



# Does Christianity really work?

**In our sophisticated world of astonishing technical advances why have confidence in this Good News we share? Well, because it makes a difference. It actually works. Alison Morgan writes**

**R**ecently we got a map and put little stickers all over it so that we could see where ReSource has worked over the last three years. We did know we've been working hard, but even so the results surprised us. We have worked in 23 dioceses, facilitated 28 deanery or regional gatherings, spoken at 15 conferences and engaged with more parishes than there was space to mark. We now know why we are tired; but what have we learned?

For me it's been a fascinating process, after years given primarily to writing and ministry in a single parish. What is the issue the Church finds most difficult today? Tim Sledge put his finger on it as we ate sandwiches together in Northampton. It's confidence. We live in a culture which dents and knocks our confidence as Christians. And so 'does this stuff really work?' is probably the question most ordinary Christians in this country would like to have a convincing answer to. It's expressed in different ways; but whether people are saying help us to know how to pray for healing, or to find ways of developing our mission, or to deepen our relationship with God, or to encourage our people, what they really mean is perhaps just this: can we actually have confidence in this ancient faith of ours? Do we really have something which people out there need and want – or not?



Alison Morgan

**'Having constructed a society of unprecedented sophistication, convenience and prosperity, nobody can remember what it was supposed to be for.'**

Why is it so hard to keep our spirits up? Well, there's the issue of declining congregations. There's the scientific fundamentalism of Richard Dawkins. There's the pressure of Islam and the threat of faith-based terrorism, fenced round with the secularist call for us to unite around a shared belief in nothing, a position held up as the epitome of maturity and tolerance. And there's the pick'n mix world of enticing alternative spiritualities, most of which demand no time-consuming commitment and threaten nothing more dangerous than the risk of ridicule.

But maybe there's a deeper cause

too. Maybe it's something to do with where we are as a society. Every person in every culture has to come up with the answers to two basic questions: how do we know things, and how do we make sense of them? Those answers form a worldview, one which most people never examine, but which they live by nonetheless. But we are living in an extraordinary time of

philosophical and cultural change. It's very confusing; like living through an earthquake, standing on the shifting tectonic plates of different ways of doing things.

Now most people don't realise this, because they are busy at the gym or doing the shopping or sitting in a traffic jam. But historically our culture is founded on two quite different worldviews. The first was the Hebrew worldview. It offers faith-based answers. We know things through revelation; in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. What we know, we know because God

tells us; and He tells us through story. The Scriptures tell the story of the relationship between man and God in the context of a bigger story which runs from the creation of the world in time to its recreation in eternity. Jesus is made known through story, and we find meaning for our lives through finding our own part in that story.

The problem with the Hebrew worldview is that whilst it gives good answers to the question about purpose – my purpose is my part in the story – it gives bad answers to the question about knowledge. Attempts to understand the world we live in from within this revelation-based epistemological framework led to controversy and ultimately rejection – revelation does not help us to understand the rings of Saturn or the laws of gravity. And so from

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about the 13th century we turned to a different worldview: that of the Greeks. Medieval scholars pored in excitement over the newly translated works of Aristotle. Galileo and Darwin and Freud followed in the footsteps of Archimedes, Euclid and Pythagoras in seeking to understand reality by thinking about it rather than by trusting in it; and a new, scientific worldview was born. It's one which has brought astonishing advances in our ability to understand and manipulate the world we live in. But its disadvantage is that it has nothing at all to say to us about purpose. The result: journalist Clifford Longley comments:

*Having constructed a society of unprecedented sophistication, convenience and prosperity, nobody can remember what it was supposed to be for. Just enjoying it does not seem to be enough. Indeed enjoyment as an end in itself quickly turns to ashes in the mouth. Not only is it boringly bland. It is even more boringly purposeless. There is more to human life than comfort, entertainment*

## Earthly breakfast can wait as Lydia finds heavenly peace



**When Lydia gave her life to Christ she had her first good night's sleep for a year and 70 delegates at a SOMA conference in Mozambique happily went without breakfast.**

*Pictured: the substitute breakfast which appeared halfway through the morning as Lydia slept on!*

*and the avoidance of suffering.*<sup>1</sup>

Or, as Chinese philosopher T Carver Yu puts it, we now live in a society of technological optimism and literary despair.<sup>2</sup> It's been said that we are the only people in the whole of history to have supposed that a mechanistic and individualistic understanding of life offers the way to become fulfilled and whole persons.<sup>3</sup> And so in our frustration we are beginning to look beyond our scientific worldview, beginning again to ask the questions about purpose and story and our own place in it. The problem is, we can't wind the

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clock back. The Hebrew worldview now seems ancient and outmoded. Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins, along with others, have tried to extend the boundaries of science beyond the 'how' questions into the 'why' questions – but while their science is presumably impeccable, their philosophy or theology is laughably amateur. Science is a lousy vehicle for meaning, however hard you try; and a lousy vehicle therefore for matters of the human soul.

Where does this leave us as a society, as we try to fit a revealed faith into a scientific straitjacket

which leaves no room for our souls? Perhaps in what has been called a 'cultural millenopause'<sup>4</sup>, in something of a crisis of purpose, where people engage in a resurgence of spirituality and ask renewed questions about the source and nature of human happiness, but direct scarcely a backward glance towards Jesus – who after all is the story before yesterday.

And yet only three weeks ago I had a conversation with Dawn. Dawn had gone to the city centre to do her Easter shopping, and had found herself caught up in Leicester's re-enactment of the Passion of Christ. Gazing at Jesus on the cross, Dawn's life changed. Suddenly aware that this Jesus was speaking to her, demanding a response, she found someone to pray with and committed her life to him. And then, she said, she was left standing there wondering why on earth she'd thought she needed to do all this shopping, to buy all these things she didn't need.

A week after that I met Lydia, this time in a village on the shores of Lake Malawi. Could we pray for her, she asked. She had been unable to sleep since the sudden death of her brother a year before, and as she prepared the food for the SOMA conference we were leading she wondered if maybe here lay an answer to her need. Lydia too committed her life to Christ. The next morning, 70 conference delegates found themselves without breakfast; for Lydia was fast asleep.

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Neither Dawn nor Lydia had, I imagine, given much thought to the rival merits of the Hebrew and Greek worldviews. And yet both had responded to Jesus, aware that their life lacked the settled peace they craved. Maybe it is open to us not to wind the clock back so much as to offer a new way of thinking about life, one based neither on revelation nor on scientific expertise, but simply on relationship. It's been comparatively easy for us, as the church, to offer a culturally compatible social gospel which ruffled no secularist feathers but stopped short of bringing people into the kind of relationship with Jesus which Dawn and Lydia have found. It's not been too hard either to offer a doctrinally correct gospel in which we believe all the right things with a fashionable scientific exactitude – but Dawn and Lydia have often found it rather hard to connect with. Is there another way?

### IF WE ASK ANYTHING ACCORDING TO HIS WILL HE HEARS US

**1 John 5.14-15:** And this is the confidence we have in approaching God that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

**1 John 3.21-22:** We have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask, because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him.

**Hebrews 4.16:** Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

**Hebrews 10.35-6:** Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.

Well, philosopher Michael Polanyi has suggested there is. He points out that we cannot know things outside a fiduciary framework – that there

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is no such thing as an 'objective' understanding, however much Dawkins may like to claim that there is.<sup>5</sup> Knowledge comes, as Einstein said, not in a vacuum of objectivity but as a hypothesis – one you have to commit yourself to in order to test it out, to see if it holds up. The claim that it can be arrived at objectively, without some prior assumption which acts as a foundation, is false.

And that takes us back to the word 'confidence' with which we began. The word confidence means 'with faith' – con-fid-ence. The true basis of confidence is not optimism, hope, or carefully cultivated certitude, but relationship – relationship with one in whom we have faith, in whom we can trust. How do we know things, and how do we make sense of them? Well, perhaps best of all in relationship, with God as first of all with our own parents. In relationship with one who said he was God, one who is both the writer of the story and the creator of the universe; a relationship which is made possible only through the presence in our lives of the Holy Spirit, sent to make us alive in ways we were not alive before – as Dawn and Lydia

have found. 'The time is ripe for a redefinition of the faith', John Drane has suggested. Jesus stands outside both the worldviews we have inherited, offering us not primarily a part in the history of a people, or an understanding of the created world, but a personal relationship which will change our very being, and draw us into a completely new place. 'If ever there was a time to rediscover Jesus the Messiah, it is now', Frost and Hirsch have said. 'It is possible that the story of Jesus may find a hearing once more, if it can be cleansed of its institutional accretions and retold in simplicity and honesty', Michael Riddell writes. 'Jesus emerged from the interviews with a good reputation', Nick Spencer reports from a series of discussions with people outside the Church<sup>6</sup>. Christianity is a person. He's a person who, when you meet him, offers you the sudden realisation that you no longer need to buy all that stuff, or to toss and turn in your bed at night. Why should we have confidence in this good news we share? Well, because it makes a difference. It actually works. **r**

### END NOTES

1. Quoted in Roy McCloughry, *Living in the presence of the future* (IVP 2001) p 32.
2. *Truth and Authentic Humanity*, Dr Carver T Yu, [www.gospel-culture.org.uk](http://www.gospel-culture.org.uk).
3. John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church – spirituality, creativity and the future of the Church*, (DLT 2000) p 20.
4. Gerard Kelly, *Get a grip on the future without losing your hold on the past* (Monarch 1999).
5. Michael Polanyi, *Personal knowledge* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1958).
6. Frost & Hirsch, *The Shaping of things to come* (Hendrikson Publishers 2003) p 113; Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the future* (SPCK 1998) p 115; Nick Spencer, *Beyond the fringe – researching a spiritual age*, (LICC 2005) p 19.

### about the writer

**The Revd Dr Alison Morgan** is an Associate of ReSource. She is on the staff of Holy Trinity, Leicester where she oversees the prayer ministry. She is the author of a number of books including *The Wild Gospel*.

**ABOUT THE PICTURES:** *The photograph at the top of page 4 and on this page shows a scene from 'Christ in the Centre', Leicester, the annual re-enactment of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus in the city centre which helped to change Dawn's life. All photographs by Alison Morgan.*