

Speaking of God in public – can God be broadcast in sound bites?

Introduction

Good evening and thank you for this invitation to explore with you the theme of *Speaking of God in Public: can God be broadcast in sound bites?*

This is a question to which I have had to pay attention since becoming a regular contributor to *Thought for the Day*, broadcast six days a week on Radio 4's flagship breakfast show: the Today Programme. This is a fast moving news programme full of interviews and comment that reaches 7 million viewers each week. *Thought for the Day* is a scripted slot preserved for a comment on the events and people in the news from a faith perspective. Over the last 3 years I have contributed 25 such thoughts – each 2'45 in length – the most recent of which was broadcast yesterday.

Each time that I sit down to try to write something for the following morning I am faced with the challenge of putting the Word made Flesh – the Word beyond words - into words. And not just into words, but into a sound bite; a sound bite that connects the flurry of current events with the profundity of the Word of life itself. A sound bite because 2'45 is what I am allowed; a sound bite because this is what our culture's attention span is reduced to. But can a sound bite bear the Word of God?

At its heart my question is a question of apologetics. This is the matter of giving a public account of the faith that is in us. This is not the same as evangelism; it does not necessarily seek to persuade; but it does seek to present the Christian faith in ways that are credible within the cultural settings in which Christianity finds itself. For this reason, apologetics is never a finished task. It is always a task for the present age and cultural context.

This is a challenge not only for broadcasters but for Christian communication in general. I remember the late Ivor Jones, who was Principal of Wesley House Cambridge when I was a student there in the 1990s, telling us that across different contexts – social, liturgical, pastoral, cross-cultural, we need to be 'different in order to be the same'... reminding us that the same words and actions spoken and performed in different contexts will have different meanings and that we need to adjust our approaches for each context if we wish to communicate the same message across them.

In my experience though, the impact of trying to communicate the faith also shapes my understanding of it as I struggle to speak of God in ways that make sense to others, and to myself.

In this lecture I intend to reflect on the experience of seeking to offer a *Thought for the Day* into the Today Programme as a way of thinking about the cultural context in which we are living out our Christian faith and need to be able to give an account of it. I hope that it will be of some use, not only to those who broadcast or write columns in magazines or

newspapers for a general readership, but to all of us as we think about how to answer questions in the workplace or amongst our families or social circles, or even in the church coffee bar or from the pulpit, remembering Karl Barth's injunction that we should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other...

Making the connections though, in ways that can be simply communicated, is a skill to be learned – and perhaps something to which adult Christians do not pay enough regular attention in a culture in which Christianity has lost currency and church attendance is plummeting.

My experience, for example, of working with local preachers to help them construct a good conversation between the Bible and the questions and issues in the newspapers however is that people do not necessarily find it easy to see the connections... I once led a workshop on John 10 and having spent a day on the lost things I invited the group to choose a newspaper article from the local or national press and address, on a postcard, their concerns to the writer of this gospel. This was discharged fine. The second part of the task was much more difficult however – when I asked the group to write back a postcard from the gospel writer addressing the questions raised – only 1 person felt able to attempt an answer...

I hope this evening to offer some strategies and ways of thinking that might resource those of us who find the task of bridging the Bible and the newspaper a difficult one.

My own commitment to attempting to speak of God in public, and the commitment of Wesley House Cambridge, where I am Principal, to educating our students for such a task is a theological one. Recent events both at home and abroad more than demonstrate the human need for wisdom. Despite all the complexities of hermeneutics and epistemology that post-Enlightenment thinking has introduced, I believe that God has wisdom to offer that the world cannot offer itself, and of which the world is in urgent need.

So this evening, in approaching Thought for the Day as a case study in apologetics I shall begin by seeking to get some perspective on what is particular about that task and what is general to the business of apologetics by comparing *Thought for the Day* with John Wesley's Sermon on Scriptural Christianity preached in a public space in 1744.

Second I shall analyse the 25 TFTDs that I have broadcast, to see whether they reveal any strategies for apologetics that might be more broadly useful.

Third I shall consider my own theological orientation to the task of apologetics that is revealed by this analysis and compare my theological emphases with those of John Wesley to see whether or not I am succeeding in being 'different in order to be the same.' Or in other words, whether, within the constraints of *Thought for the Day*, I am conveying an authentic Wesleyan message.

Finally I shall attempt to come off the fence and answer the question I have set myself for the evening.

The dynamics of apologetics

So to begin I am going to attempt a comparison between the contexts of TFTD and Wesley's sermon on Scriptural Christianity from 1744 – the last he preached before the University of Oxford - in order to understand something of the context in which contemporary apologetics needs to be undertaken as well as something of the consistent dynamics of the apologetic task.

I'm going to begin with today's context and with TFTD.

Some 3 years into the role and I still find it very demanding. Why *is* that? Well, first the news moves fast with many stories not surviving more than two or three bulletins – the events and people mentioned being literally here today and gone tomorrow - and for that reason everyone has to do the slot live and must be prepared to research a topic from scratch and make edits right up until the moment of broadcasting. For that reason too, the subject of the *Thought* is not agreed until the morning before, with the script being provisionally signed off – on a good day by lunchtime, and on a bad day by midnight - so to be topical you have to be flexible and responsive to what's happening around you...

I normally broadcast on a Monday and it pays to pick topics that are rising in the news on Sunday rather than falling – Janet Morley, the liturgist and author who presented TFTD in the 1980s said to me recently, 'I always give extra points if the topic is mentioned within half an hour of the Thought and a bonus if it's the next item!' On the other hand, this can lead to trouble. My very first TFTD was on the subject of flood defences. I had thought to discuss the advantages of non-defensive living – making space for the extra waters higher up the catchment area rather than relying on shoring up ever higher walls and barriers nearer the mouth of rivers where the flooding happens. This is not only a strategy I believe in for the environment but is a metaphor for the non-defensive living that I believe Jesus modelled and calls human beings into.

The subject was topical because of long term flooding in the Somerset Levels that had been in the weekend papers. However, during Sunday night the Thames flooded in Berkshire, meaning that people were waking up to sewage floating in their living rooms. The tone and emphasis of the Thought needed to change overnight to acknowledge that sometimes emergency defences have their place...

So TFTD is a demanding slot to fill because it is high profile and because the news moves very fast but there are other, deeper reasons why it is a difficult gig. One of the things that I had not anticipated when I first began was the amount of correspondence that 2.45 can

generate. Some of it is plain abusive and that I do not respond to, but where substantive points are made I make it a policy to reply at least once. What is certainly clear, however, is that it is not possible to please all of the people all of the time... two Methodist correspondents on my reflections on the tenor of public debate on the EU Referendum summer last are a case in point.

From one Methodist Minister a complaint that I was not political enough:

Jane I was interested in TFTD. & it annoys me that Church leaders have a terrible habit of not coming down on 1 side or tother – unless it's safe to do so!!!! & it all sounds a sort of mush in the end. Not only Bishops & Chairs these days I notice but also 99% of ordained!!!! Like so much of voting in Eurovision, vote was political NOT MUSICALLY judged. But your point was (Having a dig at OUT & IN -Boris etc) "let's listen to each other". Which is fair enough as a principle of education but there was no clue from u on whether we shld be In or OUT of Europe. But is the kerygma (esp proclamation of Jesus) so open-ended????? the 6 page pullout of MRec puts both sides & recommends none! is this attitude good enough – both on June 23rd & on May 14th 2016? Gw Al

Whilst from another AI, a local preacher from a different part of the country, the problem was that I had missed an opportunity to preach the gospel...

Dear Jane Leach

I write to say I listened with interest for your announced talk this morning on THOUGHT FOR THE DAY ON Radio 4 having picked up the designation "Methodist" etc.

I was left wondering whether you personally believe in the one true and living God and His Son our Lord Jesus Christ who said "I am the light of the world"? Or is Hi name and person not of sufficient worth to mention?

I thought of the thrilling words of Christian hope for the Church and secular world in the words of Mr Wesley himself:

*Happy if with my latest breath I might but gasp His name,
Preach Him to all and cry in death behold, behold the Lamb.*

As a Methodist Christian believer I was disappointed to hear of "religion" and the politics of the day etc. I am sure the BBC team were pleased.

Yours very sincerely in Christ our LORD

At one level I find myself taking a deep breath before replying to either AI. The constraints of the slot on Radio 4 are such that the producers are worried about listening figures and switch off rates because they are constantly under pressure from secularists and radical atheists to get the slot off the air. In that atmosphere sometimes it is hard to persuade

them that it is okay to mention Jesus at all; meanwhile, because this is a 'no right of reply' slot, one sure way to get myself banned for good, is to imply, even by accident that the Bible might have something to say about whether we should have voted IN or OUT of Europe or on the subject of how we treat the poor, or spend our money...

Whilst I fear being bland and trite above all else... it does not seem to me that there are any easy solutions other than withdrawing to the safety of the Christian ghetto. The reason I feel compelled to keep trying to say something worth hearing from a Christian perspective into the Today Programme, however, is because I believe that what Brian Redhead is quoted on the BBC website as having said in the 1970s: "If you want to drop a word in the ear of the nation, then this is the programme in which to do it."

The difficulties of doing it well, however, are illustrative of two sets of problems. One age old and perennial and the other, a product of our particular cultural context and time.

The Perennial Problems of Apologetics

The first set of problems that beset and have always beset apologetics – concern the perils of seeking to express the impact and relevance of Christianity in a milieu that is alien to it. If you err too much on the side of telling it as those on the inside see and experience it, the danger is that you do not communicate effectively with those on the outside. The early Christians for example, had a good deal of PR problems caused by the fact that the practice of holy communion led some to think they were cannibals... For the Christian, the eating of Christ's body and blood was the fulfilment of Jesus' command, and a profound experience of being grafted into the life of Christ and of his community. For the more literal minded outsider, it was a disgusting and immoral practice.

At the other extreme, the eager apologist can seek to try to explain Christianity within the concepts and frameworks of the prevailing mind-set. If we live in a culture that has evolved thirteen different kinds of shopping trolley and values the right to choose above almost all else, then it is easy to fall into the trap of presenting Christianity as a choice of lifestyle amongst all other lifestyles; and to suggest that those shopping around for nuggets of wisdom, might occasionally drop something into their trolley from the Christian shelf. Christianity can help you live your life within its current frameworks and priorities – try it out and see what works for you...

And yet Jesus' call to follow him is a radical call to re-centre oneself that should shape the use of our time and resources, our relationships and priorities, our motivations for and our interventions in the political and social and economic spheres... it is fundamentally not a private matter but a public matter.

The knife edge that apologetics has to walk in every generation is that of engaging the concepts and frameworks of the prevailing culture, but of resisting complete assimilation with them... within a sound bite there is not much room for manoeuvre...

It's not impossible to walk this tight rope - for example, one might find ways to speak about holy communion in a culture that believes you are what you eat – as we take into our bodies the consecrated bread and 'feed on Christ in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving' so we believe that we are transformed into Christ's living body... what we now know scientifically about the way in which the nutrients in our food are transformed into the physical stuff of our bodies, makes a good way of speaking about how we are nourished by the sacrament of holy communion as a converting ordinance that brings us closer to being the body of Christ in the world -

It's not impossible to walk the tightrope, but this knife edge walk between obscurity and assimilation is a perennial challenge for apologetics. In fact, in the case of the Today programme, this particular example of explaining an aspect of the faith in ways that might be intelligible to an outside audience would need quite a lot of work to be usable – as it doesn't reference anything happening in the lives of those outside the Christian tradition that is currently in the news to which this explanation of the power of holy communion might have something to say.

This fact highlights the problem that it is difficult to begin with the Bible or the lived Christian experience and work from there to current events. Consequently I have never used this way of talking about holy communion on Radio 4, though I have talked about the practice at the annual Methodist Conference of singing Charles Wesley's hymn, "And are we yet alive?" The context was the week after the terrorist attack on the beaches of Tunisia during the summer of 2015. I talked about two beach experiences I had had during that week: of a labyrinth dug in the sand by Southport Pier and of Anthony Gormley's Sculpture, Another Place, a bit further south along the coast. By speaking about the way in which these ritual or artistic spaces enable human beings to access both their fears and mortality but also a deeper sense of security and goodness, I was able to make a comparison between these relatively accessible human experiences and the rather more obscure practice of singing 18th century hymns, explaining that:

Together, through this hymn, we recall what is most unbearable in our lives, and we remember those we have loved, so that our fears and griefs might be drawn into the well-worn ritual space that the hymn offers and there connect with what we believe is at the centre of all things... the love of God that is stronger than fear and death and even hell.

Because, in apologetics it is difficult to begin from the things that matter deeply to Christians in our own terms, the constant pull is to fall off the tightrope by getting sucked into the secular mind-set that can only speak about things in political and economic terms, fearing that Christianity doesn't really have much to offer if we can't solve an economic crisis or engage multi-national companies taking more environmental responsibility or effect nuclear disarmament.

The alternative temptation is to fall off in the opposite direction by allowing Christianity to be restricted on the subjects it will address and thus be marginalized into a privatised, spiritual ghetto in which Christianity becomes in Marx's terms an 'opiate of the people' – diverting them from the business of transforming the world into the business of being more personally content with their lot. This too is a temptation that I have encountered on TFTD.

For example, when David Cameron announced the new Living Wage I wanted to broadcast the comment made so eloquently by Rachel Lampard, this year's Vice President of Conference, and the Head of the Joint Public Issues Team of the Methodist, URC and Baptist Churches, that you can't call it a Living Wage unless people can actually live on it. The response of my producer was that the churches had made poverty a political issue and that I could only talk about the Living Wage if I spoke about the things other than money that make life worth living. The row that ensued was about the volume of references in the Bible to money and to poverty and the way that BBC Religion policies castrate the gospel. Rather than collude with a spiritualising of Christianity as if money doesn't matter, and a privatising of Christianity as a lifestyle choice that does not affect how we vote or spend resources as a society, I chose to speak about something else entirely.

The temptation to engage in apologetics as if religion was only about the personal and private wellbeing of the participants is a perennial one. However, a comparison with the undertaking of the apologetic task in other times and contexts suggests that the third millennium in the UK presents Christians with quite particular versions of the problem. By way of illustration I want us therefore to look briefly at John Wesley's sermon, 'Scriptural Christianity.'

The Historical Context of Apologetics

This was a sermon preached by John Wesley before the University of Oxford, in 1744. I don't know how University sermons are organised now in Oxford or who goes to them (though I may find out a bit more on 7th May when I preach one!) but in Cambridge where I am a member of the preaching syndicate that appoints the 6 preachers a year, things have changed a good deal since the 18th century. In the eighteenth century members of the University were obliged to attend. In the eighteenth century sermons were preached every week – even in August, as this one. In the eighteenth century this was not so much a once in a lifetime guest appearance by someone who should be honoured or who might possibly draw a crowd, but part of the duties of those priests who were on the rota. And whilst the University may have harboured some atheists and agnostics, to teach in the University one had to be in holy orders. To study there one had to be a communicant in the Church of England. And so to preach before the University was a public event in which the assumption could be made that all present were at least nominally Christian, and if not pious, were certainly familiar with the Scriptures and with the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith.

How the world has changed. It is difficult for us to think now, of genuinely public events, at which such an assumption could be made and at which something of the length of a full sermon would get a hearing. And how did this come about? Well, to sketch in some possibilities, the Reformation made its contribution with the Elizabethan Settlement of 1566 that turned its back on religious violence by refusing to make 'windows in men's souls'... allowing a range of belief within the newly established Church of England, providing these views remained private.

But what the Reformation only hinted at exploded during the Enlightenment period of the 18th century. As philosophy started to root its work in objects that could properly be investigated by the subject, God became more and more to be regarded, not as a matter for science (proper knowledge about the nature of things) but a matter of morality, a matter of feeling and a matter of individual experience. As many became convinced that what is real can be observed and measured, so also the belief emerged that the advancement of education and reason and the advancement of democratic freedoms would make religion politically irrelevant and a merely private and marginal matter.

The influence of this 'turn to the subject' and the appeal to experience can be seen to some degree in this Sermon of John Wesley's. Beginning by setting out the work of the Holy Spirit in experimental and practical religion, Wesley's focus in this sermon is mostly upon the salvation and sanctification of the individual. Morna Hooker-Stacey in her commentary on this sermon published in Wesley House's free online theological journal, *Holiness*, last summer says:

... in view of his own experience of the warmed heart, it is hardly surprising that Wesley should begin in this sermon with the individual's experience of the Spirit, and the love of God 'shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost' (Romans 5:5) (l.1-4).

However, whilst such a conversion of the heart is where Wesley begins, there is no sense for him that what he has experienced is *only* his experience, nor that this experience, if authentic, should not propel him into a love of neighbour and the working towards nothing less than the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Morna Hooker again:

In Part 3, Wesley turns to the ultimate goal – a Christian world. He affirms that God will finally reign and the kingdom of God be established on earth.

Here, Wesley betrays some traits of Enlightenment thinking but crucially, his theory of knowledge is not primarily that of reason – though reason has a place – but of revelation. Further, the experience of God that he has is not for him a personal or private matter that has no bearing on the way that anyone else lives, but the personal reception of the eternal and timeless revelation of God's very self – a revelation of the God who is transforming the whole world.

A thorough-going philosophical relativism and the notion that Christianity can or even should be a personal and not a social or political matter were alien to Wesley yet these

developments in thought are ones that separate our time and context from his in ways that are crucial to the discipline of apologetics for both of these philosophical developments work to push Christianity to the margins of discussion concerning what is true. In this way the philosophical way was paved for Christianity to be a private lifestyle choice without necessary implications for the choices of others.

Also, lying in the gulf between us is a myriad of social developments. For example, the taking on by the State of many of the social functions that before the 19th C were the preserve of the Church such as education, welfare and healthcare, gave the Church less influence in public life. During the latter half of the 20th C mass immigration and the increasing presence in Britain of people of other faiths and none has led to the challenging of the privilege of Christianity as a voice in the public square and has made pluralism and relativism part of our lived reality.

Whilst religion, globally, is certainly not less politically influential than it has been in other historical periods: consider US politics; consider the desire of some for a new Islamic Caliphate, in the UK the situation is complicated. For some religion has become such a private matter that whatever spiritual experience or religious beliefs they have they no longer make any public practice of it (what Grace Davie calls believing without belonging) whilst others feel an affiliation to a national brand that includes a religious flavour expressed in nativity plays and easter eggs but does not involve knowledge of or commitment to Christian belief (belonging without believing) –

Finally I want to mention, in this whistle stop historical tour, the communications revolution. Beyond the democratisation that occurred with the development of universal literacy in western culture – aided and abetted by the Wesley and Primitive Sunday Schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - we now are experiencing the social media revolution that has given everyone who wants one, a voice on twitter. Two things are notable about this. First, via twitter we express and reinforce the belief that everyone is an expert – on the basis of their own opinion and experience alone. In such a context revelation and religious authority are de facto suspect; second, twitter proclaims that if something is worth saying it can be said in 140 characters. This mitigates against exploring the subtlety, mystery and depth of encounter at the heart of what Christians have to say.

If this sketch of philosophical and social developments gives a reasonable flavour of the changes that since Wesley's day have shaped the apologetic tissues facing Christians today as we engage in the task, what I now want to think about is some strategies for addressing these issues and giving a credible account of Christian faith in the public square today.

When John Wesley spoke into the public space that was the University Sermon on 24 August 1744 he was still living in a culture where he could begin on home ground by outlining the doctrines of Christianity and then, apply them to the context of the University

which members he was confident to accuse of hypocrisy. William Blackstone, a lawyer, was present, who wrote afterwards:

We were last Friday entertained at St. Mary's by a curious sermon from Wesley the Methodist. among other equally modest particulars he informed us; first, That there was not one Christian among all the Heads of Houses; secondly, that pride, gluttony, avarice, luxury, sensuality, and drunkenness were the general characteristics of all Fellows of Colleges, who were useless to a proverbial uselessness. Lastly, that the younger part of the University were a generation of triflers, all of them perjured, and not one of them of any religion at all. His notes were demanded by the Vice-Chancellor, but on mature deliberation it has been thought proper to punish him by a mortifying neglect.⁷

Wesley was never invited to preach in St Mary's again.

There are days when frustrated after a row with my producer or by conflicting pieces of feedback I plan a swansong that says exactly what I think.... But as in Wesley's day this tactic led to a mortifying neglect, so in my case I cannot be under any illusions that plain speech delivering my opinions of the behaviour of politicians or the policies of the government or the morality of contemporary society, judged by my interpretation of the Bible, will lead to anything other than the same conclusion.

Such plainness of speech will get me nowhere. So what is the alternative? Wesley's alternative was increasingly to speak to the poor and not to the establishment and this, admittedly is a strategy that is open to me. However, being the Principal of an institution, founded to educate Methodist people within a world class university in order that they would be able to speak into public life and influence the hearts and minds of the increasing numbers of secondary and tertiary educated people in our culture, it still seems to me important to find ways to persist and whatever congregation shows up in Great St Mary's next month it will not reach 7 million!

An Analysis of 25 TFTDs 2014-2017

Time and space only allow me to make a few points here but I hope it will be useful to consider the strategies I have adopted for speaking of God in public within the 25 TFTDs that I have broadcast.

Over the last two years or so I have dealt with a range of themes from matters of prison policy to matters of international relations. The most frequent issues to trigger a TFTD from me have been Terrorism, Natural Disasters, Economic policy and a variety of matters relating to human wellbeing.

Themes	Frequency
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Terror	6/25
Health	4/25
Disasters	4/25
Economic policy	4/25
Religion	2/25
International relations	3/25
Justice policy	1/25
Environmental policy	2/25

In that time the Christian resources that I have brought to bear on those subjects are overwhelmingly drawn from the Gospels – particularly the words and actions of Jesus.

Type of reference	Frequency
New Testament (Gospels)	15/25
Old Testament: Creation; Song of Songs; Commandments; Plagues of Egypt; Ecclesiastes; Revelation	5/25
Doctrines (incarnation/forgiveness/reconciliation/sacrifice/theodicy/evil/judgement/resurrection) and Theologians (Abba Mios; Rowan Williams; Miroslav Volf; John Wesley)	9/25
Practices of the Church (pilgrimage; singing at Conference; Christian Aid Week; ritual)	5/25
Church History/Saints	3/25
Hymns (Charles Wesley & Isaac Watts)	2/25
Liturgy (baptism; rite of reconciliation; Advent; Easter)	5/25

Though I have also introduced 9 theological themes, some theological writers, 5 references to the Old Testament and 2 to the 18th century hymnody...

Most of the TFTDs I offered, however, also referenced some other cultural theme or academic piece of work:

Type of reference	Frequency
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History	6/25
Social Anthropology	3/25
Science (evolutionary biology; environmental science)	3/25
TV/radio	2/25
Art	3/25
Philosophy	1/25
Film	1/25
Literature & Poetry	3/25
Other religious/cultural traditions	1/25
Psychology	2/25

At one level these tables are interesting for what they reveal about me and the connections I see and the way I think. I began my university career as an historian and took social anthropology papers as part of my theology degree and so it is not surprising that these are resources on which I draw. Other resources I have had to become more familiar with my necessity and this is certainly true where any scientific theories or research has been relevant.

I think though that there are already some pointers here to useful apologetic strategies:

First, you need to know something about the worlds of the people you are trying to address (in my case, Radio 4 listeners) and be able to draw on common reference points like Clare Balding; Anthony Gormley; the Eurovision Song Contest and reporting on the EU Referendum. (If I were speaking on Radio 2 or on local radio the audience would be different and I would need to think differently about what might be common ground). This means that to engage effectively in apologetics we need not to spend all our time reading the Bible – but engaging in contemporary culture and finding meaning there.

Second, on the other hand, it is no good being so immersed in contemporary culture that we have nothing on which to draw from the Christian tradition. A good working knowledge of the New Testament is very useful, but so too has been the work I have done on the contexts in which the Bible was written and the doctrinal themes that thread through the Scriptures like incarnation, redemption and theodicy. Remembering too that hymns and liturgies, Christian practices and figures from the past can also be brought to bear broadens the range of connections that can be made and heard – especially for those who believe

that they have already heard everything that Christianity has to say, having an new resource to introduce can be helpful.

My third observation from this data concerns the way in which art, literature, film and other cultural artefacts as well as the writings of philosophers, psychologists, social anthropologists and medical scientists can be used – not just to demonstrate a knowledge of the context, but to help make crucial connections.

Let me explain what I mean. At a more detailed level of analysis I tried next to think about the structure of each of my 25 TFTDs. I thought about them each on two axes. The first axis (A,B,C) concerns the trigger for the thought and where it began – was it with church news? Or with other news? Or with a story in which the Church is being reported on for its impact in society?

What is the Thought trying to say? What is the intended impact?



	1: Impact on personal and spiritual life	2: Impact on social, economic and political life	3: Impact on church in society
A: Starts with the Church in the News	1	1	
B: Starts with Other News	6 (+4)	15 (+4)	1
C: Starts with Church as part of Society news			1

The second axis (1,2 3) concerns the purpose of the Thought and its intended impact? Is it intended to shape the personal and spiritual lives of individuals, social economic and political life in this country, or the way in which the Church impacts society?

You can see from the chart here that I rarely begin with the Church in the news. Partly this is because the Church is not all that often in the news and if I'm not the first person to get to the Pope's latest statement about women deacons then I am not going to be able to speak about it. Only three times have I taken a religious story and worked with it – most recently in discussing the relics of Thomas Becket being brought to the UK from Hungary with the

intention of getting individuals interested in the practice of pilgrimage. The previous summer I commented on the Church of England's decision to put 'evil' back into the baptismal liturgy used this as an opportunity to ask listeners what kind of promises we want to make to our children and what kind of a society we need in order to honour those promises? And I wondered aloud whether in building such a society, a language of good and evil might be necessary if we are to identify and work against the things that threaten our children's wellbeing.

On the other occasion I was commenting on the need for the churches, like other institutions to look seriously at the abuses of children and vulnerable adults in our histories – not only so that we can apologise, but so that we can change our ways. This was the only example I could find of a story in which the issues facing the Church and those facing wider society were identical, reinforcing the point about the ways in which the institution of the church has become marginal to social and political life in Britain. In terms of apologetics this forces us to choose either to begin in the world of the Church that to many may seem quirky or irrelevant, or to begin in the secular marketplace where it is difficult sometimes to articulate the connections with what matters most deeply to us.

By far the most numerous of my TFTDs are those that start partly or wholly in the public square. 19/25 do this and of these only 5 take the thought solely in the direction of a personal and spiritual implication, rather than keeping the Thought relevant to the social economic and political world in which it arose. In this way I hope to resist the pressure to allow the world to be separated into spiritual matters on which the Church may comment and temporal matters on which it should keep its nose out, and to preserve a genuinely public space where Christian voices may be heard alongside voices from other points of view. (On this subject I was particularly delighted to hear Howard Jacobson's Point of View broadcast on Radio 4 on 27 December 2015 who argued that he would sooner see Radio 4's Thought for the Day more not less religious. Speaking against those humanists who demand that religious voices address only religious subjects he said, "I fall to wondering what exactly non-religious needs are, and whether, by insisting on a distinction between the religious and the non-religious, humanists aren't making an unpardonably limiting assumption about both.")

In a liberal democracy that protects the rights and freedoms of the individual, surely everyone should have the right to speak out of their own framework and on any matter of public concern. That Christianity is relevant to public life is a commitment I hold. That its relevance needs demonstrating is self-evident from the mortifying neglect from which the wisdom of the Christian tradition suffers in our culture.

Bringing that wisdom to bear though, is not something that can be done in an overbearing or over-direct way. One of the key things I notice about the way in which I construct the Thoughts I broadcast is that they often proceed crabwise in order to make their point. Often I bring in insights from social anthropology or psychology, or that strike me out of a

piece of art or in a piece of literature because in a world in which Christianity has lost authority the resonance of its wisdom with wisdom being discovered in other ways helps people to hear it.

So, in the aftermath of the massacre of Iraqis by IS in June 2015 I wanted to speak about the way in which human beings recycle violence, the dangers of getting our revenge and the injunction of Jesus to pray for our enemies. I began though by describing a video installation by Dennis Oppenheim entitled, 'Two stage transfer drawing' in which an artist draws on the naked back of another artist, who semi-automatically, reproduces the same design on the page in front of him. I saw this installation in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Hiroshima, and so I went on to describe the twisted metal of the A bomb dome – one of the few buildings in Hiroshima to survive the fire ball that engulfed the city killing perhaps as many as 140,000 people – where is a memorial to the dead that Barack Obama has recently visited. It says: 'Let all the souls here rest in peace for we shall not repeat the evil.'

Only then did I come to the words of Jesus. Rather than appealing first to a scripture to which most of my audience would not ascribe authority, I appealed first to art and then to the bitter lessons of human experience, before allowing people to see the connection between these and the words of Jesus.

As a strategy, this is something I repeat time and again and I think that what I am doing is something that Chris Chivers speaks about in his book, *Telling it Slant: broadcasting faith in a contemporary world*. The book collates Chris Chivers broadcasts on the daily service – a softer medium than the cut and thrust of the Today programme – and yet even here Chris says that he has learnt from the poem of Emily Dickenson who wrote:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

Whilst Wesley's strategy in the public square that was the University of Oxford was to tell the plain truth with some urgency, achieving perhaps nothing much more than getting himself thrown out, Emily Dickenson urges on us all the wisdom of telling the whole truth but letting it dawn on people slowly. *Success in Circuit lies* (not our kind of circuit obviously!). Whereas St Paul was blinded on the road, Emily Dickenson suggests that for most of us truth dawns more slowly, and needs to, lest like him we be blinded by it.

I have in this section then, drawn out three strategies for apologetics that I think are of general application:

1. Know your context and common ground
2. Know your Christian sources and resources
3. Tell it slant by means other than 'authoritative Christian sources'

III A Wesleyan apologetic?

In this third part of the lecture I now want to consider my theological orientation to the task of apologetics as it is revealed by an analysis of my TFTDs and compare my theological emphases with those of John Wesley in his Sermon on Scriptural Christianity to see whether or not I am succeeding in being 'different in order to be the same.' Or in other words, whether I am conveying an authentic Wesleyan message.

Those of you who are well versed in Wesleyan theology will have spotted in the last section references to the authority of scripture but also to other sources for theology, namely experience and art. The Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience was not an invention of Wesley's but of the 20th century. Nevertheless it is a feature of Wesley's theological work that he interpreted Scripture using the three other lenses and in that sense I hope I follow in his footsteps.

In terms of strategy however, where he was speaking to audiences who largely were not questioning the authority of Scripture, I am not and however centrally I place the task of interpreting the biblical text I cannot expect my audience to care about that per se. Rather, through the canons of secular reason, of science and psychology and social anthropology I hope to demonstrate the wisdom of much of Scripture, particularly of the words of Jesus; and by appeal to human experience through art and history and poetry I hope to help people recognize themselves in the parables I tell. This is not to make all human experience authoritative – for Wesley the experience that was authoritative was the experience of God at work in the body of Christ and was not a fundamentalism of a post-enlightenment sort.

However, because Wesley did recognize the Spirit of God at work preveniently throughout God's creation and amongst all God's people I feel that an authentic Wesleyan apologetics (not unlike Paul's in Athens) will always look for God already at work in individuals and in society and point to this as something that people already know something about. Indeed, in setting about the apologetic task with seriousness, we may even learn something new about God's very self ourselves and not just about how to communicate God to others.

Yesterday my Thought was the result of such a process. I began thinking about the mudslides in Colombia and the obligation to cover another disaster and the compassion fatigue that we all feel in a news saturated world. Fresh in my mind was the Westminster attack and the shock of half hearing the story and fearing how high the death toll would be and the gradual realisation that we were not looking at another Nice – in fact the fatalities

were only five. I began to think about the way in which we wait for the numbers of those caught up in a disaster to know how much compassion or attention to spare, and shamed by my own response I wanted to get to the God who numbers the hairs on the heads of each person.

As I thought about how to communicate the profound care that God has for everything and everyone that he has made I kept reading the news and found an article about the death of the Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko – not someone I had heard of. Someone had tweeted a poem of his called, 'People', the translation of which a classmate had passed him at school:

In any man who dies there dies with him
his first snow and kiss and fight.
It goes with him.
There are left books and bridges
and painted canvas and machinery.
Whose fate is to survive.
But what has gone is also not nothing:

Here, I thought, is an evocation of something holy – the unique preciousness of each human life – of which we become aware as we mourn their loss - here is the intimacy with which I believe God knows us and here is a sense of what it is that God holds and holds precious as he numbers the hairs of our heads. Here is a sound bite that does justice to something: 'In any man who dies there dies with him his first snow and kiss and fight.'

But as I read some more about Yevtushenko I discovered that he was most famous for breaking the silence in the USSR about the Nazi atrocity at Babi Yar – a ravine outside Kiev that in 1941 was used as a mass grave for some 35,000 Jews – Yevtushenko broke the silence by writing a poem, later set to music by Shostakovitch called the Massacre at Babi Yar. The poem begins with the often quoted lines:

No monument stands over Babi Yar.
A steep cliff only, like the rudest headstone.
I am afraid.

But it continues:

Today, I am as old
As the entire Jewish race itself.
I see myself an ancient Israelite.
I wander o'er the roads of ancient Egypt
And here, upon the cross, I perish, tortured

And even now, I bear the marks of nails.

And here in a couplet is a whole theology of suffering. Not only Yevtushenko's identification with Jewish suffering, but through his identification of Christ as a Jew, Yevtushenko's identification with Jewish suffering through Christ. Christ who continues – as he does in images of his resurrection – to bear the scars of the cross and of all human suffering.

And further, here is Christ, identified by the marks of nails – a person, unique, and known even in death through the particularity of his life – valued and loved and precious and recognisable and held.

And so into my Thought came not only Yevtushenko's poetry as a way of saying what I would have said anyway, but the doctrine of the resurrection and the season of Easter, represented to me through his poetry that I say something profound about Christ's resurrection – not as a magic trick that makes an excuse for a Spring festival – but as a sign of God's intimate knowledge and care for us as individuals – even in our loss, whether at Babi Yar, in Colombia or closer to home.

In terms of theological method and in terms of apologetic strategy then I think that Wesley and I have something in common. Wesley, who could see God at work in Jews and even a Mohamadan. But the last thing that I want to mention concerns content.

Because I am speaking on the Today programme, I am bound to speak about politics and economics and social life but my insistence that I will not be pushed into speaking only to individuals about their moral choices and spiritual lifestyles nor to the mildly interested about the quirks of Christian practice, I believe, with Wesley there is no holiness but social holiness – that love of God must be worked out in terms of love of neighbour and that God's concern is not for the few but for the whole inhabited earth. In this sense also I try not only to address things happening in the domestic news but draw attention to events in other parts of the world in an echo of one of Mr Wesley's famous and often misquoted sound bites – now correctly inscribed in the new gatehouse at Wesley House: 'I look upon all the world as my parish.'

In the end to me apologetics must matter not because it's only fair that Christians have their say in a liberal democracy; or to make us feel less marginal in a complex postmodern world; but because we believe that God's wisdom, incarnate in Christ, has something to offer the world that the world cannot offer itself. Finding new ways to embody and articulate that wisdom for our own time and place is a challenge into which all Christians are invited.

Postscript: Can God be broadcast in soundbites?

Last of all: on the one hand sound bites may not be the most effective way to speak of God... it remains hard to find ways to convey the depth and profundity of God in 2'45 in a culture that wants instant answers. There are always complexities and subtleties and more angles to explore than a couple of minutes can possibly convey and the risk is to mislead or to over-simplify.

Yet I continue to see Thought for the Day and other such Godslots as part of the attempt to do what Alan Billings calls, making God possible for people to whom God seems intellectually or spiritually impossible or out of reach. Who knows, perhaps this week someone who would not otherwise have done will follow up the reference to nails in Yevtushenko's poem; perhaps this week someone who would not otherwise have done will look at a painting of the risen Christ and think about why the marks of the nails might be there; and perhaps even someone who would not otherwise have done will want to know more about the God who numbers even the hairs on our heads.

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