

Third Order Studies Initiative
Report on Alnmouth Study Week

12th - 16th November 2007

Once again the Third Order's annual study week took place in the encouraging ambience of Alnmouth Friary in late autumn. We presented papers and a slide show, talked, debated and worshipped. We appreciated the hospitality of the friary and enjoyed breezy afternoon walks along the beach as well as the constant view of Alnmouth Bay through the chapel window during prayer.

Ten of us had gathered. On the first evening Peter Dunbar told us of the seven years of perambulations through the north of England and Scotland taken by the community bearing St Cuthbert's body away from Lindisfarne to safety. They eventually settled on Durham, having received a message from a cow! Peter was erudite and amusing. He was also welcoming us to Northern Christianity after our own travels during the day. We noted the medieval importance of relics, which Francis was to be one of the first to transcend through a more firmly Christological stance.

Nell Slocock presented reflections based on Richard Rohr OFM's book "Job and the Mystery of Suffering", and contributed the short bible readings from Job which began each day. Nell's themes were listening to God and being heard by God, living with suffering and the way that Job anticipated Jesus. These themes were to echo for us through the week. Richard Rohr's emphasis on going beyond our ego to meet God helped illuminate the distinctively Franciscan notion of "joy", while further themes of obedience and contemplation connected immediately to Beryl Warren's subsequent talk about her experience of contemplative prayer, which had taught her that "waiting on God" can lead to the discovery of "God praying in oneself". Beryl stressed the contradiction of talking about wordlessness, but still did that eloquently. She concluded by leading a meditation.

We were then joined by Caroline Cox and her non-TSSF colleague Professor John Marks for Winifred Alford's slides of her trip to Southern Sudan in 2001. Winifred, from the link diocese of Salisbury, made this trip alone during the war in Sudan to show support for Bishop Francis and a beleaguered Christian community that lacked basic amenities and was constantly threatened by air attacks and slave raids from the north. Caroline Cox knew the same towns and villages we were seeing. She confirmed the bravery and enthusiasm of these communities, and indeed of Winifred herself in undertaking her journey of solidarity. Here was more "joy" in the unlikely midst of privation and persecution.

Winifred's slides prepared us for Caroline and John's keynote presentation based on their publication, "Islam, Islamism and the West". This book, while recognising that the majority of Muslims are moderate and peaceful, nevertheless concentrates on the way that radical Islamists have over two decades used the freedoms and tolerance of Western societies to undermine them. A key notion is that of *jihad*, which the radicals interpret as military even though it has softer meanings for mainstream Islam. This was a salutary and challenging presentation, especially as it included more slides showing the horrific effects on African "front line" Christian communities of warlike *jihad* combined with the C21st slave trade. Our sense that dialogue with moderate Muslims grows more important was reinforced by this powerful presentation. What could be a more relevant focus today for followers of St Francis, who spoke with the sultan? Avril Landay could not join us because of illness, but her paper about the harsh treatment of Muslim converts to Christianity and the issues it raises about evangelism reinforced our conviction.

As if to challenge any thought of Christian complacency, Hugh Beach's paper on Christian Zionism continued our emerging theme of dangerously political religion. Remarkable numbers of Americans subscribe to this extreme Protestant world view, which has greatly influenced the American "neo-cons". Based on highly selective use of scripture, Christian Zionists give hard line support to the state of Israel. However, this is not because of any humanitarian support for the Jewish people but rather because they expect the end of all things and the second coming of Christ to be triggered by the completion of the Jewish nation - at which point only the Christian remnant will escape the miseries to be inflicted on the rest of mankind when the elect are caught up in the 'Rapture' to meet the Lord (see 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

After Caroline and John's, and Hugh's, presentations a paper called "Is religion dangerous?" from John Wiltshire seemed almost redundant! Nonetheless, this summary of responses to the militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins helped us clarify our thoughts. Drawing on Keith Ward's book of the same name, which emphasises that many other factors contribute to human conflicts in which religion plays a part, John still encouraged us to be more straightforward in accepting at least part of Dawkins' charge. Previous discussions had left us limited room for disagreement. We were led to consider the importance of investing in the long-established world faith traditions, which have generally peaceful self-definitions, rather than their often unstable and dangerous offshoots.

To end our week we returned to the devotional and domestic, firstly through David Swain's work on obedience. David distinguished between primary principles centred on the example of Christ, and secondary rules of behaviour. Essential as rules are they can only be fruitful, rather than judgemental, if they are based on a Christological approach stressing discernment. David emphasised the importance of Francis's prayer of community obedience. That

prayer comes from his last Testament of 1226 and shows that our first obedience comes from the adoration of Christ in prayer. Service in the church and in the world follows from this, pragmatically. This paper (with Hugh Beach's 1993 Assisi paper) now goes forward to a TSSF event on obedience in 2008.

Our Franciscan week finished suitably with Brenda Stephenson's exploration of the Tau cross, which promoted discussion of the benefits but also some of the dangers of complex symbolism. This symbol has many strands, foremost being the distinguishing mark by which we are "marked for life". The Tau also connotes lowliness and that we are not competing with Christ (it is not the whole cross) - but it does not imply that we should repudiate ourselves. Making links with other discussions, we concluded by noting the need for all religion to balance our relative insignificance in God's scheme of things with our residual sacredness as His creatures.

This study week produced, as before, many unexpected connections between topics chosen quite separately by their contributors. In previous weeks these have been called "God-incidents, not coincidences"! There will be many more, we trust. We return to Alnmouth Friary next year from 29th September - 3rd October, wishing the present community well as they move on before then to new ministries including the SSF presence at Walsingham. Our steering group meeting in January will consider additional events as part of the Study Initiative's future development.

2007 study week participants

Winifred Alford	:	Salisbury
Hugh Beach	:	West London
Caroline Cox	:	North London
Peter Dunbar	:	Pateley Bridge
Avril Landay (paper submitted)	:	St Andrew's; Scotland
Professor John Marks (guest)	:	Northwest London
Nell Slocock	:	Oxford
Brenda Stephenson	:	Nottingham
David Swain	:	Oxford
Beryl Warren	:	East London
John Wiltshire	:	Essex

Do contact our coordinator, John Wiltshire, with any queries, suggestions or offers of help with the Third Order Studies Initiative. John is available at:
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To book a place on the 2008 study week please contact Nell Slocock, who is at:
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