going beyond just a sense of peace and comfort. For example:

> I think that the way it all added up somehow is I remember the candlelight - not candlelight - there was a corner of the church I think the children or something to do with the choir and then the Memorials that were around with the Phipps family connected with the Church - just the whole thing about it somehow when you went in. It really did have this special feeling. (3)

The impression of the above interviewee is one of warmth and family life associated with the church, which builds on the simple sense of peace noted by others. This goes beyond the sort of focus that is helpful for meditation and constitutes a much more active engagement with the building.

4.5 Experience of Nostalgia

The suggestion of finding something lost could be interpreted as possibly an emotional or cultural experience combining both a sense of nostalgia, and a cultural heritage that involved the Church. The quote from number 3 is much harder to contain within that interpretation; as the description indicates, the different elements that are significant in their experience adding up to something more than the sum of their parts in this 'special feeling' they talk about.

It was noted above that in all the experiences the relationship of the building to people was central to the interviewee's experience of them. This is evident in the comments already noted, such as, 'It's simplicity and the feeling that people have been worshipping there for some time,' (13) and the evidence of children, the choir, and the memorials from interviewee 3. The comments suggest that it was the people in the past that had made their mark on the buildings; such as with memorials who constituted the main group of people the interviewees thought about regarding their experiences of the churches. Evidence of current use also features in these comments, but how important is that current use for the experience of the visitors?

If the experience depended not solely on the historic community but in the main, then the current community associated with the church would be largely irrelevant to the visitor's experience, save for how they interacted with the evidence of past generations presented in the buildings. Equally, it could be assumed that a closed church without a current worshipping congregation (that being the principle aim of the building to house such when it was built), would produce an almost identical experience. When challenged on this point the interviewees disagreed:

> It doesn't really tally like that. You feel there is a lift in your heart that you know
> the community – there is a worshipping community there and that it's not just
> an empty building with a few names on it and a few things round. It's not just
> ancient history. (6)

However, the interviewees have almost no contact with the worshiping community currently using these buildings, so what elements of its existing use contributed to their experience? Further comments from other interviewees reinforced the view made by the one

above; that there was a clear difference in the experience of visiting a church still in use, and one that was closed for regular worship:

> I don't know if the church was not used if the feeling would be the same. It's my daughter's phrase: Anything cared for does well. The church has 100's of years of carrying something. (1)

The 'something' being carried is not identified but the importance of the continuation in the use of the building is important for the experience of the interviewee above:

> There is a difference. It's like having a house. It's like going into an empty house, perhaps it's for sale and nobody has lived there for ages, you go into it and it doesn't have the same feeling it's cold. It smells different and there is no flowers in it. When you have something that is used all the time it has a more homely feel. They have no hymn books in them, they don't have the same feeling…No one is at home. I'll tell you what it is, it's a dead feeling. (10)

In the above response it is very clear that there is a sense of 'home' about the building if it is in use, there is something familiar about it and it is 'lived in':

> Redundant church – felt the realm of the super-rich – whereas St Mary's felt…a sense of continuity. Real continuity, not something that somebody contrived. Sadness that the thread of continuity is being lost. Thread is a link with your past. Landscapes have a psychic connection – 800 years ago people would have filed into those places. They are little time capsules and if we lose those this thread is lost. (6)

The link to the past is made very explicit in the above quote, as well as a comparison between a closed and open church that was based on the feeling of wealth – the open church having more of a sense of the common and the ordinary.

The comments above liken the building to somewhere that is cared for, a home and a place of authentic connection to the past. All of these descriptions apparently rely on the continued use of the building for it to generate the particular experience they encountered on their visit.

There is still no indication in the comments that there is a desire to know anything about the current people who use the building, just to know that it is in use and that it is cared for seems sufficient. There is however a desire for authenticity about the use of the building, particularly in the last comment. A building that is simply preserved and cared for is not enough, as for them, that would sever the link with the past it represents.

They did go on to qualify that comment with some pragmatic recognition of the current situation, but they identify the spiritual element of the building as being that which would be lost if the building was simply preserved:

> I do think it is important that the church is used, even if only now and then otherwise it becomes a sterile museum - I think that has merit, I think it should be preserved if that is the trade-off, that it has to be a National Lottery bid or project or something, then that is fine – but if you can keep it going then it serves a dual purpose: both for spiritual and for a link with the past. (6)

The comment about a preserved church being the realm of the wealthy was shared by other interviewees. One had taken the time to encounter the people responsible for one of the churches, St Michael's in Up Marden, where he had encountered his strongest experiences. His encounter was prompted by its apparent managed nature with a few bits of evidence that denote a church in use:

> When people inhabit a church every Sunday they have a way of making it like a room of their own. They bring things to it. There's another church St Mary's at Stoughton, it serves a much more vital village and it is used much more – you can tell. It's full of embroidery of village life, the kneelers etc. You don't find that at St Michael's, so I began to think this is a construct.

His views on the people who now manage the church indicate that wealth, in contrast to the view of the past generations of parishioners, is a key factor in what they do:

> Some very intelligent, pretty well healed people have made sure this church is going to survive and they are going to keep it like this. Whether that as it is now would have been the church that the 18th century parishioners mentioned on plaques on the wall would have recognised, that's another matter entirely. Would they? Or is this the 21st century intelligentsia's view of the church – I went to

their AGM, some of whom are fervent Anglican's, but some not so. Some are on the road to being, really, what I am. So, there it is: stripped out bare – no longer serving a community. They bring people to the church. They and their friends make sure the church is used for services – once a month or something – and there's a Christmas Eve service which is greatly lauded by people from far around. That's a little bit artificial – however attractive it is, and I'm glad the church is there – it's still quite artificial and I think the church stripped out is like that. (7)

Again, an active Church was identified by elements that likened it to a home and clearly linked that to an active village community. However, for the interviewee above, St Michael's had a degree of artificiality brought about by wealthy patronage that sought to preserve it. Even so, it was in that environment where they felt they experienced most.

This view challenges in part the idea of the other interviewees regarding the need for the church to host a current worshipping community; for it to have a particular feel, and which generates an experience that could be defined as spiritual. None of the other interviewees stated that they had met the congregation in the churches they visited, and discussed more impressions of people who came to the church in the past. The only connection they make is through the evidence of use in the churches, through which they make the assumption it is still used for worship.

What the above quote also highlights are the differences people can associate with their experience of churches, and the possible disappointment when they take the step of engaging with the current community, and comparing it to the one they imagine concerning the church.

The interviewee describes two of the survey churches, both of which have active communities associated with them, but each according to the interviewee with a different purpose in their use of the building. One is for a broader community and inclusive of a variety of people, the other more exclusive and set aside for a specific purpose in being contemplative.

What is evident from the other interviews and from the survey data, is that both types of church have those who visit them for spiritual reasons. Interviewee 3 valued the broader community element she identified at the church in Compton. This was delineated

through the memorials, children's activities and other elements of use; while it is clear other interviewees valued the lack of these. As noted before, 14 preferred Racton over both the churches mentioned above by 7, for them it was contemplative and cosy with an all-embracing feeling. Again, this demonstrates the subjective nature of the experiences.

Interviewee 7 stated their religious position as agnostic, which is reflected in their quote above discussing the people involved with St Michael's in Up Marden. Their comments about the people concerned suggest a difference between those who are committed Anglicans, and those with a more agnostic position. Both of which have a concern for the building, but between who he could discern a difference over its use. The tone of his comments, surrounding those with a controlling influence over the future of the building, suggest they are favouring a privatised form of religion – one governed by individual needs rather than by a broader community or by an overarching structure, such as the Anglican Church.

The interaction between the interviewees and this idea of privatisation of religion or spirituality appears to be a complex one. For all of them, at one level, they value the corporate nature of the idea of the people involved with a church, but for several they are not involved with a congregation themselves. Those who often worship in very different churches to the ones they are visiting. For example, those who identified themselves as Baptist or United Reformed Church (URC), all worshipped in relatively modern buildings.

The language used by all the interviewees as stated before, focuses on the people of the past, and their experiences are encountered on an individual basis or with close friends. Therefore, despite the idea of corporate religion being important, these experiences seem very much related to the privatised religion of the 'subjective turn' as discussed by Heelas and Woodhead. It has been noted how each of the interviewees experiences are subjective in some way, in that they identify different churches and different features within those churches as being spiritually significant to them.

4.6 Experience as Pilgrimage

The opposing view to this conclusion would be to consider the experience in relation to the practice in Christianity and other world religions of pilgrimage. For a number of the interviewees, the journey to reach these buildings is significant as well as the significance of the buildings for their religious practice. As one interviewee describes:

In one sense there is nothing special about this building but in another it is a place where God has been present over history, a sense of purpose of this building – it has been set apart. At a spiritual level I believe in the realities of spiritual warfare – in angels and demons and so on. In a building that has been part of God's Kingdom for so many years must have had a large number of spiritual battles fought over that place. Spiritually there is a guardianship over the church and God still has his hand on it. Not quite like God's presence in the temple in Old Testament times, but there is a sense of that. (8)

For the above interviewee, their practice of visiting the church is one enacted as a discipline in prayer. They note it as a place of spiritual significance, that it has been a place where spiritual battles have been fought and has been part of God's Kingdom for a long time. For them the journey to the place and the place itself constitutes a pilgrimage. For others too, there was a similar sense of the journey and experience, such as with the Church of England minister (9) who made their visits part of a regular spiritual practice for at least part of their lives.

Pilgrimage, while being an individual journey, can be set within a broader corporate structure of religious practice by the individuals who make the journey (as in the case above), and while the experience is individual; it is set within that organised structure of faith. For those Heelas and Woodhead have identified as making a 'subjective turn', a turn to focusing on an internal authority for an individual's spirituality, they have self-organised the elements of the churches in their experiences to be spiritually significant. An example of one of the interviewees who could be considered to have done this is 7, who feels uncomfortable praying but organises their own thoughts in the church. Equally who acknowledges a spiritual preference for Up Marden even though they question its relationship with the past and the broader Anglican Church.

From the responses to the survey conducted in the churches, 55 % of the visitors came from more than 10 miles away to visit the churches, and of those 25 % did so for spiritual reasons. (Approximately 15% of the total respondents) This suggests that for a number of people significant journeys to the church formed a part of their spiritual practice.

Overall, of the reasons why 30 % of people came to the church most stated they did so on impulse, and 27 % did so for spiritual reasons. The fact that spiritual reasons formed a close second to 'on impulse' as a reason for visiting the churches, means for many

people these visits are part of their spiritual practice. Of the 40 people who stated they came for spiritual reasons 17 (42.5%) also said they worshipped regularly at another church. For these people it could be argued against the view that their visit represents an individualised spirituality and that a pilgrimage would be a better explanation for their visit – that it was part of their Christian practice. However, 23 people did not regularly attend worship at a Church and still stated that their principle reason for visiting was spiritual.

4.7 Experience of the Rites of Passage

What these responses, both from the interviews and the survey indicate, is a mixed economy of visitors for spiritual reasons; some with a clearly defined Christian narrative behind their visit, and some who value these places as part of a spiritual practice away from the institutional Church.

For the Baptist minister (8) their practice was very clearly to pray in the church and their understanding of the building was from a well-defined Christian perspective. For someone who is not a regular member of a Church (6), they saw their experience of the church in terms of a psychic connection to the landscape.

While the individual descriptions of their practice differ according to their spirituality, for those who would describe their experience of the church as spiritual, they use very similar terms to describe the experience itself; as noted in the use of the phrase 'Be still and know that I am God' by both the Baptist minister and an atheist. Peaceful, still, and timeless are the adjectives which cut across the spiritual practices to describe the experience. Moreover, the references to the past people who have used these buildings join the responses of the interviewees together in further describing their experiences; linking the significance of the building to those people.

In making this connection the question remains about who the interviewees believe those people to be, and why they have imbued significance to that building.

In the comments made there has been mention of the rites of passage celebrated in these places, particularly the marking of the passing of the dead, which is made obvious by the memorials left to commemorate them. There are a number of comments relating to 'prayer, love and grief', as one interviewee puts it, expressed by the people in the church that gives it significance. Other comments point out the signs of community life and the activity

of the church as a place of worship. In all of the comments, the factor of time expressed in the intergenerational presence in these places, gives them particular significance.

These comments imply the interviewees have more of an emotional connection with the building than one based on aesthetics, or because of its significance in terms of its connection to major events in history. This suggests they view it through a lens of sentimentality and romanticism, where this emotional connection gives the building authenticity as a place of significance.

Although for each of the interviewees, the details of each church contributed in different ways to build up their experience; it was the signs of human interaction that give it authenticity and hence value. It was also noted that the experience in each case was a positive one, not emotionally disturbing or draining but uplifting; or at least 'steadying', as commented by one interviewee. Thus indicating that even though the element of mortality and death was very much part of the experience, it was not seen in a negative light.

Apart from the current occupants of the buildings, the interviewees did not associate any negative attributes to the people they imagined had used these buildings in the past; there was no sense that these had been places of conflict or had fostered oppressive social structures, which could legitimately have also been associated with the past. These places had undoubtedly seen periods of confrontation, and had quite likely been places of feudal authority, both from the Church and from the local landowners in the past.

While comments about the 'absence of Knight so and so…' was seen as a positive thing in these churches, no other associations with these potentially oppressive structures was mentioned, and instead the sense was of an idealised community associated with the building. For example, one comment about their experience stated they felt an, 'Overwhelming sense of goodness, of people trying to do better, a skin, a patina, of people striving to do better.' (1)

According to the language utilised such as in the last quote, it is very much the human interaction with the building that provokes their experiences. With the exception of interviewee 7 who attended the AGM at St Michael's in Up Marden, the rest of the subjects know little or nothing of the community that use the churches by first hand contact. They do not attend worship regularly, or live in the geographic area associated with the church.

So, who are they imagining are the people that have formed the building as it stands today? We get some indication from comments that suggest people 'know the purpose of a church,' and that elements such as people praying and commemorating the dead form part of that purpose. There are also images of community associated with the materials used for worship such as hymn books, kneelers and children's activities. Some of the interviewees were more explicit about the community images they associated the church with. One associated the community with their personal memories of being part of a Church in the past:

> I miss my village and it brings that back. I miss being part of the village.
>
> I was brought up in the Church of England, I lived in a village in Sussex which is quite near Hazlemere. I used to go to the Church three times a day in the village on Sundays as well – not much else to do really. The Vicar was really good, he used to run the Youth Club so it was the…you know the centre of social life in the village… …and I love reading about Vicarage tea parties and all of that. (3)

For some the imagined community is one they feel is linked by faith and through generations in the same place:

> The church has somehow, it's not just centuries of faith but generations of faith that come together with a common bond. The sense of community in rural areas is stronger because of a sense of essential conservatism. Spit and polish of Victorian times has meant some of that patina of use has been lost. Some of the rural churches, it has been kept as they were not worth worrying about. The patina: not just in the furniture sense but in the sense of faith. (14)

It is a place where significant points in time have brought people together for generations:

> It's a repository for high days and holy days and its historical and when people go to find out about their ancestors it the first place you go. It's the place you go first to find out about your sense of place. (7)

And also somewhere that holds the tradition of the community:

119

Certainly, it's part of the tradition, the tradition…succession of generations. (12)

Patina was a term used by another interviewee (1) to describe the same phenomena – essentially a residue created by centuries of use. The subjects associate this residue with an intergenerational community sharing the same faith.

The connection with past generations was also made beyond the church building and through the monuments in churchyards, linking families through the commemoration of the end of life:

I found some interesting grave stones. That's another thing that fascinates me – this continuity you can find in graveyards, the idea of service there, so many people who have given their lives for their country. Of course, such communities are very, very conservative – son follows fathers into the navy, the same regiment etc… Sometimes I am overcome by some kind of sadness or melancholy as I sit down, but most often not. It's a pleasurable place – I know it sounds odd to say that graveyards are such places. (7)

The generations are marked out in military/patriotic terms by the interviewee above, something shared by some of the other respondents, particularly relating to memorials for the dead:

The reaction you get when you walk into a church is of people who've died. The church's history is mainly the people who've lived in the village and they may have lived and died there since 1066. We go around and look at all the plaques and all the sad stories of people who died in the war. (10)

The idea of death as a significant aspect of these places is raised again, and again it is not a negative aspect of the interviewees experiences, but one that leaves them with a positive sense of the commemoration of lives.

The images given speak of the past in terms of historic images of families, expressed in the writings on memorials and gravestones, and of villages and village life. It can be argued that what the interviewees are describing is a romantic view of rural communities, that they are based on families and generations, that they are static and holders of tradition.

It is difficult from the interviews to get any sense that this inter-generational view of these places detracted from their value, or at the least was not a contributing factor. The only caveat to this is the preference of some for there to be fewer memorials commemorating people; particularly those who appear wealthy or aristocratic; seeing them as a distraction from the spiritual experience of the place. For many it was the key way to describe why they thought these places had spiritual significance for them.

There is also a sense of patriotism in what is said about the people they imagine coming to these places, speaking for example of service to country in the above quotes. This is in part due to the nature of the memorials and the records placed on them; military rank and death in war are commonly recorded on male memorials. Specific war memorials are also a common feature of many churches commemorating the dead of major conflicts since the First World War.

The language utilised by the interviewees does not seem to glorify these people, but rather there is a tragic dutiful feeling to the comments about service and death. It is difficult to see these comments as reflecting a nationalistic sentiment, as there is nothing to set those who died in service to one nation in contrast to other nationalities, and put them up as being superior in some way. As such it is difficult to label this language as nationalistic. Virtue is seen in lives spent in service to the nation, but above that in the continuity of tradition in these places.

The word patriotism denotes this view better as the word denotes love of country in contrast to love of nation.[2] The contrast being highlighted by Jean Bethke Elshtain in relation to the millions who fought in the First World War; first and foremost with a willingness to sacrifice their lives for their country rather than a desire to kill the enemy.[3] The interviewees comments speak more of the preservation of community and tradition as opposed to nation, in the significance they attribute to those commemorated on memorials.

Patriotism is associated with a defence of culture,[4] and there is something of a cultural stereotype that appears to be imagined in the communities spoken of by the interviewees. One, interviewee 3, is quite explicit in the community they imagine, part based

---

[2] I Primoratz, 'Patriotism and Morality: Mapping the Terrain' in I Primoratz, A Pavković,
Patriotism: Philosophical and Political Perspectives (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 17-36
[3] J Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (NewYork: Anansi, 1993), 1-36
[4] For example see: G Orwell, J Carey, (ed.) 'Notes on Nationalism' in *George Orwell Essays*,
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), Chapter 24

on their own memories of village life and part based on what they have read. Interviewee 14 spoke of an essential conservatism in communities which survived through the Victorian period in these churches, suggesting an older image of a community than that of the 19th century. This conservative image of the community, was also spoken of by interviewee 7. The same subject spoke of these places as where you seek out your own ancestors, and as such have placed themselves into the tradition of the community they see as forming the church.

This is not the case for all the interviewees. 1 in particular said, 'I'm not sentimental – it does not conjure up images of church in the past or of cultural stereotypes. Focus only on the feeling the place generates.' The same interviewee also commented that the church generated an overwhelming feeling of people striving to do better, but did not elaborate on who those people were. Again, however, this is a romantic view of the place even if not focused on a cultural stereotype where the feeling it generates is of primary importance.

The cultural link made by the interviewees is important to their descriptions of their experiences. There is discussion of personal history that may mirror what is imagined about the past community surrounding the church, and the search for a sense of place. None of the interviewees are linked by family relations to the study churches, but they still saw the people they associated with them in relational terms. Even if not their past generations they were past generations they could associate with such that the church could give them a sense of place.

Although these descriptions focus on the people associated with the building, they also point to the significance of the building as compared to others that could equally have been host to them; that it has spiritual significance because of its use by them. For example, interviewee 8 discussed this in explicitly spiritual terms, 'In one sense there is nothing special about this building but in another it is a place where God has been present over history, a sense of purpose of this building – it has been set apart.'

The above interviewee sets out the purpose of the building in explicitly spiritual terms – that it has been set apart for a spiritual purpose by the people who built it. He goes on to describe that it is the fact that the building has been set apart for worship by the community, and the active engagement by people in spiritual battles, that gives the building the spiritual quality associated with it.

It would appear from the interviewees that it is the quality of being set aside for a particular purpose by the people that distinguishes them from other places. That purpose was spiritual, as identified above, and the content of that description takes into account the activity of the people they associate with them. It is the rites of passage, particularly those relating to death as expressed on grave stones, war memorials and plaques that receive the most attention in the responses. In addition, the activity of prayer, worship and of gathering as a community are mentioned in connection with the experience of the visitors.

4.8 Does the Experience Compare to Their Experience of Other Places?

Despite the description above, the view that these experiences are specific to these places identified as being set apart by the community, can be challenged by comparing them to other places that might produce a similar experience; by virtue of age or community use for example. Moreover, do other places not necessarily associated with people, worship and prayer provoke similar experiences? Would it be the same or a similar experience visiting another building of a similar age? Is it just their historical significance in recording past communities, or does its existing use and community matter for the experience? Does the rural location of the selected churches matter for the experience?

The interviewees were asked if the experience in the church equated to the experience of walking in the countryside or of being on a mountain top. These experiences were selected because they have also been described as places of spiritual encounter.

All of the interviewees that were asked stated there was a distinction in the experience encountered. One interviewee described that distinction:

The difference compared to a mountain top? It's the concentration of that experience within the building, which isolates you – if it is remote and has few visitors, and you are alone, there's no distraction of wind or sound. There's no movement of people or things across the landscape. You're in the building, you're focused, you're made to think about things. (7)

The description of the distinction suggests the building concentrates the experience through removing distraction and encouraging people to focus. The focus seems to be on the reflective process, which was noted above in the ability of the buildings to help people into a more meditative state.

However, does the building itself concentrate focus on what is other as well, a focus on the mysterious and other worldly? That was not the impression the interviewees gave as highlighted by this response:

> I think when you visit things like Stonehenge you feel there is an unknown quality, a mystery to it. I didn't feel there was anything particularly mysterious at the church, but there was a kind of continuity to it. Like many families had walked in the doors and walked out again. I felt a spiritual calmness about it. Not a mystery. Kind of more grounded. (6)

They indicate their experience was one of familiarity and not mystery, a relationship to the past and present represented by the building. Another response shared similar thoughts:

> The church feels organic to the place. That it was still used made a difference. I liked to think of people coming there, both now and in the past. There is a strong sense of history about the place. The rites of passage which have gone on there. If you feel there is a nice sort of community – you can tell from what you find in the church – it gives you a nicer feeling. (11)

The continuing use of the building by the community in celebrating the rites of passage is noted as important for the experience of the place, but how much is it being set apart for this importance? Is it just the historical significance in marking the passage of time for families, through the celebrated rites of passage, that was important for the experience? Could the same experience be encountered in another building used to celebrate those rites?

In part, this last question has already been asked before in considering the continued use of the church. There would be relatively few buildings where these rites would have been celebrated over as long a period as in these churches. That connection to the past has already been identified by the interviewees in valuing these buildings. Other buildings that would also have had this function over a similar period would have been the much larger abbeys and cathedrals.

The affluence of the community associated with the church, real or imagined, has been noted before in relation to visitors' perceptions of the churches. On asking the question if the experience in a cathedral or abbey were similar, it featured again in the responses:

One is a representation of riches. One is a representation of ordinary people. You can't compare these churches to Westminster Abbey but there's a beauty there. (10)

The comparison above is between the grand and the small in relation to these buildings. The comparative size of the churches in the study, set the experience apart from that in larger buildings such as cathedrals. In commenting on the difference another interviewee said:

You walk into those places and they have the wow factor but it is different. They [the churches] are places where there has been prayer for hundreds of years…its somewhere set aside from daily life but part of it. Especially two hundred years ago it was very much part of the life of the village, but it is set aside from the work in the barn. But it's a breathing thing that you know people worshipped in it. It's hard to get these feelings over actually. (12)

The fact that the building was set aside from the use of other buildings was again important in the above comment to the experience. Interviewee 12 also points out the difficulty some were encountering in putting their experience into words.

This difficulty was also acknowledged by interviewee 3, when they tried to describe how all the different elements of the building combined to give a special feeling for them at the church in Compton.

In response to the questions above, the next to endeavour to answer is the relation of the experience to the age of the building, and if similar buildings of comparable age produce similar experiences. The interviewees were asked to compare the experience in the churches to visiting another place of similar age, and in a similar setting such as a historic house – a National Trust property being one example. Again, a similar distinction was drawn between the perceived affluence demonstrated by something like a National Trust property:

In a National Trust property you are looking at material things, you're not looking for spiritual things, if you go into a church – for me anyway – you are looking for the spiritual. A National Trust property works on a completely different level. It's just something that's in the fabric – you either feel it or you don't. It's very subjective. (14)

Another also described the difference:

> It's comforting. It's just the beauty of the church – when you go in and you look up, and if it's a sunny day, and you see the sunlight coming through the stained-glass windows it gives you a lovely feeling. You don't get that feeling in a stately home or a garden. It's a feel-good feeling. (10)

The affluence of the people associated with the place comes across again in this description and the absence of 'material things'. The assumption is made by the interviewee 10 that the community that built and used the church they visited were not well off, or at least not affluent. An assumption shared with others who have commented on this aspect before.

Interviewee 12 reiterates another aspect of the experience encountered in the study churches and commented on by others, that they are places of comfort. Again, they speak of their experience in terms of a feeling, a positive feeling that is distinctive compared to that encountered in a stately home or garden.

Another question was regarding the historical importance of the buildings, and the interviewees were asked if they have had a similar experience in a modern church? Again the experience was described as a feeling:

> Living tradition – a continuing tradition. Modern churches – very modern churches - you don't get that feeling. (5)

Following on, a further question was asked about the current community associated with the church – did it matter what that community was like?

> I don't think the size of the congregation is important. It's nice that it is used. The church at Compton gave the impression of being quite a busy church, there was a little corner for the Sunday School, which was quite sweet. (14)

There is a sense in the above response of quite a twee image of the church, which may translate in their impression of the community that uses it. They associate the church in Compton with a community, incorporating families, one that is busy but not too large, one that is 'nice' and 'sweet'.

The comment above resonates with the theme that the impression of the community is one of a village community, that is as much about one imagined from the past as representing one today. Although not all the interviewees would agree on this point, as noted above, the image is consistent with a small well connected community, particularly across the generations.

This image of a village community and the context of this study prompted the question; Did it matter that the survey churches were located in the countryside? Could you get the same experience visiting urban churches, where the village image is less likely to be associated with? The responses were mixed:

> It's the remoteness that appeals. It's rural. I rarely do that in a town. It's the sense of time moving on and leaving them behind. And yet when you look at them and you see the histories, the stories, it's not irrelevant it's as relevant to me as ever. (7)

For the above interviewee the rural location was important in disassociating the building from the world around. However, this impression as commented by another (particularly in the location of the study churches in the South East) can be illusory:

> You feel fairly isolated, which you're not. (5)

The need for the rural location to make the connection with the community behind the building, that seems so important for the experience, is not universally shared by the interviewees:

> Doesn't matter if it's in the countryside or the city. Wherever it is you can have that similar experience – they have that similar accretion of people's lives. (5)

> I've been to churches in towns where there is a spiritual connection with them. No, no real differentiation between urban and rural churches. (14)

From the responses above, it is inconclusive that the rural location of the church is significant for the experience encountered in them. The connection with people remains the significant factor and particularly the connection with their lives and history.

For the study churches however, the quotes by the interviewees suggest the landscape around the churches does contribute to the experience. Interviewees note the walk to the churches that it is hidden by the landscape, that they are in some way isolated, made a difference to their experience. This again highlights the subjective nature of the experience, but the fact that some of the interviewees had similar experiences in urban churches points to the non-exclusive nature of these experiences in rural churches; these buildings in general can provide spaces for people to encounter these experiences.

The rural context does give further elements that can form part of the experience in a different way to other contexts. For example, the cultural patriotic sense in which some of the interviewees described their experiences. This in reference to the people they connected with the churches, and particularly the memorials and gravestones. This interviewee put it most explicitly:

> The first time I went into the grounds of the church I felt like an intruder. It seemed almost a private area. The landscape is so secretive there. That's another thing I find about the English landscape, it has that quality, you can have people not very far away – towns not far very away – and yet you can be alone and safe.
>
> It's partly to do with their Englishness. If you drove around England and you didn't see a church spire in the distance, and didn't drive in to a village with a church there, would I feel diminished - yes. I would like to think there is a residual affection for the church as a kind of repository of community spirit. (14)

The patriotic idea, the love of country, comes across very strongly in the above quote and is centred on a rural setting. There is for this interviewee a distinct connection between the building and its location to an idea of 'Englishness'.

The overall sense is one of comfort in being alone and safe, and also of being alone but not really being alone because there are people not far away. The cultural aspect of the buildings is something expressed by the interviewees, summarised succinctly by one:

> One of the things I love about them are they are repositories of folk history. (7)

The idea that they also carry cultural history as well as evidence of community, is reflected in the comments about the churches being buildings where people come to find their sense of place as noted by interviewee number 11.

Overall, the responses by the interviewees build into a probable picture of their experiences within these churches. They are marked by both distinctive elements that are specific to each person, and a unifying theme built around the response regarding the peacefulness of the places. Each of the interviewees identified different elements in the churches they visited that they valued as part of their experience such as memorials; evidence of an active community; and the wear on wood and stone. The combination of these or lack of these appealed to each on an individual basis, and for them denoted one church over another as being a place of spiritual encounter. What unified the responses was firstly the description of peacefulness; sometimes described more so as stillness or timelessness, that promoted thoughtfulness and contemplation through helping to focus attention. Furthermore, their experiences were linked by the descriptors of the elements that focused the attention being connected with the people associated with the building, and either the more obvious signs in memorials or the subtle indications of use in the wear left behind.

However, if these experiences can be classified as spiritual experiences, there needs to be something more than contemplation involved and include an experience of something greater. For the interviewees, their responses did indicate an experience that went beyond the culmination of the elements that produced the sense of contemplation. Two called it a 'feeling', which was hard to describe. One as something that lifted you up or steadied you. Two in an explicitly religious way described it as, 'be still and know that I am God.'

On the other hand, it seems certain that there are other visitors who never encounter a spiritual experience, and it is not certain that all of the interviewees have had a spiritual encounter in the churches. The descriptions of the lives of people they associate with the building, demonstrates potentially more of an emotional encounter with the place; or possibly a cultural encounter if the comments about Englishness and folk history in the quote above are taken.

It is unlikely these experiences are mutually exclusive and do not preclude one another; given the experiences described by the interviewees they often included elements of emotional and cultural encounters as well as, and probably more so, than suggesting they had a spiritual encounter.

The emotional connection to the people of the past is made clear in the interviewees responses; but what is less clear is the type of connection with the people; how do the interviewees view the people they are describing coming to the churches in the past and how do they fit within their own experiences? The interviewees associate with the love and grief they believe that was expressed by people in the churches, but is that association made stronger by cultural connections they feel with these people? Does the cultural resonance of these places for the interviewees add to the spiritual connection they make?

4.9 Further Research

These ideas were tested much later in this research by asking as many of the interviewees as possible; those who it was still possible to contact (nine in total) some follow up questions using an online questionnaire.

The questionnaire was not envisaged as part of the original methodology, but has proved to be a useful way of getting further confirmation of the ideas the results of the interviews have provided. The questions proffered were generated specifically to look at the cultural and religious associations the interviewees made with rural churches; to explore the links made apparent in the results. Was the bucolic image of the village community with the Church at its centre an important factor in the experience of the visitor? Were the links to the Church, the community or the state more or less important in forming the identity of the building for the visitors?

Ten questions were asked specifically to pick out elements of this; with the last question arranged to be a provocative summary of the views interpreted from the interviews to see if the interviewees agreed or disagreed.

The first question related to the idea of the image of the rural church and Englishness. Presented with a list of seven potential places and activities that might denote Englishness they were asked to pick three. The top three were a cricket match, a country pub and a country church. The others they could have picked from included: Her Majesty the Queen, the London Eye and the Houses of Parliament. This list is very limited, but the most popular answers were around those items that conjured up a village scene.

The next question kept to the theme of Englishness and asked the respondents if they could list three things they felt made the English countryside an attractive place to live? Of all the words given the most popular could be categorised as beauty, community, peaceful and undeveloped. These words could also be used for the interviewees description of the churches they visited; they spoke of the beauty of these places but most of all of their peacefulness; they talked about the community they associated with the churches and also that some were simple and free of material things. Moreover, others only had the hallmarks of community life.

To probe this connection further they were asked if they could say what role the church had in making the English countryside an attractive place to live? The responses started to show some differences at this point. One of the respondents said it had no role, another said it, 'should be central to each community, leading influencing and occasionally directing.' Two commented that it should be central to the community life of the village, one of these suggesting with the caveat 'if it is open, vibrant and has a Vicar'. That thought was also reiterated by another respondent who gave a more negative comment, 'The church building exists in every village, but most don't have vicars and the congregations are dying.' Two other comments spoke of community and another two that the church has a role in providing a quiet, reflective place.

In some of these responses it is clear that there are assumptions being made about what constitutes the English countryside, that it is synonymous with villages and village communities and this is where the role of the Church is. Noting that in these responses the Church is seen as more than the building, and the unmentioned assumption is that it is the worshipping community. Not all the responses saw it in this way as the two who pointed towards its role being a quiet place for reflection demonstrate.

The fourth question asked them if there was anything they would change about the church buildings? There were different answers by each respondent as set out below:

- Advertise that they are not for the religious only
- Yes. Accessibility, it's lovely when they are open
- They should be open and maintained and have services
- Happy for there to be change, to make buildings more comfortable and convenient for all, but should be in keeping with church style

- Yes and no

- Additions like toilet facilities would be welcome providing the atmosphere of the church is maintained

- I love country churches - idiosyncratic, fascinating and, frequently of considerable artistic/architectural merit in fabric and furnishings

- No I would not change anything. Maybe open them up more often for passers-by to enjoy

- There is something profoundly beautiful about these little sanctuaries that have stood so long in these peaceful environments. Yes, as an atheist I would still use the word Spiritual.

Other than measures to improve the accessibility the general view expressed is above all not to change the atmosphere of the building.

The next question put forward was who owned the village church with four possible answers: the Church, the Vicar, the Community or the State? Five thought the community, three the Church and one the Vicar.

The next asked if it should be a living part of the village or is it a piece of history? Almost universally the respondents answered that it should be both.

They were asked what role the Sunday congregation has regarding the churches place in the village? For two they 'were' the Church, for one they were vital to keep it going as a place of worship, and for two they did not know what role the congregation played. The remainder considered the congregation to be an important social element in village life.

The next question split the respondents almost evenly: does it matter if services happen there? Four said no and five said very much yes – responses varied from: 'Not to me' to 'Of course - Christians are called to go into all the world to proclaim the gospel … "do this in remembrance of me" - not in secret but thankfully and openly. A church without Christian services becomes a museum piece - even if it becomes a concert hall etc'.

Question nine requests the respondents write down five words they associate with a country church when they imagine one. The most popular words were around peacefulness and history, with some about beauty and atmosphere as well as community.

The questions so far have been establishing a picture around the views of some of the interviewees; it is clear that church buildings are a valued part of the English countryside and that their relationship with the community there is important. They are an oasis of peace and concentrations of history. However, their relationship with the institutional Church is a divisive issue with more people thinking that the building is owned by the community over the Church, and the role of regular worship is uncertain.

The final question was developed from the review of literature around people's experiences of country churches and the conversations with the interviewees; it is an open question asking for comments on a statement written to reflect the output of the review and the interviews. It sets out provocatively deliberate connections with a nostalgic view of communities and of England centred on a common belief; which it was suggested was encapsulated in the Church of England. This was to test the connections people made with these buildings in general and what preconceptions they may hold when they visit. They were asked to read the statement below and afterwards write down their thoughts and comments if they agreed or disagreed with its contents:

> The church in the English countryside is a place in which God dwells. It is the spiritual home of the village and heart of the community that have lived there through generations. It gives hope to all who come to it that the possibility of community still exists, that relationships can be mended, that some structure in life can exist and that not all things vanish with time. It calls to mind a community of common and mutually understood culture at harmony with its landscape. Disagreements and upheavals happen but the heart of the village remains. That heart is based on a belief held in the tradition of the Church of England, open to everyone and part of the landscape, a landscape which has both shaped it, and that it has shaped. A belief respected by others without the need to explain that belief to them.

The statement was constructed in an attempt to overcome any inarticulateness in the interviewees in expressing their views on these places in relation to their experiences there. It makes a number of assumptions that may, or may not lay behind some of the comments made, specifically: a divine relationship with the building; a strong and central connection to the local community; a positive static place in time in contrast to a changing world in which families are remembered; that it reflects a common culture characteristic of

the English countryside; that the faith reflected there is from the Church of England, and that it is a belief that does not need to be stated.

The statement is not meant to reflect the views of any one interview or of a particular theology as discussed in the literature review. It is a combination of the views expressed over all the interviews as well as some of the popular conceptions of rural churches from the review. As such, it was not expected that the interviewees contacted would necessarily agree with all of it, but the responses would help to clarify the interpretations of their comments so far.

In total eight of the respondents commented on the statement. Four of the respondents agreed with the statement largely without comment; one simply stated that 'God does not dwell in a building,' and the other three had much more expansive answers. The questionnaires were collected anonymously, so it is not possible to attribute them to a particular interviewee from the nine questioned. One of these more expansive comments, seemed at variance with the idea expressed by most of the interviewees of an external spiritual effect with the buildings in their experience:

> God dwells in the people not a building. Too much tradition in the Anglican Church; it's not meeting 21st century challenges and its voice is not heard in major issues.

It also disagrees with a connection to the past. However, the comment seems more directed towards the institution of the Anglican Church than the building in this respect. Another of the comments also focuses on the institutional Church:

> Sadly, a typically inadequate description. It is the Church's job to show that God in Christ lives in the hearts of people, not in a building. Nor does he support C of E exclusively, or its beliefs - as implied. Anyway, what are the traditional beliefs of the C of E? Perhaps the biggest problem here is the final assumption that these beliefs are so well known (and respected??!!) that there is no need to explain them. Here you've hit on the exact reason why so many village churches are empty. I think I remember Jesus making comments about those who valued tradition and structure above all else. "Come unto me ...." not go to the C of E, or any other organisation.

The comment also makes it explicit that, for them, any spirituality associated with the building is only there because of the people associated with it.

Of the previous two comments it can be assumed that the commentators were either Christian or had a significant experience of the Church. The final comment is from someone who is clearly not:

There is no evidence for God and I am sure there is no God. That said a lot of people seem to feel the need for there to be a God in their lives. I respect this just so long as they do not use this faith as an excuse for doing others harm (which throughout history and to this day has happened/happens a lot). As buildings that bring communities together or as oases of tranquillity and peace, I think the churches fill a need not available anywhere else. When/if I am feeing desperate I might often visit one of these little country churches not to talk to a supernatural power but to sit and reflect and consider my place in the world. Where else would I go to do this? I know these churches are there whenever I need them. I value them and the people who look after them enormously.

Despite not sharing the faith of those who have built, used and maintained these buildings the comment above indicates the value the person holds these buildings in.

These responses represent what appears to be a dichotomy in interpretation between those who associated God with the place and those who did not. Four people agreed with the statement as it stood. Three disagreed with the statement saying that God dwelled in the church, and the remaining statement did not personally associate with the term God. Of the three that disagreed with the statements, saying God dwelled in the church, two also commented on its inclusion of the Church of England and its relevance.

It would seem likely that the three who disagreed about God dwelling in the place did so on theological grounds, where the Church, is those who are called out of the world to worship Christ.[5] As the Baptist minister pointed out in a quote earlier, they could not say God dwelt in the building, as in the Old Testament understanding of the Temple, but there was a sense of something like that in the church they visited. The two who commented on the Church of England (Anglican Church) were focused on the final sentences in the

---

[5] Example, Acts 17:24-25

135

constructed statement that proposed; (The heart of the village) is based on a belief held in the tradition of the Church of England, open to everyone and part of the landscape, a landscape which has both shaped it and that it has shaped. A belief respected by others without the need to explain that belief to them.

The notes about a faith not communicated and not meeting the challenges of the 21st century, point to issues of evangelism and decline in the Church of England. Although the comments have an institutional focus rather than one located around the community of the churches they visited, the implication of the comments are that; firstly the statement is stereotypical and does not sufficiently cover the breadth of experience (hence not all who come are or have experience of the Church of England), and secondly that its validity is declining as those whose tradition it appeals to, have failed to pass on or adapt that tradition for the next generation.

The statement created for the questionnaire is deliberately designed to be provocative. In making the association with the Church of England and its traditions as from a Christian perspective, it is a very narrow sectarian interpretation of the faith of the traditional and current community in the surrounding area. However, what is potentially more interesting than the disagreements with the statement, are the number that accepted it. For them it encapsulated the English rural church to a greater or lesser extent. This suggests that for many of the visitors, they have expectations of these places built upon the ideas contained within the statement, relating to community and tradition within the context of both rural, and more specifically an English version of that.

4.10 Results Summary

In trying to summarise the information from the interviewees, it is possible to conclude that one of the most important factors behind their experience, is that they all associate the building with the community that have used it in the past. The sense of age and continuity of use is a critical part of their experience. The interviewees tend to connect emotionally with the people they associate that have come to these places in the past, and who have expressed their 'prayers, love and grief' there, as described by one response.

Each respondent connected differently with the various elements they found in the churches; but the culmination of these elements produced an experience that went beyond a

purely emotional one; and became a spiritual experience centred on a deep and profound sense of peace.

It is possible through the detail contained in the interviews to say more about this experience. Particularly, that there are assumptions made about the community envisioned using these buildings in the past and the culture they represent.

There were a higher proportion who preferred the churches at Up Marden and North Marden for their simplicity and lack of adornment, something that spoke of a simpler, humbler time. This simplicity removes distraction, providing focus for time in thought and prayer. Although the location of the churches is not identified by them as important for the nature of the building, it does seem to be significant for their experience overall. The walk to the churches, the stillness encountered inside them, are all features of their location.

The remaining interviewees valued other churches for different reasons; for some it was the memorials and other adornments which made them special. Additionally, the signs of current use and community engagement were important in illustrating that the building was still in use.

In all the cases the fact the building was still in use was important for the experience, but details such as the type, size of congregation and how often were less important. The central element of the experience as interpreted from the interviews, is summarised in the sentiment of the words of T. S. Elliot, that these are places where 'prayer has been valid'. The detail of what the interviewees said however, allows more unpacking of this phrase from the perspective of their experience.

They say that it is important that these buildings had been set aside by a community as places of worship and as places of prayer, where the rites of passage of the community – marriages, baptisms and particularly funerals – are celebrated across generations for centuries, are what has imbued them with significance for the visitors.

This view is common to the interviewees. Their actual experiences are in some way related to the human element of the buildings, and in general seem to be similar in form. The key features are an experience of peacefulness, often described as stillness, of comfort and of being grounded – in the sense of being familiar with rather than it being a mysterious

experience, and of recognising a sense of their place in the world. There is a human sense of connection with the building, something about it they can relate to.

These are general aspects of the visitor's experience, but there are also more specific elements in the comments that they made which suggest further detail relating to those experiences. The patriotic element is very explicit in some interviews, and was hinted at in others, where stereotypical English village communities are suggested in the communities they associate with the church. There is the suggestion that these communities and by association these churches are keepers of tradition and folk law.

Although the religious purpose of the building is acknowledged by the interviewees, it is one set in the background of assumptions about the English countryside. This is not universal, but there are several comments by different interviewees that suggest a romantic view of the communities they associate with these places. It is the feeling and sentiment they create which seems to give them their spiritual quality.

The follow up questions have provided some further information: firstly, that for several of the respondents they do have a preconceived idea about these buildings and the communities they imagine have formed them. Secondly, that there is a difference of thought about how these places relate to Christianity. Some of the respondents were happy for them to be places where God is present, and for others God is only located in the people, and that for some the relationship to the Church of England is implicit and others expressly not.

Theologically we have a mixed economy of visitors. Those who are visitors without a clear spiritual idea of why they have come, essentially tourists who come because the idea of the church interests them, and those who are pilgrims. Regarding the pilgrims some have come as part of the tradition of their Christian religious practice, and some who have come as part of their self-defined religious practice.

Of the tourists, there are visitors who come simply to admire the context, architecture and history. There are those who are seeking ancestors and who appreciate the stillness of these places. There are those who visit for spiritual reasons, as part of their religious practice set within the Christian framework of which they feel part of (as identified by the respondents to the original survey). Equally there are those who visit for spiritual reasons, but ones that are not set by the Church and are likely to be self-determined and subjectively led.

Even if the intention of the visitor is not to visit for spiritual reasons as demonstrated by the interviewees, they encounter a stillness within the church which can lead to a deeper spiritual encounter of profound peace.

The reflective process undertaken by visitors largely centres on the people they associate with the church, and of whom they detect their presence through the evidence of their use of the building. For some people that reflective process is informed by a preconception of those people based on a nostalgic idea of community – one that is traditional, inter-generational and relatively small, summed up in the idea of a village community. Community is always a positive term, and speaks of safety and companionship – it has a cosy warmth about the idea[6]. This view is in part confirmed, if not explicitly then implicitly, by the follow up questions where a very positive view of community was given in the prepared statement used for the final question. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with elements of it - there were no negative comments about the image of the village community given. Of those comments, which did contrast with the statement, none of them contradicted the ideas about the community it gave – the implication being that they did not disagree with that aspect of it.

This view of the community is possibly why the interviewees often described these places as places of comfort. They are comforted by their visits to these churches, and particularly around the idea of death which features very highly in their comments surrounding the memorials for example.

Overall, they describe their experiences as a feeling, and have difficulty in describing them further than that. The feeling comes from the combination of elements in these buildings that speak to the visitors and mark out certain churches as special to them. The feeling is distinct and different from other places of potential spiritual encounter.

That feeling gives these places a sense of authenticity, authenticity about the community associated with them, that they were a community of people. The communities associated with these places are set in contrast to others, particularly places associated with wealth. It almost seems as if the ordinariness of the people they associate with the building in the past is one of the most important features. It is easier for the interviewees to bridge the gap between themselves and these people if they feel they are, as they would see, ordinary

---

[6] Z Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Back Page

and not someone very different from themselves. As one interviewee describes it, the feeling about the place is not mysterious but familiar. 'I didn't feel there was anything particularly mysterious at the church, but there was a kind of continuity to it. Like, many families had walked in the doors and walked out again. I felt a spiritual calmness about it. Not a mystery. Kind of more grounded.' (6)

It is universally a positive feeling. As the first interviewee quoted states, 'Feeling does not come from within but outside. If you are up it steadies you, if you are low it comforts you…' And as another says, it is for them an, 'Overwhelming sense of goodness, of people trying to do better, a skin, a patina, of people striving to do better.' The experience described follows what Greeley identified as a sense of deep and profound peace in his descriptors of religious experience.

Both of the above quotes come from those who identify themselves as atheists; which points out that these experiences are not restricted to those who are part of an organised religion; equally who might be argued to have a predisposition to having a spiritual experience. It is not universal that everyone who visits these places has a spiritual experience, but for those that do the experience seems to be consistent across different spiritual identifications.

What all of the interviewees held in common was nationality, race, a background that had at some point encountered Christianity, and to a certain extent age. That does give them all access to a certain shared cultural tradition that they can call upon for reference when visiting these buildings. It may or may not be a defining characteristic of their experience, but certainly for some the element of tradition and searching for your place in the world are part of the experience.

The word timeless was also used to describe the insides of these churches set in contrast to a readily changing world outside of it. The continuity of them is also a sense of comfort to the interviewees, that they persist and are alive in the sense of still being used for their original purpose.

All of this is contained in the summary of the experience of these places as being one of peacefulness, the word most commented on in earlier studies of visitors to rural churches; but one which when unpacked reveals a lot more information behind it relating to the differences and similarities in the theologies of the visitors.

The theology expressed by these visitors particularly for tourists is something new in respect of rural theology; a theology of place and of a pilgrim theology as discussed in the literature review, is not adequately covered by them individually.

It is also a theology that has not been addressed by the Church which has understandably focused on the worshipping community of these places, and the poor, vulnerable and marginalised of the wider communities associated with them. However, the numbers of visitors to churches is significant compared to the size of the worshipping congregations,[7] and hence there is a need to develop theological resources to support these visitors.

---

[7] The 2011 Statistics for Mission published by the Church of England give average Sunday attendance in 2008 as approximately 800,000, or 41.6 million people attending Sunday worship over a year. A submission by the National Churches Trust to an inquiry on rural tourism in England by the Commons Select Committee on the environment and rural affairs gave a figure of 40 million visits to churches in 2008. See: 'Rural tourism in England Inquiry: Response from the National Churches Trust' The National Churches Trust http://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/sites/default/files/National%20Churches%20Trust%20Rural%20tourism%20inquiry%20response%20%20FINAL.pdf (accessed 23rd July 2018) and 'Resources, Publications and Data, Church of England' https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/2011statisticsformission.pdf (accessed 23rd July 2018)

5. From Pilgrim to Tourist: A Theology

The results of detailed discussions with visitors to rural churches has revealed they have experiences which are both individual in their specificity but general in their form – that the experience is one of deep and profound peace. Overall, they point to a theology that is not adequately catered for by rural theology, or a theology of place and a pilgrim - although all of these have something to say about the visitor experience. The visitors were not part of the worshipping or local community of the church; they valued the building because of its association with people and were not necessarily Christian, or viewed their visit as part of a spiritual journey. They would all however, describe their experience as spiritual and that there were common themes in the descriptions they offered of the experience.

For our interviewees there was the general sense that these places had a definite and authentic rootedness in a community, which had set apart these buildings for a particular purpose. There seems to be from the interviewees a warm and nostalgic view of the community, yet no desire to be part of or even experience the current community associated with the building.

Some of the visitors with an explicitly Christian faith treat these visits as a pilgrimage, a journey to these sacred places of Christian heritage; but the evidence from the survey conducted as part of this study suggests that spiritual experiences are as common to those who visit on impulse, as those who do so specifically for spiritual reasons. So, the explanation of the experience being part of a long tradition of Christian journeys to significant places of faith is insufficient.

It is instead proposed that these experiences are part of a 'tourist theology', that these places are sought out as part of a culture of visiting, and represent a particular type of stop in what can be a transitory lifestyle. The character of the tourist is taken from Bauman's description in his essay, *'From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity'*, a work that sets out descriptive tools for sociological reflection on the contemporary society. This work is part of his broader work on the postmodern character.

Bauman's work on the postmodern character can be summarised firstly as the change from the modern stereotypical life that he describes as a 'pilgrimage' to a postmodern 'nomadic' lifestyle; the change from a definite course that is plotted and followed in preference to other destinations that may potentially seem more attractive on the way; to one

which has no such course but is instead a series of wanderings from one destination to another depending on wherever seems most attractive at the time.

Secondly, how the notion of community has become more attractive and less of a reality as part of this transition. The safe and stable set of relationships that the word 'community' conjures, becomes less and less of a lived experience as people move, and more readily look for the attractive location or relationship to be in - for fear of 'missing out' or of becoming stuck in a situation that is not to their advantage.

The uncertainty this transition has created has become a source of anxiety and mistrust of others; where there is always somewhere and someone better they should be looking out, and where all those around them are doing the same. So, the idea of community where those around you are looking out for you and for the good of all, where there is shared experience and strong relationships, becomes more attractive as a balm for this anxiety and fear.

The tourist from Bauman's essay is rooted in one form of this transition from pilgrim to nomad. His concept here is explored from a theological perspective, rather than the strictly sociological perspective in which Bauman developed the concept.

The tourist is one 'identity' theorised by Bauman which is not intended to be an exact universally applicable empirical description of how people must and will act; but more to speak of the pressures they live under and the strategies they may or may not utilise to respond to these.[1] The tourist is designed to be an interpretive tool to help the analyst understand human practices. As such, a tourist theology is not intended to be a description of the theology of the visitors to these churches, but a tool for theological reflection on their experiences.

As noted by Bauman the tourist is one identity among others that may help to understand the human condition. In this study what has also become apparent, is that there are a number of identities at play that interact with visitors to these churches and each other to help create their experience of them.

---

[1] M Dawson, 'Keeping Other Options Alive' in M Jacobsen, (ed) *Beyond Bauman: Critical Engagements and Creative Excursions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 227

In addition to the visitor being pilgrim or tourist, the church itself has an identity being an iconic building referenced in television and literature. Add to which, from the interviews, the descriptions given that the communities associated with those buildings also have a perceived identity. Finally, both the churches and the communities in some way reference back to the Church as an institution, specifically the Church of England which has tended to form and shape both in rural areas.

As Bauman has developed the identity of the tourist, so has Roger Scruton developed an identity for the Church of England in his personal account *Our Church*. His version of the Church of England had some severe criticism for its lack of historical awareness, and its paradoxes in theological thinking.[2] However, because of this it provides what might be described as a popularist view of the Church from its fringes. As such, it is a useful identity in discussing the theology of the tourist. It reflects, as Jeff Astley points out about Ordinary Theology, a belief 'which is wholly anecdotal, figurative, inconsistent or even logically confused (but) may still work as a personal expression of religious belief.' [3] In Scruton's work the identities of the Church of England, the church building and the community it serves, are completely intertwined to provide the narrative of his theology.

These identities help provide tools to reflect on the theology of visitors to these places. They are illustrated here based on the insights of the research in this study that point to their importance. What they cast light on is a tourist theology that is centred on an idea of home and homesickness. This has been identified previously by Schwartz as having potential positive and negative trajectories, depending on if its goal is to create a positive environment, reflecting the warm ideas of home and community, or if it limits itself to nostalgia.

The course of this exploration requires an understanding of these concepts and the critique of them; then putting it into a theological perspective using work which has also considered this transition from modern to postmodern environments; such as the work of Heelas and Woodhead and Grace Davie that have been discussed before. Finally comparing this perspective with the results of this work in the context of these churches in the English countryside.

---

[2] An example of this type of criticism of Scruton's work see: Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'What Makes the C of E Special? This account of Anglicanism is Full of Clichés and Misrepresentations' *The Guardian,* 19th June 2013 www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/19/our-church-roger-scruton-review (accessed 11th August 2018)

[3] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 2-3.

Firstly, as it forms the basis for the identity used in creating a tourist theology the work of Bauman is considered in more detail.

5.1 Zygmunt Bauman and the Post-Modern Identity

Zygmunt Bauman is one of the most important sociological figures of the last fifty years and has published prolifically. He has never termed any of his work as theological, but has had close conversations with a number of theological thinkers. The most notable being Stanislaw Obriek regarding the place of spirituality and religion in the world today, in the everyday lives of individuals, and the nature of religious experience and its impact on human worldviews and life strategies.[4] Within his work he seeks to interpret the world as it is and point out that it does not have to be this way.[5] This does not mean he is a revolutionary seeking to enact change in the world, but is careful to remain within the bounds of sociology, providing intellectual interpretation and pointing out with despair what he sees, but does not suggest remedies. As such, Michael Hviid Jacobsen has commented that he is nether priest nor prophet, 'he is not searching for followers or disciples to enter his congregation (as the priests), but he is also not the isolated, quixotic or tragic figure as the prophet who will always remain on the outside, and whose arguments will therefore often fall on deaf ears.[6]

His work on the post-modern society and the identities it has developed has grown and evolved over his career. He has abandoned the idea of post-modern in favour of what he understands as a much more fluid world, one that he terms as 'Liquid modernity':

> There are reasons to consider 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways *novel*, phase in the history of modernity…we recall that the famous phrase 'melting the solids' when coined a century and a half ago by the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* referred to the treatment which the self-confident and exuberant modern spirit awarded the society it found much too stagnant for its taste and much too resistant to shift and mould for its ambitions – since it was frozen in its habitual ways. If the 'spirit' was 'modern', it was so indeed in so far as it was determined that reality should be emancipated from the 'dead hand' of its own history – and this could only be done by melting the solids (that is, by definition, dissolving whatever

---

[4] For example see: Z Bauman, S Obriek, *Of God and Man* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015)
[5] K Tester, *The Social Thought of Zygmunt Bauman* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004), 9
[6] Jacobsen, *Beyond Bauman*, 19

persists over time and is negligent of its passage or immune to its flow). That intuition called in turn for the 'profaning of the sacred': for disavowing and dethroning the past and first and foremost 'tradition' – to wit, the sediment and residue of the past in the present; it thereby called for the smashing of the protective armour forged of the beliefs and loyalties which allowed the solids to resist the 'liquifaction'.[7]

In his book *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies,* Bauman explores our view of death as an example of the situation he indicates above. He identifies two different approaches to mortality: Firstly, a modern approach where the insoluble issue of death is translated into several specific problems of health and disease which have the potential to be solved. Secondly, a post-modern approach that deconstructs immortality so that life becomes a constant rehearsal of 'reversible death'. Reversible death is practiced in the reinvention of personal identity, and as mentioned previously is seen first with actors and celebrities reliving their identities through engaging with recordings of them, and now more popularly through the ubiquity of self-recording or being recorded. The permanent termination of life is replaced by a pause in the life recorded while a new identity is constructed.

The example of people's perception of death is an important one for the study of the visitor to a church. Churches, particularly with churchyards as most rural ones have, are home to the dead. In the interviews the importance of the memorials and the commemoration of the dead in the churches was often referred to in relation to the visitor's experiences. They are littered with monuments locating forever past generations which seemingly stand in defiance of the reversibility of death. They seem to be bulwarks when considering the post-modern (liquid) sea of impermanence; set in stone as physical reminders of permanent resting places.

What is also true is that these places are not comfortable from the modern perspective as well as the liquid modern state as identified by Bauman. They are a constant reminder of the insolubility of the problem of death, that despite progress death is assured. They relate back to a pre-modern era where the end of life was something more readily witnessed as part of the everyday, and where corporate beliefs supported communities in

---

[7] Z Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 2

their grief. In this period fears and hopes were given a space to be aired within sacred places, without the need to quantify them or work out your own solutions.

The roots of these places go deeper than the institutions and societies which in part were a feature of the modern project. Moulded out of the material which could be detached from the institutions of the time before, and as such remain connected to a past to which few unbroken, un-reinterpreted, un-re-presented, tangible elements remain.

It is often a criticism of Bauman's work that while the rise of the modern and post-modern cultures are discussed at length, his concept of the pre-modern world remains underdeveloped.[8] It is seen as a world inhabited by the Church and God; which through the process of secularisation and the rise of the natural scientific world view accompanied by the state; has steadily declined in the face of the intensification of Man's aspirations to control, cultivate and socialise outer nature as well as human nature in modernity.[9]

However, the value of the pre-modern experience is seen from comments like Peter Stanford's at the end of his book, '*How to Read a Graveyard: Journeys in the Company of the Dead'*, the book which came out of his visits to a local graveyard whilst walking his dog:

> …we don't have to limit ourselves to social studies or historical investigation when in the company of the dead on a visit to a cemetery… I plan to keep on visiting, first of all for the dog – that is certainly what I tell the children – but really for me, for that reassuring sense my walks give me that I am part of a human chain, going through the cycle of birth and death as those who came before, and will come after me.[10]

Although this sense of reassurance is obviously of value, the notion of how that reassurance translates into the everyday experience of the visitor, and fits within the matrix of everything they hold dear, is more complex in the post-modern identity.

As Bauman points towards in his statement above, the experience of people has changed over time. Research on the way visitors view nature in churchyards has indicated that while most value the churchyard itself, the values given to the nature it contains vary.

---

[8] Jacobsen, *Beyond Bauman*, 244
[9] Ibid, 260-61
[10] Stanford, *How to Read a Graveyard,* 241

For some it is a threat to the preservation of a final resting place, for others it holds a symbolic value relating to the cycle of life and its complexity.[11] The ingress of uncertainty that allowing 'wildlife' to carry on unmolested both seems a breach in the modern need to see nature managed, and a more post-modern reassurance of life continuing without it depending on or conforming to our will.

In his interpretation of the trajectories in life that people pursue and the drivers that set them going, Bauman identifies the modern approach with a Protestant world view. In this case each day is viewed as a step towards an ultimate heavenly goal, and every sacrifice now as a deposit for your ultimate heavenly treasure marking out a 'pilgrimage through life'. This pilgrimage has its roots in the physical pilgrimage practiced since the earliest days of Christianity and before; but the land, and the desert through which the ancient pilgrim travelled has been internalised in a Protestant world-view, so that now it is the progress towards meaning and identity. The heavenly treasure has become the respectability afforded by home ownership, and reaching the pinnacle of the career ladder with the legacy of a life well lived according to the tributes of friends and colleagues.

The postmodern approach he identifies with the concept of nomadic travel:

> Postmodern nomads, unlike Protestant 'pilgrims through life', wander between *unconnected* places. It is on this that they differ - not in the concern with *establishing* and *preserving* their identities, a concern which they share with their pilgrim ancestors…Where the nomads and the pilgrims differ, and differ rather sharply, is the *disconnexity* of the time/space in which the identity of the nomads is plotted, as against *connexity* of the time/space canvas on which the pilgrims' identities are woven.

> Pilgrims select their destination early and plan their life-itinerary accordingly. We may say that they are guided throughout by a 'life-project', by an overall 'life-plan'. Nomads, on the other hand, hardly ever reach in their imagination beyond the next caravan-site…Nomads do not bind the time/space, they move through it; and so they move *through* identities. [12]

---

[11] M King, M Betson, *The Nature of God's Acre* (Chichester: NOGA, 2014), 40-47
[12] Z Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 166-167

For the nomad the distance between where they are and what the pilgrim would regard as their ultimate heavenly destination is unbearably distant. This can be seen very easily if the ultimate goal is owning a home and climbing the career ladder; the price of the home is unaffordable, and the career ladder is constantly being taken out from beneath them as jobs become obsolete and skills worthless. Even if you have ascended these heights, the long-promised happiness remains a mirage on the horizon. For nomads the pilgrim desert has become full of dunes with increasing steepness.

As indicated by the metaphor of the desert, the pilgrim and the nomad are not necessarily different people. Bauman identifies this change in behaviour as something which has happened over time. The pilgrim has become the nomad as the conditions of the journey have changed, and the ultimate goal ever more unobtainable and unattractive. The nightmare of remaining on a path that is ever more arduous or which may run out at any time makes the pilgrim turn aside to a goal that is seemingly obtainable and satisfying.[13]

Bauman breaks down this notion of the nomad as the inevitable successor to the pilgrim in the fulfilment of the modern project, into other metaphors for the identities that characterise their progress.

5.2 Bauman's Tourist

In his essay *From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity,* Bauman identifies four types of identity that people adopt in this postmodern environment that is inhospitable to the pilgrim life lived in the modern age: the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player.

The stroller is a casual observer of life based on the idea developed by Walter Benjamin from Charles Baudelaire's writings on the flaneur – the wanderer of Parisian streets - about the impact on the human identity brought about by modern city living.[14] Bauman sets the stroller as a dramatist, creating narratives out of their observations and conversations, but never acting in the plays they create, and the plays they create never impact on the lives of those they set as actors.

---

[13] Z Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist' in S Hall, P Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*
(Trowbridge: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996), 25-26
[14] B Seal, 'Baudelaire, Benjamin and the Birth of the Flâneur' in *Psychogeographic Review* posted on the 14th November 2013, http://psychogeographicreview.com/baudelaire-benjamin-and-the-birth-of-the-flaneur/ (accessed 9th August 2018)

Once a marginal activity, Bauman sees this as now being encouraged in the advent of shopping malls – places built for strolling – but where the narrative is closely controlled in a consumerist direction. The ultimate end of this evolution Bauman sees as television, where images are presented before us without the need to venture out into what is now seen as an unsafe world. The casual observer of life has then lost all interaction with that life.

Critiques of the flaneur as portrayed by Benjamin such as Martina Lauster, see the concept of the removal of the observer from the scene as unhelpful in trying to understand modern city life, because they remain part of it.[15] Bauman's concept in effect, offers a similar critique in that while the stroller progressively removes themselves from the outside world, they by that act, invariably impact upon it.

The vagabond and the player do not merit as much text as the stroller or the tourist in Bauman's essay, and are possibly not as worked out as concepts. The vagabond is the transient individual who by their transience escapes confining social structures; who fears putting down roots because of the inevitable rejection of them as an outsider; because of missing out on what could be better and what looks more attractive elsewhere. Hence they are always on the move. Once these were the pariahs of the roads and on the margins of society, now Bauman thinks they are in the majority. The obsolescence of skills and relationships create a positive environment for transience. His portrait suggests most of the people the vagabond meets are vagabonds themselves now or in the future, with the existence of 'settled' places on the decline. The player simply treats life as a series of games which may be played without consequence. The player's world is the world of risks, of intuition, of precaution-taking; there is neither laws or lawlessness, only moves more or less cunning to be made. Bauman sees more and more people entering into this world of play in a completely immersive way like children with a complete suspension of disbelief. The reality however is, the game is not as self-contained and zero-sum as the individual assumes, and their moves have ripples that affect others and the future in ways so that disbelief may not be suspended indefinitely.

These other identities set the scene for the identity that forms part of the title of the essay – the tourist.

---

[15] M Lauster, 'Walter Benjamin's Myth of the "Flâneur" *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Jan, 2007), 139-156

As in the case of the vagabond, tourism was a marginal activity restricted to holidays, leisure and those who could afford it; but now Bauman sees it moving much more to the centre of life for some. It is the pull of visiting the new and unusual, of new experiences and sensations that draws the tourist on. Its effect is rejuvenating but is subject to the condition that this remains a visit and the individual is only passing through, so that as its effects wear off they are at liberty to move on.

The caveat in these experiences is that they are ultimately safe. They are part of a managed environment; massaged for benefit of the tourist; made attractive but always with the assurance of safety and that the tourist can leave at any time.

Decisions by the tourist are governed according to Bauman by aesthetic criteria – judgement as a matter of taste. This is in part the distinction between this identity and that of the vagabond, where the tourist is a person of means and who choses their 'package' when travelling; the vagabond feels compelled to move in directions not necessarily of their choosing. For the tourist environments are managed exclusively for their benefit and they retain the right to be free from them as owners of the package that was sold to them.

This distinction is made by both Bauman and by Jacobsen; where Jacobsen distinguishes the majority freedom of the individual 'de jure' with the actual situation globally where only a small number of the total population are 'de facto' free individuals.[16] Where in an increasingly globalised world the access to mobility is fast becoming one of the major stratifying factors; the tourists who travel freely to any destination of their own choice are the winners but the losers, the vagabonds, are perpetually pulled or pushed to stay on the move and are seldom welcome anywhere.[17]

The second difference between the tourist and the vagabond is important in understanding the results of this study. Bauman describes this difference as this:

> Second, unlike the vagabond who has little choice but to reconcile himself to the
> state of homelessness, the tourist has a home; or should have, at any rate. Having
> a home is a part of the safety package; for the pleasure to be unclouded and truly
> engrossing, there must be somewhere a homely and cosy, indubitably owned
> place to go to when the present adventure is over, or if the voyage proves not as

---

[16] Jacobsen, *Beyond Bauman,* 254-255
[17] Z Bauman, *Globalization The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), Chapter 4

adventurous as expected. "The home is the place to take off the armour and to unpack - the place where nothing needs to be proved and defended as everything is just there, obvious and familiar.[18]

The tourist will by definition always have a safe place to return to; a place that enables them to enjoy these adventures and where they do not have to wear a façade of a personality, but where they are simply themselves. However, as the tourist's adventure increasingly becomes a way of living the returns to the safe place of home become less.

Life becomes a series of well managed packages that are opted into for the experience but can be opted out of at any time. Where the place you live for example is not a home, but something bought into – an investment or an aspiration to a lifestyle – but equally may be sold up when there is a new opportunity for you to climb the housing ladder. Equally where it is something rented as a temporary arrangement, and home is always somewhere else, permanent but not where you live; an aspiration for home ownership but not within reach, when there is always somewhere better and the image of home becomes blurred again.

In the move from the pilgrim to the tourist, from tourism as a marginal activity to one pursued almost continuously, the difficulty for the tourist becomes which one of these places visited is actually home? Bauman states, that for the tourist there is always a clear understanding that where they are is where they are visiting but somewhere else, 'there', there is where home is; but the home becomes less and less a real place and more a concept:

> There is increasingly stripped of all material features; the home it contains is not even imaginary (each mental image would be too specific, too constraining), but postulated; what is postulated is having a home, not a particular building, street, landscape or company of people. Jonathan Matthew Schwartz advises us 'to distinguish the homesick searching from the nostalgic yearning'; the latter is, at least ostensibly, past oriented, while the home in homesickness is as a rule 'in the future perfect tenses.... It is an urge to feel at home, to recognize one's

---

[18] Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist' in S Hall, P Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 25-26

surroundings and belong there.' Homesickness means a dream of belonging, to be, for once, of the place, not merely in.[19]

Schwartz's defence of homesickness was born out of his encounters with migrant communities. It is the loss of the home and longing for it, the place of safety that Bauman sees as the place where the tourist is able to shed everything and just be their true identity, which Schwartz sees as a stimulus for the recovery of the Romantic sentiment. It is the desire to feel at home, and that feeling to be authentic that Schwartz sees as a positive sentiment that can help migrant communities in their current environment. He distinguishes this from nostalgia, which further alienates people from their current condition by continually replaying the past.

Bauman though, breaks with Schwartz in his critique of everyday life with his tourist analogy, as while the tourist feels homesick, it is just a tool for them to continue to be on tour because of the tendency of the home for the homesick to always be on the horizon and never an actual reality. Should the sense of being at home become a reality, Bauman's tourist would find it too confining and all of its charm would be lost. Hence being homesick is not a bar on the life of the tourist, but a mechanism to perpetuate that life by holding home as something which is always there, but far enough away as not to tie the tourist down.

For Bauman, the tourist is part of a suit of identities that describe in part the postmodern move from pilgrim to nomad; in which life moves from one lived with definite direction to one that becomes a series of excursions. What marks the tourist out from the other identities is both their search for new experiences, but also their never-to-be-fulfilled desire for home. Unlike the vagabond who does not seek the settled life, the tourist always carries the settled life with them as something they can return to at any time, but just not yet. Meanwhile their search for new experiences continues subject to careful controls and safeguards so that risk is low.

Theologically the tourist presents an image of a person who seeks for spiritual experience in the confidence that they have a spiritual 'home' – a safe place where their beliefs are accepted and understood by all around them without having to explain them. Their adventures into other spiritual areas enable them to sample other beliefs and to choose

---

[19] Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist' in Hall, Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 26

153

what is to their taste without the danger of being overwhelmed by an overarching meta-narrative, or if that is the case they have the opt out to leave.

The theology of the tourist is normally interwoven with other aspects of the life which has become a series of excursions, as rarely are those excursions chosen with an explicitly spiritual motive. At the end of his essay Bauman concludes that decisions are made in the postmodern consciousness based not on the object of the decision – spirituality for example – but the affect they have on the subject: interest, excitement, satisfaction or pleasure, regardless of the content of the object. He quotes Jean-Francois Lyotard stating, 'the objects and the contents have become indifferent. The only question is whether they are "interesting".[20] There may be a spiritual content to the object, but it is chosen because of its interest to the individual.

The decision made by the tourist of where to go is based on interest in the experience and not on what that experience is. For example, they may choose to walk the route to Santiago de Compostela following the well-trodden route of many pilgrims, but their reason for doing so is not to find Christ in the sense of a true medieval pilgrims, but to seek a new experience.[21] For example take the way such a package is sold from one tour company:

> Walking the Camino de Santiago is unlike any other walking holiday. There is no single section of any Camino walk that is not bursting with regional Spanish culture, historic cities and some of the greatest food available, from Michelin Star quality to hearty regional classics. There is more still to the Camino. A deep spiritual sense that accompanies the walk, whether you are looking for it or not. It may be an overused sentiment but walking the Camino de Santiago will change your life.[22]

The spiritual is part of the experience, but it is not sought out explicitly - it is part of the adventure.

---

[20] Jean-François Lyotard, Moralités postmodernes (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1993), 66-68
[21] Bartholomew, Hughes, *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, 107
[22] Mac's Adventure: Self Guided Walking Holidays & Cycling Holidays
https://www.macsadventure.com/caminotours/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI5526oN3c2wIViTLTCh2KMw0KE AAYASAAEgL4tPD_BwE# (accessed 9th August 2018)

5.3 From Pilgrim to Tourist

This move from pilgrim to tourist resonates with the work of Heelas and Woodhead discussed earlier, and the work of Davie on religion in modern Britain. The turn to the inner authority, the 'subjective turn' as coined by Heelas and Woodhead is seen as the determining factor in the movements of the tourist. The object and its content are not as important to the tourist as how much it interests them; they are guided by their inner sensibility as to what they do. Their spiritual choices are very much that, open to choice and change by them at instances determined by them, and in combinations that reflect their preferences. What Davie describes as a 'bricolage' of individual packages of spirituality, and religion reflecting individual lifestyles.[23]

The key element for the tourist is the experience. That is what these places offer to the tourist, an experience of deep and profound peace. As mentioned before this experience remains the same for the pilgrim as the tourist; for those who have pursued a 'life as' model of religion that defines authority from the meta-narrative of a faith that they accept through self-discipline or inheritance; and those whose visit forms part of their self-defined authority and choice.

What is interesting is that the roots of the experience also seem to be the same for pilgrim and tourist. The sacred nature of these places, the thing that imbues them with religious or spiritual quality, is seen in the conversations with visitors to be the inter-generational links with the past. It is the evidence of use by generations, who have set these places apart for a special purpose that provokes the spiritual experience.

The people themselves largely remain in the imagination of the visitor, pilgrim or tourist, constructed from the limited information of the evidence in the church –for example, memorials, worn wood and stone – and from whatever cultural or otherwise resources they possess. Often the image is centred around the idea of community, of relationships between family and neighbours brought together in these places.

The key difference for the pilgrim and the tourist lies in the concept of home. For the pilgrim the concept is well defined, it is both the place they have journeyed from and the

---

[23] Davie, *Believing Without Belonging,* Kindle edition, 8

place they hope to reach. For the tourist the term is much more nebulous, there is a strong desire for a home but also a repulsion from one that too clearly becomes a reality.

For the pilgrim these places form a stop on their spiritual journey, a place of rest and refreshment on their more or less clearly defined path. For the tourist it is one stop among many, but for them too there is a sense of rest and refreshment found in the experience of deep and profound peace. Taking Bauman's concept of liquid modernity; the constant state of flux in the structures of the world; we see the world through the post-modern lens as more a sea of change in which these places have remained constant, and offer a stillness and peace for the traveller on this sea. Hence for the tourist these places can seem a safe harbour when there is considerable change in life. They offer something of the essence of home about them, both in their permanence and in the warm notions of community they conjure.

For the pilgrim the next steps on their spiritual journey when they leave these places, are on that clear path aimed at their ultimate destination. For the tourist their next steps may be uncertain. From Bauman's perspective they will be looking for the next adventure, for the next spiritual experience, more confident now thanks to their stop in this place that their reference of home both exists and is not going to bind them. The tourist's experience in these places can be seen from this perspective, as a temporary balm for the anxiety of not knowing home exists.

5.4 The Identity of the Rural Church

Roger Scruton has in part explored this identity, an identity of home and Church theologically in his book *Our Church*; not as a systematic theology but as a personal reflection that draws on philosophy and sociology as much as theology. While his aim is to discuss the institution of the Church of England, his work draws heavily on context, and the building of the church comes in for special attention. For him the English rural church evokes a very distinctive theology, which is intimately bound to the landscape it inhabits:

> More than in any country I have visited, the English country church of my youth
> was a home – God's house, the private space that is both here and elsewhere, a

part of England, and an immortal projection of an England in a realm beyond space and time.[24]

It is obvious from Scruton's depiction that the building has a particular significance in the theology he is aiming to describe. It is the temple at the centre of Jerusalem for the people of Israel, as far as it is a place where God is expected to dwell, and the spiritual home of God's people. However, the religion which inhabits that place, is not that of the priests who inhabited the temple in Jerusalem, but much more a laissez faire religion defined by ceremony and personal belief. His description of the Church of England illustrates this:

> It belonged to what Bagehot was later to call the 'dignified' part of our unwritten constitution, clothing public events in ceremonial splendour, and wrapping the conduct of political life in rules and procedures that conferred an inscrutable majesty on the affairs of the state. But its rules were not truly binding, and anyone could break them with impunity and still remain within the fold.[25]

Scruton has written much on English life and culture where the church, particularly the rural church has featured prominently. His own description of these places is rooted in his experiences in growing up in a rural setting, and their importance in the culture which formed him:

> All over the neighbouring countryside were those sleepy hamlets and half-vacant villages, each with its Norman or Early English church of flint and stone. And in these churches a peculiar silence had been stored, along with the sweet damp smell of plaster, the mouldering prayer books, the embroidered kneelers and the Victorian altar cloths with their gold and emerald fabrics, like robes left behind by some visiting angel. You could not ignore those places. My father too was drawn to them, for he was a country lover, a disciple of H. J. Massingham. He delighted in country lanes and shady churchyards, where you could contemplate the beauty of a landscape made in the image of the Anglican God, who in turn had been made in the image of the landscape.[26]

---

[24] R Scruton, *Our Church: A Personal History of the Church of England* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), 40
[25] Ibid, 78
[26] Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (2006, London, Continuum), 89-90

Portrayals of churches in popular culture, particularly rural churches, have tended to be representative of a halcyon age evoking warm memories of English village life. Commonly, they are a backdrop for murder-mystery fiction, such as in the G K Chesterton *Father Brown* series of stories. Modern depictions continue to have them as a backdrop to a rural idyll such as in the *Vicar of Dibley* or *Midsomer Murders* television series. Rural churches are also, in popular imagination, the ideal backdrops for weddings, evoking images from the novels of Jane Austen.[27] They are the quintessential icons of English quaintness.

Scruton supports this iconic view of rural churches in English culture and as representative of the landscape. It is about a home and not a country:

> England was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don't need an explanation. They are there because they are there. It is one of the most remarkable features of the English that they required so little explanation of their customs and institutions….Home is a place where you can be yourself and do your own thing. Respect the rituals and the household gods and for the rest you can please yourself. [28]

Scruton highlights one of the problems that could hinder the Ordinary Theological approach in the context of English Churches, that a person's theological understanding is considered to be personal and can go without saying.[29] There are certain phrases and actions which are considered acceptable in this context; but only because they assume a personal faith and don't threaten to impinge on anyone else's; or expose the speaker to criticism by revealing too much. The limit in comment about a sacred space for an individual may be only as far as saying 'it's a peaceful place'.

Scruton instead turns to writers, poets, painters and composers as the voices of the faith he seeks to reflect upon:

---

[27] See for example: 'Jane Austen Film and Adaptation Locations: Mr Collins' Church and Rectory in Pride and Prejudice 2005' http://austenonly.com/2010/09/19/jane-austen-film-and-adaptation-locations-mr-collins-church-and-rectory-in-pride-and-prejudice-2005/ (accessed 19th January 2014)

[28] Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, 16

[29] Ibid

The churches and cathedrals of England are, for the most part, churches built by Roman Catholics, in the conviction that they will be monuments to an eternal Mother Church. But their identity with England has been settled beyond question by the history and culture of our country. They are symbols of a pastoral England that we know from our poets, painters and composers and from brief glimpses caught from time to time through the chaos of modern life. Our war memorials are built in a style that derives from them, and when we invoke the sacred presence of our country it is in words hewn from the rock of the King James Bible and the Anglican liturgy. The church towers stand in our towns and villages like distillations of the buried dead; and should from time to time the peal of bells ring out from them, and that strange caricature of music pour across the countryside, haunting the woods and the fields, and echoing ghost-like in the distant farmsteads, we hear the sound as a call to remembrance. It is the unmistakable voice of ages past that sounds also in the verses of Tennyson, in the prose of Thomas Hardy and in the music of Elgar – great artists whose faith in England endured long after they lost their faith in God.[30]

The challenge his reflection poses is what faith is being expressed by these voices? Is it a Christian faith or is it one which raises landscape and culture above any God, as understood through the eyes of the Church? It is certain he raises the landscape and culture to a level that reflects an image of God:

But it is undeniable that English literature since that time has been dominated by writers who defend a sacramental vision of England as part of our cultural legacy, and therefore as something that can go on flourishing, even if no longer rooted in faith.[31]

His answer to this, is that the Christian heritage expressed in the literature continues to come through even when the literature is avowedly secular; or indeed in reaction to an explicitly Christian message:

The situation is not uncomfortable for the pure believer only. Fellow travellers find it even more difficult to deal with, for the reason that they accept, perhaps

---

[30] Scruton, *Our Church*, 42
[31] Ibid, 151

more deeply than committed Christians, the intertwining of secular and spiritual allegiance that is embodied in the Church of England. Wherever you look in our serious post-war culture – Britten's Church Parables, the paintings of David Piper and David Inshaw, the poetry of John Betjeman, Ted Hughes, Geffory Hill and C. H. Sisson, the novels, essays and children's books of C.S. Lewis, the crime fiction of P. D. James, the plays of Alan Bennet and Tom Stoppard – you find the image of England held in an Anglican frame. Even the new literature for children conforms to this rule. J. K. Rowling's Hogwarts, for all its pagan accessories, is an Anglican institution, as Gothic a settlement as any chaplain-haunted public school. Philip Pullman's anti-Narnia, designed as an answer to C. S. Lewis's Christian allegories, takes off from a very Anglican-seeming Oxford college, and at every point recalls the enchanted world of Milton and the struggle of the angels by which our Puritan ancestors thought themselves surrounded. You cannot read very far in English literature, listen very long to serious English music, or walk with your eyes open about our towns and countryside without noticing that an enormous cultural effort has been expended on endowing England with an aura of home and redemption, and that the art devoted to this cause has leaned at every point upon a church that was doing the same.[32]

The aura home and redemption is also something which comes out of the previous discussion on the contemporary condition and motivation of people. The search for a place of safety in a world that acts to remain fluid and uncertain, may be one of the drivers for people to come to these places, the aura they affect being one of timeless community.

For Scruton the identity of the building, the community associated with it, and the institution of the Church are all intertwined in his reflection. However, it is clear that the building is an important building block in his theology; he raises the landscape and its place within it up to sacramental status. The building reflects a culture and a community that has formed it, and at the same time has formed the culture and the community. His evidence for this is the frame of reference these places provide for contemporary authors seeking to create an instantly recognisable setting for the community. Furthermore, the community envisioned by Scruton is a peculiar community; where communication is implicit rather than voiced, and where it is not bound by common rules but a freedom to depart from them. The binding for

---

[32] Scruton, *Our Church*, 169-170

the community is instead based on a common civic life, centred on the small local associations and the largely rural landscape.

Scruton argues that this community, while perhaps emanating from secular or ambivalent position, still requires an input from Christianity, albeit from its built superstructure and the form of its ceremonies.

5.5 Rural Romanticism v's English Nationalism - A Problem of Identity

The issue of nationalism was raised in the discussion of the interviewee comments about 'England' and 'service to country.' The reflection by Scruton cited above brings these comments into stark relief with sacramentalizing 'country', and the incorporation of the Christian narrative into it.

This type of identity, where religion has become incorporated with nation, has been discussed by Martin Kettle in his recent work on the problem of identity in the UK in the light of the European refugee crisis.[33] In his description of Identity Politics he sounds very much like Bauman noting the move from pilgrim to nomad, and Heelas and Woodhead's move from 'life as' roles to the subjective turn of self-definition:

> Older people in Europe can perhaps remember a time when their identity
> seemed relatively self-evident; they occupied a clear and fixed position in a web
> of belongings (birth, faith, home etc.). Now it is far clearer that identity is a
> construct, not a given, and a problematic and shifting one at that.[34]

Scruton's narrative, particularly within his works such as *England: An Elegy* clearly point back to this self-evident identity whilst noting that it no longer exists. Kettle goes on to look at the disputed place of religion in the British national identity, and the claim that Britain is a Christian country – as is explicitly put in Scruton's reflection *Our Church*:

> Claims that the UK is 'a Christian country' seem to come from one of three
> directions – historicist, essentialist, or ideological. The historicist view tends to
> look back either to the original Christianisation of the islands or the Reformation
> and the Elizabethan settlement as defining a Christian nation with a uniquely

---

[33] M Kettle, "Refugees" and the Problem of Identity in the UK' in U Schmiedel, G Smith (eds.), *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 145-162
[34] Ibid,146

nuanced brand of Protestantism. The essentialist view sees 'Christian values' or the 'Christian gospel' as foundational in a more permanent sense, a part of the unwritten constitution. The liturgies of the crowning of the monarch are frequently cited in this regard. The ideological view is less concerned with the 'spiritual' content of faith more with the totemic significance of the cultural signposts set up in the name of Christianity. Any public authority that messes with 'Christmas' or 'Easter' learns the strength of these signposts in some quarters.[35]

As noted in the quotes from Scruton above, the 'unwritten constitution of England that clothes public events in ceremonial splendour' is a major part of his reflection on the Church of England. It is very evident from his writing that he holds both a historical and essential view that England is a Christian country (although he has been accused of drifting from Christianity in his descriptions). It is more problematic to assume his interpretation is also ideological.

In the epilogue to *Our Church,* he discusses a retrenchment of those sharing his beliefs about the Church of England into differentiated churches against the world outside; but ultimately concludes this would be against the faith he is professing which is intimately bound up with the landscape. Instead he is content with a historical view of the Church and the landscape it inhabits.[36]

These views of a Christian heritage have, however, been appropriated by the far-right in a much more totematic way; where intolerance is often cloaked in the language of culture and faith, both of which can be used to fuel racism and religious hatred. This has been noted by the Church of England, and a briefing note designed to tackle this mis-appropriation of Christianity, was issued from the Mission and Public Affairs Division of the Archbishop's Council in 2007. In that they describe:

---

[35] Kettle, *"Refugees" and the Problem of Identity in the UK*, 150
[36] Scruton, *Our Church,* 193-194

Lately the British National Party has sought to promote itself as a guardian of 'British Christian heritage' against an increasing 'islamification' of British society and the leadership of the mainstream churches.[37]

There is a danger in the association of Church and nation as an identity that opens the door to the type of rhetoric put forward by the British National Party (BNP), and fuels xenophobic behaviour. However, as noted in the discussion around the interviewee comments, there is a difference between the love of country, and love of nation identified in the works of Igor Primoratz, Jean Bethke Elshtain and George Orwell. Where love of country is identified with service, and love of nation with a desire for power.[38] In the interviewee comments it is the element of service that comes through most strongly.

In the conclusion to his work Kettle states, that for Christians, their identity in Christ to surmount any identity politics that otherwise claims authority over them:

Christians have the opportunity to understand and revitalize all temporally and socially constructed identities in the light of their gospel understandings of human identity, without allowing hierarchies and abusive uses of constructed identity to claim any kind of absolute validity.[39]

However, despite the dangers of hierarchy and the abusive uses of a constructed identity, it is the wistful longing for the self-evident identity of an older generation that Scruton epitomises. Its attraction being the relative simplicity of the constructed identity in the face of all the possibilities on offer today.

Scruton's view of the Church of England is essentially a Romantic view; one that values emotion, folk culture and the past, rather than a nationalistic appropriation to suggest superiority or difference from those that do not hold that view. It is however, open to abuse by nationalist groups such as the BNP, who have claimed the Christian heritage, as spoken of by Scruton, as a tool to incite racial hatred.

---

[37] Archbishop's Council Mission and Public Affairs Division, 'Countering Far Right Political Parties, Extremist Groups and Racist Politics' https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/community-urban-affairs/countering-racist-politics.aspx (accessed May 2017)
[38] For example see: I Primoratz, 'Patriotism and Morality: Mapping the Terrain' in I Primoratz, A Pavković, *Patriotism: Philosophical and Political Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) 17-36, J Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (NewYork: Anansi, 1993), 1-36, and Orwell 'Notes on Nationalism' in J Carey, (ed.) *George Orwell Essays*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), Chapter 24
[39] Kettle, *"Refugees" and the Problem of Identity in the UK,* 162.

5.6 An Identity for the Christian Community in Rural England

Scruton provides one popularist view of the church and community in the setting of rural England. The image he harks back to in his reminiscing is one he remembers and has been told of by his father. He calls on well-known authors, artists and poets to illustrate his point of view, and puts forward a romantic understanding of the past based on sentimental view of Church and countryside.

As noted in the literature review about the image created of the rural idyll by the likes of George Herbert, it is often this romanticised image of the life and community in the countryside that colours popular imagination. It has been noted how this image persists into the portrayal of the countryside today and the communities that inhabit it; often with the church, if not central to the scene, at least an essential item to include in the background to authenticate it. One of the most popular genres to feature the countryside in the last few decades has been the period drama.

Without a doubt one of the most popular sources for these dramas has been the novels of Jane Austen. Her work provides a window on some of the images associated with rural, particularly upper class rural life, and the rationale that guided it. Scruton does not make use of Austen to illustrate his perspective, perhaps because she is almost anti-Romantic in her writing favouring reason over sentiment; but the Church and theology pervade her work, and as such it has done much to illustrate popular understanding of them.[40]

Although Austen moved from country to town, her work centred on a rural image of England that she was familiar with.[41] The theology implicit in her work has been studied by Michael Giffin. In his book *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England,* he points to the role Christianity has in the image of an English rural community as seen in the writings of Jane Austen:

> The novels are carefully constructed commentaries that describe and develop
> Austen's argument against romanticism as a movement that has the potential to

---

[40] For an example of the anti-Romantic theme of Jane Austen's work see *Sense and Sensibility* available online at: https://www.janeausten.org/sense-and-sensibility/sense-and-sensibility-online.asp,
(accessed September 2018)
[41] D Le Faye, *Jane Austen's Country Life* (London: Francis Lincoln Ltd, 2014), Introduction

disrupt the person, the household, and the community. Because the romantic movement was perceived to be a threat to personal and communal stability, Austen's novels can be read as 'condition of England' novels in which the estates and parishes that dominate each story, can be understood as microcosms of the state and the church. Austen's novels are about reordering the disordered personality, family, community, and church. In Georgian England these things were still understood to be related to each other in an organic way. In Austen's vision of society, every person and every institution lives under the sign of the fall and is in need of salvation.[42]

The romantic period was one where figures sought for an appropriate mode of personal autonomy in a constantly expanding and diverse social world.[43] Compare this with Bauman's depiction of increasing personal autonomy being the goal of the contemporary condition, and the cause of constant fractionation within society.

The increasing role of personal autonomy in society links the post-modern interpretation of Bauman with the stories told in the novels of Jane Austen. The concept of salvation also links the two; where Bauman's work highlights both the utopian vision for salvation of the modern project, and the individual quests for a release from unhappiness that has replaced it. The microcosms of church and state are also still the theatres in which contemporary life is played out, the villages, the homes, the families are places where drama takes place and issues of salvation are resolved.

There are many examples of this in popular culture focusing on the English village; just take *Miss Marple* and *The Darling Buds of May* as two examples from television. The organic link between personality, family, and community has something of the world we wish to inhabit about it; but as Bauman suggests we are no longer able to do so - the paradise lost but which we still catch glimpses of in places such as the churches which have always inhabited that landscape.

Giffin argues, that in the novels of Jane Austen, the theology expressed is intimately bound up with practical circumstances in which landscape and culture play a significant role.

---

[42]M Giffin, *Jane Austen and Religion : Salvation and Society in Georgian England* (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) ProQuest Ebrary, (accessed 28 April 2016), 6
[43] *Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 512

Salvation, in terms of returning to a paradise lost, is seen in very practical terms and is not seen in an other-worldly sense. He states that for Austen salvation is seen as:

> …wholeness, health, preservation from disease, deliverance from enemies, moral and spiritual deliverance, breadth or enlargement (of vision, or of self-knowledge).[44]

The identity of the idealised community for Austen, is one in which salvation takes place through the proper ordering of relationships and the landscape to reflect the qualities above. Salvation is not mysterious but sensible. It is a world which can be envisioned, even if reality remains far from it.

The role of God in salvation is implicit rather than explicit in her stories; where God is revealed not in the supernatural but in the working of nature, place and people:

> In Austen's novels, as parables of natural reason and natural revelation, there are no fulfilled prophecies or miracles in the scriptural sense. Instead there are landscapes with built environments and human figures. [45]

This non-supernatural revelation is something shared with those interviewed in this study; where their experiences in the churches were not mysterious but grounded in the every day. The environment of the churches acted as a mediator for this experience, this is seen through the evidence it provided about the history and purpose of the building along with the people who used it. It was a door, an icon, into aspirations by individuals, families, a community to do 'better' as one interviewee described it.

In Austen's novels the arrangement of the built environment was equally as important in the search for redeeming qualities:

---

[44] Giffin, *Jane Austen and Religion*, 7
[45] Ibid,14

The built environments…are measured and judged against neoclassical thinking about order and disorder in the long eighteenth century. The human figures are a complex mixture of the cultivated and the uncultivated depending on whether they represent a 'natural' or 'unnatural' balance of the rational (neoclassical reason) or the irrational (romantic feeling).[46]

The salvation sought in the stories of Jane Austen is the reordering of the disordered, and there is a link between that order and disorder, and with the person, community and place. The image of what a landscape should look like is highly important in defining salvation in this view. In considering the English rural church, its place in that landscape is well defined in popular imagination as the icon that determines what a village is, and in Scruton's view, by doing so the identity of an England ordered in its natural state.

This view of salvation is on the margins of Christian thinking, where salvation is, through Jesus Christ, revealed in scripture and in worship, and the role of natural revelation and society is uncertain. This view has been defended recently in the example of Helen Cameron, where the Church universal is seen as setting the boundaries of salvation.[47] However, Scruton offers Hardy and Tennyson as examples of authors who paint a picture of rural England, but also who challenge the orthodoxy of a salvation only revealed in scripture. Instead, Scruton sees in them the elevation of the landscape to sacramental status; offering a reflection of God in the place you inhabit.

It is Scruton's idea of the sacred which has generated most debate around his ideas. Various authors have attempted to demonstrate that this concept is the interpretive centre of Scruton's work on religion, aesthetics, and political philosophy despite its apparent vagueness.[48] John Cottingham shows that Scruton wants this concept to have a metaphysical foundation, but that Scruton does not go far enough. While it is clear that Scruton has a Judeo-Christian orientation, he will often overlook the ethical demands of this framework in favour of an 'over-aestheticized, or perhaps over-romanticized analogue for religious awe'.[49] As another commentator suggests, 'Scruton clearly understands the power of Christianity's

[46] Giffin, *Jane Austen and Religion*, 14
[47] H Cameron et al, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 10
[48] B Baise, 'Review of the Religious Philosophy of Roger Scruton' James Bryson (ed.), JBTS Online, http://jbtsonline.org/review-of-the-religious-philosophy-of-roger-scrunton-edited-by-james-bryson/ (accessed 9th August 2018)
[49] J Cottingham, 'What is the sacred?' in J Bryson (ed.), *The Religious Philosophy of Roger Scruton* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 41-42

ideas, his reluctance to pursue the path of metaphysics makes me wonder how far his commitment to the truth of Christianity goes'.[50]

Austen's view of Christianity, according to Giffin, is also one that does not confer automatic authority to scripture, worship, people or institutions, but on individual reason:

> Authority— whether of scripture, tradition, or rulers— should be negotiated through the prisms of natural reason, natural law, natural revelation, and natural order. Scripture is not authoritative because it is canonical. It is authoritative because its revelation is reflected in society as well as in nature; and its truth is empirically verifiable to the believer who has been made in the image of God, who has been given the faculty of reason, and who has the ability to reflect on experience.[51]

While much more clearly concerned for the ethical demands of the Christian faith than Scruton, Austen also does not automatically defer to the Church for sacramental signs, but instead requires more practical visible signs of salvation at work.

According to Giffin, it is salvation that is at the heart of Jane Austen's novels, and that salvation has a recognisable Christian tradition rooted in experience. The work in the novels is one example of the literature which has created an image of England in which the Church plays a central role. The image that her works create see salvation not from the Church exclusively, but in the ordering of a landscape of which it is part of, and hence on this aspect agrees with Scruton's sacramental view of the landscape.

Although the works of Jane Austen speak of a time past, and Scruton does not believe the world they speak of still exists;[52] it still has a powerful resonance which colours people's imagination today, and is a powerful driver in the individual search for identity as discussed previously. The context of change and the dissolution of old certainties, is something shared between the contemporary situation and that of the time Austen wrote of:

---

[50] B Hebblethwaite, 'Metaphysical and Doctrinal Implications' in *The Religious Philosophy of Roger Scruton*, 71
[51] Giffin, *Jane Austen and Religion*, 12
[52] Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, 255

This upheaval and mobility is marked by insecurity and a strong desire for change; and, in fact, there are very few characters in an Austen novel who do not feel under threat, from within and without, in many ways.[53]

Another parallel with Austen's world is the part wealth plays in that search for identity, where it is the practical basis of knowledge and authority and found in the unregulated capitalism of the long eighteenth century.[54] In wealth lies the basis for salvation:

For the Georgians, the ideal answer to social disadvantage is to encourage every person— who has the ability— to participate in agrarian and global capitalism, marry as best as they can, husband their resources effectively, and look towards improving their position in society. Metaphorically speaking, the bricks that are used to build this Georgian edifice are education, marriage, money, and morality; and the mortar that cements these bricks together is a mixture of civics and civility.[55]

The key element is that of natural reason - that the individual by their own faculty and through their own experiences determines their salvation. Through her work and through the work of other writers, an image of salvation is presented bound up in an English identity centred on the country estate, the village and rural life. This is an image where wealth plays a key part, and where it can be bought into through ownership of a place in the country. It is an image of civic life and improvement based on education, a good marriage and increased affluence. It is an image which is retained and promoted by many in politics and which sees its greatest assent in the countryside.

This view of the outworking of salvation is linked to the search for meaning and identity, where a properly ordered life is the tangible goal of salvation. The images of civic life lived well according to Austen give clear, meaningful paths to an identity that are better than the current one.

It is the view though, now shared by both Scruton and Bauman, that the life lived well is out of reach, even if the image of it is not. Scruton maps out a meaning and identity he believes once existed and is now lost – that of Englishness and of being English. Bauman

---

[53] Giffin, *Jane Austen and Religion,* 14
[54] Ibid
[55] Ibid

observes the quest for meaning and identity through time, and the consequences the modern desire to remould the past had in effectively causing its dissolution. A criticism of both, in this respect, is their assumption of what constituted the past, the pre-modern era, to which if only by its absence they both look back to.

Scruton depicts an England which is rooted in his own personal experience of growing up in such a place. Beyond and before that experience, the meaning and identity he attributes to people's lives may not have been so universal to those who made their home in England. Certainly the periodic waves of immigration, the movements between rural and urban populations and class struggles, have challenged the meaning and identity of individuals and communities.

For Bauman his starting point is his background within the Communist regime of the Soviet Union, and then, within the English context, his studies of the British labour movement. The pre-modern rural England dominated by the parish system predates his experience, and does not persist in his work other than as a memory and the raw material out of which modernity and post-modernity is constructed.

This dismissive view of the past, has also been adopted by some church commentators on the identity of Christian communities today. Pete Ward has taken on Bauman's concept of liquid modernity and applied it to the contemporary church. Ward notes the pre-modern but discounts it as a persistent source of meaning and identity; rather taking the elements neglected by Scruton of emigration, urbanisation and industrialisation as wiping clean the slate. Instead he sees the modern church being formed of gathered groupings based on shared culture and experience as source of identity, where size and numbers matter.[56]

In the post-modern era, culture and shared experience are diluted by the plethora of options available to the individual, and the potential to gather around these becomes increasingly ephemeral. Ward accepts this, and analyses its effect on the modern church noting a subtle mutation in its being to counteract it – again acting as a bulwark against its effects. He sees the church becoming either a heritage site, a living artefact of the past, a refuge for like-minded people or as a nostalgic community.[57]

---

[56] P Ward, *Liquid Church* (Massachusetts: Paternoster Press, 2002), 23
[57] Ward, *Liquid Church*, 22-29.

Interestingly, in Ward's description of the pre-modern era, even though it is dismissed as a persistent feature, there is almost a wistful view of the communities that inhabited it:

> In pre-modern societies, with economies located mainly on the land, communal life was based around a sense of place. So the idea of a parish expresses the way that the church served all of those, rich and poor, those who worked on the land and those who owned the land. Community, organised around the village or the small town, was inclusive even if it was not always equitable.[58]

Bauman's understanding of community also sees it in that wistful sense, 'Community' feels good because of the meanings of the word 'community' conveys – all of them promising pleasures, and more often than not the kinds of pleasures we would like to experience but seem to miss'.[59] It is also a casualty of the modern project, notably as a target for modern capitalism. Modern capitalism, as Marx and Engels memorably put it, 'melted all solids; self-sustained and self-reproducing communities were high on the list of solids lined up for liquefaction'.[60] The replacement of community he argues started as a controlled and monitored work place and society – extracting people from a work related to home and setting them in the factory instead; then as the community structures were broken down further there was no need for the control and monitoring; as individuals lose self-confidence and a shapeless authority that is difficult to draw to account enforces obedience.[61]

The re-creation of community, the search for an authentic community or to touch and feel what one used to be like, is a driving force for individuals seeking a particular meaning and identity in their lives. The motivation for this driving force lies both within the description Bauman gives of community's replacement – the shapeless, distant authority, the unspecified threats which keep people in a state of uncertainty and fluidity with a lubricant of fear – and in the salvation offered by community as depicted by Austen. It is possible to see the fall from the ideal Austen portrays of well-ordered civic society in Bauman's comments about the new ruling elite:

---

[58] Ibid, 23
[59] Z Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 1
[60] Ibid, 30
[61] Ibid, 43

The contemporary global elite…can rule without burdening itself with the chores of administration, management, welfare concerns, or for that matter, with the mission of 'bringing light', 'reforming the ways', morally uplifting, 'civilizing' and cultural crusades. Active engagement in the life of subordinate populations is no longer needed…Travelling light rather than holding on to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity – that is, for their heavy weight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance - is now the asset of power.[62]

In this state the driving force is to find a place of safety, to look for the well-ordered environment that is characteristic of salvation. Gated communities are one manifestation of this, a well-regulated home for affluent people secured by walls from the rest of the world. Another manifestation of this search for safety is the flight to the countryside of all who can afford to do so, with perceived lower crime levels and healthier living.[63] Bauman cites Philippe Cohen, a notable commentator, as identifying 'urban violence' among the three major causes of anxiety and unhappiness today, alongside unemployment and unsecured old age.[64]

These solutions in the quest for safety, meaning and identity, are also seen by Bauman as ultimately futile, and worse as exacerbating the situation:

Insecurity affects us all, immersed as we are in a fluid and unpredictable world of deregulation, flexibility, competitiveness, and endemic uncertainty, but each one of us suffers anxiety on our own, as a private problem, an outcome of personal failings and a challenge to our private savoir-faire and agility. We are called, as Ulrich Beck has acidly observed, to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions; we look for individual salvation from shared troubles. That strategy is unlikely to bring the results we are after, since it leaves the roots of insecurity intact; moreover, it is precisely this falling back on our individual wits and resources that injects the world with the insecurity we wish to escape.[65]

---

[62] Z Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (London: Wiley, 2000), 13
[63] Report of the Rural Affairs Group of General Synod, *Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church* (London: Archbishop's Council, January 2015), 7
[64] Bauman, *Community,* 149
[65] Bauman, *Community,* 144

In this flight to safety the iconic image of the rural church becomes a symbol of an age before, and a place where the memory real or imagined of community can be touched. Where the world in which Jane Austen looked towards a better future existed.

Although the image of the community is attractive, and visitors to these places that communicate about them have an affection for them, they do not wish to be trapped there. If we go back to Bauman:

> The urge of mobility, built into the structure of contemporary life, prevents the arousal of strong affections for places; the places we occupy are no more than temporary stations. The progress in life is measured and marked by moving homes and offices…Nothing seems to be 'for life', and none of the things in life are approached and embraced and cherished as if they were. Skills, jobs, occupations, residences, marriage partners – they all come and go, and tend to annoy or bore or embarrass when they stay too long.[66]

However, as can be argued from Bauman, the images of community are a forlorn hope for the visitor, as the reality of their life experience does not necessarily bear witness to this. Relationships fail and are seen as an encumbrance; the image of civic society is not the reality as people look to place ever greater defences on their homes. The prospect of ever greater affluence is seen to have a ceiling or to be out of an individual's grasp.

The identity of the communities advocated in the novels of Austen are those that are well ordered, selfless and aspirational, and contrasted with those that are disordered, self-orientated and without a clear goal. It is in part those advocated communities which are evidenced in the conversations with the interviewees in this study, particularly where the description of them are 'people seeking to do better'.

The intertwining of landscape, buildings and people is, as was the case with Scruton, apparent in Austen's work. However, while the landscapes and buildings feature more prominently in Scruton, it is the individual relationships in the community that feature in Austen's work.

It is through these well-ordered relationships that a community can be seen as a source of salvation. Because of its iconic status a church building can form a connection with the image

---

[66] Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies,* 188-189

of community drawn from literature (and also in popular imagination) through its timeless connection with those stories. As pointed out by Bauman, however, they remain elusive today and stand in contrast to the lived experience of people.

5.7 The Identity of Church of England

The identity of the 'Church' is an important factor in the experience of visitors. For the descriptions of Scruton and from Austen, the identity of the institution of the Church is intimately bound up with those of the buildings and the community.

For all of those who were interviewed in this survey the identity of the building and of the institution to which it was most associated were linked. For some that was an explicit link, either in explaining its purpose or in affirming/distancing their own beliefs from those of the institution; for others it was more implicit in the expected activities associated with the building.

In defining the Church as an entity, it was the institutional Church, the Church of England, to which most of the interviewees made reference; either because of their personal experience with it or that it was the tradition of all the survey churches. It also provides a popular identity which becomes synonymous with rural churches of whatever tradition. For example, take the BBC adaptation of G. K. Chesterton's *Father Brown Stories,* which have been mentioned already; where the original tension between the Roman Catholic and the Church of England in a picturesque rural Cotswold setting, has been largely removed from the story to leave Father Brown as almost a stereotypical village Church of England Vicar.[67]

For those who distance themselves from the institution, they are still attracted by the building, and what has been invested in it by the community that formed it. Some of the rationale of those who wanted to distance themselves from the institution but who are attracted to the building, and particularly the community they associate with it, is summarised by Duncan Dormor in his book *Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity.* This is delineated in him commenting on the expectations of students at Cambridge University when engaging with the Church:

---

[67] S Greydanus, 'BBC's amiable Father Brown doesn't keep faith with Chesterton' Crux, 19th September 2014, https://cruxnow.com/life/2014/09/19/bbcs-amiable-nostalgic-father-brown-doesnt-keep-faith-with-chesterton/ (accessed 3rd October 2018)

Some are resentful or afraid of a body they perceive as unwilling to enter into dialogue and still interested in stridently asserting its own version of the facts about the universe and of the true interpretation of those facts. There is a deeper dissonance between student expectations of dialogue, critical awareness and optimism, and the paternalistic dogmatism which they either see plainly in the Church, or sense that it is not far below the surface. What they yearn for is wisdom and to be good. What they are told by the Church to desire is to be saved and to be obedient.[68]

However, even the institutional Church struggles with its own identity. It has, and continues to struggle with the sources of authority that is takes to be formational. Mark Chapman in his introduction to *Anglicanism* highlights the history of the authority in the Church of England, and what has become competing claims on that authority today in the face of greater choice for individuals.

In its origins, its authority was bound up with the state and as such was a universal and incorporated part of daily life for all, but its Christian nature was subject to the sovereign:

However much doctrinal and liturgical innovation there might have been in the last 70 years of the 16th century, what was perhaps most important in shaping the Church of England was a vision of a Christian nation upheld by a Christian monarch. Uniformity and obedience were at the heart of the settlement. The Church of England owes as much to what one early 20th-century commentator called the 'absurd theory' of the Divine Right of Kings as to anything else. It was simple: kings had a right to rule over both their spiritual and temporal realm and no foreign potentate could usurp this power. [69]

However, the monopoly of power it enjoyed by association with the ruling elite was eroded with the emergence of alternative forms of Christianity in the 18th and 19th centuries:

The advantages [the Church of England] might have retained in aligning itself with the political classes through the 18th and 19th centuries were modest compared with the difficulties it began to experience as England opened up to a

---

[68] D Dormor, *Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity* (London: Continuum, 2003), 2
[69] M Chapman, *Anglicanism*. (Oxford: OUP, 2006) ProQuest Ebrary, (accessed 13 May 2016), 1

whole range of competing denominations and religions, not to mention the all-pervasive secularism of modern society. It became a voluntary organization in which there was no longer any sense of external compulsion; it changed from being the religion of the English to being simply one denomination among others, though always one with certain privileges.

Consequently, the history of the Church of England from the 18th century is the search for an alternative locus of authority after the breakdown of the Divine Right of Kings. Some looked for authority in the direct experience of God in the heart or in God's Word as set forth in Scripture (the Evangelicals). Others sought it in God's appointed messengers, the bishops (the Anglo-Catholics).[70]

The historical origins of the Church resonate with what Roger Scruton sees as the English national identity, and his views on the place of the Church of England in the life of the nation and its people. Scruton supports this iconic view of rural churches in English culture and as representative of the landscape. The religious institution itself, in his view, has been moulded by its context:

> Put very briefly, the Church was *domesticated* in England, defined, like everything else, by a place rather than a doctrine or a chain of command. It adapted to the core religious experience of the English, which was of the consecrated nature of their island. Its ceremonies and liturgies sanctified the English language, the English landscape, the English law and institutions… [71]

The term 'domesticated' is used very deliberately by Scruton, as he would argue his definition of Englishness is not nationalistic, but quite the opposite in being undefined localism. It is about a home and not a nation:

> England was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don't need an explanation. They are there because they are there. It is one of the most remarkable features of the English that they required so little explanation of their customs and institutions…Home is a place where you can

---

[70] Chapman, *Anglicanism*, 2
[71] Scruton *England and Elegy*, 18

be yourself and do your own thing. Respect the rituals and the household gods and for the rest you can please yourself. [72]

The advent of more choice and less compulsion has slowly changed the religious habits of people, and the Church of England is becoming increasingly something which is to be opted in to rather than opted out of. However, its intrinsic place in national identity stemming from its role as the spiritual arm of the monarchy; may mean that its authority continues in part not just from the where Evangelicals or Anglo-Catholics seek to locate it; but in the latent identity that still emerges in claims that England is a 'Christian country'.[73]

The understanding of the Divine Right of Kings to be head of the ecclesiastical affairs of the people they govern, was given form in the establishment of the Church of England. One of the most prominent figures in its formulation was Richard Hooker. In his argument he saw the right as being one given by consent of the people – as opposed to one conferred directly by God or imposed by conquest on the people.

Hooker is credited with setting out what became known as the Anglican 'via-media'; a Church authority based on scripture, tradition and reason, steering between the Puritan scripture only doctrine, and the apostolic authority of Rome. Reason plays a key role in this, and as can be seen from the example of Jane Austen given above, had a prominence in popular culture during the Enlightenment period in evaluating spiritual authority.

It is this Anglican recourse to another source of authority in reason and the state in the form of the monarchy, which has in part given it a distinctive identity more broadly than just within the Church. However, within the Church as the influence of these sources of authority have changed (and in the case of the authority of monarchy reduced), other sources of authority have been turned to in an attempt to fill that gap in identity for the Church, in the face of ever greater options and competition in the spiritual marketplace.

The reaction to this challenge by the Anglican Church in seeking a distinctive identity has been discussed by Sykes in his book *Unashamed Anglicanism*. His view is that it does not see itself in competition with other denominations of Christianity, but as a mediator, a place where discussions can be had within one Church that could not happen within other

---

[72] Scruton, *England an Elegy*, 16

[73] For example, see comments by the former Prime Minister David Cameron on the 400th Anniversary of *The King James Bible,* 16th December 2011, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-16224394 (accessed September 2018)

denominations. A place that others can learn from as it learns for itself and in doing so promote greater unity among the Church as a whole. [74] However, while this view seeks to capture the conversation within the Anglican Church, it bypasses the identity it still holds beyond the mainstream Church.

The identity of the Church of England has clearly moved on from its origins in the Elizabethan settlement of the Reformation. Its own self-understanding has been for some time challenged, as it has looked to different sources of authority, and to be distinctive within an increasingly diverse spiritual arena. However, in concert with its own internal debates on the matter, it has also been subject to the imposition of an identity by a wider group of people. Its traditional and continuing relationship with the state, means it has a broader significance to public life than other Christian denominations. Its identity has been caricatured in popular culture, and is commonly associated with the rural scene as a backdrop to village life. That identity draws more on romantic images of community life that point backwards to a more idyllic time, in which, as pointed out by Martin Kettle, there are memories of a self-evident place in which people fitted. [75]

5.8 Homesickness and the English Rural Church

It is this romantic image of community and church that underpins a tourist theology, and in some way, influences the spiritual experience of visitors to these places. Bauman highlights the attraction of community to people, particularly in a more highly fractionated society, as a place of safety and comfort, but one that regrettably seems out of reach. [76]

---

[74] S Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism* (Michigan: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), xii
[75] Kettle, *"Refugees" and the Problem of Identity in the UK,* 146
[76] Bauman, *Community,* Back Page

In his metaphors for the identities adopted in a post-modern world, the stroller, vagabond, player and tourist, the visitors to churches fit most closely with that of the tourist – but not in search of the strange and bizarre as described by Bauman, but for an encounter with what they need to continue in the role of the tourist – a home. It is the fear of losing their home; that safe place to which they can return; in a life spent in perpetually visiting one place after another that draws them to the village church. This is not a permanent homecoming, but more a postcard from something to reassure them on their travels that home still exists.

This drive to go home, or to have some remembrance of home, could be nostalgia or homesickness. Schwartz argues that there is a distinct difference between nostalgia and homesickness; nostalgia is longing for, while homesickness requires you to feel you belong to something.[77] In his book *In Defence of Homesickness* he seeks both to separate nostalgia and homesickness, and also to raise homesickness from being a clinical symptom to being a cultural resource.[78] He argues a defence of homesickness involves a critique of nostalgia.[79]

In support of this he turns to the Romantic Movement in Europe. In England he cites William Blake as an example:

> A nostalgic longing could affect peasant and proletarian communities: the very notion of *community* in English socialist thought has its members looking backward… as they summon courage for the struggles ahead. William Blake is memorable for this reason. *And did those feet in ancient time/Walk upon England's mountains green*?

This longing, he notes, has often been seen as a fault, a brake holding people back, but his argument is that it is also a root and source of courage and inspiration:

> Karl Marx was complaining about nostalgia in *The 18th Brumaire,* when he observed how the modern revolutionary dresses up in the obsolete styles of the past. The images of the past become *like dead weights on the minds of the living*, but they can just as likely be living roots. Renovation demands tradition, so a *nostalgia mode* seems inevitable in every epoch of modern times and post-modern times

[77] M Schwartz. *In Defense of Homesickness: Nine Essays on Identity and Locality*
(Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989), 11-12
[78] Ibid
[79] Ibid

as well. It is not the imagery of the past which is at fault *per se*. It is rather a question of whose past and why.[80]

It is the question of the imagery of the rural church and of the past, which is envisioned by some visitors to be critical to the theology of their experience. Understanding the sense of homesickness in a battle for meaning and identity is key to understanding the theology appropriate to their situation.

In a sense these places are places of salvation or refuge; they serve as places where people are safe from an uncertain past and an uncertain future; they can hold out the hope of healing and transformation, or just be retreats into a world of nostalgia. The work of salvation in these places which the visitors are seeking, is not a corporate kind which is located either in worship or in participation in society.[81] It is an individual search for salvation which is made with the resources of the individual, with all the risks that involves as noted by Bauman, and enabled by the identity of the place.

The power of these places comes through in Scruton's raising of the English landscape to sacramental status; it is reflected in the value people place on the image of the countryside, and the desire to move to it, and it is in the idealised image of community that people seek to be welcomed by.

In this view, salvation is something open to everyone notwithstanding their adherence to Sunday worship, or collective worship of any kind within the Church. It is accessed by a participation in a shared heritage and the assurances that come from it, the aura of home and redemption. It is the reordering of what has become disordered, in the sense of Jane Austen's work, and, as Scruton points out, it is the church which is a cornerstone of that salvific aura.

However, the identity of the Church is one that has changed over time, as noted by Mark Chapman,[82] and Justin Lewis-Anthony; [83] from a universal feature of national life with bucolic overtones, to one struggling to come to terms with ever greater competition, both in terms of relevance and in the spiritual marketplace as a whole. As noted by Martin Kettle the given identity, which applied both to individuals and the role of the Church in their lives, is

---

[80] Schwartz, *In Defense of Homesickness,* 11-12
[81] D F Wells, *The Search for Salvation* (Oregon: Intervarsity Press, 1978), 102
[82] Chapman, *Anglicanism*, 1-4
[83] Lewis-Anthony, *If you Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him,* 1-2

not now a given, but needs to be constructed. [84] As such the Church of England has looked towards different sources for its authority and its distinctiveness in this environment, as have all those who would have once nominally called themselves 'C of E'. The breadth of the debate within the Church has seen the mutation of individual Churches in different directions in reaction to these changes.

Pete Ward discusses the mutation of the Church in his work on *Liquid Church*. Ward sees this mutation as one driven by the need of church leaders to attract numbers, and the desire of those who already belong to church to find a place of significance and meaning in an uncertain cultural environment. [85]

One of the mutations he defines is that of a heritage church, which he describes as a slice of living history that attracts some people because it represents the living culture of the past. The effect of this does not seem to him to have positive connotations, at least for the incumbent of such a church, as they are described as being pushed into becoming curators of a monument.

However, it does in part capture the wistful view of Scruton and the desire for community highlighted by Bauman. The difference in what is being discussed here, to the heritage church as described by Ward, is that the visitors to these churches are also not necessarily attracted to worship there or elsewhere. They do not have to be members of a Church already to value these places. The value these places have stretches beyond Sunday morning congregations, and as such reaches out to people who would be described as 'outside of church' by the institution itself. [86] Although, as pointed out by Scruton, they themselves would not necessarily describe themselves as such.

The role of Christianity in the visitor's experience is a vexed issue. The element of salvation – the element of self-preservation, of safety in these places is key, but it is what that salvation rests upon which is uncertain. Through Scruton's argument we can see that the salvation is communicated through the shared experience of the heritage of the Church of England; the intimate association its places of worship have with a national identity, and the shape of the landscape. But in Scruton's argument we could also see that the salvation he

---

[84] Kettle *"Refugees" and the Problem of Identity in the UK,* 146
[85] Ward, *Liquid Church,* 26
[86] *What is Fresh Expressions All About?* https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis (accessed 14th May 2014)

sees can be there with or without Jesus.[87] From the theology expressed in the novels of Jane Austen, religious truth is subject to natural reason rather than an exclusive appeal to scripture, which reflected the thought processes of the Anglican Church of her period. As mentioned above, Scruton offers Hardy and Tennyson as examples of authors that support his sacramental view of the landscape; but also whose faith was challenged by an evangelical Christianity, that saw salvation revealed in scripture, while their own experiences challenged that certainty.

Scruton remains steadfast in his belief of a Christian bedrock in the theology he discusses in *Our Church*, and as such would continue to assert his vision of salvation is in the person of Jesus Christ. The issue with the Christianity encountered by Austen, Hardy and Tennyson is in the clash with the Church about the revelation of salvation and the failure, in their eyes, to acknowledge context as being important.

While Austen is not Romantic, her work has been romanticised in its adaption, giving a wistful image of the past. Hardy and Tennyson also look in a wistful way to the past and a landscape that is reflective of it. There is a nostalgia that has been incorporated into their work, which as Schwartz describes may be a sense of homesickness that provides strength in looking back for struggles ahead.

It is this nostalgia that connects the experiences of visitors to these churches, with the communities of the past they envisaged inhabited them, and as such may also be a source of strength for troubles ahead. As described by one of the interviewees, it is an experience which 'If you are up it steadies you, if you are low it comforts you'. It is a positive experience of homesickness that gives hope in looking forward.

5.9 A Tourist Theology

The discussion around the experience of the visitor to rural churches, has focused on the move from pilgrim to tourist in the nature of their encounter with these places. The identity of the tourist has been taken from Bauman's work on the post-modern character – as someone who is drawn on by the pull of visiting the new and unusual, of new experiences and sensations that draws the tourist on. Its effect is rejuvenating but is subject to the condition that this remains a visit and the individual is only passing through, so that as its

---

[87] Scruton, *Our Church: A Personal History of the Church of England* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), 169-170

effects wear off, they are at liberty to move on. The caveat in these experiences is that they are ultimately safe. The tourist will always have a safe place to return to; a place that enables them to enjoy these adventures, and where they do not have to wear a façade of a personality, but where they are simply themselves – a home.

The experiences of the tourist have been compared to the work of Heelas and Woodhead as well as Davie, who examine the theology present in contemporary British society. The tourist fits within their assertions about contemporary spirituality; that they exhibit what Heelas and Woodhead call the 'subjective turn' in looking to an internal authority to determine their spirituality, and also Davie's idea of moving from a culture of obligation to a culture of consumption. [88] The tourist determines their movements based on what their interests are at that moment. Their theology is self-created from the elements they choose and while it is not necessarily systematic, for them, it is internally consistent.

Context is important to the experience as noted by the elements of the place that contribute to it – the connotations of memorials, worn stone and wood. While the setting - nature, the countryside, the village – generate mixed views by the interviewees in this survey; the formation of the building seems to be a critical part; where the rationale or possibly the sentiments of those who built and worshiped in these places is what sets them apart. In the tourist's experience, there is a touching upon a society and culture potentially very different to their own, which is part of the attraction for the visit. It is also touching upon a theology that is distinct from what is suggested above, and which is very much governed by a Christian meta-narrative. The lives of those they imagine in these places are shaped by the rural context; where they are intimately bound up with the land upon which most people depended, and where there are settled communities with well-defined boundaries in which they lived. It is made more complex by the national cultural narrative that accompanies perception of this context, making them a window into a cultural heritage.

The tourist theology is then very much contextual; its meaning is made sense of through the surrounding notions that these places hold for the individual. The common experience of deep and profound peace found through these places being set apart on an inter-generational basis remains central to the theology, but the framework that explains the spiritual encounter is built of material available to the visitor on an individual basis. Hence, the images that the inscriptions on memorials create; the assumptions of the activity of

---

[88] D Pollack, D Olson, *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 165

people who have worn the structure of the church; the surroundings of countryside and village all go into their explanation of their spiritual encounter. These images and assumptions in turn are products of the life experiences and cultural inheritance of the visitors – their own history with these places, the Christian faith and what has been passed on to them both through family and through media.

The building blocks of their explanation are relatively constrained, but how people organise them mean that each explains their encounter slightly differently. We see this in the interview results that there are several common themes in the descriptions given, but the priority and use of them vary. The context is used to describe the spiritual encounter of the visitors and hence is central to the theology of that encounter.

We have then a theology of the visitor to these sacred places that is not one of pilgrimage but one of tourism. The unplanned spiritual experience, or one which is sought out as an excursion rather than as part of a journey.

The sacred places of study, rural churches, generate an experience of deep and profound peace. Age and generations of being set aside for a particular purpose are central to this experience. This experience is not exclusive to these places and may be experienced in other places, notably other churches in other settings; but it is common to these buildings, so that for rural churches in general there is the potential that a visitor will experience this sense of deep and profound peace.

For the tourist this experience may stimulate a sense of homesickness, in the sense of thinking positively about a settled community and long-lasting relationships. This may not be an inherent part of their current situation or the world they experience around them.

Choice and change governed by internal authority is the spiritual mode of life for the tourist, as described by Heelas and Woodhead in their studies on those taking the 'subjective turn'. The communities which have formed these churches, in contrast, demonstrate a different spiritual life – the 'life-as', one governed by defined roles and under the over-arching Christian meta-narrative.

The tourist chooses to touch this community through the building; remaining at a safe distance from the actual community, such that their image of the community may not

be contaminated, or that they may not lose their independence in choosing their spiritual path by subjecting themselves to the community and what it believes.

The spiritual element of the tourists visit may not be explicit in what they seek in coming to the building. It is the experience of visiting that interests them over an explicit spiritual motive. The spiritual encounter is part of the experience, which also may include history, nostalgia, beauty and other points of interest. This makes the tourist's theology interwoven with other aspects of what is present and represented by the building as well as aspects of their own lives.

6. Conclusion

The tourist theology developed above is not intended to be descriptive of the experience of a visitor to a rural church. It is instead a theological reflection on the descriptions by visitors of their experience of visiting these places. As such it follows Bauman's development of the tourist identity in his reflection on the post-modern character; so that a tourist theology is an interpretive tool to look at visitor experiences, and takes one aspect that will to a greater or lesser extent be incorporated into the visitor experience.

In following the methodology of Ordinary Theology it has been necessary to build up a tourist theology from a sociological and cultural background; as compared to a systematic or Biblical one, as it is the background that Bauman developed the identity in. Furthermore, the language used by most of the interviewees to describe their experiences, was sociologically orientated in talking about the people they associated with the church. Their own theologies also, as pointed out by Astley, being unlikely to be worked out in any theologically or biblically systematic way.[1]

Bauman's development of the identity is intended as a critique of post-modern society, revealing the potential motives behind individual behaviour and the moves by society as a whole. Likewise, a tourist theology points towards possible motives behind the spiritual experiences of visitors, and opens up theological perspectives on rural churches.

Tourist theology effectively turns Bauman's description of the tourist on its head, by focusing on the tourists need for a home rather than their desire to experience the new and the exotic. In Bauman's construction of the tourist, it is the necessary corollary for the tourist to remain on tour, seeking the experiences that interest them, that they have a place of safety and comfort they can call home, even if it is imagined. What is repeatedly shown in the responses by the interviewees is the comfort they find in the churches they have visited, an experience located in the evidence of people's interaction with these places. Comfort, safety and peace are often the words that accompany the idea of community, and it is the tourist's vicarious encounter with community that is behind their experience in these places. It is a pattern that follows Davie's idea of 'vicarious religion', where for the tourist the experience of community is done at a distance from it.[2] For, as much as it was noted that

---

[1] Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 2-3.
[2] Davie, *Believing Without Belonging,* Kindle Edition, 5-7

community was important to the visitor's experience, it was also noted that there was no desire to become part of that community. As such it is possible for the tourist to create an idealised image of a community that is supported by elements from their own life experience and images from media and culture.

As lived experience of the type of community associated with the churches declines, because of declining participation in religion and the decline in the inter-generational communities in villages; so will the role of media and culture become more significant in the tourists' construction of the community they associate with these places. This is something which is desired by Bauman's tourist, where it conclusively places this community, this idea of home, in a realm that is unreachable and hence it has no power to bind the tourist to it. They remain free to continue on tour without being bound to a home, as the home they envisage does not exist beyond the screen or the pages of the book they take it from.

Given this trajectory, and the negative connotations Bauman gives to his tourist identity of increased anxiety over insecurity, in not having an actual experience of community, and the belief that they may always be missing out on a new and better experience with the destinations they visit, is there anything positive that can come out of having a tourist theology?

The answer comes from Schwartz's defence of homesickness, where he states, 'It is not the imagery of the past which is at fault *per se*. It is rather a question of whose past and why?'[3] Schwartz sees homesickness as a positive force for change, looking to the past for the courage to face the struggles of the future. He states that renovation requires tradition and because of that there will always be a need for nostalgia in any modern or post-modern time. It is the tourists need for home and the search for it, their homesickness, which can be a positive force in responding to the anxiety that Bauman states is inherent in the post-modern condition.

For the nostalgia related to homesickness to be a positive force, it must fulfil the requirement of inspiring/strengthening the present to give hope for the future. Therefore, if a tourist theology is going to be a positive force it must look to whose past is being remembered/imagined and why?

---

[3] Davie, *Believing Without Belonging,* Kindle Edition, 5-7

It is clear from the interviewees that the past being remembered is that of the community which inhabited these churches. Specifically, it is the relationships within that community noted on the memorials, and with the hopes and fears they associate with that community assumed in their purposes for creating and coming to these places. These hopes and fears are often noted by the interviewees, as the prayers and worship they imagine going in in these buildings and evidenced by wear on wood and stone. The relationships they discuss are intergenerational and close knit, of community in some way connected with local village life. It is on this community the nostalgia of the visitor concentrates. It is a community that by definition in creating and coming to these buildings is one with Christian beliefs and ethos.

Why? This has been in part noted already, it is the safe and warm connotations that are carried with the idea of community that respond to the need for home in the life of the tourist. However, there is more to it than this. It is the 'seeking to do better' of this particular community, and the heritage of that in the evidence of one generation handing on that aspiration to the next that sets the community apart. This doing better is more than an aspiration for health, wealth and happiness,[4] or an aspiration to fulfil a simplistic golden rule of do as you would be done by.[5] It has elements of standing in solidarity with the humble and poor – which can be seen by the differentiation the interviewees made between these churches and country houses, or even cathedrals as being for 'ordinary' people as compared to the rich.

So, in response to Schwartz's question in the case of visitors to these places, it is the past of a small traditional community that is remembered/imagined; it is remembered because it signifies a place of safety and comfort for the individual in which they are known, and where they know the community. It is also a community that has faith and hope for the future which applies to the whole community. These connotations were explicitly made in the follow up exercise with some of the interviewees, in the statement they were asked to comment on if they agreed or disagreed with it. In their responses there were clear objections to ideas around the institution of the Church for example, but no objections were raised to the idea of a hopeful community that were explicitly mentioned. For a tourist theology, it

---

[4] For an example of a critique of a popular view of health, wealth and happiness see D Jones, R Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011), 39-68

[5] For variations on the 'Golden Rule' see W Cunningham, 'The Golden Rule as Universal Ethical Norm' *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (1998) 105–109

then asserts that the visitor vicariously absorbs the sense of comfort and safety, as well as a sense of hope, from the continuity of these places. Particularly if they are still used as places of worship by a community.

These places act as a home for the tourist, sufficiently out of reach not to be binding but still real and tangible to prove that home does exist. They bring calm to the anxiety Bauman's identity of the tourist possesses, through the reassuring warm sense of community. What Schwartz's hypothesis about homesickness also says, is that the positive message about the community associated with these places means more than just a simple balm for the anxiety of the tourist mentioned by Bauman. It can also be an agent of change in the life of the tourist in how they look forward to future challenges. Positive messages about continuity and community support the tourist in the challenges they face.

As well as the challenge posed by Bauman's negative view of the identity of the tourist, there is also the challenge that it only applies to the affluent – that, hence, a tourist theology, if not explicitly for the rich, then implicitly for the relatively well-off. The case for this is made if you take Jacobsen's criticism of Bauman's tourist into account – that for the majority of the world's population their liberty and resources do not permit them to practice this mode of living. [6] It is implicit that the tourist has the means to go in search of the experiences that interest them with no compulsion to stay or move to any particular place. Schwartz's defence of homesickness demonstrates that wealth is not a requisite for the experience. Schwartz began his research with the migrant communities who were auto-workers in Detroit and then with guest workers in Copenhagen, both not wealthy groups or high-status. The key difference in the homesickness encountered, is that the source of the displacement from home is a free choice by the tourist where for the migrant worker it may be a necessity. Hence, to the degree that the tourist can choose their destination to suit their interests, so a tourist theology will only apply to those who have the liberty to do so.

This means that there is a marked difference between the tourist and the people they imagine inhabiting these buildings; where signs of wealth in the building seem to have a negative impact on their experience of the place. The dislike of signs of wealth seems to correlate with the authenticity of the community imagined by the visitor – the community they imagine is not based on wealth, which may be in contrast to the groups they belong to

---

[6] Jacobsen, *Beyond Bauman,* 254-255

otherwise if the assertion about their own means as tourists is true, hence again distinguishing this place from others they visit.

6.1 The Application of Tourist Theology to Churches

Recognising tourist theology as a real mode of encounter with these buildings produces several questions for those with responsibility for them. Firstly, is the building accessible? It is a simple point but an important one – unless people can gain access to the church at times outside of worship then they will not have full access to the experience.

Secondly, what message about the community of the Church does the building give to those who visit? It can be seen from tourist theology that this is a critical element in the spiritual encounter of the visitor.

The experience of peace and comfort in the church, is supported by the evidence of past communities there. It is a delicate balance however, because simplicity is also valued, and the freedom for the visitor to create the community for themselves. So, in support of the visitor experience, lots of information in the form of detailed description of the past of the church is more likely to detract from the experience than add to it. Instead the evidence of the use of the building over time, is more important for the visitor to deduce for themselves about who the past community that used the church were.

This has several implications. Evidence that the church is cared for is a positive sign to visitors of its continued use. There are simple things that can indicate this; such as it being tidy, having up-to-date notices and evidence of the continued activities associated with the building; such as regular worship and the continued celebration of rites of passage – weddings, funerals etc. It is evidence like this that separates a church that has a living tradition as compared to one that is redundant.

As the visitor experience revolves around the evidence of the buildings use over time by people, great care needs to be taken when considering removing that evidence. Worn out items indicate that a church is not cared for, but worn wood or stone speak of centuries of use. Memorials speak of past generations that have inhabited these buildings and placed great value in them.

The challenge of this reflection is faced when the decision to reorder the church is taken. These churches have been periodically reordered over time as seen in the historic changes in the building, but what any new reordering should consider is the question of are the changes proposed going to break with the past of the church or build on it? Most Diocesan Advisory Committees who have the responsibility to recommend or not recommend these changes to Anglican Churches are very conscious of this question. However, the overall move by the Church and theology, as shown for Rural Theology, is towards a focus on the worshipping congregation, and particularly the number of the worshipping congregation. As works such as *Re-Pitching the Tent* show, there is consequently more of a desire to break with the past, and reshape the church around the needs of the current worshipping congregation plus the utilitarian ability of the space.

The need for this type of work cannot be denied if many churches are to have a long-term future as has been cited by various commentators; but it can be done in such a way that is sensitive to the history and tradition that is kept within the structure of the building. Elements of the worn wood and stone can be kept indicating the use of the building through the ages.

Running through all these considerations based on this research, is the theme of the message that is given to visitors. It is this that transforms the visitor experience from one which merely pampers to the spiritual interests of the tourist, but does not support them theologically, to one that can have a salvific effect and lead to positive change for them.

First and foremost, it needs to be a message of welcome. One of the key attributes of a home or community you belong to is that you are welcome there. The message cannot be one that states, 'if you are not here on a Sunday morning we don't want to know you.' For example, notices displayed which are written in such a way as to be only directed at members of the congregation. Visitors need to be encouraged to enter and spend time in churches to experience these places. Sometimes, while lots of technical descriptions of the interior of the churches put up around the church may detract from things, a simple guide will help the visitor to know the inside of the church better and feel more at home. For the tourist it is the return home that provides the strength to face the future, so the more these buildings can produce a sense of home the more positive an influence they can have on the visitor.

However, on a very pragmatic basis, why would the Church wish to encourage this message if only the visitors benefit and the burden of care for these buildings, the continuation of community and worship, is left to others? In addition is this message sufficiently Christian that it has a positive effect of the future of the Church?

In response, the argument for encouraging this message can be made in terms of engagement. Visitors to these churches can come from a Christian background, but can equally come from one that has or would not engage with the Christian faith, at least recently. While, for the interviewees who were not practicing Christians, there was not a desire to be part of the current church community, they spoke warmly of the idea of that community. In Bauman's identity for the tourist, home and community are ideas that are pushed further away by the need to be constantly on tour. However, as part of a tourist theology, home and community are the attractive parts of the experience in churches as they address the insecurities of the tourist. More than this, the experience opens the door to the continued existence of communities of faith, and as such presents the visitor with the possibility of engaging with them more fully. Bauman does not pass judgement on the identity of the tourist, but his overall comment on the post-modern identities he has determined, are that they have a negative impact on the wellbeing of people. Tourist theology points towards the continued existence of community through a shared faith, that ultimately counters the negative effect of Bauman's identity for the tourist. For those who more closely fit the identity of the tourist, it gives them at least a vision of home, which then they have the possibility of pursuing. For the Church, that means a more receptive audience beyond regular worshippers for a conversation about faith with. The message of welcome to visitors may not immediately yield additional people at worship in churches but may, in the longer term, attract more people into the community associated with the church. It also keeps the idea of community alive in the face of the dissolution of links that make up a community, which Bauman observes as being inherent in the post-modern condition.

7. Appendix

7.1 Survey Questionnaire

This survey is part of a study into the value of our rural churches to those who visit them.

1. Do you live near to this church?

(Please circle one answer)

0-5 miles   6-10 miles   10+ miles

2. Do you come to services at this church or another regularly?

(Please circle one answer)

Yes, at this church,   Yes, at another church,   No.

3. Have you visited this church before?

(Please circle one answer)

First time   2-3 times   often.

If you visit often how frequently do you visit?

(Please circle one answer)

Weekly Monthly   Every 2-3 months   Annually

4. Will you come again?

(Please circle one answer)

Yes   no   don't know.

5. Would you say you came here today mostly:
(Please circle one answer)

For spiritual reasons?

On impulse?

For family reasons?

For its connections with famous people?

For the architecture/stained glass windows of the church?

6. On a scale of 1 - 10, 1 being not peaceful and 10 being a strong sense of peacefulness, what number would you give this church?
(Please circle one answer)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

7. Did you spend time in prayer/thoughtful reflection in this church today?
(Please circle one answer)

Yes   No

8. On a scale of 1 - 10, 1 being not spiritual at all and 10 being your ideal spiritual place, what number would you give this church?
(Please circle one answer)

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Thank you for your time with these questions - it is greatly appreciated. When finished can you place the questionnaire in the box indicated.

We are looking for volunteers who would be willing to be interviewed about their experience in this church. If you feel you would be able to help us further with our survey please put your name and contact details below

Or contact The Revd Dr Mark Betson, Rural Officer, Diocese of Chichester on: m.betson@hotmail.co.uk , telephone: 01403 891367.

7.2 Appendix: Notes on questions for Interviews

1. Personal information: where do you come from/job/hobbies?

2. Do you visit churches regularly? If so which other ones do you visit?

3. (If a regular churchgoer) What is the church you worship in regularly like? (If not a regular churchgoer) Have you attended worship in a church in the past?

4. Is there anything in particular which drew you to this church?

   A: Location? Environment? Architecture? Guide book? Looking for a place to think?

5. What did you do when you went into the church?

6. Were you on your own?

7. Did you find anything about it particularly special or noteworthy?

8. Did you find anything about it that evoked memories or emotions?

9. Can you compare the experience of being in the church to any other experience – such as a visit to a museum or an art gallery?

10. Did you find the church a peaceful place? Do you think that is important?

11. Did you spend time in thoughtful reflection or prayer in the church?

12. How long were you there?

13. Was there anything that annoyed you or you wanted to change?

14. How did you feel when you left the church?

15. Have you thought much about it since?

16. Do you have any questions about this research?

7.3 Appendix: Descriptions of Interviewees

1. Male 40-60 years old, atheist, Up Marden

2. Male 40-60 years old, atheist, North Marden

3. Female, 60-80 years old, Church of England (lapsed), Compton

4. Female, 40-60 years old, Church of England (lapsed), North Marden

5. Male, 40-60 years old, Church of England, North Marden

6. Female, 40-60 years old, Church of England, North Marden

7. Male, 60-80 years old, agnostic, Up Marden

8. Male, 40-60 years old, Baptist Minister, Up Marden

9. Female, 20-40 years old, Church of England Minister, Up Marden

10. Male, 60-80 years old, Church of England (lapsed), St Lawrence

11. Female, 60-80 years old, Church of England (lapsed), Up Marden

12. Male, 60-80 years old, Baptist, Up Marden

13. Male, 60-80 years old, URC, Racton

14. Male, 60-80 years old, Church of England, Up Marden

8. Bibliography

Secondary Source (published)

Abercrombie, N., Baker, J., Brett, S., Foster, J., 'Superstition and Religion: The God of the Gaps' in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain 3* Martin, D., Hill

(London: SCM Press, 1970)

Ahern, G., Davie, G., *Inner City God: The Nature of Belief in the Inner City*

(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987)

Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, *Faith in the Countryside*

(Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1990)

Astley, J., *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002)

Astley, J., Francis, L J., (eds.) *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013)

Avila, St Theresa of., *The Interior Castle or the Mansions* (New York: Tan Books, 2011)

Avis, P., (ed.) *Public Faith? The State of Religious Belief and Practice in Britain*

(London: SPCK, 2003)

Badham, P., (ed.) *Modern Britain* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, 1989)

Ballard, P., Pritchard, J., *Practical Theology in Action* (London: SPCK, 1996)

Batholemew, C., Hughes, F., (eds.) *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004)

Bauman, Z., Obriek, S., *Of God and Man* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015)

Bauman, Z., *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000)

Bauman, Z., *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000)

Bauman, Z., *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998)

Bauman, Z., *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992)

Bell, J., Hopkinson, J., Willmott, T., (eds.), *Re-shaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009)

Bergmann, S., *God in context: a survey of contextual theology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)

Bouquet, A., *Religious Experience Its Nature, Types and Validity*

(Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978)

Bowden, A., *Ministry in the Countryside: A model for the future*, 2nd edition

(London: Continuum, 2003)

Bowker, J., 'Negative Theology' in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*,

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Brown, D., *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience*

(USA: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Bruce, S., *Politics & Religion* (London: Wiley, 2003)

Brueggeman, W., *The Land: Place as Gifts, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002)

Bryson, J., (ed.) *The Religious Philosophy of Roger Scruton*

(New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)

Cameron, H., *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010)

Campbell, C., *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989)

Carey, J., (ed.) *George Orwell Essays*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002)

Carrette, J., King, R., *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*

(Abingdon: Routledge, 2005)

Christie, A., *Ordinary Christology: Who do you Say I Am? Answers from the Pews?*

(York: Ashgate 2012)

Chapman, M., *Anglicanism* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) ProQuest Ebrary (accessed 13 May 2016)

Francis, L J., Robbins, M., (eds.), *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012)

Crook, J., *Medieval English Shrines* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011)

Cupitt, D., *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech* (London: SCM Press, 2001)

Davie, G., *Believing Without Belonging: A Persistent Paradox* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), Kindle Edition

Davie, G., *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994)

Davies, J., *The Secular use of Church Buildings* (London: SCM Press, London, 1968)

Dormor, D., McDonald, J., Caddick, J., *Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity* (London: Continuum 2003)

Duffey, E., *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (London: Yale University Press, 2001)

Duffey, E., *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400 – c.1580* (London: Yale University Press, 1992)

Durran, M., *Making Church Buildings Work* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)"

Elshtain, J., *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Anansi, 1993)

Flannagan, K., Jupp, P., (eds.) *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007)

Francis, L., Robbins, M., (eds.) *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012)

Francis, L., Martineau, J., *Rural Visitors'* (ACORA, 2001)

Gaze, S., *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2006)

Gibson, T., *Church and Countryside: Insights from Rural Theology* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2010)

Giles, R., *Re-pitching the Tent: The Definitive Guide to Reordering Your Church*, 3rd Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004)

Gorringe, T., *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Greeley, A., *The Sociology of the Paranormal* (London: Sage, 1975)

Guder, D., *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000)

Hall, S., Du Gay, P., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Trowbridge: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996)

Hardy, A., *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979)

Heelas, P., Woodhead, L., *The Spiritual Revolution Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)

Heelas, P., *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998)

Heitink, G., *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains,* trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999)

Inge, J., *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)

Jacobsen, M., (ed.) *Beyond Bauman: Critical Engagements and Creative Excursions*

(Abingdon: Routledge, 2017)

James, W., *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1907)

Jenkins, S., *England's Thousand Best Churches* (London: The Penguin Press, 1999)

Jones, D., Woodbridge, R., *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011)

King, M., Betson, M., *The Nature of God's Acre* (Chichester: NOGA, 2014)

Le Faye, D., *Jane Austen's Country Life* (London: Francis Lincoln Ltd, 2014)

Lewis-Anthony, J., *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him: Radically Re-Thinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009)

Litchfield, K., *Tend My Flock* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006)

Lynch, G., *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004)

Martineau, J., Francis, L., Francis, P., *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues* (Norwich: SCM/Canterbury Press, 2004)

Morris, R., *Churches in the Landscape* (London: W&N, 1989)

Newman, L., *The Basics of Social Research*, 2nd edition (Boston: Preston 2007)

Palmer, M., *Sacred Land* (London: Piatkus, 2012)

Pevsner, N., *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: Pelican Books, 1972)

Pollack, D., Olson, D., *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

Primoratz, I., Pavkovic, A., *Patriotism: Philosophical and Political Perspectives*

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008)

Redfield, R., *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956)

Richardson, A., (ed.) *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1969)

Rowlands, C., *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999)

Russell, A., *The Country Parish* (London: SPCK, 1986)

Schmiedel, U., Smith, G., (eds.) *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*

(Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Schwartz, M., *In Defense of Homesickness: Nine Essays on Identity and Locality*

(Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989)

Scruton, R., *England: An Elegy* (London: Continuum 2006)

Scruton, R., *Our Church: A personal History of the Church of England*

(London: Atlantic Books, 2013)

Serafin, S., Bendixen, A., *Encyclopedia of American Literature* (London: Continuum, 1999)

Sheldrake, P., *Spaces for the Sacred* (London: SCM Press, 2001)

Sheldrake, P., *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*

(London: DLT, London, 1995)

Silverman, D., *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*, 2nd edition, (London: SAGE, 2001)

Silverman, D., (ed.), *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, (London: Sage, 1997)

Sorensen, S., *The Collar: Reading Christian Ministry in Fiction, Television and Film*

(Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014)

Stanford, P., *How to Read a Graveyard: Journeys in the Company of the Dead*

(London: Bloomsbury, 2013)

Stanford, P., *The Extra Mile: A 21st Century Pilgrimage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011)

Sumption, J., *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God*

(Mahwah NJ: Hidden Spring, 2003)

Sykes, S., *Unashamed Anglicanism* (Michigan: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995)

Tester, K., *The Social Thought of Zygmunt Bauman* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004)

Towler, R., *The Need for Certainty: A Sociological Study of Conventional Religion*

(London: Routledge & Kegan, 1984)

Ward, P., *Liquid Church* (Massachusetts: Paternoster Press, 2002)

Waugh, A., *Introduction to George Herbert: Poems,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952)

Weiss, R., *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*

(New York: The Free Press, 1994)

Wells, D., *The Search for Salvation*, (Oregon: Intervarsity Press, 1978)

Willows, D., Swinton, J., *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care* (London: JKP, 2000)

Wolterstorf, N., *Art in Action* (Carlisle: Solway, 1997)

Journals

ap Siôn, T., 'Listening to Prayers: An Analysis of Prayers Left in a Country Church in Rural England', *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, No. 29, 2007, 199-226

Brown, A., Burton, L., 'Learning from Prayer Requests to a Rural Church: An Exercise in Ordinary Theology', *Rural Theology*, 5, 2007, 45-52

Cunningham, J., 'The Golden Rule as Universal Ethical Norm' *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol.17, No.1(1998) 105–109

Davidson, R., Kabat-Zinn, J., Schumacher, J., Rosenkranz, M., Muller, D., Santorelli, S F., Urbanowski, F., Harrington, A., Bonus, K., Sheridan, J F., 'Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation', in *Psychosomatic Medicine,* July 2003 Vol. 65, Issue. 4, 564-570

Dunn, T., Castro, A., 'Postmodern Society and the Individual: The Structural Characteristics of Postmodern Society and How They Shape Who We Think We Are' *The Social Science Journal,* (2012) Vol. 49, Issue 3, 352-358

Lauster, M., 'Walter Benjamin's Myth of the Flâneur' *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Jan, 2007), 139-156

Maltby, J., Day, L., 'Religious Experience, Religious Orientation and Schizotypy', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (2002), 163-174

Maltby, J., 'Religious Orientation and Religious Experience', *The North American Journal of Psychology*, 1 (1999), 289–292

Richebacher, W., 'Missio Dei: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path' *International Review of Mission*, Vol. 92 Issue 367, (2003), 588-605

Swinton, J., Pattison, S., 'Moving Beyond Clarity: Towards a Thin, Vague, and Useful Understanding of Spirituality in Nursing Care', *Nursing Philosophy* (2010) 11, 226-237

Voas , D., Crockett, A., 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging', *Sociology* Vol. 39, No.1 (2005), 11–28

Woodhead, L., 'Nominals are the Church's Hidden Strength' *The Church Times*, 26th April 2013

Reports

Bullivant, S., 'The "No Religion" Population of Britain' Catholic Research Forum Reports 3, Benedict XVI Centre, St Mary's University, Twickenham, London 2017

Report of the Rural Affairs Group of General Synod, 'Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church' (London: Archbishop's Council, January 2015)

Thorlby, T., 'Assets not Burdens: Using Church Property to Accelerate Mission', *Centre for Theology and Community Report,* January 2017

Electronic Sources

Archbishop's Council Mission and Public Affairs Division, 'Countering Far Right Political Parties, Extremist Groups and Racist Politics', February 2015 https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/community-urban-affairs/countering-racist-politics.aspx (accessed May 2017)

Archbishops' Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 'Faith in the City, 1985', Church of England website, http://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/community-urban-affairs/urban-affairs/faith-in-the-city.aspx

(accessed 9th May 2012)

Austen Only Jane Austen Film and Adaptation Locations, 'Mr Collins' Church and Rectory in Pride and Prejudice 2005', Austen Only http://austenonly.com/2010/09/19/jane-austen-film-and-adaptation-locations-mr-collins-church-and-rectory-in-pride-and-prejudice-2005/ (accessed 19th January 2014)

Austen, J., *Sense and Sensibility*, https://www.janeausten.org/sense-and-sensibility/sense-and-sensibility-online.asp (accessed September 2018)

Baise, B., 'Review of the Religious Philosophy of Roger Scruton' edited by James Bryson, JBTS Online http://jbtsonline.org/review-of-the-religious-philosophy-of-roger-scrunton-edited-by-james-bryson/ (accessed 9th August 2018)

Chignell, A., Pereboom, D., 'Natural Theology and Natural Religion' in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,* 6th July 2015, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/natural-theology/ (accessed 17th August 2017)

Corti, L., Day, A., Backhouse, G., 'Confidentiality and Informed Consent: Issues for Consideration in the Preservation of and Provision of Access to Qualitative Data Archives', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Volume 1, No. 3, Art. 7 – December 2000, http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1024/2207#gref (accessed 5th August 2017)

Ekklesia 'Christian Research Data Defended, but Church Decline Continues' *Ekklesia* 9th May 2008, http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/7112 (accessed 20th January 2014)

Fraser, G., 'We Must Do To Our Churches What Beeching Did To The Railways' *The Guardian*, 15th October 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/oct/15/we-must-do-to-our-churches-what-beeching-did-to-the-railways (accessed 30th July 2018)

Giffin, M., *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England.*

(Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) ProQuest Ebrary (accessed 28 April 2016)

Glyn, I ap., *Pagans and Pilgrims: Britain's Holiest Places,* BBC Four November 2013,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01r6z2d, (accessed 19th January 2014)

Greydanus, S., 'BBC's amiable Father Brown doesn't Keep Faith with Chesterton' Crux, 19th September 2014, https://cruxnow.com/life/2014/09/19/bbcs-amiable-nostalgic-father-brown-doesnt-keep-faith-with-chesterton/ (accessed 3rd October 2018)

Inge, J., 'Report of the Church Buildings Review Group' Church of England, September 2015, http://www.churchcare.co.uk/images/church_buildings_review_report_2015.pdf (accessed 2nd August 2018)

ITV News 'Church Faces Closure Just After its 150th Anniversary' 29th December 2016, http://www.itv.com/news/granada/2016-12-29/church-faces-closure-just-after-its-150th-anniversary/ (accessed 7th September 2018)

Jenkins, S., 'England's Churches Can Survive – but the Religion Will Have To Go',

The Guardian, 22nd October 2015
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/22/churches-survive-church-of-england-religion-buildings (accessed 30th July 2018)

MacCulloch, D., 'What Makes the C of E Special? This Account of Anglicanism is Full of Clichés and Misrepresentations' *The Guardian,* 19th June 2013, www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/19/our-church-roger-scruton-review (accessed 11th August 2018)

Newport, F., 'In the U.S., Christmas Not Just for Christians' Gallup 24th December 2008, www.gallup.com/poll/113566/us-christmas-not-just-christians.aspx (accessed 2nd August 2018)

Office for National Statistics bulletin Marriages in England and Wales: 2015
https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/
(accessed 6th September 2018)

Philo, C., Cadman, L., Lea, J., 'The New Urban Spiritual? Tentative Framings for a Debate and a Project Working Paper', University of Glasgow 2011,
http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/96750/1/96750.pdf (accessed 18th July 2017)

Resources, Publications and Data, Church of England,
https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/201711/2011statisticsformission.pdf (accessed 23rd July 2018)

Ridley, L., 'British Shoppers Have Fallen Out Of Love With Supermarkets' *Huffington Post* 10th September 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/09/10/morrisons-tesco-supermarkets-closing-shopping-habits_n_8115464.html (accessed 30th July 2018)

Rudgard, O., 'Anglican Church Congregation Numbers have Stabilised' in *The Telegraph* 14th May 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/13/anglican-church-congregation-numbers-have-stabilised/ (accessed on 17th August 2017)

The Rural Theology Association (RTA) http://www.rural-theology.org.uk/about-us/history (accessed 10th October 2011)

Rural Tourism in England Inquiry: Response from the National Churches Trust, The National Churches Trust,
http://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/sites/default/files/National%20Churches%20Trust%20Rural%20tourism%20inquiry%20response%20%20FINAL.pdf

(accessed 23rd July 2018)

Seal, B., 'Baudelaire, Benjamin and the Birth of the Flâneur' *Psychogeographic Review*, 14th November 2013, http://psychogeographicreview.com/baudelaire-benjamin-and-the-birth-of-the-flaneur/ (accessed 9th August 2018)

Telegraph View 'It wouldn't be Britain without the Church' 23 December 2012
https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/9762521/It-wouldnt-be-Britain-without-the-Church.html (accessed 8th October 2018)