

# **The Psalms and Spirituality**

**A STUDY OF MEDITATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH SELECTED PSALMS  
AMONG EDINBURGH STUDENTS**

**Fergus Alexander James Macdonald**

**PhD**

**University of Edinburgh**

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This is to certify that this thesis has been composed by me and is my own work. The thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Fergus Alexander James Macdonald

## ABSTRACT

This study is the account of an empirical research programme in practical theology exploring the potential of the Book of Psalms to facilitate the spiritual journey of a sample of University of Edinburgh students aged between twenty and thirty who are on or beyond the fringes of the churches. Drawing upon some insights of the Bible Society movement regarding 'scripture engagement,' and in the wider context of increasing interest in spirituality and decreasing confidence in the churches among many westernised young adults, the project seeks to answer two research questions. First, how far does creative engagement with specific psalm texts in the form of a semi-structured three-week meditative spiritual journey facilitate the quest of contemporary young adults for personal meaning and spiritual enlightenment? Second, what does this study contribute to the current debate among the Bible Societies and other Bible agencies concerning the nature of Scripture engagement?

In the first part of the thesis I review the debate on Scripture engagement, exploring the contemporary sacred landscape, and elucidating why the Book of Psalms was chosen for this exercise. Additionally, I develop the theological-cultural framework employed in interpreting the data. In the second part I describe respondents' meditative engagement with six psalms and identify six main findings. These findings are: that 'subjective-life' and 'like-as' modes of spirituality coexist in some respondents and that the subjectivism of the psalms provides a bridge between them; that the cursing psalms, although considered by many respondents to be unacceptable, have potential to foster non-violence in conflict situations; that a desire to resolve suffering is a feature of the self-identity of many respondents; that meditating on the psalms fosters faith commonly as a generic process and particularly as theological trust; that interacting with psalmic texts helps to resolve the disorientation often experienced when facing confusing lifestyle choices; that meditating on the psalms provides space in which to reflect on the moral ambiguities of life.

In the third part I evaluate the findings, concluding that the creative engagement between respondents and text results from respondents discovering that the psalms resonate with their idealism and basic human needs in ways that facilitate their ongoing spiritual quest for meaning and enlightenment, as well as providing an opportunity to confront God with complaints and dilemmas. I question some of the prevailing thinking on Scripture

engagement for being too exclusively outcomes oriented, and suggest that meditative engagement with psalms could become a gateway to interacting with other biblical texts. My subsidiary findings are: that respondents believe audio texts enhance their use of print, appreciate the perspective psalm meditation provides on contemporary events and trends, are fascinated by psalmic metaphor, and find some readers' helps more useful than others. I indicate areas where further research would be useful and outline some future directions that the Bible agencies might fruitfully follow in developing Scripture engagement resources for the churches.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	American Bible Society
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
BDT	<i>Baker's Dictionary of Theology</i>
BT	<i>Bible Translator</i>
CD	<i>Church Dogmatics</i>
CEV	<i>Contemporary English Version</i>
DETS	<i>Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society</i>
ESV	<i>English Standard Version</i>
GNB	<i>Good News Bible</i>
GNB 2	<i>Good News Bible, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.</i>
FOBAI	Forum of Bible Agencies International
HP	<i>A Handbook on the Psalms</i> . New York, 1991
KJV	<i>King James Version</i>
LOC	The 'Life of Christ' video series, American Bible Society
NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
REB	<i>Revised English Bible</i>
RSV	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>
ST	<i>Systematic Theology</i>
TEV	<i>Today's English Version</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TP	Theistic Practice
UBS	United Bible Societies

### Abbreviations for respondent data

**D** followed by a numeral from 1-7 indicates the day of the week's journal entry, e.g. D4 refers to the fourth day's entry. Where the psalm to which journal entries refer is not clear from the immediate context, it is prefixed to the reference, e.g. Ps 55-D2.

**L** is used to identify data gathered during the *Lectio Divina* sessions. Where the immediate context does not make clear which psalm is in view the psalm number prior to the L indicates the text and the number following the L is the page number of the *Lectio Divina* transcripts, e.g. Ps 55-L: 4 signifies the page number of the transcript of the group mediation of Psalm 55.

**I** refers to the follow-up interview carried out with each respondent. The number immediately following the I indicates the respondent and the final number refers to the page of the interview transcript, e.g. I-5: 1 indicates the first page on the transcript of Connie's interview. I accorded the following interview numbers to the respondents: Liz (1); Tom (2); Norah (3); John (4); Connie (5); Luke (6); Kate (7); Elsie (8); Ashok (9); Saul (10); Edith (11); Flora (12), and Joan (13).

**PrM** refers to the notes of the discussion at the preparatory meeting held with respondents before the meditations began, e.g. PrM: 2-3 refers to page 2 and 3 of the record of the meeting.

## CONTENTS

### PART I: SETTING THE SCENE

- |    |   |    |
|----|---|----|
| 1. | Introduction                                    | 2  |
| 2. | Developing a Theoretical Framework              | 23 |
| 3. | Research Design, Pilot Project, and Psalm Texts | 44 |

### PART II: ENGAGING WITH THE PSALMS

- |    |                                  |     |
|----|----------------------------------|-----|
| 4. | Self and Soul                    | 63  |
| 5. | Vengeance and Non-Violence       | 79  |
| 6. | Suffering and Self-Identity      | 96  |
| 7. | Faith and Ultimate Being         | 112 |
| 8. | Disorientation and Reorientation | 129 |
| 9. | Psalms and Qualms                | 149 |

### PART III: EVALUATING THE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PSALMS

- |     |                                   |     |
|-----|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 10. | The Dynamics of the Psalm Journey | 168 |
| 11. | What is Scripture Engagement?     | 187 |
| 12. | <i>Quo Vadis?</i>                 | 208 |

APPENDICES 224

BIBLIOGRAPHY 317

## **PART I: SETTING THE SCENE**

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

The decision to undertake this research project was born out of an experience of thirty years in the Bible Society movement resulting in a keen interest in the popular use of the Bible. The principal focus of the study is ‘Scripture engagement’ as understood and undertaken by the United Bible Societies in serving Christian Churches of all confessions. The study’s specific context is the claim that an apparent openness to spirituality exists among some young westernised adults in their twenties who pursue this interest with little or no reference to the Bible or to the churches (Brierley and Sanger 1999).<sup>1</sup> Although studies exist on the attitudes and practices of this audience in relation to religion (e.g. Brierley 2001), none of these directly addresses the challenges the Bible Societies face in seeking to facilitate Scripture engagement by young adults who are on or beyond the fringe of the churches. In brief, my project is an attempt to explore Scripture engagement in the context of the churches’ mission and to understand it as an important form of Christian practice. The pilot project was undertaken in partnership with the American Bible Society, and the main project with support from the Scottish Bible Society. Throughout both phases I received ongoing encouragement from some key members of United Bible Societies staff.

The central questions that my research sets out to answer are: (1) How far can meditative engagement with specific psalm texts facilitate the spiritual quest of young adults for personal meaning and spiritual enlightenment? (2) To what extent does this engagement contribute to the current debate among the Bible Societies and other Bible agencies about the nature of Scripture engagement? As far as I am aware, the present project is the first empirical exploration of the relationship between the Psalms and contemporary young adult spirituality. If this is, indeed, the case, it underlines the need for further research in this area.

These two questions are asked in a specific context, which I intend to describe in this chapter. That context has three main aspects. First, there is the concept and practice of Scripture engagement within the United Bible Societies. Second, there is the resurgence of interest in

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<sup>1</sup> In Brierley’s Generation X survey (2001) 67% of the non-Christian respondents read the Bible hardly ever or never. In the focus groups research undertaken by Hay in the Adults’ Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham in 2000, not one of the focus group participants mentioned reading the Bible (Hay and Hunt: 31).

spirituality in many western secularised societies which to a large extent have lost an awareness of religious tradition. Third, there is the decision to use selected psalms from the Old Testament as appropriate Scripture texts for the study.<sup>2</sup> Each of these aspects will now be reviewed in turn.

### 1. Scripture engagement

Although the term, 'Scripture', may refer to a range of sacred texts, in this study it is used exclusively of the Old and New Testaments. In my pilot project (which is reported in Appendix 5) the specific Scriptures utilised were six video translations of four incidents and two parables from the Gospels, published by the American Bible Society under the series title *Life of Christ* (LOC). In my main project, 'Scripture' refers primarily to selected psalms from the Old Testament and, where appropriate, to other biblical texts that either allude to these psalms or are themselves alluded to by them.

The phrase 'Scripture engagement' may be a relatively recent addition to the internal vocabulary of the Bible Societies, but in order to understand the current debate it is necessary to consider the historical roots of this concept. The idea of Scripture engagement has been implicit from the foundation of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in 1804, the date regarded as marking the inception of the global Bible Society movement (Robertson: 2) which since 1946 has found expression in the United Bible Societies (UBS)<sup>3</sup>. Although the BFBS was formed in response to a need for Bibles in the Welsh language, the vision of the founders was much wider: 'If for Wales, why not for the world?'<sup>4</sup> The mission of the BFBS was to 'encourage a wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures' and it decided that these Scriptures would be published 'without note or comment'.<sup>5</sup> The phrase 'without note or comment' was replicated in the

<sup>2</sup> Although the term 'Hebrew Bible' is often used nowadays, I have chosen to stay with the more traditional terminology of the 'Old Testament' since my work is framed within the context of Christian mission.

<sup>3</sup> The United Bible Societies was formed in 1946 as a cooperative of 9 national Bible Societies, and today is made up of 105 member Bible Societies and 50 national offices, which together form a network serving over 180 countries. At the beginning of 2005 the UBS was helping to coordinate over 600 translation projects, and in 2004 had distributed over 500 million pieces of Scripture, which included 25 million Bibles, 12.5 million Testaments, 30 million Portions and 323 million Selections. One of the key resources provided by UBS is a team of over 150 Translation Consultants who monitor translation projects, produce technical helps for translators and make a major contribution to the ongoing debate on Scripture engagement.

<sup>4</sup> These words are attributed to Joseph Hughes, a founder who was to become one of the first Secretaries of the BFBS. See Canton 1908 and Burke 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Article 1 of the BFBS *Laws and Regulations*, cited in Burke: 299.

constitutions not only of the many local Bible Societies in the UK founded under the inspiration of the BFBS, including the Edinburgh and Glasgow Bible Societies (which later in 1861 united to form the National Bible Society of Scotland), but also of Bible Societies founded under the same inspiration in other countries. The most notable of these early overseas Bible Societies was undoubtedly the American Bible Society (ABS) founded in 1816. Peter A. Jay (eldest son of John Jay, first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States) addressed the new society in the following terms:

Our object is to distribute the Holy Scriptures without note or comment. At this, no politician can be alarmed, no sectary can be reasonably jealous. We shall distribute no other book, we shall teach no disputed doctrine. Laying aside for this purpose the banners of our respective corps, we assemble under the sole standard of the great captain of our salvation. We endeavor to extend his reign, and in his name alone we contend.<sup>6</sup>

The rationale for the ‘without note or comment’ limitation by the early Bible Societies was missional. ‘It was precisely their model of setting aside their own particular doctrinal stances for the sake of advancing the cause with and in all ecclesial spheres of Christendom that was the key to making the movement work.’ (Burke: 301). Implicit in this position was the view that the doctrinal interpretation of Scripture is not the Bible Societies’ task, but rather that of the churches.<sup>7</sup> Also implicit may have been a conviction that the Scriptures, with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, were sufficient in themselves to engage with readers and hearers. Thomas Chalmers, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish church leader and theologian and an ardent supporter of the new Bible Society movement, told the secretaries of the Fife and Kinross Bible Society in a letter of 20 October 1813, that missionary experience made it clear that ‘the Christianity of the bible gains a readier access into the hearts of the ignorant than the Christianity of sermons and systems and human compositions.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Peter A. Jay, ‘Address to the Founders’, in *Proceedings of a Meeting of the Citizens of New York and Others, convened in the City Hall on 13 May 1816 at the request of the Board of Managers*, American Bible Society, New York 1816, cited in Burke: 299.

<sup>7</sup> This view continues to hold sway, and was well articulated in 1971 by F. Donald Coggan, then President of the United Bible Societies: ‘A clear distinction must be made. It is not the task of the Bible Societies to engage in detailed exposition of the Scriptures. That is the abiding work of churches into whose hands the Bible Societies put those Scriptures’ (Coggan: 103).

<sup>8</sup> W. Hanna, *A selection from the correspondence of the late Thomas Chalmers*, 1853, in Roxborough: 58.

Although the phrase ‘without note or comment’ came to be regarded as ‘the Bible Society Movement’s Fundamental Principle’ (the subtitle of Burke’s article), it did not prevent early editions of the King James Version (KJV) distributed by BFBS and ABS from carrying some of the marginal notes which had regularly appeared in editions of the KJV since 1762, such as cross-references, alternative readings, chapter summaries, etc.<sup>9</sup> This assumption that the average person could meaningfully engage with the Scriptures without the help of marginal notes other than these very basic annotations of the standard King James Bible, was no doubt made against a background of a considerable degree of popular biblical literacy in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain and America, and it continued to undergird the growth and expansion of the Bible Society movement over the first 130 years of its history.

It was not until 1939 that the need for a more nuanced understanding of the traditional mandate, ‘without note or comment’, was recognised (Burke: 305). In that year representatives of the BFBS, ABS and the Bible Societies of the Netherlands and Scotland met at Zeist, in the Netherlands, to discuss the issue of readers’ ‘helps’.<sup>10</sup> This move towards a broader concept of readers’ helps was a response to changes in the audiences Bible Societies were seeking to reach. ‘It was understood that, if the message and meaning of the Bible were to reach contemporary readers (who increasingly bring less and less background knowledge to their reading of the Bible), new strategies would be needed to assure increased understanding.’ (Burke: 311). However, it was not until 1968 (BFBS) and 1971 (ABS) that ‘the fundamental principle’ was formally revised by the two largest members of UBS.<sup>11</sup>

Two significant documents contributed to that revision (Ellingworth: 4). The first was Eugene Nida’s comprehensive paper on ‘Marginal Helps for the Reader’ (BT 9/1 (1958): 1-21) which

<sup>9</sup> The ABS understandably excluded the KJV’s dedication to the British king.

<sup>10</sup> According to Paul Ellingworth, this was a key turning point in that it formally recognised the need of ‘helps for readers’ and foreshadowed the revision of the ‘fundamental principle’ which would take place in the 1970s (Ellingworth 1989). The phrase ‘readers’ helps’ was popularised by the article ‘Marginal Helps for the Reader’ by Eugene A. Nida (BT 9/1 (1958)).

<sup>11</sup> In 1968 BFBS amended its by-laws to read: ‘publication and circulation should normally be without “note or comment” other than aids to readers... approved by... the Society’. (Burke: 326, n 47). ABS made a similar constitutional revision in 1971 which spelt out more explicitly the determination to avoid explicit creedal assertions or advocacy for theological positions (Burke: 309) by stating that the only purpose of the Society ‘shall be to promote the distribution of the Holy Scriptures without doctrinal note or comment....’. (Minutes of ABS Program Committee meeting of 20 January 1971, cited in Burke: 309).

argued that marginal helps 'are nothing more nor less than the inevitable means by which we permit the text to speak for itself in some degree equivalent to the manner in which it spoke to those who first received it' (21). Nida, who worked for ABS and UBS, identified two principal types of readers' helps: (1) identificational, e.g. section headings; (2) explanatory e.g. cultural differences such as anointing with oil. Nida contended that the nature and the range of helps to be provided should be determined by the constituency which any particular edition of the Scriptures had in view. The needs of people groups in, say Africa, receiving the Scriptures for the first time in their language are very different from those of audiences with a long Christian tradition (e.g. German speakers). In summary, Nida (1958:20-21) stated that the actual form of footnotes should be determined by the application of the following principles: (1) the note should clarify and not complicate; (2) the explanation should take into consideration the background of the reader; (3) the note should be as brief as possible; and (4) the explanation should avoid all doctrinal interpretations or emotionally charged accusations or innuendoes.

The second significant publication leading to the revision of 'the fundamental principle' was the UBS-Vatican Guiding *Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible* of 1968, which authorised the inclusion in interconfessional Bibles of the following kinds of helps: alternative readings, alternative renderings, explanation of proper names, plays on words, historical backgrounds, cultural differences, cross-references and section headings. In addition, some supplementary features up to that point avoided by Bible Societies were validated: indexes, concordances, maps, and illustrations.

The 1970s witnessed the publication of common language versions of the Bible based on functional equivalence (meaning for meaning) translation, pioneered by Eugene Nida and the American Bible Society. The first was the *Good News Bible* which carried marginal notes that 'typically provided important socio-cultural, historical or linguistic information, which was familiar to people in Bible times, but no longer common knowledge' (Burke: 311).

As the fellowship of Bible Societies composing the United Bible Societies grew in numbers and in mutual trust, the boundaries of Scripture engagement were pushed outwards. The UBS Council meeting held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1980, moved the emphasis from 'How far can we go?' to 'What do readers need?' (Robertson: 258). The creative thinking at Chiang Mai had

a major influence on the ABS Vision Statement for the 1990s, where we find a similar expansion of focus from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader. Among the things this statement affirmed was that ‘With regard to challenges facing the ABS, the Bible cause is more than production and distribution. It is the promulgation of effective Bible reading in terms of changed lives and changed conditions of justice and fairness.’ (Burke: 310-11).

A logical next step was the creation of UBS Study Bibles. In 1992 the UBS approved ‘Guidelines for Study Bibles’, a five-page document produced through a consultative process under the coordination of Paul Ellingworth (Burke: 312). Here again we find a broadening of the focus from narrowly considering the context of the text to take into account also the context of the reader.<sup>12</sup> *The Learning Bible*, published by ABS in 2000, became the first Bible Society Bible to include ‘Reflection Questions’ at regular intervals while seeking to avoid doctrinal and prescriptive comments.

Several Bible Societies, including those in the UK, responded enthusiastically to the challenge to facilitate Scripture engagement. From the 1990s onwards the *Bibleworld* projects of the Scottish Bible Society opened up new areas in Scripture engagement by children, and these projects have been replicated in other countries, including Peru, Egypt and Lebanon.<sup>13</sup> Another example of the Bible Societies’ approach to Scripture engagement was the launch in 1998 of the BFBS partnership with Churches Together in England and Wales in the ‘Open Book’ programme, which sought to advocate the Bible’s credibility through creative engagement with the wider

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<sup>12</sup> In paragraph 1.1 the Guidelines assert that a Study Bible will contain ‘in addition to readers’ helps, further helps intended to enable readers to understand more fully, and practically to apply to themselves, the meaning of the biblical text’. The subsequent paragraph (1.2), which emphasises that UBS Study Bibles will exclude doctrinal note and comment, concludes as follows: ‘The study materials, however, should be written so as to allow the readers to discover applications to their own situations.’

<sup>13</sup> The *Bibleworld* experience for visiting school children was opened in 1991. It offered both a lo-tech and a hi-tech interactive experience of the Bible involving a simulated journey in a time capsule back to the Gospels. Alongside this journey were computer activity programmes in ‘mission control’ and also some lo-tech activities like colouring an ancient biblical manuscript in the ‘Scriptorium’ while dressed as Celtic monks. *Bibleworld* was considered successful and *Bibleworld 2*, a mobile version for visiting schools, was opened in 1996. In 2003 *Bibleworld 1* was replaced by *Bibleworld Experience* which provides interactive activities for adults as well as children, and in 2005 *Bibleworld 2* was replaced by *Bibleworld: SBS Studios*, a 45-foot-long mobile classroom. Between 1991 and mid-2007 over 90,000 children visited *Bibleworlds 1* and 2, resources that came to be highly regarded by Scottish educational authorities.

culture, especially key influencers such as Arts, Politics, Media and Education (Spriggs).<sup>14</sup> The 1990s also saw a new emphasis being laid on the strategic importance of producing ‘human-need-centred Scriptures;’ one example of these is the portion *Living in Hope*, produced by the Bible Society of South Africa and widely distributed among AIDS sufferers in Africa. A report of the UBS General Secretary to the UBS Executive Committee in May 2000, entitled ‘From First to Twenty-first: The Bible Societies and Scripture Engagement’, offered a broadened rationale for Bible Society proactive involvement in Scripture engagement. It argued that the traditional division of labour between Bible Societies and churches, in which the Bible Societies translated and distributed the Scriptures and the churches dealt with their use or non-use, was too simplistic. Both the Bible Societies and the churches had complementary roles in Scripture use: ‘while the churches help people engage with the Scriptures, the Bible Societies help the Scriptures engage with people’ (Macdonald 2004: 145). The report contended that the need for greater Bible Society involvement in Scripture engagement was inherent in the nature of the Bible as *story* and in its invitation to readers to enter the narrative, thus becoming involved in it and responding to it.<sup>15</sup>

When the UBS was founded in 1946 its purpose was defined as achieving the translation and distribution of the Scriptures. In 1977 ‘use’ was added to ‘translation’ and ‘distribution’. But it was not until October 2000 that the UBS World Assembly, meeting in Midrand, South Africa, formally affirmed Scripture engagement in its purpose statement by defining the Bible Societies’ common task as ‘achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures, and of helping people interact with the Word of God’. (*UBS Bulletin* 192/193, 2001: 55).

The implications of the Midrand decision are still being ardently debated and Scripture engagement is becoming a priority on the agenda of many Bible Societies. One fruit of this

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<sup>14</sup> David Spriggs in a paper entitled ‘Communicating the Bible in the Post-modern World’ presented to the Forum of Bible Agencies, meeting at Sunbury-on-Thames, 17-20 April 2000, related how the advance of secularisation and the advent of postmodernism had persuaded the BFBS to change the focus of its home programme from the availability and relevance of the Scriptures to their credibility.

<sup>15</sup> The report encouraged Bible Societies to greater exploration in the production of readers’ helps designed to encourage engagement through six ‘models’: meditation, prompts to transpose the text into another medium, improvising the contemporary continuation of the biblical story, greater use of imagination, offering contextualising questions for the reader to put to the text, and suggesting interactive approaches in which specific audiences could relate the text to their felt needs.

debate was the publication in 2003 of a *UBS Background Paper* (Noss) in which the UBS Scripture Project Team defined ‘Scripture engagement’ as ‘a concept that emphasises making the Scriptures discoverable, accessible, and relevant’. It went on to explain that this involves, first, ‘making the Bible recoverable and discoverable as sacred Scripture’, and, second, ‘making Scripture accessible as the place of life-enhancing and life-transforming encounter’. (Noss: 2).<sup>16</sup> The substance of the *Background Paper* is two papers by Joseph Crockett of the ABS, one a theoretical perspective and the other an empirical study. Both papers utilise insights from perception theory as developed by Gibson and Spelke, and from Elliot Turiel’s domain theory and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’. In his first paper, ‘Engaging Scripture in Everyday Situations: A Theoretical Perspective’, Crockett explores ‘some of the psychological and social processes that are critical components in individuals’ move from a transaction with Scripture to engagement with a potential life-changing text’ (3). His second paper, ‘Studying Religious Practices among African-American Adolescents: An Empirical Study’, is a quantitative examination undertaken in 2001 of the psychological and social processes involved in a random sample of 418 African-American adolescents’ engagement with Christian Scripture.<sup>17</sup> The audience is composed of African-American teens, 12-18 years of age, three-quarters of whom are church involved, and had read or studied the Bible within the last 30 days, as a result of which they had either received guidance and wisdom to make decisions, or grown closer in their relationship with God, or had better understood the purpose of life as being to know and serve God.<sup>18</sup> Crockett’s theoretical paper offers a comprehensive pragmatic description of Scripture engagement: ‘Scripture may be used as a spiritual guide, a reference book, a text for religious practice, a tool for living, a book of rules for moral behaviour, a basis for arranging human relationships, or a source for developing social policy’ (47). In addition, Crockett stresses that people can interact with the Bible and yet not live under its influence.

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<sup>16</sup> This definition was devised by the UBS Scripture Project Team.

<sup>17</sup> The *Background Paper* also contains responses to Crockett’s first paper from two UBS translation consultants, Gosnell Yorke and Esteban Voth, and a rejoinder from Crockett.

<sup>18</sup> Even accounting for the ‘halo effect’, Crockett’s sample is predominantly church involved. Crockett’s audience in the empirical study is so different from that of the Psalm Journey that meaningful comparison is limited.

The debate continues, not only in the UBS family, but also more recently in the Forum of Bible Agencies International (FOBAI).<sup>19</sup> A paper entitled ‘Exploring “Scripture Engagement”’ presented at the April 2005 meeting of the Forum, proposed the following as a tentative definition of Scripture engagement:

Scripture engagement is a process that enables people to encounter God through engaging with the Bible so that they may come to faith in Jesus Christ, grow in Christian maturity, and become both committed members of the Church and servants of a world in need.<sup>20</sup>

While this is very similar to the 2003 UBS definition, it goes further in explicitly describing Scripture engagement as facilitating an encounter with God and not simply with the text. The paper underlines the need for undertaking audience research and meeting identified audience needs. It also urges the Forum member agencies to focus on bringing about change in attitudes and behaviour towards the Bible in the churches and the wider culture in order to counteract the erosion in the position and use of the Bible brought about by secularism and consumerism.

The most recent contribution to the debate is a paper by C. Rene Padilla presented at the 2007 meeting of FOBAI entitled ‘Bible Engagement and Advocacy and Christian Mission Today’. Padilla laments that the Protestant churches of Latin America lack a hermeneutic that embraces sociological analysis which would make possible an engagement with Scripture where ‘The point is to let the text illuminate the contemporary situation and, at the same time, to let the contemporary situation illuminate the text – a hermeneutical circulation which would make it possible for the contemporary readers or hearers to perceive present-day reality from a biblical perspective, even as the original readers and hearers could perceive their own reality’ (6).

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<sup>19</sup> The Forum of Bible Agencies International is a network that includes the UBS, Summer Institute of Linguistics, International Bible Society, Lutheran Bible Translators and The Bible League. It was formed in 1990 to minimise competition and encourage cooperation in Bible work.

<sup>20</sup> The Scripture Engagement Development Group of the FOBAI, reporting to the annual meeting of the Forum in April 2007, provided a revised version of this definition: ‘Scripture Engagement describes the intersection of three elements...: a *process* by which individuals and communities gain access to the Word of God (in the most appropriate language(s) and media) , an ongoing set of *meaningful individual and group encounters* with God through his Word, and an intended *outcome* – people becoming followers of Jesus in the expectation that this will lead to their transformation as individuals and communities’. (Italics original).

Although Padilla's primary focus is on the Bible's role in the life of the churches, a very different setting from the 'open ground' beyond the institutional life of the churches where the Psalm Journey is set, his plea for new imaginative Bible study methods that will encourage readers and non-readers 'to enter into the biblical drama of redemption through... storytelling, art, meditation or contemplation' (17) is probably as pertinent to university students in the UK as it is to Latin Americans.<sup>21</sup> The debate among the Bible agencies is ongoing and it is my hope that this thesis may contribute creatively to it.

In this first section of the chapter I have traced the evolution of Scripture engagement across the 200-year history of the Bible Society movement. While an explicit focus on Scripture engagement did not develop until well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its roots go back to the founding documents of the early Bible Societies produced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scripture engagement is regarded as mainly a missional activity, aiming to help those who are on the fringe of the churches, or, indeed, who have never had any Christian links, to interact with the biblical text. The reason why the debate has widened and sharpened in recent years is found in the changing religious landscapes confronting the Bible agencies. I turn next to examine the religious landscape among western young adults in which the Psalm Journey took place.

## **2. The contemporary sacred landscape**

A review of various recent studies exploring the current state of religion in western societies reveals considerable diversity, but suggests there are three broad groupings of religious practice in the UK. The first grouping is 'institutional religion' (Bruce 1996b: 264) as expressed by the churches. The second grouping has been described as 'common religion' (Davie 1994: 83) and represents those who identify themselves as Christian but who are not church involved. The third grouping is composed of those who practise one or more of the New Age expressions of 'self-religion' (Heelas 1996: 221).<sup>22</sup> The first grouping is broadly characterised by sharp decline, the second by quiescence and the third by growth. In order to set the Psalm Journey in its religious context I now give a brief overview of each of these groupings.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The phrase 'open ground' is taken from Neilson.

<sup>22</sup> 'The New Age shows what "religion" looks like when it is organized in terms of what is taken to be the authority of the Self.' (Heelas 1996: 221).

<sup>23</sup> It must be emphasised that this three-fold division reflects a rough rather than a sharp analysis. For example, although there is overall decline in church membership and attendance, some churches – most

### 2.1 Institutionalised religion

Over the past sixty years there has been a steep decline in the popularity of traditional Christian practice in the United Kingdom, one indicator of which is the falling figures of church attendance which dropped by 33% between 1980 and 2005 (excluding Northern Ireland).<sup>24</sup> Davie reports roughly similar trends for western Europe (Davie 2002: 6-7).<sup>25</sup> In the UK the decline in churchgoing is most notable among young adults.<sup>26</sup> The low participation by young adults in traditional worship reflects the ‘the apparent fall in religiosity in younger generations’ obtaining throughout much of Western Europe (Davie 2000: 77). However, there are exceptions. For example, the Netherlands Bible Society reported in 2006 on a research project undertaken among Christian young people in Holland which found that almost 35% of those aged 16 to 25 said they read the Bible regularly.<sup>27</sup>

The decline in churchgoing is attributed by some to the secularisation of western societies (e.g. Martin 1978; Bruce 1996a). This view is generally accepted both inside and outside the churches, although Gill (1993) considers that the decline can be attributed as much to the churches’ ineptitude as to external social trends, and Brown (2001) questions the way the theory of secularisation has been applied by Bruce and others to account for the decline of religious institutions in the UK.<sup>28</sup> In Brown’s view the major key to religious decline is found in ‘folk’

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notably those with a charismatic focus –have registered significant growth. There are also creative new forms of church life among the various streams making up the ‘emerging churches’ (Gibbs and Bolger 2006; Ward 2002). In addition, this division does not reflect the presence of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, etc.

<sup>24</sup> Attendance, rather than church membership or the UK 2001 national census figures, is cited because it reflects religious practice rather than affiliation. When broken down by country, Wales showed the steepest decrease (53%), followed by Scotland (42%) and England (30%) (Brierley 2003b, Table 2.24; cf Brierley and Macdonald 1985; 1995). In 1988 Gill calculated that the churchgoing public then was less than one-sixth of its size at the height of Victorian churchgoing (Gill 1988:1).

<sup>25</sup> Gill (1993) presents data suggesting that the decline in British churchgoing began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>26</sup> In Scotland between 1984 and 2002 the number of church attenders aged 20-29 fell by 52% and those aged 30-44 by 37% (Brierley 2003a). The Welsh Churches Survey of 1995 revealed that only 4.1% of people aged 20-29 and 5.8% of those aged 30-44 were church attenders (J. Gallagher). The decline in England between 1979 and 1998 was 45% for those in their twenties, and 27% for those aged 30-44 (Brierley 2000: 94-95).

<sup>27</sup> Those from a Reformed background turn to it on average 25 times a month, while those with a Catholic upbringing read it an average of six times a month (UBS *World Report* 405, September/October 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Although the literature frequently refers to ‘the theory of secularisation’ there are, in fact, several such theories (Berger 1999; Davie 2000; Casanova 2003; Martin 2003).

religion rather than in institutionalised religion.<sup>29</sup> He claims that discursive Christianity in Britain suffered a grass roots collapse in the 1960s (Brown: 2); it was men and women as individuals ceasing to use Christianity as a means of constructing their identities and sense of self, and not failing churches, which, in his view, brought about what he describes as ‘the death of Christian Britain’.<sup>30</sup>

## 2.2 *Common religion*

Not all social researchers agree that secularisation inevitably leads to the demise of religion. Some studies suggest that religion is not so much dying as assuming new shapes, as it gives way to ‘spirituality’ (Davie 1994, 2000; Hay and Hunt 2000; Lynch 2002; for comparable studies in the USA see Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1994, 1999; Hoover 2003).<sup>31</sup> Davie (1994: 83) argues against the idea that the people of Britain are succumbing to secularisation, suggesting that while many may no longer wish to ‘belong’ to religious institutions, they do wish to affirm some form of faith in the supernatural. Her claims that a ‘common religion’ exists, representing a broad spectrum of religious belief and experience (Davie 1994: 83),<sup>32</sup> is supported by three MORI surveys carried out in 1998, 1999 and 2000 in which between 60% and 71% of respondents claim to believe in God, two of the surveys also indicating that more than half the British people believe in heaven (54% in 1998 and 58% in 1999).<sup>33</sup> Also in support of Davie’s assertion is the *The European Values Study* finding that across Western Europe in the 1990s belief in God, confidence in the church, and the proportion of those claiming they gain comfort from religion all increased (Halman, cited in MacLaren: 14).

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Secularisation – the decay of religiosity in all four traditional forms [i.e. institutional, intellectual, functional and diffusive] – is inconceivable without decay in discursive religiosity in which there is a loss of popular acceptance and recirculation of those discourses’ (Brown: 31).

<sup>30</sup> There has been a marked decline in church membership as well as in churchgoing: between 1960 and 2000 church membership dropped by 40%, a net 6,000 churches closed, and the number of ministers fell from 54,760 to 48,695 (Brierley and Sanger 1999: Table 2.12).

<sup>31</sup> Hoover (2003:11-12) identifies three trends that are restructuring religion from institutional authority to individual practice: (1) The fact of the seeking, questing, autonomous self; (2) the re-articulation of ‘religion’ into ‘spirituality’; (3) the fact that a market place of supply exists outside the bounds of traditional religion.

<sup>32</sup> According to Hay and Hunt (2000) slightly more than 76% of the national UK population are likely to admit to having had a spiritual or religious experience, this proportion increasing by almost 60% between 1987 and 2000. Cf. MacLaren’s observation: ‘sociologists have become suspicious of the “one-way street” theory of secularisation, and have begun to discern exceptions and U-turns’ (MacLaren: 18).

<sup>33</sup> ‘Paranormal survey conducted for the *Sun* between 4-5 February 1998’; *Sunday Telegraph* Millennium Poll conducted on 19 December 1999’; ‘Divine inspiration our speciality! Poll for BBC Online conducted on 14 January 2000’. These reports were downloaded from [www.mori.com/polls](http://www.mori.com/polls) on 06/09/05.

Gill (1993: 9) cites the strong religious attendance in the United States as evidence that secularisation is not a very useful explanation of decline in churchgoing.<sup>34</sup> However, there are differences in religious values in Europe and the United States. Americans and Europeans have differing perceptions and expectations of their respective churches: Americans regard churches as competing firms, while Europeans tend to think of them as public utilities to be contacted in emergencies. (Davie 2002: 43-44). The fact that American church attendance is relatively high does not necessarily mean that importing American strategies will reverse the European decline.<sup>35</sup>

Davie's questioning of the extent and inevitability of secularisation in Western Europe is strenuously contested by Bruce who argues that one or two indices of religious faith and experience are insufficient to refute the overall weight of the evidence for the extensive secularisation of British society. He contends that survey evidence for 'believing without belonging' has to be significantly qualified by, for example, the findings of the 1991 British Social Attitudes Survey that such 'believers' do not feel very close to God; nor do they hold social, cultural, economic or political views that distinguish them from unbelievers. While Bruce acknowledges that a majority of the British population still believe in God and that evidence exists for alternative forms of belief in the supernatural or the spiritual, he contends that belief in God and in orthodox Christian teaching is diminishing, and that the number of people showing interest in the new alternative 'self-religions' (a term he borrows from Heelas) is

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<sup>34</sup> 'Five Out of Seven Core Religious Behaviors Have Increased in the Past Decade According to Barna Survey' (The Barna Group, 3 April 2006); 'Annual Barna Group Survey Describes Changes in America's Religious Beliefs and Practices' (The Barna Group, 11 April 2006). In a typical week in 2006, 47% of American adults attended church, confirming that the slow increase in the years following 1996 when it fell to 37% continues, but has not yet reached the 49% level recorded in 1991.

<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateID=186>; and <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateID=232>. Both downloaded 06/09/06.

<sup>35</sup> Davie and others recognise that there is an element of over-reporting in the Barna figures because Americans are anxious to be seen as churchgoers, even if many attend less frequently than they say. However, although there is disagreement among researchers as to the degree to which attendance is overestimated, it is generally accepted that churchgoing in the United States is significantly higher than it is in Europe (Davie 2002: 28). However, Roof and McKinney (1997: 68) highlight an overall downward trend in mainline church membership in the USA; this is particularly marked in the Protestant denominations. While 40% of the nation's adult population belongs to the 18-34 age category, this age group accounts for only 26% of the members of the Reformed Church, 21% of the United Church of Christ, and 28% of the Methodists. 59% of non-affiliates to the churches are under 35 years of age.

minute when compared with the millions who have been lost to the churches (Bruce 1996a; cf Bruce 1995; Bruce 1996b).

While Bruce's advocacy of the secularisation thesis has been consistent, some other advocates, notably Berger and Martin, have had second thoughts (Davie 2000: 26). In addition, Casanova has made the debate more sophisticated by clarifying the notion of secularisation:

A central thesis and main theoretical premise of this work has been that what usually passes for a single theory of secularisation is actually made up of three very different, uneven and unintegrated propositions: secularisation as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, secularisation as decline of religious beliefs and practices, and secularisation as marginalization of religion to a privatised sphere. If the premise is correct, it should follow from the analytical distinction that the fruitless secularization debate can end only when sociologists of religion begin to examine and test the validity of each of the three propositions independently of each other (Casanova 1994: 211).

Casanova contends that the differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms is a modern structural trend and that it is this that constitutes the essence of secularisation. However, he argues that such separation does not necessarily imply reduced religious belief or practice or the relegation of religion to the private sphere, thus envisaging a modern society which is both secularized and religious.

### *2.3 Self-religion*

The 'self-religions' are so described by Heelas because of the tendency of participants to explore a range of options and then to pick and mix ideas and practices that in their opinion suit them. This perspective of the contemporary sacred landscape is forcibly articulated by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) and others (Luckmann, 1990; Campbell, 1999). They take a very different view from Bruce, contending that, far from being a whimper, 'spirituality' is early evidence of 'a tectonic shift in the sacred landscape that will prove even more significant than the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century' (Heelas and Woodhead: 2). This conviction is reflected in the title Heelas and Woodhead gave their published report on the Kendal project: *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*.

The Kendal project, called after the town in Cumbria where the field work took place between 2000 and 2002, compared and contrasted the spiritual/religious experience in two domains: the congregations of the local churches on the one hand, and, on the other, the ‘holistic milieu’ composed of people meeting in groups to further their mind-body-spirit spirituality through Yoga, Tai chi, aromatherapy, reflexology, and forty-nine other holistic activities. Although five times as many people (7.9% of the population) attended church as took part in such holistic activities (1.6%), there was a marked contrast in rates of growth or decline of the two domains. Heelas and Woodhead (40-45) estimate that the proportion of the town’s population attending church between 1990 and 2000 fell from 10.3% to 7.9%, in line with the English average identified by Brierley’s church censuses, while the numbers attending holistic groups grew by around 300% over the same period.<sup>36</sup> It has to be borne in mind that these percentages of decline and growth, having different base figures, do not constitute an equivalent comparison. Nevertheless, they are indicators of relentless attendance decline in the first domain and of striking growth in the other.<sup>37</sup>

Heelas and Woodhead (5; 95) consider that their Kendal research, taken along with earlier studies, substantiates a ‘subjectivization thesis’ which postulates that the ‘subjective turn’ to the autonomous self has become the defining cultural development in contemporary western culture.<sup>38</sup> This ‘is a turn away from being told what or how to be yourself to *having freedom to be yourself*’ (italics original). The thesis contends that any self that is based on external obligation cannot be autonomous, and that the autonomous self is based rather on what one ‘is’ - one’s personal, unique subjective life. So the autonomous self acts on the basis of intuition, inner promptings, the promotion of its own wellbeing, or in response to another person’s need, and so on.<sup>39</sup> Heelas and Woodhead (82) argue that the growth of holistic spiritualities ‘owes a very great deal to their ability to cater for the values and expectations, potentialities and vulnerabilities of those who attach importance to subjective-life as a primary source of

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<sup>36</sup> This represents a decline of approximately 10% in absolute numbers of attenders in Kendal.

<sup>37</sup> At the Conference on ‘The Spiritual Revolution’ held in the University of Edinburgh on 15 April 2005, Callum Brown was critical of Heelas and Woodhead’s inclusion in the holistic milieu of some groups like chiropractic and others that, in his view, inflate the holistic population.

<sup>38</sup> Heelas and Woodhead allude to Hobsbawm (1995), Inglehart (1997); Taylor (1989; 1991; 2002); Veroff, *et al.* 1981); Geertz (1984); Bellah, *et al.*, 1985).

<sup>39</sup> Charles Taylor perceives modern culture as being characterised by a ‘massive subjective turn’ towards ‘a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths’ (Taylor 1991: 26).

significance'. Kendal represents the move away from institutional religiosity towards individual spirituality, a move away from life lived in terms of external or objective roles, duties or obligations, and towards life lived in accordance with subjective rather than objective experience. However, as with the first perspective of the sacred landscape, so also with the third, Davie makes the point that significant qualifying factors are in danger of being lost sight of.<sup>40</sup>

The New Age movement is not the only context of contemporary spirituality. Tom Beaudoin's study of American young adult interaction with music videos reveals a search for spiritual meaning and transcendence. Beaudoin's review of Generation X popular culture<sup>41</sup> detects 'four main religious themes that represent strands of a lived theology'. These themes are: (1) a deep suspicion of religious institutions; (2) an emphasis on the sacred nature of experience; (3) setting suffering in a religious context; and (4) an exploration of faith and ambiguity. Fundamental to Beaudoin's discernment of a religious dimension in popular culture are two assumptions: (a) young adults find interacting with popular culture to be a source of meaning, and (b) meaning-making is a 'spiritual' exercise (Beaudoin: 42). The first assumption probably reflects a consensus in contemporary media studies, and the second is shared by many of the current studies on religion and media (Hoover and Lundby 1997, a and b; Hoover and Clark 2002; Mitchell and Marriage 2003; Hoover *et al.* 2004).<sup>42</sup>

A somewhat similar use of popular culture for spiritual enlightenment has been discerned in the UK clubbing scene. Gordon Lynch (Lynch 2002: 69-89; 2005: 166-83) suggests that popular culture can in complex ways become a source of meaning for clubbers. Clubbing has become a

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<sup>40</sup> In Davie's view the Kendal findings are skewed by the report's failure to take into account the extensive middle ground occupied by non-churchgoers who declared themselves in the 2001 national census to be Christian (Davie 2005).

<sup>41</sup> In the present study Generation X is regarded as being composed of those born between 1963 and 1983, that is, those who were in their 20s and 30s in 2003 when my study began. This date span is two years later than the original cohort proposed by Howe and Strauss (1993); it begins two years earlier than the smaller cohort proposed by Barna (1995) and adopted by Brierley (2001), but ends in the same year. However, I am assuming initially that these differences are unlikely to prejudice comparison of my findings with those of others who identify an 18-20 year period from the early to mid-60s to the early to mid-80s.

<sup>42</sup> The 'mid-life factor' in the holistic milieu of Kendal contrasts with the Beaudoin study. In Kendal 73% of all those active in the holistic milieu are aged 45 or over; only 15% of the Kendal holistic milieu were in their 20s and 30s. (Heelas and Woodhead: 107-110).

significant and popular activity<sup>43</sup> and Lynch (2002) found that for at least some young adults it functions as a significant source of meaning in their lives. He alludes to analogies that have been drawn between club culture and early pagan mysteries, noting that a small number of clubs explicitly acknowledge a spiritual or religious dimension to their activities. In addition, he quotes from interviews with clubbers testifying to the transformative effect of clubbing on their experience of both self and relationships with others. However, the majority of interviewees did not see clubbing as a spiritual or religious experience, and Lynch's research revealed no evidence of a common 'clubbing spirituality' which provides a shared system of values and meanings for clubbers. (Lynch 2002: 88).<sup>44</sup> Brierley's study *Generation X: Attitudes and Lifestyle* (2001)<sup>45</sup> suggests that there may not be a general awareness of a popular culture spirituality in the UK. His survey reveals that, while 28% of the non-Christian respondents had had what they would define as a 'spiritual experience,' popular culture was not cited as a significant source of this.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, Lynch (2005: 97-98) is convinced that reflection on the nature of existence in popular culture raises issues of meaning, value and practice which call for serious theological study.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Lynch (2002: 70-71) quotes authorities who claim that by 1993 the total attendance at rave events across Britain reached 50 million, with more than £2bn being spent by British clubbers on their nights out in 1996.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Neilson (Neilson: 106-112) in his account of working with young clubbers in Edinburgh city centre speaks of discovering 'spirituality in club culture' and cites the case of a young woman who spoke of encountering God in the dancing in a deeper way than anything she had known before.

<sup>45</sup> This study, which was undertaken for the Evangelical Alliance, was based on data from a questionnaire distributed to a random sample of 724 people (515 'Christians' and 209 'non-Christians') aged between 18 and 35, and also on qualitative data from two focus groups.

<sup>46</sup> Surprisingly 'a Christian church' is the most common (31%) location of spiritual experience by non-Christians, followed by the 'natural environment' (24%). 'Other place of religious worship' and 'personal spirituality (e.g. Yoga)' each accounted for 7%. 'Concert/gig', 'football matches/sports event' and 'nightclub' taken together account for only 9% of the locations; but if we add 'home' (6%) where television and video viewing are major activities it becomes possible to infer that popular culture may have directly contributed to the spiritual experience of up to 15% of the non-Christian respondents in the survey. In addition, popular culture may well have contributed indirectly to the spiritual experiences reported as happening in places of worship, personal spirituality and the natural environment. (Brierley 2001).

In Lynch's view a theological critique of popular culture involves three broad types of questions: (1) Do popular understandings of God, suffering, evil, and redemption offer a true, adequate, or meaningful account of existence in the light of the absolute reference point for life? (2) To what extent does popular culture involve justice in relationships between people, enable people to lead good and authentic lives, or promote human well-being? (3) To what extent does popular culture offer constructive experiences of pleasure, beauty, and transcendence? (Lynch 2005: 98).

Our brief review of studies focused on today's sacred landscape reveals a great divide between those interpreters who detect the results of massive secularisation and others who discern signs of sacralization. Heelas and Woodhead (9-10) sum up the state of play as follows:

Those who defend theories of secularization and those who oppose them with accounts of sacralization are divided over fact, interpretation and explanation. Controversy rages between those who claim that the sphere of the sacred is largely if not entirely undergoing relentless decline and develop theories to explain this, and those who claim that certain forms are growing and develop explanations accordingly.

These authors go on to suggest that religious decline and spiritual growth may not be mutually exclusive. In their view the evidence from the Kendal project suggests that 'the West is currently experiencing *both* secularisation (with regard to life-as forms of religion) *and* sacralization (with regard to subjective-life forms of spirituality),' and they propose that the subjectivization thesis is the key to explaining both the growth and the decline. It may be that it is precisely this contemporary struggle between individual autonomy and external authority that accounts for the fascination of the Psalm Journey audience with those ancient psalms where the psalmists interact with God, arguing, protesting and demanding.

In sum, this section has explored the sacred landscape inhabited by many westernized young adults today. It is a landscape which is interpreted from three different perspectives: by researchers espousing the theory of secularisation that religion is in terminal decline, by researchers who discern a persistence in believing alongside a reluctance to belong to be the key trend, and advocates of the subjectivisation thesis who argue that subjective-life spirituality, expressed in the New Age and in some forms of popular culture, will replace traditional religion. The prevalence of self-reference in much contemporary spirituality suggests that the Psalms, many of which are deeply personal and internal, might speak in a meaningful way to today's young adults – a possibility I now move on to explore.

### **3. Why the Psalms?**

My rationale for selecting psalms for this research into Scripture engagement with young adults is perhaps best expressed in a question: If the Psalms have been 'the breviary and the viaticum of humanity' over many generations (Prothero: 2), ought they not to hold some appeal for a generation engaged in 'a new spirituality of seeking' that searches for fleeting sacred moments

and negotiates among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality? (cf. Wuthnow 1998: 4)  
But before looking at the psalms and today's generation, it is helpful to note that there is a long tradition of celebrating the Psalms:

[W]ith gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.  
St Paul<sup>48</sup>

I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter. And nothing beyond these is found among men.  
Athanasius (296-373)<sup>49</sup>

What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasury, it were difficult to describe.... I have been wont to call this book, not inappropriately an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.  
John Calvin (1509-1564)<sup>50</sup>

My heart swelled with joy and thankfulness for the Psalms.  
Dorothy Day (1897-1980)<sup>51</sup>

We enter into the prayer and song of common humanity in the Psalms.  
Walter Brueggemann (1982)<sup>52</sup>

At the end of the Psalm Journey, will my respondents wish to add their contribution to the large volume of testimonials to the power and usefulness of the Psalms of which these quotations are representative? Or do the trends I have just traced in today's sacred landscape make it impossible for early 21<sup>st</sup> century young adults to access the world of the Psalms? Is secularisation rendering these spiritual songs redundant? Is vicarious common religion leaving

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<sup>48</sup> *The Letter of Paul to the Colossians* (NRSV). Significantly all three categories of song referred to here occur in various psalm titles in the Septuagint.

<sup>49</sup> Gregg: 126.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin 1979b: xxxvii.

<sup>51</sup> In Holladay: 226. Day, a protagonist for women's rights in the USA, wrote these words while jailed for picketing the White House on behalf of women's suffrage.

<sup>52</sup> Brueggemann 1982: 16. Considerable contemporary anecdotal evidence of the universal appeal of the Psalms exists. One example is found in an email sent me on 15 September 2005 by Harriet Hill, a Bible translator working with the Summer Institute of Linguistics in west and central Africa: 'Laments have been extremely effective in our trauma healing ministry in Africa. When people realize you can praise God and question him in the same breath, and express your anger, and it's okay, it sets them free – often to use their own traditional lament structures and melodies and dance, which they never realized could be connected with their Christian experience. Very freeing and healing.'

prayer to the professionals? Is the self-reference of the subjective turn making obsolete the God-talk of the Psalms?

We will find the answer to these questions when we review respondents' journals in Part II of the thesis. But meanwhile I am quietly confident for three reasons. First, the Psalms have shown a remarkable versatility over the centuries in meeting a wide range of human needs and aspirations. Second, the robust, subversive language of the psalms strikes a chord with the irreverent spiritual quest Beaudoin and others detect to be taking place among contemporary young adults. Third, the Psalm Journey respondents have come to these ancient texts with remarkable openness and honesty. Ultimately, as Michael Fishbane says, everything will depend on how they read.<sup>53</sup> But the signs are promising.

To summarise the third section of the chapter, the psalms have exercised a strong influence over the centuries and these ancient poems and prayers promise potential to connect with today's young adults searching for meaning and enlightenment.

In this chapter I have reviewed three main areas. First, I described the emergence and development of Scripture engagement within the Bible Society movement as that movement undertook its mission over the past 200 years, seeking to achieve the widest possible effective and meaningful distribution and use of the Holy Scriptures. I then explored the contemporary debate within the Forum of Bible Agencies International about the nature of Scripture engagement, following this up to April 2007. Secondly, I outlined the state of religiosity and spirituality among western young adults (with special reference to those living in the UK) noting particularly the steep decline in church attendance, the stubborn persistence of latent Christian belief, and the rapid growth of alternative spiritualities focusing on subjective life. The findings of the Kendal project were reviewed in the light of this socio-religious context and the debate over the relative merits of the 'theory of secularisation' and the 'subjectivisation thesis'. Thirdly, I noted the potential of the psalms, as 'the breviary and the viaticum of humanity' to resonate with the audience's search for meaning in a postmodern society. Having undertaken this brief

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<sup>53</sup> 'Everything depends on how we read, on how we enter the magic circle of a text's meanings; on how we smuggle ourselves into its words, and allow the texture of the text to weave its web around us.' (Fishbane: 141).

investigation into the nature of Scripture engagement, the spirituality of the audience and the potential of the psalms to address contemporary questions, I have laid the foundations for my argument in the chapters that follow. I am now ready to give an account of my search for a theoretical framework to interpret the rich data emerging from the Psalm Journey project.

## Chapter 2. Developing a Theoretical Framework

The relationship between text and audience in the Psalm Journey is an expression of the broader relationship between theology and culture. Since my research is situated at the interface of these two fields it is logical that I explore the literature emanating from practical theology and cultural studies in searching for a theoretical framework for interpreting my data. This search might be compared to building a house that will provide me with an intellectual home as I undertake the work described in the subsequent chapters.<sup>1</sup> The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first, I explore the range of approaches to culture adopted by Christian theologians, and elucidate the theological understanding I bring to the project. In the second part, I explore in more detail the relationship between theology and culture, in particular whether they can work together in an enterprise like the Psalm Journey. In the third part, I explore the dialectic between texts and audiences and complete my search for resources to analyse and interpret the Psalm Journey data. My theoretical framework must allow me to ask questions of the data concerning both the power of the text and the cognitive, affective and behavioural activity of the audience.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 Theology and culture

The Psalm Journey is a research exercise set in the field of practical theology, a discipline that embraces and transcends both the contemplative and active life of humans (Forrester 1990b). The project describes a theological dialogue among young adults with no formal training in theology. In this regard the theology of the Psalm Journey harks back to a primitive usage of ‘theology’, understood as a popular, rather than a specialised, activity. Some practical theologians suggest that early Christian theology reflected its etymology by being (mostly) simple ‘God-talk’ or ‘God-wisdom’, rather than a rigorous intellectual debate (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996: 69). One of the ways ancient theology was mediated is the practice of *Lectio Divina*, a slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures that has been traced back to the early

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<sup>1</sup> The appropriateness of the ‘house’ metaphor for the theoretical framework is confirmed by its use in the Bible carrying several figurative meanings (e.g. a family in ‘house’ of Boaz (Ruth 4.11); a multigenerational community in ‘House of Israel’ (Ruth 4.11); a dynasty in ‘house of Saul and the house of David’ (2 Samuel 3.1).

<sup>2</sup> The communicative power of Scripture and the active response of its readers are implied in the UBS purpose statement: ‘The world fellowship of Bible Societies joins together, as the United Bible Societies (UBS), for consultation, mutual support and action in their common task of achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures and of helping people interact with the Word of God.’ (United Bible Societies Bylaws, May 2006, para 2; see also ‘The Identity and Ethos of the United Bible Societies: Who we are, what we do and how we work together’ in *UBS Bulletin* 192/193, 2001: 53).

monastic tradition which I have adapted for use in the meditative dialogue between my respondents and the Psalms.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the Psalm Journey also exemplifies some of the most recent theological trends in practical theology, for example, its commitment to critical correlation and praxis (Ballard and Pritchard: 43-56). It also works with a broad contemporary definition of theology as ‘the process of seeking normative answers to questions of truth/meaning, goodness/practice, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty in specific contexts.’ (Lynch 2005:94). Furthermore, by serving outsiders rather than insiders (in relation to the churches), the Psalm Journey exemplifies mission - one the current concerns of practical theology (Ballard and Pritchard 1996: 21). It also illustrates the current tendency of practical theology to draw on the methodologies of the social sciences as its critical partners by constructing an interpretive model incorporating components from cultural studies (Ballard and Pritchard 1996: 16; Forrester 1990b: 7). Many of the Psalm Journey participants report that the Psalm texts spoke realistically to them in their actual situations, thus fulfilling one of the cornerstones of practical theology (Ballard and Pritchard 1996: 48). However, in several respects the Psalm Journey differs from many contemporary exercises in practical theology, most notably in its attempt to achieve a critical theology-culture correlation with only minimal explicit theological input from the researcher. In the Psalm Journey it is the representatives of the culture – not so much the theologian - who do the work, critiquing the texts, and also themselves in the light of the texts. Nevertheless, since the Psalm Journey is an exercise in practical theology, the data calls for a serious theological critique that will be well informed concerning how theology and culture relate to each other.

The nature of the relationship between theology and culture has preoccupied theologians from the beginning of Christianity, but despite such a long period of reflection, no agreed Christian perspective has emerged. Most modern surveys of the theology and culture debate begin with Richard Niebuhr (Niebuhr 1951).<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr developed the following five-fold typology which famously summarizes the range of missiological perspectives operating at this interface:

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<sup>3</sup> *Lectio Divina* is Latin for ‘spiritual (lit. divine) reading’.

<sup>4</sup> Recent examples include Lynch 2005: 99-101; Bartholomew *et al.* 2002: 2, n 8; Gorringer 2004: 12-16. Yoder observes that within a few years of publication of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* ‘the terms suggested, and the classification of various typical positions which it proposed, had become the common coin of contemporary thought, not only among specialists in Christian ethics, but in many other circles as well.’ (Yoder: 31).

(1) *Christ against Culture*. This is the *exclusivist* model that sees a fundamental discontinuity between a corrupt world and a church called to be separate from it. It was represented by Tertullian in the early church, by the Mennonites at the Reformation, and more recently by Leo Tolstoy.

(2) *Christ of Culture*. As practitioners of this model, which attempts to harmonise gospel and culture, Niebuhr cites the Gnostics in the early church, Abelard in the middle ages, and Ritschl, among others, in the modern period. This *accommodationist* perspective lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the ‘Christ against Culture’ stance.

(3) *Christ above Culture* is the first of three intermediate positions for Niebuhr and constitutes a *synthetic* approach. Proponents include Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, and Joseph Butler. For them the fundamental issue ‘does not lie between Christ and the world, important as that issue is, but between God and man’ (117). Because Jesus Christ is the Son of God, he and the world synthesise; they cannot be simply opposed to one another.

(4) *Christ and Culture in Paradox* is the *dualist* model which according to Niebuhr is reflected in the Pauline tension between the declaration that all human works – including cultural institutions and distinctions – are included under sin, on the one hand, and the requirement of obedience to political authorities on the other. Marcion in the early church and Luther at the Reformation are cited as champions of this position.

(5) *Christ the Transformer of Culture*. This is the *conversionist* motif that sees Christ ‘as the converter of man and his culture and society, not apart from these, for there is no nature without culture and no turning of men from self and idols to God save in society’ (43). According to Niebuhr, those who thus engage with culture, among whom he includes Augustine and Calvin, belong to ‘the great central tradition of the church’ (190).<sup>5</sup>

Niebuhr acknowledges that each of these views expresses only a partial perspective and recognizes that he is proposing ‘ideal’ types, none of which has been perfectly exemplified in history. But he believes that together they ultimately lead to a fuller understanding of the issue. In addition, he recognizes that his pentagon is porous. ‘When one returns from the hypothetical

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<sup>5</sup> Goringe (15) disputes that Augustine exemplifies the conversionist position.

scheme to the rich complexity of individual events, it is evident at once that no person or group ever conforms completely to a type' (44).<sup>6</sup>

I find Niebuhr's classification provides a useful template for locating the Psalm Journey on the theological spectrum.<sup>7</sup> I also find it helpful in identifying core issues and different perspectives (cf Lynch 2005: 101); during the Psalm Journey all five motifs were reflected in different respondents' articulation of their engagement with the psalm texts. On the other hand, Niebuhr's paradigm is open to serious criticism. Most importantly, for my present purpose, it is of limited use in helping me envisage how a dialogue between theology and culture might be conducted (Lynch 2005: 101).<sup>8</sup> Another weakness is Niebuhr's failure to distinguish sufficiently the multiple manifestations of culture which call for a more complex analysis than the Niebuhrian typology is capable of providing (Gorringe: 15). Yoder highlights the fact that Christian responses to culture are more varied than Niebuhr allows:

Some elements of culture the church categorically rejects (pornography, tyranny, cultic idolatry). Other dimensions of culture it accepts with clear limits (economic production, commerce, the graphic arts, paying taxes for peacetime civil government). To still other dimensions of culture Christian faith gives a new motivation and coherence (agriculture, family life, literacy, conflict resolution, empowerment). Still others it strips off their claims to possess autonomous truth and value, and uses them as vehicles of communication (philosophy, language, Old Testament ritual, music). Still other forms of culture are created by the Christian churches (hospitals, service of the poor, generalized education, egalitarianism, abolitionism, feminism)' (Yoder: 69).

Yoder's broader understanding of culture is a reflection of the radical break that has taken place in cultural studies from the traditional classicist concept of 'high' culture (where culture is seen

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<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr discerns all five motifs in different New Testament texts: the *exclusivist* (Christ against culture) in 1 John; the *accommodationist* (Christ of culture) in the Judaizing party in the early church; the *synthetic* (Christ above culture) in the Johannine assertion that Jesus Christ is both Logos and Lord; the *dualist* (Christ and culture in paradox) in Paul; and the *conversionist* perspective in the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>7</sup> If Niebuhr's five types are converted into a scale from 1 to 5, representing in ascending order Christ against Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, Christ transforming Culture, and Christ of Culture, I would place the Journey at 3.7, i.e. between Christ and Culture in Paradox and Christ transforming Culture. If there were no gradations between intervals, I would place it in 4 rather than in 3.

<sup>8</sup> Yoder: 51-2 considers that the assumption of a pluralistic understanding of theology by the Niebuhrian typology serves to regard as naïve any conviction that truth can be known and can lay upon us definite claims which we must unequivocally obey. Yoder also thinks that Niebuhr's typology is so vague that it cannot be falsified.

in terms of intellectual and aesthetic interests and pursuits) to ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture, which views culture as a way of life (M.P. Gallagher: 3; 11-26; Gorringe: 4).<sup>9</sup> This contemporary anthropological notion of culture aims at analysis as well as description, investigating how the production and consumption of cultural images are controlled in different societies (Gallagher: 3). It has also resulted in a widespread perception that ‘the field of culture seems to be full of contradictory tendencies’ (Gallagher: 6-7). In the light of the fluidity of meaning attributed to the term, it is desirable that at this stage I clarify the understanding of culture I bring to the Psalm Journey.

My understanding is theological as well as sociological and is based on four perceptions of culture. The first of these is that culture is *creational*. Culture constitutes part of the divine mandate given to humanity that features in both biblical accounts of creation (see Gen. 1.28-31; 2.15-20a). ‘The passage that begins in Genesis 1.26 .... enjoins us to bring every type of cultural activity within the service of God. Indeed, there is a dynamic element to the “image of God”. God himself is revealed or “imaged” in his creation precisely as we are busy within the creation, developing its hidden potentials in agriculture, art, music, commerce, politics, scholarship, family life, church, leisure and so on, in ways that honour God.’ (Bartholomew 2006: 16). Gorringe affirms that culture is a fundamental gift of God. ‘Theologically understood, culture is the name for that whole process in the course of which God does what it takes, in Paul Lehman’s phrase, to make and to keep human beings human. Culture in this sense is, under God, “the human task”’ (4).<sup>10</sup> The Psalter implies a creation mandate in Psalm 8 where ‘The psalm invites us to see all the civilizing work of the human species as honor and glory conferred on it by God and, therefore, as cause and content for praise of God’ (Mays: 69).<sup>11</sup> According to Mays ‘the organizing confession of the Psalter’ is the affirmation that ‘the LORD rules’ – in creation, history and salvation (Mays: 32). Although the Psalm Journey audience, for the most part, find it difficult to affirm God’s kingship in the modern world, all appeared to believe strongly in humanitarianism, or – in Lehman’s terms – keeping human beings human.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lynch’s definition of popular culture as ‘the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life in a given society’ (Lynch 2005: 14).

<sup>10</sup> Gorringe acknowledges that this last phrase comes from Barth, adding that Barth qualified it by saying that the task is the response to God’s Word (K. Barth, *Theology and Church*, London 1962: 337).

<sup>11</sup> Other psalm passages portraying the LORD as creator-king are 29.10; 89.5-14; and 104.1-9 (Mays: 66)

Second, culture is *incarnational*. The incarnation is God's engagement with the historical process (Gorringe: 21). When 'the Word became flesh' (John 1.14), the Fourth Gospel makes clear that the Word embraces culture – food and drink, the world of symbols, the way in which we cherish our bodies. The gospels reflect culture both as metaphor and in its original agricultural sense. 'Jesus feeds the five thousand; his first word to Jairus is to give his daughter something to eat; his parables are about sowing and harvesting, banquets, feasts, the need to obtain a loaf when the shops are shut; he shares table fellowship with his disciples and with the outcast.' (Gorringe: 18). Such an understanding of culture is appropriate for the Psalm Journey in which the meditative responses and interactions bring together what our compartmentalised society tends to pull apart: religion and politics, theology and economics, ethics and aesthetics.

Third, culture is *sacramental*. Barth has argued that eschatology is the appropriate theological category under which culture is to be considered, for culture can be a witness to the fact that the kingdom of God is approaching. Culture cannot be sanctified, according to Barth, but because God is the Lord of the entire created process, culture can be a witness to the divine promise, a reflection of the light of the incarnate Logos. (Barth 1962: 344). Culture, therefore, has a sacramental, or signifying role and it is the role of the church to read these signs (Gorringe: 20).<sup>12</sup> Although the Psalm Journey did not have an explicit eschatological focus, it enabled participants to interact with texts that witness to a divine purpose in history which Christian theology affirms is fulfilled through the Son of David.

Fourth, culture is *fallen*. As early as Genesis 9 (the story of Noah becoming drunk and disgracing himself) it becomes clear that cultural development is ambivalent (Bartholomew 2006: 34).<sup>13</sup> The New Testament in places goes further, seeing something more sinister in culture than moral ambiguity. Although Christ is the head of every ruler and authority (Col. 2.10) and the civil authorities are instituted by God (Rom. 13.1), nevertheless 'rulers' and 'authorities' can become enemies of truth, righteousness and peace (Eph. 6.12) – an antagonism

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<sup>12</sup> Gorringe (4) interprets as 'implicitly eschatological' Raymond Williams' statement that this process 'has no particular end, and ... can never be supposed at any time to have finally realized itself, to have become complete' (Williams 1989: 37).

<sup>13</sup> 'On the one hand, agriculture does advance: Noah is the first to plant a vine and to develop the wonderful art of wine-making (9.20). But while wine itself and the craft of making it are good gifts in themselves, they can also be misused sinfully. The world's first vintner becomes drunk and disgraces himself and his family, lying openly naked in his tent to sleep it off, where his son Ham discovers him.' (Bartholomew 2006:34).

the last book of the New Testament understands to be demonic (Revelation 13). Walter Wink (1992: 5-10; 16) argues that such ‘powers’ are still a reality, constituting ‘the spirituality of institutions and systems’ in the modern world, and that ‘the Domination System’ with the basic ideology of ‘might makes right’ is set up ‘when an entire network of Powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values’. Any theology of culture has to address ‘the antagonism and alienation’ that mark culture and ‘think through ways of addressing it.’ (Gorringe: 19). The Psalter witnesses to this dark side of human history by giving prominence to ‘the enemy’ and/or ‘the wicked’.<sup>14</sup> The psalm texts employed in the Psalm Journey reflect cultural alienation by featuring the forced exile of a people in an alien culture (Ps. 126), the desecration of a sacred shrine (Ps. 74), street violence and personal betrayal (Ps. 55), and the physical and psychological agony of an oppressed individual (Ps. 22).<sup>15</sup> The dialogue in the groups revealed a readiness to identify modern parallels to these ancient examples of alienation.

This four-fold theological understanding views culture as mixed. The ambiguity and malevolence present in culture are captured by the Lausanne Covenant: ‘Because man is God’s creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he has fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.’<sup>16</sup> According to Calvin it is God’s providence that enables ethics to operate in such a mixed environment: ‘For he who has fixed the boundaries of our life, has at the same time entrusted us with the care of it, provided us with the means of preserving it, forewarned us of the dangers to which we are exposed, and supplied cautions and remedies, that we may not be overwhelmed unawares.’ (*Institutes* I.xvii.4). Although we may be more wary to talk of providence than was Calvin, Gorringe declares that the question we have to

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<sup>14</sup> Terence Collins identifies ‘the opposition’ (in the form of enemies, the wicked, the nations) as one of the three cardinal points of psalmic narrative structure, along with ‘the protagonist’ (the psalmist, the just, Israel, the king) and ‘God’ (Collins: 45). Andy Warren sees God, the psalmist and the enemy as constituting the three principal ‘actants’ or rhetorical persons in the Psalter (Warren 1998). It should be stressed that most psalm scholars seem to assume a high degree of overlap between the enemy and the wicked (see, e.g. Mays: 35), but Rosenbaum has contended that ‘the word most English translations render by “enemy” denotes foreign powers almost exclusively’, maintaining that the term translated “wicked” ‘refers to those within the Israelite community who consciously and deliberately flout the law’ (Rosenbaum: 486-489).

<sup>15</sup> Commenting on the selfish way humanity has performed its God-given role of regent over creation (Ps. 8), Mays observes ‘Dominion has become domination; rule has become ruin; subordination to the divine purpose has become subjection to human sinfulness.’ (Mays: 70).

<sup>16</sup> *Lausanne Covenant*, Clause 10; 1974, in Stott 1996. Lundström provides a comprehensive review of discussions on Gospel and Culture during the years 1973-96 in the World Council of Churches and in the Lausanne Movement.

face is whether it is possible that, if God exists, God's existence could be 'of no effect' (Rom 3.3; 4.14) (Gorringe: 20). According to an early Christian perspective, we humans also have a responsibility to 'sanctify' or improve culture (1 Tim. 4.4; cf 6.17-19). For, although 'everything created by God is good; [and] nothing is to be rejected,' it requires to be 'sanctified by God's word and by prayer.' In this regard, it is worth noting that the psalms, being both Scripture and liturgy (Mays: 36), have a potential to provide any audience with a unique instrument for such a sanctification of culture.

The foundation of our theoretical 'house' is now complete; it is composed of two elements. The first is a theological perspective that is practical (rather than systematic) and that seeks normative answers through psalmic engagement to questions of truth/meaning, goodness/practice, evil, suffering, redemption and beauty in the thinking and behaviour of the audience. This perspective shares some features with both primitive and contemporary Christian theology. The second element of the foundation is a four-fold understanding of culture, developed by combining insights of Calvin and Gorringe, which sees culture as creational, incarnational, sacramental and potentially demonic. With the foundation in place, I am now ready to begin constructing the internal compartments of my theoretical 'house' by establishing that a correlation can take place between the psalm texts and the popular culture of the audience.

## **2.2 Theology with culture**

The aims of the Psalm Journey will stand or fall on its ability to facilitate a dynamic interplay between the psalms and their interpreters. I have already noted that Niebuhr is of limited help in this regard, so I turn to Paul Tillich who is widely regarded in western modern theology as laying the foundations of a methodology whereby the church and society can interact creatively. Tillich understood 'a theological system' as requiring 'to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation' (I:3). He sought to develop a theological method in which the message and the situation are related in such a way that neither of them is obliterated, and which 'tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with answers implied in the message' (I: 8).

However, Tillich's 'Method of Correlation' has two disadvantages for the Psalm Journey. First, the focus on 'high' culture – 'the great works of the visual arts, of music, of poetry, of literature,

of architecture, of dance, of philosophy' (Tillich 1959: 46) – differs from my audience's fascination with 'low' or popular culture. Second, Tillich's assumption that the answers come ultimately from the Christian tradition would jar with the wish of the Psalm Journey participants to contribute to whatever answers might be forthcoming in the exercise.<sup>17</sup>

David Tracy developed a method of 'critical correlation' that places greater emphasis on the two-way nature of the questioning process between situation and tradition (Tracy 1975: 14). Tracy understands the dynamic of the correlation as 'a critical dialogue between the implicit questions and explicit answers of the Christian classics and the explicit questions and implicit answers of contemporary cultural experiences and practices' (Tracy 1975: 43-63). He proposes five theses to defend his revisionist model. The first two theses correspond to my requirements, first, by affirming two sources for theology: 'common human experience and language, and Christian texts', and, second, by arguing for the necessity of correlating the results of the investigations of these two sources. The third thesis, which specifies that the principal method of investigating common human experience and language is a phenomenology of its 'religious dimension' present in everyday and scientific experience and language, allows for the extensive autonomy that Psalm Journey participants believe they possess. The fourth thesis proposes that the principal method of investigation of the other source ('The Christian Tradition') is an historical and hermeneutical investigation of classical Christian texts – an approach I have already indicated to be compatible with my assumptions. So far Tracy's model appears to be a perfect fit for the Psalm Journey; but the fifth and final thesis, by specifying that the truth-status of the results of the critical correlation is determined on explicitly metaphysical grounds, would create a difficulty for my audience, who feel at home with a postmodern mode of thinking which, in their own words, is identified with the phrases 'relativism and pluralism' and 'no sacred truth; truth is subjective' (PrM:3).<sup>18</sup>

However, Don Browning has refocused Tracy's model to create a 'critical correlational practical theology' (Browning 1991: 47), substituting *phronesis*, or practical reason, for the

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<sup>17</sup> While Tillich did not dismiss the possibility that culture might have important insights to offer on the nature of truth and goodness, he failed to formulate the mutual nature of the dialogue (Lynch 2005: 103).

<sup>18</sup> Sociologists tend to regard epistemological doubt as a component of the postmodern context (Lyon: 80).

foundationalism of Tracy's fifth thesis.<sup>19</sup> Browning envisions a 'conversation' or 'dialogue' taking place between an 'inner core' and an 'outer envelope' of practical reason, and stresses the key role this 'conversation' plays in the fundamental structure of human understanding. Because Browning's approach avoids the foundationalism of Tracy it offers to make a major contribution to the theoretical framework I am seeking. An additional advantage is that the overall dynamic of reconstructing human experience, within which Browning envisages his model operating, accommodates the pluralistic Psalm Journey audience's sense of being engaged in an autonomous spiritual quest.<sup>20</sup>

For my purpose the fact that both Tracy (1981: 101) and Browning (1991: 15) envisage the audience holding a hermeneutical conversation with the text is a great advantage. In addition, Tracy's understanding of classic texts as self-authenticating is very similar to the pragmatic attitude of the Bible Societies to the authority of the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Again, Tracy's contention that classics 'so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status' (1981: 108) helps to assuage, in part at least, any audience suspicions aroused by the Psalm Journey texts being part of a book that today many regard as possessing features of

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<sup>19</sup> Foundationalism is 'the view that knowledge and epistemic (knowledge-relevant) justification have a two-tier structure: some instances of knowledge and justification are non-inferential, or foundational; and all other instances thereof are inferential, or non-foundational, in that they derive ultimately from foundational knowledge or justification' (Moser: 321-23). Neither Gadamer's hermeneutical conversation nor Aristotle's *phronesis* applies abstract principles to concrete situations (Browning 1991: 39). For Browning, theology is in essence practical rather than foundational; he argues that human thought works from practice-to-theory-to-practice. 'When inherited interpretations and practices seem to be breaking down, practical reason tries to reconstruct both its picture of the world and its more concrete practices' (Browning 1991: 10).

<sup>20</sup> The pluralism of my audience is reflected not only in the inclusion of representatives of Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Ba'hai, but also in a strong sympathy with post-modernism. Its autonomy, from a theological perspective, is God-given, and, therefore relative rather than absolute. 'The sense of goodness and the meaningfulness of life and of the true nature of personality were achieved in a context of communion, interdependency and relatedness. The worth of man was seen, not so much as a natural possession or right, as it was a right conferred by or derived from God.' (G.E. Wright: 68-69).

<sup>21</sup> Tracy (1981: 248-49), who borrows the concept of the 'religious classic' from Hans-Georg Gadamer, affirms that the New Testament texts, along with the Hebrew Scriptures, become for Christians 'not just mere texts, ... but scripture .... [T]hroughout the Christian tradition these scriptures will serve as finally normative: as that set of inspirations, controls and correctives upon all later expressions, all later classical texts, persons, images, symbols, doctrines, events that claim appropriateness to the classic witnesses to that event.' While the Bible Societies affirm that God speaks through Scripture, they decline to articulate or adopt any specific doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Bible, being content to allow the Scriptures to authenticate themselves to readers and hearers. An example of this implicit affirmation is the title of the UBS *Version Popular* in Spanish: *Dios habla hoy* ('God speaks today'). The Bible Societies' refusal to define any formal doctrine of Scripture has enabled and facilitated cooperation in Bible work across the confessional and theological spectrum.

a metanarrative.<sup>22</sup> The classic text concept also accommodates the plurality present in the social context of my audience without questioning the communicative power of the psalm texts. For all of these reasons I find Tracy's approach attractive.<sup>23</sup> Browning's model of practical reasoning complements Tracy by offering me a heuristic device to interpret the Psalm Journey data in some detail. Browning envisages the narrative traditions that shape communities' self-understanding (cf Tracy's classic) as forming the 'outer envelope' of practical reason which interacts with a universalisable 'inner core' consisting of (a) the golden rule and neighbour love and (b) common human needs as the human sciences might understand them (Browning 1991: 10-12; 105-109; 187).<sup>24</sup> I describe Browning's dialectic in more detail in chapter 10 when reviewing the correlation of text and audience within the dynamic of the Psalm Journey.

At this stage I need to note that the basic assumption of Tracy and Browning that correlation between theology and culture is legitimate meets with opposition from some modern theologians who are in sympathy with Niebuhr's first perspective (the exclusivist model). In the middle third of the twentieth century Barth argued against Tillich that any correlation of theology and culture is unjustifiable, and today Stanley Hauerwas, along with other narrative theologians, takes a somewhat similar stand against the positions of Tracy and Browning.<sup>25</sup>

The crux of Barth's rejection of correlation is his denial of the validity of natural theology in favour of a more or less exclusive focus on kerygmatic theology.<sup>26</sup> While Tillich appreciated the

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<sup>22</sup> All metanarratives tend to be regarded with suspicion, following Lyotard's well-known dictum: 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard: xxiv). They are suspect by many because they do not allow for disputes about value and often lead to totalitarian persecution (Butler: 14). Bauckham argues that the biblical story is non-modern metanarrative that 'refuses to be summed up in finally adequate interpretation that would never need to be revised or replaced' (Bauckham: 93)

<sup>23</sup> Avery Dulles' (x) comment that 'revelation for Tracy is authentically experiential' needs to be evaluated in light of Tracy's recognition that classics disclose a radical gift and demand (Tracy 1991: 131)

<sup>24</sup> The criticism (Lischer) that Christian theology's 'actual narratives embodied in the scriptures, classics, and the liturgy, play no meaningful role in Browning's reformulation of practical theology' does not negate the usefulness of his reformulation in evaluating the Psalm Journey project which focuses on texts selected from an important segment of the Jewish and Christian narrative.

<sup>25</sup> Compare the similar debate between the Catholic theologians Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng. Schillebeeckx argues in favour of 'mutually critical correlations' between the interpretations of situation and of tradition, while Küng challenges Schillebeeckx's correlation model in favour of a model of 'confrontation.' (*Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Kung and Edward Schillebeeckx*, (ed.) L. Swidler, Philadelphia 1980; in Tracy 1981: 88, n 44.

<sup>26</sup> 'There is only one revelation. That revelation is the revelation of the covenant, of the original and basic will of God..... Just because it is a covenant of grace, it cannot be discovered by man, nor can it be

strength of Barth's 'kerygmatic' theology in resisting the challenge of German religious nationalism of the 1930s, he nevertheless felt Barth was mistaken in denying any common ground outside the 'theological circle'. For Tillich, kerygmatic theology is incomplete without apologetic theology (I: 6-9).<sup>27</sup> Barth's denial of any meaningful correlation between theology and culture is echoed in the linguistic cultural approach of the 'Yale' school, which relies on the narrative theory that emerged prominently in the second part of the twentieth century in the disciplines of moral philosophy and literary studies as well as in theology (Tracy: 296n.81; Browning 1991: 101)<sup>28</sup>. According to narrative theory, general ethical principles or even a substantive ethic cannot be abstracted from the tradition that shapes a particular community's moral values (Browning: 101). It is simply not possible to abstract general ethical principles or even a substantive ethic from the narratives that make up tradition (Hauerwas 1981: 4).<sup>29</sup> Hauerwas complains justifiably that the Bible is abused by politicians and others to justify a consumerist lifestyle and contends that 'The Bible is not and should not be made accessible to merely anyone, but rather it should only be made available to those who have undergone the hard discipline of existing as part of God's people' (Hauerwas 1993: 9).<sup>30</sup>

However, the anti-correlationist stance has been subjected to considerable critique. David Fergusson argues that the Hauerwasian position is inconsistent with the moral ecology of the early churches, which reflects some formal similarities with the conventions of Graeco-Roman moral exhortation (Fergusson 1998: 14-17).<sup>31</sup> David Tracy alleges that Barthians need not reject

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demonstrated by man. As the covenant of grace it is not amenable to any kind of human reflection or to any questions asked by man concerning the meaning and basis of the cosmos or history.' (CD IV,1:45 in Gollwitzer: 50-51).

<sup>27</sup> Tillich's terse critique of kerygmatic theology is memorable: 'The "situation" cannot be entered; no answer to the questions implied in it can be given, at least not in terms which are felt to be an answer. The message must be thrown at those in the situation – thrown like a stone.' (ST I: 7).

<sup>28</sup> The 'Yale' school is also described as 'post-liberal' probably because it resists historical criticism as the primary method for studying Scripture (see Hauerwas: 7).

<sup>29</sup> Browning recognises Hauerwas as the most articulate theological proponent of the narrativist view (Browning 1991: 101)

<sup>30</sup> In this statement Hauerwas may be deliberately employing hyperbole. But it does seem to imply that the long established practice of the Bible agencies of distributing Scriptures indiscriminately is misguided. He goes on to cite approvingly a passage from the *Journals* of Søren Kierkegaard, in which the nineteenth century Danish philosopher-theologian contends that 'the Bible Societies have done immeasurable harm. Christendom has long been in need of a hero, who, in fear and trembling, had the courage to forbid people to read the Bible' (Hauerwas 1993: 17).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Fergusson argues on the basis of historical data gathered by Meeks (1-17). Jeffrey Stout contends that a similar moral consensus is found today in liberal societies on a range of moral principles (in Fergusson: 75).

correlation, because ‘logically “correlation” can account for the full spectrum of possibilities ranging from “identity” through continuities, similarities and analogies to radical non-identity’. Fergusson’s argument from historical precedent and Tracy’s appeal for consistency combine to convince me not to be diverted from the task of constructing a correlationist framework for the Psalm Journey.

In this section I have discovered Tillich’s theory of correlation offers less than the mutual interaction between theology and culture that the Psalm Journey assumes. In contrast, I found Tracy’s nuancing of Tillich and Browning’s development of Tracy’s ‘classic text’ provide me with key components for interpreting meaningfully the correlation between psalms and audience. Theologians, such as Barth and Hauerwas, who deny the theoretical possibility of correlation, fail to refute convincingly the evidence of history and the canons of logic that point to a contrary understanding. I am, therefore, confident that a correlation between the psalm texts and my audience is theologically sound. The question now arises: how will I measure this interaction empirically? Tracy and Browning offer two theoretical models that I can readily envisage combining. But how will I be able to put them to work in an empirical study? In search for an answer to this question I now turn to reception studies in search of a model with a proven track record of discerning, capturing and analysing the interaction between media and audiences, that I can unite with Tracy and Browning to create an appropriate empirical model. I need a theoretical framework for my research that will not only legitimise the possibility of a correlation between the psalms and my respondents, but one that will also help me to determine whether such a correlation does, in fact, take place, and, if so, help me to describe and evaluate it in meaningful ways. Without this empirical facility, my ‘house’ will become a folly and not a home.

### **2.3 Theology in culture**

In recent decades British cultural studies and American media research have explored the dialectic between media texts and audiences (Turner 2003: 72), and I now turn to these fields in search of a model or models that I can use to produce the outer cladding of my ‘house.’ At first sight, the Psalm Journey does not readily appear to find a niche in the contemporary spectrum of audience reception theory. My primary texts are poems originating in ancient near eastern culture - a far cry from the films and television programmes which have been the main diet of

media research. Although the psalms as printed texts are central to the Psalm Journey, they belong to a very different genre from the romantic novels (Radway 1984), or teenage magazines (McRobbie 2000; Currie 1999) of reception studies. And while the audio renderings of the Psalms - read, chanted and sung – are highly valued by my respondents, such recordings are not the same medium as radio, which has tended to be the main focus of audio research work (Merton 1946; Mitchell 1999). Few (if any) of the published reception studies appear to cover rich, classic texts like the psalms. All of these facts may be disadvantages, but they do not constitute a disqualification from my employing insights from media studies. Parallels can, with care, be appropriately drawn between studies in different media (Morley 1992: 21); in fact, such a transfer takes place when television and film analysis borrows techniques that originate in literary studies (Turner 2003: 16). Moreover, the Psalm Journey explores the text-audience relationship which is at the heart of most reception studies.

The history of reception studies is characterised by oscillation between the relative powers of media and audience (Morley 1980: 2), resulting in the emergence over the years of three theoretical paradigms: the ‘effects’ paradigm, the ‘uses’ paradigm, and the ‘interpretive’ paradigm. ‘Effects’ studies are message-based, assuming that the content of the message has a direct effect on the audience, and are represented first by the Frankfurt School and later by ‘Screen theory’ (so called after the major British film journal *Screen*) which considers film and television as having power to force viewers to take on the identity and ideology preordained for them by the film text.<sup>32</sup> Such claims that media exercise a ‘direct’ effect on audiences have been widely criticised (Eldridge *et al.* 1997: 127-8; Morley 1992: 68-9; Turner 2003: 85-89). They do not ring true to the reality of the Psalm Journey audiences who are always ready to ‘argue’ with the texts and in some instances reject them. This reaction is consistent with anecdotal evidence from the Bible Societies that Scripture engagement, in practice - if not in its formal UBS definition - provides considerable evidence that audiences can, and do, reject Scripture texts.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The Frankfurt School was formed by Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer, who developed the ‘pessimistic mass society thesis’ in their opposition to mass Nazi fascist propaganda in 1930s Germany. Forced to flee to the USA, they critiqued ‘the complex conflation of entertainment, leisure, advertising, commerce, lifestyle and mass media that generated the “one dimensional” American “man”’. (Jenks 1993: 109). The Frankfurt School is often represented as following a ‘hypodermic needle’ model which regards the media as having power to ‘inject’ a repressive ideology directly into the consciousness of the masses (Morley 1980: 1).

<sup>33</sup> The UBS regular news publication *World Report* provides anecdotal evidence that audience activity can be either positive or negative. Such alternative responses are, in fact, recorded in the Bible itself as

In contrast to ‘effects’ studies, ‘uses’ research stresses audience activity and its relative independence from manipulation by the media.<sup>34</sup> Katz and Lazarsfeld’s group research led them to conclude that the influence of mass media is ‘paralleled by the influence of people’ (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, in Morley 1980: 4).<sup>35</sup> This ‘rediscovery of the primary group’ and its role in determining individual response in communication led to the decisive rejection of the ‘hypodermic model’, and to the emergence in the 1960s of the American school of media research which regarded the media as unproblematically reflecting American pluralist society, in which all social groups were guaranteed media access (Morley 1980: 4; Hall 1982 in Turner 2003: 169).<sup>36</sup> This perspective has recovered popularity since the 1970s in the British ‘uses and gratifications’ approach developed by Blumer and others (Morley 1980: 5,11). The ‘uses’ paradigm has met with strong criticism, notably from Morley and Eldridge, and would be difficult to adopt in a project that is seeking to evaluate (among other things) the communicative power of the psalms.<sup>37</sup>

As the limitations of both the ‘effects’ and the ‘uses’ paradigms became widely recognised, Merton’s early attempt to connect the analysis of the message with the analysis of its effects inspired the formulation of the third paradigm (Morley 1980: 4).<sup>38</sup> This perspective, which Morley designates the ‘Interpretative Paradigm’, is able, with the help of sociological insights, to

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characterising the ancient audiences to which the biblical texts were initially (and frequently orally) communicated (e.g. Acts 17.4-5, 32-34).

<sup>34</sup> An early example of the ‘uses’ approach was Robert Merton’s 1946 study of the Kate Smith war bond radio broadcasts. Merton contended that the effect of a message cannot be simply inferred from its content; the ‘actual processes of persuasion’ must also be examined (Merton 1946, in Morley 1980: 3).

<sup>35</sup> Katz (1959 in Morley 1980: 5) argued that a functionalist approach focusing on the subjective motives and interpretations of individual users assumed that ‘even the most potent of mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no “use” for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives. The “uses” approach assumes that people’s values, their interests... associations... social roles, are pre-potent, and that people selectively fashion what they see and hear’.

<sup>36</sup> Lazarsfeld *et al.* (1944 in Morley 1992: 48) contended that the group formed a ‘protective screen’ around the individual and that there was little evidence of people changing their political behaviour as a result of the influence of the media.

<sup>37</sup> Eldridge (1997: 152) raised concerns that, under postmodern and free market influences, the ‘new revisionist paradigm’ by over-stressing the activity of the audience, overlooks questions of the ‘political economy’ of the media, including the possibility of audience pleasure being manipulated.

<sup>38</sup> Morley (1980: 10) complains of the frequent failure of many ‘uses’ studies to recognise the complex and mediated nature of the text-audience relationship.

conceptualise the interaction between media and audiences as a process of interpretation by and of the actors involved.

In the early 1970s Stuart Hall presented a paper entitled 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse' that conceived a method capable of measuring textual polysemy by incorporating structural linguistic theory and semiotics from European philosophers like Saussure and Barthes, thus installing 'a new vocabulary of analysis and a new theory of cultural production' (Turner: 73). The strength of Hall's model over against the 'effects' and 'uses' paradigms lies in providing a basis for developing a theory which gives due weight to both 'text' and 'audience' (Morley 1980: 148). The encoding/decoding model offers a structured conception of the different determinate 'moments' in the communicative exchange between text and audience (Hall 1980: 128-129). These 'moments' are, first, the encoding of the message in the text by the producer, and, second, the decoding of a message by the audience.<sup>39</sup> It is the degree of identity/non-identity between the codes employed by source and receiver that determines the 'degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange. Where the codes are identical the message is transmitted perfectly; where they are not identical, the transmission is interrupted or distorted. Misunderstandings and distortions arise from 'a lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange' (Hall 1980: 131).<sup>40</sup> Hall argues that, while the moments of constructing and reading a television message may be determinate moments, there is nevertheless a range of possible outcomes in both cases (Turner 2003: 76).

In order to reflect this range of codes, Hall (Hall 1980: 137-8), following Parkin 1971 (cf Morley 1980: 20), adopted three decoding categories:

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<sup>39</sup> Hall thus rejects the passivity of audiences assumed by many of the studies based on 'effects'. Decoding by the receiver is essential to the effectiveness of the communication. 'If no "meaning" is taken, there can be no "consumption". If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect' (Hall 1980: 128).

<sup>40</sup> Hall's thinking was influenced by Louis Althusser's concept of ideology which was perceived as being encoded in texts, implying that texts thus encoded have a preferred reading, i.e. they possess power to persuade. This 'rediscovery of ideology' by media studies in the 1970s (Hall 1982) introduced a focus on analysing media coverage of politics and controversial issues such as industrial and race relations (Morley 1976; Glasgow Media Group 1976). The concept was later introduced to feminist and anti-racist research and also in studies of entertainment media, popular fiction and music.

A *dominant* decoding occurs where the audience interprets the text in terms of the same code used by the producer. Both text and audience ‘inhabit’ the dominant ideology.<sup>41</sup>

A *negotiated* decoding takes place where the audience theoretically accepts the dominant ideology, but negotiates its own meaning of it. ‘It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to “local conditions”’.

An *oppositional* decoding occurs where the audience interprets the text through a different code from that employed by the producer in encoding the message.<sup>42</sup>

The capacity of Hall’s model to analyse the communicative exchange between text and audience constitutes its potential to analyse the Psalm Journey data. By focusing on the ‘moment’ of the encoded message, the model will enable me to analyse the communicative purpose of the psalm texts in terms of what is the ‘preferred’ reading. In addition, Hall’s model enables the decoded message to be analysed. The model’s decoding categories acknowledge that the flow of media power is not linear; the audience can interrupt and resist dominant messages – a phenomenon evident in some dissenting responses to the text by the Psalm Journey audience.<sup>43</sup>

A problem could arise in identifying the ‘dominant’ code. In Morley’s *Nationwide* study (which adopted Hall’s paradigm) this was determined by the preferred meaning the television news programme producers said they wished to communicate (Brunsdon and Morley: 6-9). But in the case of the Psalm Journey it is obvious that we cannot consult the original composers of the psalms, and our limited knowledge of the original context of the production of the six psalm texts makes speculative any inference of ‘intended meaning’ or ‘preferred reading.’ Not being competent to adjudicate between the differences of scholarly opinion regarding the intention of the composers and editors of the psalms, I assume the dominant code to be those readings which

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<sup>41</sup> Hall justifies his use of ‘dominant’ to describe the preferred readings of texts because they represent definitions of situations and events which are ‘in dominance’ or hegemonic.

<sup>42</sup> Hall’s model was adapted (and confirmed) by Morley and Brunsdon’s well-known study of the BBC *Nationwide* news programme undertaken in 1975-76. The first of two monographs detailing this study (Brunsdon and Morley 1978) analysed the ‘moment’ of production of the BBC news programme. The second monograph (Morley 1980) explored through detailed empirical work the ‘moment’ when the programme’s encoded messages were decoded - differentially read, made sense of and acted upon - by different audiences.

<sup>43</sup> (Eldridge 1997: 160) makes the point that ‘interpretation’ by the audience does not disqualify the concept of media ‘influence’.

have been recovered by UBS scholars actively engaged in translating the psalm texts into a variety of modern languages. I take these readings from *A Handbook on the Psalms* (HP) and various publications prepared for translators by Ernst Wendland, a UBS Bible translation consultant working in Southern Africa who has specialised in Psalm studies.<sup>44</sup> The decision to privilege these UBS readings makes good sense in the light of the general context of the study, and it was taken without prejudice to the integrity of alternative readings that other scholars may offer. It should be noted that these preferred readings were not shared with the respondents.<sup>45</sup>

I cannot overlook the fact that, although Hall's influence in cultural studies is widely recognised, his model and Morley's use of it have been subjected to several major criticisms. These need to be considered in case they impose limitations on the usefulness of the model in my theoretical framework.<sup>46</sup> First, it is claimed that the model is *not innovative*. Curran claims that Morley's 'advances' were, in fact, insights that were clearly pre-dated and pre-figured by earlier work within both the 'effects' and 'uses and gratifications' traditions (Curran 1990: 135 in Morley 1992: 22; cf Fiske 1987A in Morley 1992: 27). However, even if Curran's contention were true, it does not prejudice the intrinsic integrity of the model. A second area of criticism has been the degree of importance Hall and Morley attribute to *the role of class* in the decoding process. Fiske claims that in the *Nationwide* study, 'what Morley found was that Hall, in following Parkin (1971), had overemphasised the role of class in producing different readings and had underestimated the variety of determinants of reading (Fiske 1987: 63 in Morley 1992: 11).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Wendland (2004: 4) devotes special attention to 'the previously overlooked *artistic* (formal) and *rhetorical* (interpersonal) dimensions of biblical discourse. Together these determine the relative appeal (aesthetic attraction) and impact (persuasive power) of the original message as it was produced (conceived, composed, and conveyed) and processed (heard, read) during the primary act of verbal creation. There is a prominent manifestation of the "expressive," "directive," and "poetic" functions of communication.

<sup>45</sup> Respondents do, however, receive with the text of each psalm a brief (one-two page) *Minimal Hermeneutic*, providing simple linguistic and cultural information relevant to the text and suggesting related biblical texts where appropriate. In three cases a thematic outline was also included. In addition, the Psalm Journey website provided brief paragraphs of information on Hebrew poetry, psalm categories, vengeance, mythological language, etc.

<sup>46</sup> Morley (1992: 10-41) responds robustly to all of these criticisms (cf Turner 2003: 110;138).

<sup>47</sup> Turner (Turner 2003: 110) makes a similar point, contending that in the *Nationwide* study, Morley fails to demonstrate his assumption that 'a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in particular ways' shared by members of sub-cultural formations in the audience is 'determined by factors derived from the objective position of the individual reader in the class structure' (Morley 1980: 15). According to Turner, 'many would hold that the "specific factors" (class, occupation, locality, ethnicity, family structure,

This criticism of Morley is barely relevant to the Psalm Journey study, where, with one exception, the audience are university students and largely homogeneous in terms of class, although mixed in terms of gender, ethnicity and nationality.

The third critique concerns *the group work in the Nationwide study*. Turner suggests that the minimal variations within each group's reading and the lack of focus on individual decoding of television texts makes the group readings questionable. This debate over group versus individual interviews scarcely applies to the Psalm Journey project, which employs both types of interview. A fourth area of criticism has been Morley's use of ethnographic methods. According to Nightingale, ethnographic research, because of its primary commitment to description, is intrinsically unsuited to serving the critical purposes of cultural studies (Nightingale 1986 in Morley 1992: 13).<sup>48</sup> However, methods need not be rigidly linked with methodologies and theoretical perspectives (Crotty: 12), and if the burden of this criticism is that Morley uses the adjective 'ethnographic' rather loosely in describing a method that many others would define as focus group interviews, it seems trivial, since the usefulness of focus groups is widely recognised in the social sciences (Arksey and Knight: 77-78).<sup>49</sup>

Not one of these critiques disqualifies the Hall model from incorporation into the theoretical framework for the Psalm Journey project, but there is another potential limitation to consider. This is whether a model like Hall's, designed for analysing audience reception of television, can appropriately be applied to analyse the reception of a written text. Television and print are different media, but they already share many analytical concepts which media studies have borrowed from literary studies (Turner 2003: 33-55). Furthermore, even if the model imperfectly fulfilled Morley's research purpose in *Nationwide*, that in itself would not bar it from being considered for adoption in other projects.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the criticisms of Hall must

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educational background, access to varied forms of mass communication and so on) are so many and so interrelated that even the attempt to make definitive empirical connections is a waste of time'.

<sup>48</sup> Turner is also critical; he considers the appropriation of ethnographic methods by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies to be 'anything but thorough' (Turner 2003: 113). On the other hand – regarding *Nationwide* - Turner acknowledges that 'there is actually little that is ethnographic about Morley's method, other than his use of focus interviews with audiences and his attempt to relate their readings of texts to their cultural backgrounds'.

<sup>49</sup> This brief review highlights the major criticisms of the 'encoding/decoding' model; it is not exhaustive.

<sup>50</sup> A further potential limitation might be the prominence given to the concept of ideology in Hall's and Morley's use of the model. Hall borrows this concept from Althusser and Gramsci. The fact that Althusser bases this concept on structuralist linguistic theory (Turner 2003: 19), which is

be seen in the light of the wide recognition that the emergence of Hall's model constituted a defining moment in British media studies (Alasuutari 1999 in Turner: 138; cf Morley 1992: 12).

Having concluded, after considering seriously the criticisms to which Hall's model has been subjected, that it has integrity and that it is appropriate for my purpose, I am now in a position to outline in brief the theoretical framework of my study. The conceptual perspective will be provided by combining elements of Tracy, Browning and Hall. Tracy's classic text concept will inform the analysis of the psalms as communicative, self-authenticating texts. The dimensions of Browning's *phronesis* will facilitate the identification of the cognitive, affective and behavioural activity of the audience. By distinguishing preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings, Hall's 'encoding/decoding' model will provide the means of measuring the impact of the text on the audience and also the audience reaction to the text. The 'dominant code' is the meaning invested in the text by the authors; when the audience understands and accepts this meaning it makes a 'preferred reading.' The 'oppositional code' is evident when the audience rejects the 'dominant code'. The 'negotiated code' covers those audience readings falling somewhere in the range between acceptance and rejection of the 'dominant' code. The difficulty in determining the 'dominant' code in the case of the psalms will be overcome by accepting the readings of UBS translation consultants as the 'preferred reading' of a specific psalm. By combining these three approaches in interpreting the data I hope to obtain a comprehensive and authentic understanding of both the dynamic of the Psalm Journey and the process of Scripture engagement.

In this chapter I have constructed the theoretical framework with which I shall analyse and interpret the Psalm Journey data. In the first part, I expounded the theological perspective and understanding of culture that inform my interpretation of the data. In the second part, drawing on insights from David Tracy and Don Browning, I ascertained that a correlation between the

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epistemologically very different from the constructionism adopted in the design of the Psalm Journey research, raises the question of design consistency. However, I do not see this as an irresolvable problem for three reasons: First, the validity of using the same method (or model) in several epistemological frameworks is recognised in social research design (Crotty: 12-14). Second, the concept of ideology is not of primary significance in the Psalm Journey. Third, even if ideology were more central in the present project I would wish to argue that Hall's model could operate carrying a less complex sense of ideology than that of Althusser and Gramsci, such as 'a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of a group or class' (Crockett: 37).

psalm texts and my respondents is theologically viable. In the third part, I selected Stuart Hall's 'encoding/decoding' paradigm to be the final component in my combined theoretical construct. The 'house' is now ready for occupation.

### Chapter 3. Research Design, Pilot Project, and Psalm Texts

In this chapter I will first review the design specification for the project and, secondly, will give a summary of the pilot that explored audience values and helped to set the stage for the Psalm Journey. Finally I will expound the rationale lying behind the choice of the six psalms selected for use in the project.

#### 3.1 Research Design

In designing the Psalm Journey project my primary objective is to create a blueprint capable of yielding data that will help me to answer the two research questions stated in the opening page of chapter 1. In addition, the design requires to accommodate the two basic assumptions underlying the Bible Societies' understanding of Scripture engagement. The first assumption – that the biblical texts possess communicative power – calls for a design capable of measuring that power. The second assumption – that in Scripture engagement the audience interacts with a biblical text – calls for a design that will produce and capture data relating to the audience's cognitive, affective, and behavioural response to the Scripture texts utilised. Furthermore, underlying the design is the need to test my hypothesis that the raw spirituality of the psalms resonates with the spiritual quest of the young adults interviewed and facilitates their quest for personal meaning and spiritual enlightenment.

In describing my research design I will follow the four widely accepted basic elements of a research process before going on to describe the key concepts of the project and detailing my data source.<sup>1</sup> The basic elements are (Crotty: 2):

1. What *methods* do I propose to use?
2. What *methodology* governs my choice and use of methods?
3. What *theoretical perspective* lies behind the methodology in question?
4. What *epistemology* informs this theoretical perspective?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The design takes cognizance that my project is *basic* research (cf Blaikie: 49-52) insofar as it set out to contribute to the theoretical knowledge of popular spirituality; it is *applied* research in that it aims also to produce knowledge for action in the form of the development of more effective models of Scripture engagement by the Bible Societies.

<sup>2</sup> Crotty omits from his list 'Ontology' because 'ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together' in informing the theoretical perspective (Crotty: 10).

Regarding *methods*, I am using qualitative methods for two reasons: first, to capture respondents' subjective appreciation of videos evaluated in the pilot project, and, second, to obtain the nuanced data required in the main project for exploring the three-week spiritual journey of a group of young adults and for exploring the individual spiritual quest of each participant. In both the pilot and main projects I employ semi-structured focus groups in semi-natural settings, and also structured one-to-one interviews. These qualitative methods are supplemented in the pilot by brief quantitative questionnaires which are self-administered by respondents to provide data about age, gender, social background and values. Although these questionnaires impose my concepts on the respondents, I seek to use them consistently with qualitative methods by regarding the data they yield as supplementing the much more extensive qualitative data. In addition, half of the six value questions provided an 'other' option, which might permit the conclusion that the questionnaires differ from the semi-structured focus groups in degree rather than in essence. In addition, I ensure the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is given overall consistency by pressing both types of method into serving similar ontological and epistemological assumptions. In both projects the data is manipulated manually.

Turning to the *methodology*, I follow Crotty's understanding that this describes the strategy governing the choice and use of methods and how these are linked to the desired outcome. This strategy is action research, so-called because it 'is intended to have both action outcomes and research outcomes' (Dick), takes the form of constructing and testing a participative and performative model of psalm engagement. This involves combining two of Blaikie's four main research strategies, viz. the deductive and the abductive. My strategy is deductive in that it tests my hypothesis by matching it with data; it is abductive by attempting to describe and understand spirituality in terms of the social actors' motives and accounts (Blaikie: 100-119).

The *theoretical perspective*, or philosophical stance, chosen to inform the methodology, is critical realism. Critical realism is considered 'real' because it assumes that there is a world independent of the theories that are held about it (DETS); it is 'critical' by recognizing that the social construction of reality is always an approximation to natural reality so that 'the sense we

make of things' may not be 'the way things are' (Crotty: 64)<sup>3</sup>. Underlying critical realism is the ontological notion that realities exist outside the mind (Crotty: 10).<sup>4</sup>

I employ a constructionist *epistemology* in order to allow me to capture the social actors' own construction of social reality. I understand constructionism to be the theory that 'people construct new knowledge with particular effectiveness when they are engaged in constructing personally-meaningful products' (Bruckman & Resnick). Crotty makes clear that constructionism is not to be confused with a subjectivist epistemology and that it is compatible with realism in ontology (Crotty: 11; 44; 63).<sup>5</sup>

These are the basic concepts of my research design. However, in designing research, *concepts* also play a central role in all scientific enquiry. Blaikie regards them as constituting one of the core elements of research design and as being important in forming the theoretical framework that sets a context for research, in stating the research problem. He also emphasises their role in designing the collection and categorization of data and in describing the findings in establishing those links with the social world that give theory value. (Blaikie: 129).<sup>6</sup>

Of the four traditions in the use of concepts (Blaikie: 130-139), I have selected two the 'sensitising' and the 'operationalising'. I consider the sensitising tradition as appropriate for the Psalm Journey project because it enables the researcher to begin with loosely defined concepts that are needed to provide an orientation to the research topic, and allows for later redefining of these concepts so that they identify the nature of their common aspects within the diversity of other features (Blaikie: 136-7). I also used the operationalising tradition to turn the concepts used in the two questionnaires into variables (Blaikie: 133). I first detail the concepts employed in the pilot project, and then go on to outline those that were added during the main project.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Critical realism maintains both that theories describe things that exist (hence "realism") and that theories can be true or false (hence "critical")' (Vanhooser 1998: 322).

<sup>4</sup> The theoretical perspective of my research design is consistent with, but distinguishable from, the theoretical framework I describe in chapter 2. The theoretical framework of the previous chapter assumes the ontological perspective of critical realism which is explicitly adopted in the research design.

<sup>5</sup> 'According to constructionism we do not create meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with. What we have to work with is the world and objects in the world' (Crotty: 44).

<sup>6</sup> 'Concepts are regarded as the building blocks of social theories. Theories, in turn, specify the relationships between concepts and why these relationships exist. Good theories are supposed to represent what happens in the social world.' (Blaikie: 129).

In the pilot I select the following sensitising concepts: 'video', 'story', 'spirituality' and 'suffering' and use them as open-ended themes in the focus group interviews without transforming them into operational definitions. 'Video' is used with reference to the particular video viewed and to each group's reaction to it. 'Story' is used to represent the storyline of both the videos viewed and of the Bible as a whole. But that apart, no additional semantic content is offered. 'Spirituality' is left open apart from asking the groups to think of it in a broad, rather than a narrow, sense; to help achieve this, the example of New Age and Neopaganism are offered verbally as examples. However, participants are invited to indicate the relative importance of spirituality first in their own hierarchy of values by the group voting on the relative importance ('very-somewhat-slightly-not') of young adults finding some measure of spiritual fulfilment, and, second, in a hierarchy of peer values by including 'Find a satisfying spiritual experience' in a list of 24 value options from which focus group participants are individually invited to identify the four most common and the four least common. 'Suffering' is included in light of analyses of Generation X culture indicating that a sense of internal suffering is a key religious issue for many young adults (Beaudoin: 96-120).<sup>7</sup>

In the initial stages of the main project I invite participants in a group discussion to share with me their perception of five concepts that the pilot study has highlighted. The results are as follows. As a result 'spirituality' is defined in more depth than in the pilot; it is regarded as a longing of the human spirit for connection beyond the immediate; as the personal pursuit of meaning or place and enlightenment. 'The Psalms' are seen historically and spiritually as sacred texts. 'The Bible' is highly regarded as part of western culture; many young adults react negatively to it when presented as a strict authoritarian code, but respondents affirm the appropriateness of using it as a resource for exploring spiritual values. The Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) is distinguished from the Christian Bible (the Old Testament plus the New Testament). Respondents note that Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Baha'i regard the Bible as a holy book, but not as authoritative Scripture. 'Postmodernism' is identified with relativism and pluralism, a subjective view of truth, and with the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts and concepts. Respondents confirm that 'suffering' is important in the thinking of young adults and includes internal (or emotional) as well as physical pain. 'Ambiguity' is regarded as acceptance of paradox, flexibility and relativism. It is regarded as part of a pick and mix approach to values,

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<sup>7</sup> Suffering is used in a broad sense; no attempt was made to distinguish between pain and suffering and

not as indifference. 'We like it!' (PrM: 2-3). The 'Church' as an institution is regarded with suspicion, although as a place/building it is often seen as friendly.

By giving the main project audience an early opportunity to discuss these sensitising concepts I enable respondents to establish the meaning of the concepts by their exposition rather than by my definition. The discussion also serves as an orientation to the project (Blaikie: 137). While responding to the individual psalmic texts, respondents have additional opportunities to refine and supplement these concepts.

The pilot also included ten operationalising concepts which were included as potential variables in two short questionnaires. These are: 'gender' as socially defined; 'religion' is left undefined; 'age' is reckoned as number of years since birth; 'social background' is defined as where (urban or rural) respondents have lived longest over the previous 10 years and how they describe their social class background; 'life' is defined by respondents selecting the word(s) from the questionnaire that most accurately describe life to them; 'truth' is defined by respondents selecting a phrase that comes closest to their understanding; 'God' is defined through selecting verbal images that come into the respondents' picture of God; 'Jesus Christ' is defined by selecting a phrase which reflects respondents' view; 'Bible' is defined by selecting phrases that most nearly reflect respondents' belief; 'churches' are defined by selecting phrases that most nearly reflect respondents' views of the Christian Churches in general; 'life values' are defined by respondents prioritising a list of 24 life values. The way in which these concepts are operationalised is self-evident from the questionnaires attached as Supplements to Appendix 6.

Another core element of research design is *data sources* (Blaikie: 129). In both the pilot project and the Psalm Journey, data is obtained from individuals in semi-natural settings. They are asked to report on their beliefs, values, attitudes and spirituality. I access some tertiary data for comparative purposes, but the main focus is on primary data composed by the psalmic texts and the interaction by respondents' with these texts as recorded in journals and in transcripts of group (*lectio divina*) and individual interviews.

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both terms were taken to include both physical, emotional and psychological hurt.

The sample from the target population used for this cross-sectional study has been selected judgmentally as opposed to randomly (Blaikie: 103). While obviously it would be ideal to have a randomly selected sample, judgmental selection is satisfactory for two reasons. First, the exploratory nature of this research means that the study does not need to generalize to the population. Second, the time and resources available do not allow for qualitative methods of data collection, which would be required for the in-depth and detailed data desired, to be employed with a randomly selected sample. The sample is made up of University of Edinburgh students. Sixty-one under- and post-graduate students participate in the pilot project, making up eight focus groups. Thirteen students, mostly post-graduates, undertake the Psalm Journey in two groups of almost equal size. Three of the thirteen have been part of the pilot project sample.<sup>8</sup> All respondents are self-selected through a recruitment drive by word-of-mouth and email kindly undertaken by two post-graduate colleagues who volunteered to help. In order to reduce a Christian bias, no recruitment is done in churches, the chaplaincy centre, the School of Divinity, the Christian Union or similar bodies. It has not been possible to realise my intention to broaden the recruitment base by including non-students due to difficulty in finding sympathetic ‘gatekeepers’ with personal contacts in the target audience. In spite of exploring this option with one of the leaders of the Edinburgh West End Churches’ Oasis Project working among clubbers and with several Edinburgh ministers, I drew a blank. All were sympathetic, but the ministers lacked the contacts. The youth leader in the West End advised me that the sensitive nature of the current state of rapport between churches and clubbers might be put under strain if he were to invite clubbers to participate in research on spirituality at that time. Although initially disappointed by the failure to have a broader social base to the sample, I now feel that restricting it to students has the advantage of reducing the number of variables to more manageable proportions.

As already indicated, it is not possible from a small non-probability sample to generalise to the population. In addition, the sample, being composed of university students, obviously has an elite bias. On the other hand, the high proportions of international (non-British) participants – 55% in the total sample of 71 respondents (49% in the pilot; 77% in the Psalm Journey) – might help to make the sample typical, if not representative, of global youth culture. And the fact that

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<sup>8</sup> The field work for the Psalm Journey was done during academic session 2003-4 while the pilot project was undertaken in academic session 2002-3. The fact that a significant number of respondents in the pilot

the hierarchy of values held by the sample broadly follows the findings of other studies (Beaudoin; Brierley 2001) of the age group may confirm this. However, it would be improper to generalise my findings to the general population, and, therefore, I am limiting their applicability to the project itself. Blaikie (207-26) makes the point that in qualitative research, especially case studies used for exploratory research as ‘apt illustrations’ or ‘plausibility probes’, probability samples are not essential.

In summary, the design of my research project has followed Crotty’s four-fold typology of methods, methodology, theoretical perspective and epistemology. Mainly qualitative methods were utilised, an action research methodology was employed with critical realism as the theoretical perspective. A constructionist epistemology was adopted. In addition, the key concepts playing a role in the project have been reviewed and the audience’s understanding of these noted. The sample, from which the data is drawn, was selected judgements rather than randomly. The pilot project was also based on this design and gave me an opportunity to test the design with the audience before the main project was begun; the next section will describe the pilot and what it achieved.

### 3.2 Pilot Project

The aim of the pilot project was to explore the social, religious and spiritual background of the audience in an attempt to identify the prevalent beliefs, attitudes and values of its members. The pilot project was commissioned by the American Bible Society in an attempt to discover why the series of videos entitled *The Life of Christ* (LOC) published during the 1990s had met with only limited success in communicating passages from the gospels to their intended audience (Generation X).<sup>9</sup> The research question this project sought to answer was:

Do the content and style of the LOC videos resonate with the target group's aspirations and values, and do they create an increased willingness to discover more about the story contained in the biblical text?

In effect, the project sought to evaluate the videos in a context of declining Bible use and church attendance in the face of increasing interest in spirituality. The project constituted *applied*

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project were doing a Masters course lasting one session reduced the possibilities of overlap between the two samples.

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller account of the pilot project, see Appendix 6.

research in that it sought to evaluate a range of products; it was also *basic* research in that it sought to contribute to the theoretical knowledge of both scripture engagement and popular spirituality.

There are six titles in the LOC series: *Father and Two Sons, Resurrection, Out of the Tombs, The Neighbor, The Visit, The Nativity*. The first four were each shown to two groups as part of a focus group interview (the interview agenda is found in Appendix 6-Supplement 5). Due to limitation of resources and time, the last two videos mentioned were not shown to groups; instead they were screened individually to two of the focus group participants who had extensive experience in media and active involvement at the interface between the churches and GenX. These two viewers were then interviewed following an agenda similar to that used in the focus groups. In addition, five follow-up interviews (for the interview agenda, see Appendix 6-Supplement 6) were held with selected participants from the focus groups in which they were invited to look back reflexively on the focus group and to explore in greater depth the issues involved in engaging with scripture through a visual medium. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The data - largely qualitative in nature, although supplemented with quantitative data from the questionnaires - was manipulated and interpreted manually.

Sixty-one participants took part in the pilot project. With two exceptions, all were students studying in the University of Edinburgh. The sample was surprisingly international; there were 32 British, 13 Americans, 5 Canadians, 4 Germans and one from each of the following countries: Australia, Austria, Hong Kong, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa and Switzerland. Regarding gender, 25 respondents were male and 36 female. The recruiting invitation assumed recipients would be between 18 and 24 years; and with two exceptions the participants appeared to be in this age group. 75% of respondents had lived longer over the previous ten years in an urban environment; the others in a rural context. Over half (52%) indicated their background as middle class. Of the others, just of a fifth (21%) regarded their social background as upper middle class and over one quarter saw themselves as coming from lower middle or working class origins. Regarding religion, 36 respondents regarded their religion as Christian, 3 as Jewish, 1 Unitarian and 1 Buddhist; 20 indicated no religious association. From the discussion it appears that very few of the Christians are church attenders. Ten of them offered unsolicited information about their religious confession: six were Roman Catholic and four Anglicans.

Given their numerical strength in the UK, it is likely that there were additional representatives of these denominations in the sample.

Over two-thirds (69%) said *Journey* was the primary term that most accurately described life for them, and a further 15% selected it as second or third choice. This finding encouraged me to select 'Psalm Journey' as the title of the main project.<sup>10</sup> On the whole the respondents' picture of God is theologically orthodox. Multiple answers were given and the most common pictures were Creator (52%), Love (48%), Father (34%), Saviour (33%), Judge (30%). Most respondents had a positive view of Jesus, regarding him either as 'the Son of God' or a 'very wise human being'.<sup>11</sup> Respondents have a mixed view of churches; they are old fashioned, but friendly and welcoming. On the whole, it is favourably regarded by participants. Significantly not a single respondent indicated that the Bible is no longer relevant to our culture. The most popular view of the Bible - adopted by just over half (51%) - is that the Bible is part of our natural heritage (like Shakespeare). They are less certain of the religious character of the Bible; just over 4 in 10 respondents (41%) regarded it as a holy book like others. But slightly more than one-quarter thought the Bible to be the unique word of God. In the focus groups it was clear that many react negatively to the use of the Bible as a strict authoritarian code by Christian fundamentalists. Some also feel that the age of the Bible and the questionable accuracy of its text, resulting from centuries of manual transcribing prior to the invention of printing, prevented them from accepting it as relevant to modern life. However, a majority affirm the appropriateness of young adults using the Bible as a tool to help them explore spiritual values. This affirmation was not unqualified; a respondent in the follow-up interview felt it important that attempts to promote the Bible as a spiritual resource should distinguish between the Bible's message and institutional Christianity. Two respondents felt that the psalms and other poetic passages from the Bible would resonate with those who protest against the status quo and want to make the world a better place. The psalms also appeal because they enable us to express anger to God. Also

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<sup>10</sup> The journey metaphor dominates the literature of spiritual formation. Parks (113) is of the view that this metaphor has been artificially separated from that of home, and argues for 'the recognition of the necessary relationship of the metaphors of home and journey, dwelling and pilgrimage'.

<sup>11</sup> The proportion of respondents (4 in 10) who took the traditional and orthodox Christian view that Jesus is the Son of God, is exactly half the proportion of those who took this view in a survey of English teenagers (aged 15-18) published ten years previously (Brierley 1993). However, it is unwise to highlight this difference further in view of the relative smallness and statistically unrepresentative nature of our sample.

commended are Passion readings from the gospels and Paul's letters 'if they can be lifted from the set of rules within them'. Other respondents thought that the recognition of metaphor in the biblical stories encourages spiritual exploration of the text.

Other comments made during the interviews include the following:

'You can't use it like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* where you find something that cheers you up a little. The Bible is certainly useful for that, but you can use it as a way of mediation that enables you come to terms with your problems'.

'The best way to engage with the Bible is to keep within its boundaries and to live there for a while, not just use it as a self-help guide. It demands a specific sort of interaction that you don't usually use just reading literature or searching for help'.

'The Bible restricts you to a very particular kind of spirituality, and I think probably a lot of people have a problem with that'.

'The Bible has the Psalms and things – so much nature, and so many different styles. There's poetry, prayers, letters and more. It's so broad'.

The focus group question : 'In what ways can engaging with the Bible help young adults explore spiritual values more fully?' evoked answers which were largely positive:

'I should think so. The Bible is regarded as a holy book by millions of people through 2,000 years'.

'You could certainly give it a shot.... I personally wouldn't use it to guide me, but it's probably not a bad way'.

'I would be loathe to trust something that doesn't justify its premises.... I'm not inclined to follow something purely based on faith'.

'In terms of spirituality I would say a book like the Book of Psalms, if that could be made more accessible to people'.

The ideas of truth as 'a universal law' or 'a complex mystery' each attracted the concurrence of over one-third of respondents. A much larger proportion, almost three-quarters (74%), indicated that they consider young adults' finding a measure of spiritual fulfilment to be either very or somewhat important. Only 10% of all respondents consider this to be not important. This appears to contradict the relatively low value given in a card exercise to finding life as a fulfilling spiritual experience. In the card exercise respondents were asked to rank the values of

their peers, while in this question on the importance of spiritual fulfilment they were invited to indicate their own personal assessment of one particular value. The disparity between the two perceptions may suggest that the respondents consider themselves to be more open to spirituality than are the majority of their peer group. On the other hand, the contrast may reflect that, while spirituality is deemed to be increasingly important (cf Hay & Hunt 2000), it is not considered to be of the same level of importance as many of the other values appreciated in contemporary young adult society. All the follow-up interviewees, except one, agreed that developing an empathy with those who suffer internal pain is one of the keys to communicating with GenX.

During the focus groups a quantitative exercise inviting respondents to indicate the prevailing values of their peers was carried out (Appendix 6 – Supplement 9). I later reviewed the results in light of the qualitative data relating to values which emerged from both group and individual interviews. The purpose of my review was to identify the six most common values in order that these six values might help determine the choice of psalms to be used in the Psalm Journey. ‘Have a good time’ was selected more times than any other. ‘Get a good job’ came second, while ‘care what others think of me,’ ‘get on well with friends,’ and ‘keep up personal appearances’ came third, fourth and fifth.<sup>12</sup> In this ranking procedure I modified some results from the card exercise by clustering certain values that to some extent overlap in meaning. For example, ‘Care what others think of me,’ ‘Get on well with friends’, ‘Keep up personal appearances’ and ‘Avoid loneliness’ I considered to have a degree of commonality, so I brought them together under the more general value of ‘Be well thought of.’ In addition, I accorded an enhanced ranking to the value ‘Resolve personal anguish’ in view of the qualitative data emerging from the interviews highlighting that the resolution of internal pain is important for respondents. Three values not covered in the card exercise were included in the final six popular values in the light of data that emerged from other parts of the pilot project. ‘Suspect religious institutions’ was brought in to reflect the respondents ambiguous attitude to the churches. Similarly ‘Place a high value on experience’ was included in the top six values because the respondents value spirituality more highly than they perceive their peers to value it. I also included ‘Engage with ambiguity’ in the six most common values because of the understanding

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<sup>12</sup> Next came ‘avoid loneliness,’ ‘maintain health and fitness,’ ‘avoid/clear debt’, ‘work hard,’ and ‘resolve personal anguish’ (in that order). The four least popular were ‘support animal welfare,’ ‘forgive others,’ ‘be religious,’ and ‘tell the truth.’

of truth emerging from Questionnaire 1 and the strong resistance to 'rules' evident in the qualitative data. In the end the six most common values emerged as follows (in unranked order):

- Having a good time
- Be well thought of
- Desire to resolve pain
- Suspect religious institutions
- Place high value on experience
- Engage with ambiguity

In this second section of the chapter I have summarised the findings of the pilot project which explored the reaction of focus group audiences to the series of six videos marketed under the overall title of *The Life of Christ*. The ratio of male to female respondents was 4:6; three quarters regarded themselves as coming from a middle or upper middle class background with the remainder from a lower middle or working class environment. Although very few respondents were church attenders, six in ten indicated that their religion is Christian, with one-third recording no religion and 8 percent professing other faiths (Jewish, Unitarian and Buddhist). Over two-thirds identified *Journey* as the most accurate metaphor describing human life, and on the whole the respondents' picture of God was orthodox and their view of Jesus positive. Although churches tend to be regarded as old fashioned, they are also considered to be friendly and welcoming to strangers. The Bible is viewed positively on the whole with over half regarding it as part of our cultural heritage and four in ten considering it a holy book, but many resisted its use as an authoritarian code. Almost three-quarters considered finding a measure of spiritual fulfilment to be important and most considered that suffering is a major preoccupation of contemporary young adults. From quantitative and qualitative data gathered during the pilot the following values emerged as being the most common: having a good time, being well thought of, the desire to resolve pain, a suspicion of religious institutions, a high value on experience and a readiness to engage with ambiguity. Of particular interest to the Psalm Journey project is the audience's strong interest in spirituality and its largely positive expectations of the Bible as a meditative resource in pursuing one's personal spiritual journey. The fact that the Psalms featured fairly prominently in the audience's expression of these expectations confirm the appropriateness of my decision to use psalm texts in the main project (see section 1.3 of chapter one).

What other benefits flowed from the pilot to the main project? Several. First, it enthused two respondents to become keen recruiting agents for the main project. Second, it revealed a surprising sympathy for the Bible as a resource for contemporary spirituality which gave greater confidence to both respondents and researcher that the Psalm Journey would be an enjoyable experience. Third, the pilot provided me with audience values that guided my selection of psalms for the main project. Fourth, it helped me as the researcher to build a rapport with the audience in advance of the main project.<sup>13</sup> With the benefits from the pilot there were also lessons. The pilot would have benefited from being itself piloted. The first focus group was designed with a view to being a pilot of the pilot, but when it went well, I decided to incorporate it into the pilot proper. However, halfway through the pilot proper it was clear that Question 7a ('In what ways is video format an effective tool to help young adults explore more fully spiritual values?') was not gathering significantly different data from that produced by question 9 ('How likely is it that viewing this video would encourage today's average young adult to explore more of the Bible?'). So I amended Question 7a to 7b, which for the remaining focus groups, read: 'In what ways can engaging with the Bible help young adults to explore more fully spiritual values?' (Appendix 6 -Supplement 5). The revision had the advantage of ensuring that the interface between the Bible and spirituality was made more explicit in the group discussions, and I regret not having revised Question 7a earlier. I now pass from reviewing the pilot project to explain the basis on which the six psalms used in the Psalm Journey were selected.

### 3.3 Selection and interpretation of six psalms

Having identified these values, my next step is to review the Psalter in search of psalms that resonate with the values. The Psalter is a rich resource and many psalms might have been used. After consultation and consideration I selected, on the grounds of content analysis, the psalms listed in the middle column in the table below as appropriate for my purpose. The psalm genre is provided in the third column, in order to indicate the range of psalm types covered.

<u>Audience value</u>	<u>Psalm</u>	<u>Genre/communicative purpose</u>
Have a good time	126	Thanksgiving
Be well thought of	55	Petition/lament by one betrayed
Desire to resolve pain	22	Petition/lament of one who sufferers

<sup>13</sup> Although only three respondents from the pilot project went on to participate in the main project, their enthusiasm greatly boosted the morale of the majority of respondents who had not been involved in the pilot.

Suspect religious institutions	74	Petition/lament at destruction of a venerated institution
Place high value on experience	30	Thanksgiving after deliverance from mortal danger
Engage with ambiguity	73	Wisdom psalm. To resolve doubt about the justice of God

The range of psalms that could correspond to these values confirms the appropriateness of the selection of the Book of Psalms as the biblical text for use in this project exploring Scripture engagement with the young adult audience in view.<sup>14</sup> My next question to consider was which English version of the Psalms should be used. I reviewed the six psalms in the *New International Version* (NIV), the *Good News Bible 2* (GNB2) – a revision of *Today's English Version* (TEV), the *Contemporary English Version* (CEV) and the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). My main criteria – this is the use of inclusive language and the retention of metaphors – was determined by the discomfort of the audience with exclusive language and its predilection for metaphor. I quickly eliminated the CEV because, although its language is inclusive, it tends to flatten the graphic metaphors into concepts. GNB2 also does this to a minor extent, but it also deepens many of the metaphors by nuancing them. However, its adoption of exclusive language is minimal. The NIV retains the metaphors and also the exclusive language of more traditional versions. In the end I opted for the NRSV as it preserves the metaphors and is gender neutral in its renderings of generic human beings and human activities.<sup>15</sup>

In the light of my adoption of Hall's Encoding/decoding model I needed to find a method that will allow me, with a measure of consistency, to infer from the text of each psalm its 'dominant' code which, in turn, will provide the benchmark against which the negotiated and oppositional codes can be measured. Interpretations of the psalms are both multiple and varied, making the selection of a 'preferred' reading a contentious exercise even for experts. Given that this project is not an exercise in evaluating differing scholarly exegetical views, and given that it is being

<sup>14</sup> The values identified by the Psalm Journey audience resonate with the results of other studies of young adult values (e.g. Brierley 2001). It is also significant that, with one possible exception, the six values also appear in the 1996 Heelas study of New Agers (Have a good time: 172; desire to resolve pain: 208-9; suspect religious institutions: 172; 177n21; place a high value on experience: 173; engage with ambiguity: 22). The exception (be well thought of) – if it is an exception – is probably explicable by the strong sense of autonomy that generally characterises New Agers (Heelas: 21-23)

<sup>15</sup> *Today's New International Version* (TNIV) adopts inclusive language, but was published in 2005 after my empirical work had been completed.

conducted within the parameters of Bible Societies' practice, I have, as already indicated in chapter 2, decided for the purpose of this research project, to assume the dominant code of the six psalms to be reflected in the interpretation of these psalm texts offered by UBS translation manuals, notably *A Handbook on the Psalms* (HP) and various studies by Ernst Wendland. The privileging of the UBS interpretation is pragmatic, not principial; it does not indicate that this interpretation necessarily reflects the most correct exegesis of these psalms. It simply provides a 'dominant code' for each psalm that will give me a benchmark for assessing which of the respondent readings are 'preferred', 'negotiated' or 'oppositional'. In the following paragraphs I give a brief summary of the UBS interpretation of each of the psalms.

### *Psalm 22*

In his 'Distribution of Psalm Genres' table Wendland (2000:60) regards this psalm to be petition. In Wendland's taxonomy lament is part of this genre, and, indeed, elsewhere he refers to Psalm 22 as one of the lament psalms, while recognising that it concludes as a song of praise (35, 36). The title given to this psalm in the TEV, endorsed by HP (213) – 'A Cry of Anguish and a Song of Praise' – reflects its two main constituent parts in its canonical form and suggests that the communicative purpose of the poem is to help its users resolve pain and anguish. This, plus the psalm's emotional rhythm, described as 'a series of alternating shifts downward and upward (negative and positive feelings), and a sustained shift from exclusion to inclusion in the final upward swing' (HP: 212), makes it an appropriate text to be engaged by an audience desirous of finding some *modus vivendi* that will help it to live with suffering without succumbing to it. The rhetorical question in the opening line is an open invitation to engage with the text (Wendland 2002: 157), and the powerful metaphors of verses 6, 12-13, 15, 16, 20 and 21, together with the vivid similes of verses 14 and 15, are designed to engage the imagination as well as the emotions of readers.

### *Psalm 30*

In Wendland's table of psalm genre this is a thanksgiving psalm. HP (282) agrees and spells out the basic details: 'This thanksgiving song was composed by a man who had been seriously ill and had almost died (verse 1), and whose prayer to the Lord had been answered (verses 2-3). Perhaps it was sung in the Temple, at the presentation of an offering of thanksgiving to God'. This focus on human experience is enhanced 'by the repeated use of terms belonging to the domain of communication and expression: extol, rejoice, cry, sing praises, give thanks, weeping,

joy, supplication, tell, hear, mourning, dancing, gladness, not be silent' (HP: 282). The intensity of the poet's experience of thankfulness is reinforced by the chiasmic organisation of the psalm's macrostructure (Wendland 2002: 126-129) and also by the dramatisation of the text by the repeated use of direct speech (verses 6,9-10).

#### *Psalm 55*

In his genre table Wendland classifies this psalm as petition. HP (491) is more specific: 'This psalm is a lament by an individual who is threatened by enemies and had been betrayed by a friend. The psalmist's emotions run high; he is desperately afraid and cries continuously to God for help. His distress is particularly sharp because of the betrayal by a person who at one time had been his best friend. At times almost incoherent with despair and rage, the psalmist in the most violent terms prays for the immediate death of his enemies'. Wendland (2002: 93) interprets the civil unrest and lawless (verses 3-5; 9b-11) that so terrorise the poet (verses 4-5) to be a consequence of the betrayal, implying that the treachery took the form of an attempted coup against the king. Although Psalm 55 contains 'a petition for retribution', in making such petitions, the psalmist 'leaves the entire matter completely in God's hands' (Wendland (2002: 49-50).

#### *Psalm 73*

HP (632) describes this as 'a Wisdom psalm designed to instruct the reader about certain basic questions relating to belief in God as a God of justice' arising from 'the fact that those who had disobeyed God's laws had not been punished as the psalmist felt they should have been'. The authors quote Toombs' description of the psalm as 'a journey from the dark night of doubt to the dawn of faith'. Wendland (2002: 60) also categorises Psalm 73 as belonging to the teaching genre, although he does not deal with this psalm in detail.

#### *Psalm 74*

Wendland (2002: 60), in common with most exegetes, classifies this psalm as petition. His table of the 'Distribution of Psalm Genres' does not detail those psalms within this category that are laments (or complaints), probably because he considers 'lament' an alternative title to 'petition' (Wendland 2002: 34). HP (646) identifies the specific nature of this particular lament: 'This psalm expresses the nation's distress and anguish over the invasion of the country by foreign enemies who had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem (verses 3-7) and other places of worship

(verse 8). The people complain that God has abandoned them, and they call on him to change his attitude and save them.... God is called upon to fulfil the promise he made to Israel in the covenant (verse 20) and to save his people from their enemies’.

### *Psalm 126*

According to Wendland (2002: 60), this psalm exhibits two genres: thanksgiving and petition, reflecting the recognition by HP (1068) that the majority of commentators take the meaning of the opening words of verses 1 (*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion*) and 4 (*Restore our fortunes, O LORD*) to be that ‘the people refer to a time in the past when Yahweh had rescued them (verses 1-3), and they now pray that he will do the same once more (verses 4-6).’ HP recognises it is impossible to specify what particular events are referred to in verses 1-3 and 4-6. If the tradition is correct that the ‘psalms of ascent’ (Psalms 120-134) were ‘sung or prayed in unison by groups of pilgrims making their way up to the worship center on the hill of Zion during one of the three great annual religious festivals, Passover, Pentecost and Booths’ (Wendland 2002:185), this would confirm that throughout its early history Psalm 126 was a song of celebration in community.

In this third section of the chapter I explain why I consider the *New Revised Standard Version* to be the most appropriate English version for use in my project. I also indicate that I selected Psalms 22, 30, 55, 73, 74 and 126 as appropriate on the assumption that they relate to the audience values highlighted in the pilot project. The preferred readings of these psalms for the purposes of the Psalm Journey will be inferred from the interpretations of Ernst Wendland and the UBS manual *A Handbook on the Psalms* (HP).

This chapter completes Part I of the thesis in which the scene for my research has been set. In chapter 1 examine the challenge the Bible agencies are facing as they seek to facilitate Scripture engagement in social contexts where churches are declining and interest in spirituality is increasing. I also give my initial reasons for selecting the Psalms as appropriate Scripture texts for engaging young adults with an interest in spirituality. I develop in chapter 2 a theoretical framework for evaluating psalmic engagement at the interface between theology and culture, by combining insights from David Tracy, Don Browning and Stuart Hall. I detail in chapter 3 my research design, as well as reporting on my pilot project with ABS videos, and indicate the six psalms to be used in the project, and identifying their ‘dominant code’ for the purpose of this

exercise. Having thus set the scene, it is now time to move on to Part II where I review the audience interaction with the six psalms and analyse the data emerging from the conversation.

## **PART II: ENGAGING WITH THE PSALMS**

**Chapter 4: Self and Soul****PSALM 126***A Song of Ascents*

1. *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.*
2. *Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
'The LORD has done great things for them.'*
3. *The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.*
  
4. *Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*
5. *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.  
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.*

Having set the scene in Part I of the thesis, I now consider my respondents' engagement with the six psalms in the next six chapters which together form Part II. I am examining the nature of the respondents' spirituality and looking for any evidence that interacting with the psalmic texts has facilitated their search for personal meaning and enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> I will report in chapters 4-6 on the first Psalm Journey and in chapters 7-9 on the second. I explore in this first chapter of Part II the conversation of six young adults with the text of Psalm 126 by analysing the data gathered from respondents' journals and from the transcript of a group meditation and follow-up interviews. As already indicated in chapter 3, the six respondents undertaking the first Psalm Journey are a non-randomly selected group of students at Edinburgh University who have enthusiastically become part of the project. Liz is an attractive Scandinavian female masters student aged 25-29, who has been brought up as a Lutheran and still attends church about four times a year. In the past Liz attended an Alpha course, and is currently practising Yoga. Tom, an African male masters student aged 25-29, has attended a Catholic school, and when younger he had wanted to become a priest. He is now attending Mass not more than about once a year, but has not lost interest in his faith. Norah is a Scottish female arts undergraduate aged under 20 with a non-religious upbringing who has become very interested in Tibetan Buddhism. John is a Canadian male postgraduate student aged 25-29, a Catholic who attends Mass about once a year and has bad memories of his religious upbringing. Connie is a Canadian female postgraduate student aged 25-29, a

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents defined spirituality as 'a longing of the human spirit for connection beyond the immediate; as the personal pursuit of meaning or of place and enlightenment' (see Chapter 3).

Protestant who attends church occasionally (not more than once a year); she has a deep concern for homeless people. Finally, Luke is an English male undergraduate student aged 20-24 who is deeply involved in student politics and is an active member of an independent evangelical church. These are the travellers whom we are to accompany on their journey with three psalms over the next three chapters.

I begin with a reminder that Psalm 126 was selected because of its assumed audience resonance in light of respondents selecting ‘having a good time’ as one of the main values of their peer group. In the first section of the chapter I review the responses of the audience to the text, focusing particularly on whether they reveal resonance between the text and respondents’ understanding of ‘having a good time’ identified in the pilot project. In the second section I highlight the contrast between respondents who interpret their spirituality within the theistic framework of the psalm with those who adopt a more self-oriented hermeneutic. I utilise the paradigm developed in the Kendal project in an attempt to evaluate whether any of the respondents integrate these two contrasting modes of spirituality. At the same time, I utilise the ‘self versus soul’ tension identified in much contemporary spirituality by Eugene Peterson in an attempt to discover any indication of respondents being attracted from a selfist to a theistic mode of spirituality. In the final section, I compare my respondents’ readings of the psalm with those of Claus Westermann and James L. Mays, two well-known commentators.

### *Section 1: Resonance or dissonance?*

In this section I explore the resonance and the dissonance between respondents and Psalm 126.

#### **‘A good time can be so elusive’ (Luke, D5)**

Psalm 126 was selected, as I have said, because I reckoned its theme would resonate with the audience putting a high value on having a good time.<sup>2</sup> This psalm, which probably recalls the joy of exiles returning to their homeland, is categorised by scholars as combining the genres of thanksgiving and petition (Wendland 2002: 60), and the titles given it by many

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase ‘shouts of joy’ occurs three times (vv 2, 5 and 6) and both ‘laughter’ (v 2) and the verb ‘rejoice’ (v 3) appear once each.

commentators suggest the theme of rejoicing.<sup>3</sup> The question to be addressed in this chapter is whether interacting with this psalm makes life more enjoyable for respondents.

While three of the six respondents comment on the prior supposition of some correspondence between ‘having a good time’ and the theme of Psalm 126, none of these recognise the link to be direct, mainly because they regard having a good time as finding some temporary escape from the pressures of living. For Luke, ‘a good time can be so elusive. Vacuous evenings of expensive “socialising” with minimal meaningful social contact. This isn’t the reaping with shouts of joy that my week’s sowing looks forward to’ (D5). Liz shares Luke’s scepticism about the psalm corresponding to ‘having a good time’ which is ‘like not worrying about a thing in the world’, whereas the people in the psalm ‘carry their sorrows and their history with them.... [This] is what defines the tone of the song – the coming out of the dreaming-state to the real life, which contains sorrows and *possibly* joy’ (D3). Connie also indicates that ‘the value of “having fun” did not seem readily apparent in the words of the psalm’ (D1).

#### **‘Pain as gain’ (Tom, D2)**

The publication in 2004 of Pat Kane’s *Play Ethic* highlights the value of play as opposed to work.<sup>4</sup> For my respondents the issue is not so clear. Even when the concept of having a good time is broadened to enjoyment (which Browning includes within the tendency-need dimension), respondents are still ambivalent. Liz responds negatively; she finds the references to ‘the collective shouting of joy’ (vv 2, 5, 6) to be immensely provoking because

I am too rooted in the notorious ironic distance to accept that image as mine; it is too naïve, too dedicated. If any fortunes were to be restored to me, it should perhaps be a childlike faith; an unquestioned, joyful, dreamlike, unspoken faith. The faith I have is more distant and at the same time very simple and concrete: I believe in life as an absolute truth and I believe that prayers work (D7).

Tom stresses the theme of joy coming after pain (‘go out weeping... come home with shouts of joy’ v 6), because he has a deep concern for the suffering of his people at home in Zimbabwe (D2) and he seems to anticipate the possibility of passing through suffering into salvation: ‘Maybe I am not among the chosen, maybe I could be if I suffer’ (D2). Luke, who

<sup>3</sup> For example, ‘Our mouth was filled with laughter’ (Knight II: 275) and ‘Joy – experienced and anticipated’ (Davidson: 416). Since petition is prominent in the latter part of Psalm 126, most commentators classify this psalm as lament (Anderson: 863; Allen: 172).

<sup>4</sup> ‘When we work we are essentially slaves, and in our leisure we are potentially gods’ (Kane: 74).

offers most preferred readings of this psalm, writes reflectively in his journal on the phrase ‘like those who dream’ (v 1): ‘Within my religious experience there are moments of transported peace and overflowing happiness. There are also moments of great “toil.” Do I toil so that once again I can experience God’s goodness and love? This psalm seems to suggest that’s OK’ (D4). Again, on day 7, Luke finds himself meditating on the mutual interaction between happiness and thankfulness in his experience: ‘I find when I am genuinely thankful I am genuinely happy, and I’m not sure the two work in either order. Thankfulness MAKES happiness just as happiness makes thankfulness’ (D7).

The psalm inspires Luke also to reflect on the joy one seeks in job satisfaction. ‘What does it mean to “sow in tears”?’ he asks on day 3.

Desperation, hopelessness, slavery and habit. Yes, but also implied is faith? Many people work, not because from their work they derive satisfaction, but because it is their only hope, distraction, or indeed they are compelled to. Some work in environments which are soul-destroying. But to “reap with shouts of joy” is to see work fulfilled. To go through the motions with little expectation, but then to be blessed to the extent people notice how well you see is kinda nice (D3).

John’s reflections are more general than those of Luke. Although he finds meditating on the psalm to be ‘positive and calming’ because it affords an opportunity to reflect critically on life, John considers that the value of ‘having a good time’ is not nuanced enough in Psalm 126. ‘When I meditate on this psalm,’ he writes, ‘I think more about the cycle of “ups and downs” inherent in life. The psalm seems to me to be as much about hardship as it is about celebration’ (D3). But John sees this as strength rather than a weakness, for it made the psalm ‘a good symbolic tool’ for capturing the daily cycle of celebration and tribulation (D5). However, John’s last journal entry focuses exclusively on joy: ‘I think the psalm makes me realize that I need to spend more time “rejoicing” in the things that are going well in my life. Usually too busy and stressful, so I take what is going well for granted. Taking a minute to meditate helps me concentrate on the good things’ (D6).<sup>5</sup> Tom writes about ‘Pain as gain’ (D2), reflecting on how his experience of joy seems to follow a sense of pain, such as the hard discipline of study or sharing his people’s suffering in Zimbabwe.

Connie also shares this general ambivalence. ‘While reading this psalm,’ she writes on day 1, ‘I felt a sense of hope and happiness – that it is possible to make the most of what one has.

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<sup>5</sup> John found that his meditation overflowed well beyond the limits of his ten-minute commitment. He tells us how he ‘reflected on how the psalm sits in your head and kind of stews all day. It pops into conscious thought at odd times, like walking to school or doing other “mindless” tasks’ (D2)

I do feel this is an important value that should be kept in mind, because all too often it is easy to forget how lucky one is.’ Yet on day 3 she wonders why, if the Lord has power to restore the fortunes of Zion, is he allowing such suffering and sorrow in Iraq?<sup>6</sup> Over against the general uncertainty as to how far the mood of the psalm reflects having a good time, there is one respondent for whom meditating on the psalm is transformative.

**‘I decided to take refuge’** (Norah, L1: 3)

Life-changing decisions, it is said, are not uncommonly prompted by intellectual and emotional crises.<sup>7</sup> Norah’s experience with Psalm 126 confirms this observation. Initially she finds meditating on Psalm 126 to be traumatic; she writes of being enveloped in ‘a massive feeling/sense of darkness’ (D2). But two days later her mood changes as she tells us that now she is able to connect with what the psalm is saying to her in terms of ‘the idea of things improving’ which, in turn, cheers her up and makes her feel appreciative of the support of friends. She attributes this enlightenment to the psalm, to which, in effect, she brings the question, ‘Is there a purpose to live for?’ (D4). Although the answer she found while engaging with the psalm should probably be construed as a negotiated reading, there is little doubt in her mind that the psalm has met a very real spiritual need of the moment and encouraged her to take the next step in her journey into Buddhism (D6). The next day she tells the group during the *lectio divina* session: ‘As from last night – after a long time of indecision – I decided to take refuge in June’ (L1: 3).<sup>8</sup>

Norah’s decision is the most dramatic immediate result of the Psalm Journey. Three basic factors appear to have contributed to it. First, the psalm evokes a sense of antagonism towards God as she perceived God to be portrayed in the text. On the third day Norah posted this message on the website:

After doing some meditation on Psalm 126 I have this overwhelming sense of blame and in a way hatred (that word may be too strong) for god. Does this mean that people only like god when something’s going right for them and all is lovely? Is their faith really that shallow?

<sup>6</sup> I consider in chapter 9 the issue of theodicy: why God allows suffering.

<sup>7</sup> In the thirty-two case studies of Christian conversion taken from the *Finding Faith Today* (1992) research in the UK, and summarised in *Stories of Faith* (1995) by John Finney, sixteen involve at some stage emotional crises occasioned by suicidal feelings, depression, divorce, addiction, etc.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Taking refuge’ is Buddhist terminology for formally converting to Buddhism in a ceremony which involves taking refuge vows and saying the refuge prayer. (‘Going for Refuge’ on <http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/refuge.html>, downloaded 28 November 2006). The coincidence between this Buddhist terminology and the concept of refuge as ‘the controlling metaphor’ in the Book of Psalms (Creach 1998: 18; McCann 1996: 666-7; Thomas 2002: 217) is striking, but coincidental.

Norah does not make clear why she has this extremely negative image of God, perhaps because she does not know. But almost certainly it serves to highlight the attractiveness of Buddhism. A second factor influencing Norah's decision to take refuge is psychological, for during that week she is suffering from depression. 'Massive feeling/sense of darkness when meditating,' she writes. 'Large feeling of being deserted and having no purpose to live for' (D2). Fortunately, Norah's diary reveals that three days later she is recovered and paying tribute to the help she has received from friends (D4). However, her melancholy returns; on day 6 she makes this journal entry: 'After today's meditation I cannot seem to stop reflecting on death.' This is because it is the sixth anniversary of the death of a close friend. These three factors: her sense of hatred for God, her depression, and her grieving probably contribute to her decision to adopt Buddhism.

Norah's case calls into question several of the current understandings of Scripture engagement which I reviewed in chapter 1. There can be little doubt that Norah genuinely engages with the text of Psalm 126. Having got over her crisis, Norah tells the group that the words of verse 1: 'We were like those who dream' have impacted her deeply: 'You dream about it,' she says. 'All tell you it's impossible. Then it happens. The happiness, sense of achievement, satisfaction for oneself this gives you' (L: 1). Norah is not the only respondent whose experience indicates that people can intellectually, emotionally and spiritually engage with Scripture without manifesting the consequences detailed in the definition of April 2005. Later in the thesis I argue for an alternative understanding that distinguishes the engagement from its desired outcomes.

In summary, the theme of joy in Psalm 126 registers with all respondents, inducing reflection on it. But the joy in the psalm resonates with the experience of only three: Luke, Tom and (ultimately) Norah. These three respondents internalise the joy in ways that enhances their spirituality. Norah's case raises questions about current definitions of Scripture engagement that I return to in chapter 11. Meantime, I go on to explore the different views of the self through which joy is perceived in the psalm by all, and appropriated by some. While, in one sense, there is as much variety of self-understanding as there are respondents, two basic attitudes to the self stand out.

*Section 2: Theistic or selfist?*

I am styling the two basic attitudes as ‘theistic’ (where the self is seen in a ‘life-as’ relation to a supreme being) or as ‘selfist’ (where the self is regarded as autonomous and non-accountable to a higher power). Luke and Tom reveal such a theistic understanding of both the psalm and their own spirituality. Reflecting on the piety of the psalmist, Luke reckons that it is ‘in the past beneficence of God’ that ‘the writer derives the expectation of joy in the future despite current hardship’ (D1). Tom, in recalling the spirituality of his youth, comments: ‘Closeness to God is like a fantasy, like a beautiful longed for dream, real but beyond human understanding’ (D1). In contrast, the journals and comments of the others do not reveal a theistic frame of understanding. The readings of three respondents suggest a search for joy with a selfist focus.<sup>9</sup> According to Liz, her spiritual life is ‘a feeling of the current that runs under all life’ (D7). Connie finds that meditating on the psalm does not necessarily help to connect to her ‘spiritual self’ any more than usual (D6); my inference is that the meditation on the psalm does not further or deepen her spirituality. Norah, while feeling a sense of abandonment and lack of purpose in life, sends strength to herself to help her to survive (D2).

This focus on the self in the journals of these last three respondents raises the question whether the Psalm Journey reflects the ‘subjective turn’ which many see as a key feature of contemporary western culture and some claim to have religious manifestations.<sup>10</sup> According to Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 2-5) the subjective turn has produced a distinct ‘subjective-life’ religious paradigm that is manifested in many of the networks making up the New Age movement. Eugene Peterson (1992: 102-103) goes further, claiming that the self has become the hub of much Christian spirituality even when the traditional theistic framework is retained. ‘Our culture presents us with forms of prayer that are mostly self-expression.... Such prayer is dominated by a sense of self. But prayer, mature prayer is dominated by a sense of God. Prayer rescues us from a preoccupation with ourselves and pulls us into adoration of and pilgrimage to God’. I want to address two questions to the Psalm Journey data. First, do they indicate a possibility of integrating traditional and contemporary spirituality? Second, is there any hint that psalm meditation might pull the audience away from a preoccupation with the self and into pilgrimage to God? I will deal with these questions in turn.

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<sup>9</sup> John’s focus appears to be external to himself, but on life, not explicitly on God (D1, D3, D5).

<sup>10</sup> See Taylor: 26; cf. Vitz.

### **Do contemporary and traditional integrate?**

I explore the first question by utilising the paradigm of spirituality developed by Heelas and Woodhead in the Kendal project (2005: 1-11) which found evidence of a clear distinction between traditional and contemporary religiosity. The traditional is characterised by ‘life-as’ spirituality and the contemporary is marked by ‘subjective- life’ spirituality. The former is expressed in life lived in terms of external expectations, while the latter manifests itself in life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences (relational and individual). The Kendal researchers contend that ‘life-as’ religion is rapidly giving way to ‘subjective-life’ spirituality, a trend that constitutes a ‘spiritual revolution’ and reflects the ‘massive subjective turn’ in contemporary western culture towards ‘a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths’ (Taylor: 26; cf. Hobsbawn: 320-343). Heelas and Woodhead (6) succinctly describe the spiritual revolution in two propositions. First, ‘life-as’ forms of the sacred, which emphasize a transcendent source of significance and authority to which individuals must conform at the expense of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives, are most likely to be in decline. Second, ‘subjective-life’ forms of the sacred, which emphasize inner sources of significance and authority and the cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective-lives, are most likely to be growing.<sup>11</sup>

If the ‘subjective turn’ is a cultural reality in western society, and few sociologists of religion doubt that it is, one of the challenges facing Christian practical theology is to facilitate the development and practice of a genuinely Christian spirituality that will have the capacity somehow to fuse power from on high with power from within. This challenge prompts the question: Does the Psalm Journey yield any indication of respondents exhibiting what might be called ‘dialectic spirituality’ (‘life-as’ interacting with ‘life-within’)? Does the Book of Psalms have the potential to bridge and close the gap between life-as and subjective-life forms of spirituality?<sup>12</sup> Psalmic liturgy reveres a transcendent Being who is higher and greater than the worshippers: ‘The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble’ (Psalm 99.1). At the same time those who pray the psalms can worship God in ways that exercise and express

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<sup>11</sup> The Kendal project found the first proposition to be predominant in ‘the congregational domain’ (which is declining) and the second proposition in the ‘holistic milieu’ (which is growing). The Kendal project has already been considered in Chapter 1.

<sup>12</sup> The bridge metaphor may be too static because integration as well as connection between the two spiritualities would be required. Jointing two pieces of wood in carpentry via a mortise and tenon might provide a better analogy.

an intensely subjective spirituality: 'Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me' (Psalm 103.1). Given this combination in the spirituality of psalms of theism and human subjectivity, does the data provide any evidence of such a combination being reflected in the spirituality of Psalm Journey participants? This question can best be considered by exploring what Liz reveals about her spirituality. Few respondents provide clearer evidence of the subjective turn than does Liz who had clearly moved along the trajectory of the Kendal 'revolution' away from the influence of traditional Christianity imparted by her Lutheran upbringing and into the 'subjective-life' paradigm Heelas and Woodhead find in the holistic milieu. If the Psalm Journey fails to close the gap between 'life-as' and 'subjective-life' spirituality in Liz's experience, this would question the potential of the psalms to become a fertile contemporary spiritual resource.

'Subjective-life' spirituality is evident in Liz's final journal entry on Psalm 126 where she describes her faith as very simple and concrete. 'I believe in life as an absolute truth,' she writes, 'and I believe that prayers work' (D7). In some respects Liz's spirituality has the 'feel' of the New Age, a movement composed of 'those who maintain that inner spirituality - embedded within the self and the natural order as a whole - serves as the key to move from what is wrong with life to all that is right' (Heelas 1996: 16). Liz combines psalm meditation with Yoga: 'I found that doing Yoga before meditating on the psalms helped me to get to another level of understanding, and to absorb it better and to see things more clearly,' she tells me afterwards. 'These two manoeuvres have overlapped' (I-1: 1). However, despite her interest in Yoga, Liz's journal suggests she is not as focused as many New Agers on the struggle between the self and the ego (cf. Heelas 1996: 19); her celebration of the self is rather reflected in the way she continually evaluates the psalm in relation to how it impacts her subjectively. When she says 'I believe in life as an absolute truth' she seems to have primarily in mind life as she experiences it: 'life (sensual / painful / joyful / hopeful) is what I can be sure about' (D4), and she appears to identify praying with dreaming of a golden age (D4 and D5). On day 7 she further describes her spirituality in 'subjective-life' terms:

But the spiritual life I lead has not got a strong sense of history in it, has not got a strong trust in divine intervention. It is more a feeling of the current that runs under all life – it has not necessarily got a public name.

Yet although Liz understands her faith as more distant than that of the psalmist (D7), there are aspects of her Lutheran upbringing that the Psalm Journey seems to reactivate. She finds

listening to the chanted version of the psalm evokes her cultural memory and awakens more in her than does the written text. In her follow-up interview she reports that, following the final group meeting, she went to church for the first time in months, hoping that the choir would render one of the three psalms in plain song. Despite Liz's repeated reservations about assuming any divine intervention in life, the influence of the love of neighbour commandment learned in her church tradition may have helped the text to challenge her about the importance of good actions: 'Am I being called to action? Not really... and then, on the other hand, I am being provoked to think about my actions; DO I want to fight for a better world?' (D6). Liz is also affirming her religious tradition, at least to some extent, when she explains to Norah via the website that the psalms are not Christian, but Jewish, and that the picture of God in the Old Testament is harsher than that of God in the New. Furthermore, Liz's frank acknowledgement of 'spiritual captivity' which she describes as 'a moral dead end street where my action is inhibited by the knowledge that I might damage something while restoring something else' (D6) might reflect the prominence in her confessional tradition of 'the bondage of the will', as well evidencing the strong relational dimension of 'subjective-life' spirituality.<sup>13</sup> She wants to be set free, for she goes on: 'Liberation from that captivity would be like making a blocked river running freely again' (D6). Is Liz here hankering after a 'life as' mode?

The ambiguity of the data precludes a simple answer to our question whether some respondents might attempt to integrate successfully traditional and contemporary spirituality. Liz may have had a 'limit-experience' during her meditation, but it seems clear from her repeated doubts about direct divine intervention in human affairs, that she did not, in fact, adopt a theistic spirituality.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, as we have seen, there is evidence that she has not given up on her religious tradition, and the Psalm Journey moves her to re-engage with it by attending church. A biblical prophet might regard Liz's spirituality as evasion of choice (cf. 1 Kings 18.21), and, perhaps, Liz would agree, for in her journal she acknowledges that the idea of the divine as a direct, historical intervention remains closed for her because maybe 'it would include a stronger commitment, a more expressed faith than I dare' (D6). But if in prophetic terms Liz is 'halting between two opinions', she is by no

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<sup>13</sup> 'We believe that the intellect, heart and will of an unrenewed man are altogether unable, in spiritual and divine things, and of their own proper natural vigour, to understand, to believe, to embrace, to think, to will, to commence, to perfect, to transact, to operate, or to co-operate in any thing.' (The *Book of Concord* (1580): 656. In 1525 Martin Luther published *On The Bondage of the Will*.

<sup>14</sup> Tracy (1981: 160) identifies the meaning of limit-experiences as 'finitude, contingency, mortality, alienation or oppression' revealing 'a limit-to our existence'. In the Western tradition 'the metaphysical reality of God as the one necessary existent grounding all reality is explicated as *the referent* of just such limit-experiences of a religious dimension in our lives'.

means alone, for wider empirical investigation ‘reveals the universal operation of a variety of processes’ which prompt Heelas (1996b:1-20) to formulate the ‘coexistence thesis’ which argues that in the construction and operation of social life, the self and traditions coexist and intermingle inextricably, although with varying emphases.<sup>15</sup> The data suggests that in the case of Liz the self plays a considerably stronger role than does church tradition and she would probably acknowledge that the Psalm Journey offers a bridge which enables her to stay on one side and nostalgically admire the other. It is time to move on and consider how the data might answer my second question: Are there any indicators that psalmic interpretation could become a route along which respondents might reverse the spiritual revolution of Heelas and Woodhead?

### **From Self to Soul?**

Eugene Peterson (2005: 29) highlights the difficulty of building a bridge from ‘subjective-life’ to ‘life-as’ spirituality, for he perceives a fundamental difference, if not irreconcilability, between the spiritual dynamic of the psalms and a contemporary spirituality which ‘has become widely secularised in our present culture and consequently reduced to mean simply “vitality” or “centered energy” or “hidden springs of exuberance” or “an aliveness that comes from within’.

Peterson contends that for most people spirituality ‘conveys no sense of the life of God’. The psalms, as he conceives them, operate in a different universe. Peterson (2005: 37) summarises this polarity as self versus soul: ‘But in our current culture “soul” has given way to “self” as the term of choice to designate who and what we are. Self is the soul minus God. Self is what is left of soul with all the transcendence and intimacy squeezed out, the self with little or no reference to God (transcendence) or others (intimacy)’.<sup>16</sup> Clearly Peterson implies that there can be no easy transition from self to soul. However, such a change is possible. Peterson asserts that the psalms ‘can rescue our prayers from self-absorption and set us on the way to God-responsiveness’ (1992: 104), but he appears to regard this as much a revolution as Heelas and Woodhead perceive to be taking place in Kendal in the reverse direction. So how realistic is Peterson’s claim that ‘The Psalms are the cemetery in which our Lord the Spirit leads us to get out of ourselves, to rescue our prayers from self-absorption and set us on the way to God-responsiveness’ (1992: 104)? Can the

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The working assumption of the [coexistence] approach – namely that investigation reveals the universal operation of a variety of responses – is backed up by theoretical claims concerning the impossibility of purely tradition-informed and purely autonomous modes of being’ (Heelas 1996b: 11).

<sup>16</sup> Peterson draws his understanding of soul, ‘the totality of what it means to be a human being’ (2005: 36), from Hebraic rather than Greek sources.

psalms really become a cemetery of the self and an incubator of the soul? Did the Psalm Journey help any respondent to experience ‘fear-of-the-Lord’ psalmic spirituality?<sup>17</sup>

This question can be answered by recalling the preponderance of a self-focused spirituality among respondents. The powerful impact Psalm 126 makes on Norah which in itself suggests that Peterson’s distinction between self and soul may be drawn too sharply. His assumption that the traditional and the contemporary modes of spiritual practice are more or less mutually exclusive is also challenged by both the widespread lack of involvement in the churches by western young adults today despite a growing interest in spirituality, and reports like *Finding Faith Today* which make clear that in cases where the church responds to people’s felt needs (which are often self-oriented) some respond positively and begin a new journey of faith. There are signs that Liz may be contemplating making such a journey, for when reflecting on possible ‘liberation’ from her ‘spiritual captivity,’ she seems to look beyond herself for an answer. Commenting on ‘May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy,’ she tells the group: ‘There’s always a forward direction, even if looking back. Somehow I would like to go there’ (L1). Is Liz here moving in a theistic direction? Has she reached the boundary of human existence where we ‘need to go beyond ourselves to make sense of life’ (Tracy 1978: 105)? In my opinion, the evidence can be interpreted as pointing to Liz beginning to move from ‘subjective-life’ towards a ‘life as’ mode of spirituality and it will be interesting to note whether this movement from self to soul continues during Liz’s meditation over the following weeks.

At this stage a definite answer cannot be given as to whether Peterson’s claim is borne out by my respondents’ conversation with Psalm 126. However, this is the point at which to register the possibility that Peterson may be addressing a different (but not unrelated) context from the present research. His concern may arise because churches are content to see people make a good beginning and less ready to help them grow and continue in their spiritual pilgrimage. The deficiency identified by Peterson may not be in the early phases of the new journey, but in the later stages. Indeed, a careful reading of Peterson suggests that his concern regarding the self replacing the soul is not so much about methods of pre-evangelism or evangelism, as with his perceived tendency of the church to nurture its

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<sup>17</sup> For Peterson, psalmic spirituality is succinctly captured by the common biblical phrase ‘fear-of-the-Lord’ which he hyphenates in order to emphasise its nature as a bound phrase (or syntagm). His understanding of the use of the phrase does not imply the study of God or a code of conduct so much as a spirit of reverence. ‘Fear-of-the-Lord, nurtured in worship and prayer, silence and quiet, love and sacrifice, turns everything we do into a life of “breathing God”’ (2005: 42-44).

members as if they were ‘either problems or consumers,’ which results in our ‘thinking of ourselves and dealing with others in marketplace terms: everyone we meet is either a potential recruit to join our enterprise or a potential consumer for what we are selling.’ (2005: 38).

In summary, the principal answer to both my questions is that the Psalm Journey succeeded in helping Liz to bring together two modes of being – the tradition-informed and the autonomous. But she is unable to integrate these and prefers to pursue her spirituality mainly through the subjective-life mode which she finds more accessible than a transcendent source of authority. By the end of the week perhaps it could be said of her that the self was holding the soul at bay. Norah, Connie, and John consistently interact with the text in a ‘subjective-life’ mode, while for Tom and Luke, the ‘life as’ mode is the principal dynamic of their spirituality. We will now move to compare the respondents’ responses to Psalm 126 with the exegesis of two well-known commentators.

### *Section 3: Meditation and commentary*

If Peterson (2006: 53) is right in asserting that ‘exegesis is foundational to Christian spirituality’ a brief comparison of respondents’ readings with those of a selection of recognised Christian commentators on the Psalms might raise some early indicators of whether the Psalm Journey has the potential to play a role in pre-evangelism strategies of churches. In making such a comparison it has to be borne in mind that meditating and exegeting are distinct activities, although as Peterson suggests, there is often an area of overlap between them. Commentating is an attempt to get behind the text to understand what it means, while meditating is to sit before the text to hear what it says. The first is structured and logical; the second is spontaneous and random. The commentators selected for Psalm 126 are Claus Westermann and James L. Mays. Westermann was professor of Old Testament in the University of Heidelberg from 1958 to 1978, previously having been a pastor in Berlin. Mays is professor emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>18</sup>

I select four main respondent themes for the purpose of this ‘conversation’. The first is the prominence of ‘subjective-life’ or ‘preoccupation with the self’. The second theme is the pain-joy dynamic suggested by sowing in tears and reaping with joy (v 5). The third is the

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<sup>18</sup> The views of the commentators are taken from Mays and Westermann 1989.

audience appreciation of the audio versions of the psalm; and the fourth is Norah's conversion to Buddhism. What the respondents have to say on each of these themes is compared in the following paragraphs with the exegesis of the commentators.

### **'Subjective-life' mode**

The first respondent theme, which both Heelas and Woodhead and Peterson hold to be typical of much contemporary spirituality, differs radically from the 'life-as' perspective of the psalm which the commentators respect and reflect. The divine deliverance in history that Liz finds 'closed' to her is identified by the commentators as critical to understanding the meaning of the text with its rejoicing in a past deliverance that was 'so unexpected, so overwhelming, that it could hardly be grasped' and its confidence in future deliverance from the present distress that the closing verses 'pronounce will certainly happen' (Westermann 1989: 48; 49). The contrast here in the two readings is marked. On the other hand as I noted earlier, Liz, despite her difficulty in believing in the existence of a personal God, continues to keep one foot in the 'life-as' camp and reflects perceptively on the metaphors of dreams, sowing and reaping. The need for 'ever-recurring rhythms of renewal' implicit in verse 4 (Mays: 400) may have prompted Norah to write: 'In my good moments I send strength, or store it if you like, for myself when all around me feels desolate, dry and full of despair at an emotional level' (D2).

### **Pain-joy dynamic**

The second respondent theme is summarised by Tom's terse epigram: 'Pain as gain' (D2) and is not strongly reflected in the commentaries because neither writer speculates on the nature of the 'present distress' implied by verse 4 (Westermann 1989: 48), although both conjecture on what the past distress implicit in verse 1 may have been. Mays observes that the contrasting correlation between weeping/sowing and reaping/laughing in verses 5-6 (which prompts the pain-joy comments from respondents) is a cultural idiom borrowed from the ancient myths of Ugarit and Egypt associating seedtime with the death of the god of fertility (and also with grief), and harvest with his revival (therefore, also with joy). Both commentators major on the prominence of joy in the psalm. 'Words for laughter/joy occur five times in the whole, giving the song its dominant emotional tone' (Mays: 126). However, respondents are more aware of the pain implied in the 'weeping' of verse 6, which may reflect a Generation X preoccupation with suffering which I will return to in chapter 6.

### **Audio and metaphor**

The third respondent theme is the appreciation of the audio (spoken, sung, chanted) versions of the psalm. Luke speaks for most when he says: ‘Hearing the text really helped me’ (Luke, L: 1). The audio texts may have been particularly helpful to respondents as they interacted with this text because the psalm’s stress on shouting, laughing, and weeping – all activities involving higher decibels than normal speech – perhaps lends the psalm to being heard rather than read. Also metaphors often come alive more powerfully when heard. Metaphors that respondents find attractive and powerful tend to be explained conceptually by the commentators rather than explored in terms of their potential to render the psalm as the speech-act it almost certainly was in its ancient usage. ‘[L]ike the water-courses in the Negeb’ (v 4) is the one metaphor (more correctly, simile) the respondents missed. In this case the Mays’ comment, far from conceptualising the metaphor, brings it to life by indicating that it alludes to ‘the seasonal freshets that make the dry watercourses of the Negeb run with water’ (Mays: 400). Westermann offers a similarly helpful comment. Overall, respondents may be more open to the aural pleasure the psalm imparts, probably because they are sitting in front of the text, meditating on it, while the commentators are busy getting behind it in order to understand what it means.

### **Weeping and shouting**

One might hardly expect the fourth respondent theme (‘I decided to take refuge’) to be paralleled in the commentaries, but Westermann makes a comment that comes close. He observes that the Hebrew verb ‘restore’ which ‘opens the review of the past in v 1... is taken up again in the plea for removal of distress in v 4, and... also echoed in verses 5 and 6’ means ‘to bring about a change’. All of these elements appear in Norah’s story. On the other hand, her cyclic understanding of the movement in the psalm contrasts with the commentators linear structuring of the psalm: past (vv 1-3), present (v 4) and future (vv 5-6), but this is to be expected given the respective contrasting perspectives of history. One wonders whether, had Mays’ linking the metaphors sowing and reaping with the ancient fertility cults of Ugarit and Egypt been known to respondents, it might have stimulated more thinking on non-Judeo-Christian religious practices.

### **Summary**

I began this chapter by giving a brief biographical introduction of the six respondents, and then indicating that Psalm 126 was selected for the Psalm Journey on the presumption that its recurring emphasis on ‘joy’ would address the respondents’ expressed interest in ‘having a

good time'. The response of respondents shows that they understand having a good time to be different from enjoyment, which they feel is deeper and more satisfying. Most indicate that interacting with the psalm stimulated them to think about, if not necessarily to experience, joy and its importance in life. The selfist orientation revealed in most readings contrasts with the more theistic structure Tom and Luke give to their interaction with the text, and encouraged me to explore the majority 'self' orientations with a view to finding any signs of (a) the possibility of integrating them with the theistic approach; and (b) of the potential for psalmic meditation influencing the audience to move from a self focus to a God focus. The data is by no means unambiguous on each issue, but it yields some indicators suggesting that both (a) and (b) are possible, at least in the case of this particular audience. I concluded the chapter by setting up a 'conversation' between the respondents and two commentators. Having reviewed and analysed the group's engagement with Psalm 126, I now turn next to Psalm 55.

**Chapter 5: Vengeance and non-violence****PSALM 55**

*To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David.*

<sup>1</sup>*Give ear to my prayer, O God;  
do not hide yourself from my supplication.*

<sup>2</sup>*Attend to me, and answer me;  
I am troubled in my complaint.  
I am distraught <sup>3</sup>by the noise of the enemy,  
because of the clamour of the wicked.  
For they bring trouble upon me,  
and in anger they cherish enmity against me.*

<sup>4</sup>*My heart is in anguish within me,  
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.*

<sup>5</sup>*Fear and trembling come upon me,  
and horror overwhelms me.*

<sup>6</sup>*And I say, 'O that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest;*

<sup>7</sup>*truly, I would flee far away;  
I would lodge in the wilderness;*

<sup>8</sup>*I would hurry to find a shelter for myself  
from the raging wind and tempest.'*

<sup>9</sup>*Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech;  
for I see violence and strife in the city.*

<sup>10</sup>*Day and night they go around it  
on its walls,  
and iniquity and trouble are within it;  
<sup>11</sup>ruin is in its midst;  
oppression and fraud  
do not depart from its market-place.*

<sup>12</sup>*It is not enemies who taunt me—  
I could bear that;  
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—  
I could hide from them.*

<sup>13</sup>*But it is you, my equal,  
my companion, my familiar friend,  
<sup>14</sup>with whom I kept pleasant company;  
we walked in the house of God with the throng.*

<sup>15</sup>*Let death come upon them;  
let them go down alive to Sheol;  
for evil is in their homes and in their hearts.*

<sup>16</sup>*But I call upon God,  
and the LORD will save me.*  
<sup>17</sup>*Evening and morning and at noon  
I utter my complaint and moan,  
and he will hear my voice.*  
<sup>18</sup>*He will redeem me unharmed  
from the battle that I wage,  
for many are arrayed against me.*  
<sup>19</sup>*God, who is enthroned from of old,  
will hear, and will humble them—  
because they do not change,  
and do not fear God.*

<sup>20</sup>*My companion laid hands on a friend  
and violated a covenant with me*  
<sup>21</sup>*with speech smoother than butter,  
but with a heart set on war;  
with words that were softer than oil,  
but in fact were drawn swords.*

<sup>22</sup>*Cast your burden on the LORD,  
and he will sustain you;  
he will never permit  
the righteous to be moved.*

<sup>23</sup>*But you, O God, will cast them down  
into the lowest pit;  
the bloodthirsty and treacherous  
shall not live out half their days.  
But I will trust in you.*

In the previous chapter I reported on how my respondents interacted with a psalm in which a community rejoices in its newly found freedom. In this chapter we encounter a very different type of psalm, a poignant lament arising from a betrayal of trust between close friends. I chose it because I considered it would be of interest to my audience who, as we saw in chapter 3, put a high value on maintaining good relationships and being well thought of by others. On the other hand, I realised that the cry of vengeance articulated in the psalm creates problems for most audiences, and that introducing it to the Psalm Journey would be a risk. Had the poet restricted his complaint to the eloquent poignancy of verses 12-14 and 20-21, the respondents' task would have been much less complicated. The temptation to find a 'softer' alternative psalm was strong. But, despite the good that is said and done today, we live in a world where sadly hatred is endemic. So I decided to stay with Psalm 55, even if

the poet prays that his betrayer might meet a swift and premature death (v 15), and exudes a confidence that God will oblige (v 23).<sup>1</sup> After all, Psalm 55 is not unique, even if it is extreme. The Psalms are ‘full of unsettling enemy talk’ (Peterson 1989: 95)<sup>2</sup> a feature which ought not to be brushed under the carpet in an attempt to explore the potential of these ancient songs as a resource for contemporary spirituality. What is unsettling is not the presence of enemies, but the psalmist’s vengeful reaction to them.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it is such yearnings for vengeance that prompts Brueggemann (1984: 58) to say ‘The Psalms do “tell it as it is” with us’ who live in a world divided by ethno-religious hatred and revenge.<sup>4</sup> Although separated by time and culture, my respondents find in Psalm 55 a mirror that enables them to reflect helpfully on the animus they sometimes feel against others. I did, however, make one concession towards diminishing the shock by placing on the website some short extracts from Brueggemann’s *Praying the Psalms* that advocate a creative approach to such ‘texts of terror’ (see Appendix 4).<sup>5</sup>

This chapter, like the previous one, has three sections. In the first I review the respondent interaction with the psalm, exploring the extent to which rapport is established between text and audience. I organise the data around respondents’ attitudes to the poet and their attempts to contextualise the violence and vengeance in the text, and to internalise the poet’s feelings as a victim. In the second section I review the data in the light of the interpretive paradigm for texts of vengeance developed by Walter Brueggemann, exploring whether that paradigm holds potential to enable these difficult texts to add value to the spirituality of young adult audiences. In the third section I compare and contrast the readings of respondents with those offered by G. A. F. Knight in his commentary on Psalm 55 found in the popular *The Daily Study Bible*.

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<sup>1</sup> The shift from singular in v 13 to plural in v 15 is not uncommon in imprecations (Dahood I: 34-35, 134). ‘The plural adds to the impassioned nature of the language’ (Tate: 57).

<sup>2</sup> ‘[T]he Psalmist’s world... consists of a horizontal plane in which he interacts with the Enemy, and a vertical plane in which he interacts with God, the language of the Psalms (and of prayer in general) is concerned with these two relationships and three actants (rhetorical persons)’ (A. Warren 1998: 937). ‘God is the primary subject in the Psalms, but enemies are established in solid second place’ (Peterson 1989: 95).

<sup>3</sup> According to Aejmelaeus (43) the Psalms contain some forty imperative petitions which ask for injury to/for destruction of enemies. (Cf. Tate: 88).

<sup>4</sup> In his ‘Excursus: Enemies in the Psalms’ Tate provides a helpful review of the different kinds of enemies envisaged in the Psalms and provides a synopsis of recent critical approaches in OT studies to this phenomenon. In addition, the ‘Explanation’ attached to Tate’s commentary on Psalm 58 offers a brief summary of Christian responses to the imprecatory psalms (Tate: 60-64: 88-91).

<sup>5</sup> A phrase attributed to Phyllis Trible (1984) who used it with regard to stories of violence against women. See her *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia 1984.

*Section 1: Resonance or dissonance?*

In this section I explore the data and discover that, while respondents are critical of the poet's vengeful spirit, they sympathise with his predicament. I then move on to note how half the respondents are able to contextualise the psalm in today's world, and conclude by reviewing how three of them are able to internalise the feelings of revenge in ways that help each of them to progress in their spiritual journey.

**'Should I judge him harshly? Dunno'** (Luke, D3).<sup>6</sup>

Would David (to whom Psalm 55 is attributed in the inscription) have considered setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to offer amnesty to his betrayer?<sup>7</sup> At first sight, the tenor of verses 12-15 and 20-23 make such a possibility look distinctly remote. For this reason I am surprised by the degree of ambivalence shown by some respondents to the poet. Luke's answer to his own question in our paragraph heading is not untypical. His hesitation to condemn the psalmist is born out of a fear of hypocrisy, for he reckons that it is all too easy to enjoy hating people who oppress the weak (D3). Surprisingly, the psalmist's bitterness does not seem to deflect Norah who concludes the week's journaling with these words: 'Yeah, I was glad of this psalm this week' (D5). Her journal suggests that this remarkable acquiescence with the psalm might be at least partly accounted for as a carry-over from the high emotional experience of the previous week's decision to take refuge. Her journal reads as one extended, week-long negotiated reading of the text that enables her to empathise with the poet's victimisation while ignoring his verbal violence. In contrast, Luke may come closest to giving a preferred reading, by setting the psalmist's betrayal in the context of 'strife in the city' (v 9) and asking, 'What is the connection?' (D3). The answer is, he suggests, that wherever the psalmist looks, in politics or in personal affairs, there is no virtue.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Luke expresses more appreciation of the psalm's literary features than do the others: 'The psalm reads like a narrative for a play made up of different dramatic sequences' (D3); and '[I]n literary terms it is amazing; I love the way he darts from scene to scene' (D5).

<sup>7</sup> In 1995 the new South African government set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, at which the victims of politically motivated violence could be heard, and the perpetrators of such violence request amnesty. The Commission is widely regarded as having played a vital role in promoting inter-racial understanding and acceptance after the end of Apartheid.

<sup>8</sup> A greater resonance between Luke and the dominant code of the psalm is to be expected because his strong church involvement probably provided in his case more 'equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange' (Hall 1980: 131) compared with the other respondents.

There is a varying measure of sympathy for the poet as victim. Perhaps Connie is the least generous in this regard: 'I sympathise and empathise with the poet for having his friend turn against him; however, this is where my sympathy ends' (D4). Liz is more considerate: 'The revenge motive is understandable, but not desirable. I don't understand the Christian idea of turning the other cheek either. Why invite humiliation?' (D3).

On the other hand, there is among respondents a strong aversion to the psalmist's cry for swift vengeance on his erstwhile friend (v 15). John's first diary entry is one example: 'My initial impressions relate feelings of shock, anger and even horror.' From the beginning John finds that the vindictive attitude of the psalmist is inhibiting his own engagement with the text: 'I find the angry tone of the psalm disturbing, so much so that it seems to block me from relating to the psalm in any significant way at all' (D1). Even after a week of struggling to appreciate 'the vengeful tone and the attitude of the poet,' he concludes 'I just can't seem to relate to it at all' (D7). This negative reaction is reinforced for some by the perception that the author seems to consider himself to be more worthy of God's attention than his enemies. Tom writes: 'Faith sometimes is so over-confident and so self-righteous that it gives one special status that does not take into consideration what others would feel if you were the enemy that betrays. I am finding this psalm extremely selfish and narcissistic' (D2). The psalm moves John along similar lines: 'I thought about how one can feel superior or secure because of one's faith. I must admit that I am turned off by this idea' (D5).<sup>9</sup> Even Luke, with a conservative church background, writes: 'I certainly question whether I should look at this as an inspired text or as a profoundly human scream' (D5). The ambiguity of respondents can be summed up as a combination of sympathy and outrage.

I now proceed to track their attempts to contextualise his desire for revenge.

### **'I laughed at myself in the mirror'** (Tom, D3)

Studies in hermeneutics distinguish between the 'first' horizon of the biblical text and the 'second' horizon of present situations and readers (Thiselton 1992: 556).<sup>10</sup> Five of the six respondents attempt to contextualise the psalm by fusing the distant horizon of the text with the horizon of television news programmes featuring the tensions of postgraduate student life

<sup>9</sup> Connie declares that the psalm clashes with her values: 'I do not believe it is a "good" thing,' she writes, 'to wish ill actions against others' (D1).

<sup>10</sup> Thiselton conceives 'a single hermeneutical process of understanding the interactive horizons of past and present' (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Grand Rapids, 1992: 605). The idea of two horizons is attributed to H.-G. Gadamar. See also Thiselton 1980: xix; 10-17.

in Scotland, the post-colonial social problems of Zimbabwe, the unfriendliness of Danish immigration policy, terrorism in Iraq, and the sporting rivalries of Canadian high schools.

Tom's present horizon is the most comprehensive, for he is able to view through the lens of the psalm aspects of his life as a student in Edinburgh as well as the socio-political challenges being faced by his home country. Although he confesses to being scared by the words 'Let death come upon them' (v 13) and finds it difficult to understand how Norah discovered calm in such a text, Tom recognises some resonance between the psalmist's situation and his own. During the week's meditation Tom is due to make a presentation on international politics as part of his masters course – a prospect he confesses to being 'scared' at:

Have actually contemplated thinking of the people I'm presenting to as my enemies and with God on my side. I laughed at myself in the mirror and thought: Wow, I'm already seeing myself as a person more special and more deserving of attention than others (D3).

The psalmic picture of urban violence and fraud (vv 9-11) prompts Tom to contextualise the psalm on a broader canvas as it reminds him of home 'where there is violence and pain, where there is poverty and those that claim to be trying to solve everything else on everybody's behalf'. This association between text and native soil prompts nostalgia: 'It feels sad to be away from home and here in this different country' (D4). And Tom tells us that the psalmist's desire to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest (v 8) 'stuck with me', reawakening a sense of civic duty: 'I suppose I sometimes get tired of being a Zimbabwean and I sometimes look for somewhere to hide. Even now I think I'm just delaying the fact that I must go back home and continue the struggle to make it a better place, country, to live in and be happy' (D7).

Zimbabwe had featured also in Liz's meditation on Psalm 126.<sup>11</sup> This week her focus is nearer home as she finds the colourful description of the enemies' speech as 'smoother than butter... with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords' (v 21) prodding critical thoughts of Danish immigration policy which, in her view, is unfriendly:

The ones that are supposed to comfort you when cast down, freeze you out when you enter their home. Their words are like butter, but you will not be able to live up

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<sup>11</sup> 'Liberation was a dream that came true. Now the harsh realities are biting. A longing for restored fortunes' (D4, Week 1).

to their hidden demands, and in the end they will most likely draw their swords. Understandable if people want revenge (D6).

Inevitably, Iraq also features. Connie finds verse 15 brings to mind ‘the horrifying events that take place such as suicidal bombings in Iraq, killing Iraqi civilians, Brits and Americans’ (D1). The same verse reminds John of the more peaceful, but perhaps sometimes no less competitive, scenario of Canadian sports when two Catholic school teams each pray for victory over the other in the pre-match huddle. John finds such competitive praying disturbing and asks, ‘Wouldn’t it be more Christian to pray for the ability to play the best that you can? And, equally important, praying for your opponents to play as best as they can as well?’ (D5). Luke’s only contextualisation of Psalm 55 is the phrase ‘Oh that I had wings like a dove!’ bringing back memories of the fear he once experienced when being followed during a visit to Tanzania.

The broad geographical spread of second horizon scenarios reflects, with the exception of terrorism in Iraq, the international composition of the respondents and, therefore, is not unexpected. More surprising perhaps is the absence of an external horizon of the present in Norah’s recorded reflections, and the relatively minor role contextualisation plays in Luke’s readings. However, the line between contextualisation of the text and its internalisation in subjective experience is thin, and, as we shall see in the next section.

**‘The psalm is an image of my former relationship’ (Liz, D1)**

One of the metaphors Christopher Wright employs to illustrate Scripture engagement is to regard the text as a mirror.<sup>12</sup> Liz is so moved by what she sees in the psalm that she shares with the group the deep pain she felt when her former boyfriend broke off the relationship. This is her initial entry in her journal for the week:

The psalm is in many ways an image of my former relationship. Together we built a city with strong walls made of love, but often we did not pay any attention to it, preoccupied as we were with the strife and violation of covenants that took place in its marketplace. We expected total loyalty from each other, and when felt let down we both wanted revenge and wished that some higher power would teach the other a

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<sup>12</sup> ‘What can be seen in a mirror depends on who is standing in front of it. The “contents” of the mirror, in a sense, reflects who is looking into it or what objects are before it. And so, this is saying that the meaning in the text is not something, as it were, fixed and final in the text – some sort of objective reality. The meaning of the text actually only arises, only happens in the act of reading. It is when the reader reads that the text means, just as it is only when you look in a mirror that the mirror reflects you. So meaning is the interaction between text and reader’ (48-49).

lesson he or I would not forget. And in wanting revenge, the violation of the covenant was mutual and only the beginning of a vicious circle of despair (D1).

By sharing details of the painful breakdown of such a close friendship, Liz is making herself remarkably vulnerable. She is able to identify closely with the psalmist because she also sees the violation of covenant in theological terms:

Another part of the psalm is spiritually provoking because it reminds me of the arguments me and my ex-boyfriend used to have. More often than not I had lost from the start because he at some point would claim to have God on his side. I thought it was absolutely outrageous to take God hostage in a lowly discussion AND very unfair to deny me access to God's support. I believe that has made me sceptical towards the altruism of God, but I guess it is wrong to use my ex-boyfriend's judgement as an argument for not seeking God. It is probably just a bad excuse because I am afraid of anything that feels like surrendering (D2).

Although Liz's complaint is not against God so much as against her ex-partner's claim that God was supporting the break-up of the relationship, it is clear that the boyfriend's rationale for his decision has contributed towards her scepticism of God as a transcendent agent for historical change which finds expression in five separate journal entries of the previous week (D1, D4-7).

If Liz's internalisation of the text is the most moving, Luke's is the most searching. His recollections of dread while being bullied as a child and, later, being followed in Tanzania, are relived as he meditates on the psalm (D3). Luke internalises the text in an additional way when, while reflecting on 'the ultimate perversion' of savouring conflict with and hatred for another, he turns the 'cherish enmity' image (v 2) into a searchlight focused on his own soul: 'Do I ever enjoy the fact that someone doesn't like me? Or more commonly, do I ever enjoy the fact that I am anti-such-and-such? OK, I can disagree with and can even hate what, say, Sharon or Bush or Mugabe are doing in their own way, but I must guard against enjoying that hatred' (D3).<sup>13</sup>

Tom also internalises the text, but another part of it and with less emotion. Indeed, his internalisation takes the form of an oppositional reading that follows immediately his supportive reading (noted in the previous section) that enabled him make an association between the social conditions of the psalmist's city and those of modern Zimbabwe. This

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<sup>13</sup> Luke thus validates Tate's (90) observation that 'The imprecatory psalms may evoke in us who read them an awareness of our own violent sins and our hate, of our own need of confession, and for repentance'.

oppositional reading is self-critical, for Tom sees the psalmist's self-righteousness reflected in himself:

I also get feelings of the self-righteousness, of the 'I know better syndrome' .... But then again, to do good, one has to have that confidence and that trust in the correctness of one's actions. Maybe the psalm isn't so bad after all (D4).

Tom, in contrast to Liz and Luke, is unable to internalise the anger and revenge of the psalmist, perhaps because he reacts so negatively to the parts of the text that express these emotions: 'Words like "Let death come upon them" scare me immensely,' he writes (D1). Indeed, in the same journal entry he transfers the vindictiveness of the psalmist to God: 'The immediate impression I am given by the psalm is one of shock at the capacity of God to be cruel and so thorough in defending a person who is claiming to be righteous. I don't know if God can be that punishing and I can't help but think who the enemy could be that doesn't deserve God's forgiveness' (D1). It is not clear why Tom attributes the psalmist's words to God, unless it reflects a conservative Catholic upbringing which regards every sentence of Scripture to be divine *ipsissima verba*.

While Tom internalises the psalm through a negotiated reading, Norah does so through an oppositional decoding of the text. In marked contrast to the discomfort of the others at the vengeance, Norah writes in her journal for the second day: 'I feel peaceful with this psalm,' and her last sentence of the week is: 'I really feel that I am appreciating so much more this week with this psalm' (D6). Norah is able to write like this because she seems to internalise the sense of trust the poet experiences after his catharsis (see the last line of the psalm), by finding a similar sense of confidence following a hurtful experience. She tells in her journal that she felt so let down and depressed on her birthday because many of her friends at the last minute failed to turn up at her party. But her meditation helps her overcome this disappointment:

This situation has happened a lot to me, but this time it was different. This time I understood. It's not their fault; they were not doing this to make me feel this way, and they had their reasons. I know the truth and that's all I need. I need not a bunch of people around me to have a good time. I only need myself and that peace (or faith if you like) that I know is in my depths. Yeah, I was glad of this psalm this week (D5).

That Norah can attribute the transformation of her birthday blues to the way 'this psalm has cut through the mere context in which it was written and became modernized for me' (D5),

confirms the deep emotional and psychological impact being made by her interaction with the text. Norah's explanation of how this sense of peace came – 'I feel all frustrated and hurt, but then all I need to do is breath and all is well' – suggests that her negotiated reading of the text is the determining factor.

The poet laying bare his soul gives some respondents a remarkable freedom to make themselves vulnerable before one another, but not all. John and Connie cannot internalise this psalm. Although John feels called to make the world a better place, he confesses that 'this psalm does not make me feel it any stronger. I think I can attribute it to the vengeful tone and attitude of the poet. I just can't seem to relate to it at all' (D7). Connie tells us that her normal reaction to a conflict with another person is to seek a compromise, adding that she sometimes prays for the Lord's help in achieving this. However, on this occasion she writes: 'I have not prayed to God to fulfil my wishes any more often as a result of meditating on Psalm 55' (D6).

Taking the psalm as a whole, all respondents appreciate the poet's problem; after all, they have memories of being 'troubled' (v 12). They are also united in considering the poet's response to trouble to be inappropriate. However, they differ on how they themselves might respond in similar circumstances. Most would probably not follow the psalmist in making prayer a primary response, but neither do they rule it out. Respondents are ambivalent about the vengeance that surfaces in verses 15 and 23. Most recoil from the poet's desire for retaliation (although one seems to be able to ignore it). On the other hand, there is sympathy for the poet as victim, but the motive is probably compassion rather than a desire to be well thought of. Most are able to contextualise the text creatively, which suggests that it has potential as a resource for spiritual development, but the ambivalence about the vengeance in the text is a limiting factor. In the light of this difficulty I now need to ask whether there might be a way forward that would release the psalm, and others like it, for greater popular use.

### *Section 2: A way forward?*

In this section I explore whether the paradigm Walter Brueggemann has developed for interpreting and appropriating the cursing psalms offers a way of using them constructively today in spiritual development. Surprisingly, Brueggemann finds continuity, rather than

discontinuity between these psalms and the Sermon on the Mount. He acknowledges the contradictory emphases of each, but contends that the path to loving our enemies is through these cursing psalms, not around them.<sup>14</sup> For him the psalms of vengeance are an asset rather than a liability. ‘Willy-nilly,’ he says, ‘we are vengeful creatures. Thus these harsh psalms must be fully embraced as our own so that our rage and indignation may be fully owned, expressed and yielded to the mercy of God’ (Brueggemann 1982: 68). While John and Connie are on the whole dismissive of the vengeance, the others, as we have seen, make a more nuanced response. This nuancing provides an opportunity to see if Brueggemann’s theory finds supports from the Psalm Journey experience.

Before undertaking this review it is important to recognise that the basis of Brueggemann’s approach is his assertion that ‘The Psalms are the rhetorical practice in fullest measure of what is in us.’ Quoting Calvin’s well-known dictum about the Psalms as ‘an Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul,’ Brueggemann (1982: 58-59) contends that ‘they tell all about us. The Psalms provide space for full linguistic freedom in which nothing is censored or precluded’. He stresses that a psalm of vengeance ‘is not action. It is words, a flight of passion in imagination’. As such, it performs at least four functions: cathartic, psychological, social and theological.<sup>15</sup> In the paragraphs that immediately follow I describe each of these four functions attributed by Brueggemann to the psalms of vengeance, and explore the Psalm Journey data for indications that these functions are operational in my respondents’ interaction with the text of Psalm 55.

Brueggemann’s first claim is that such psalms fulfil a *therapeutic* function. They are cathartic. ‘In our heavily censored society, this is one place left in which it may all be spoken’ (1982: 59). While our data does not suggest that any respondent was harbouring deep-seated hatred for someone else, both Norah and Liz (especially) reveal that they are both tempted to nurse feelings of revenge in the wake of being let down by friends. While Norah tells us that previous let-downs have tended to cause her to withdraw into herself, meditating on Psalm 55 helped her to take a more buoyant attitude. Her affirmation that ‘This time it was different’ (D5), suggests that the meditations on the psalm are having an emotionally healing effect. Liz, in her final journal entry on Psalm 55 tells us that she found the psalm ‘very thought-provoking’. ‘It has made me remember lots of things that are not

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<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann 1982: 68: ‘In the Gospel, Christians know “a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). But it is not the first way. My hunch is that there is a way beyond the psalms of vengeance, but it is a way through them and not around them’. For other examples of a positive approach to the cursing psalms, see Bonhoeffer: 21-23; Goldingay: 14-15, and Tate: 88-91.

<sup>15</sup> In identifying these four functions I am drawing on Brueggemann 1982 and 1984.

very nice, but probably necessary to accept if I want to move on and be able to do things differently' (D6). The psalm does not so much articulate, as recall, Liz's desire for revenge. She finds the act of recollecting helpful in encouraging her to move on.

Second, Brueggemann attributes to psalms of vengeance a positive *psychological* value, maintaining that they are 'acts of self-discovery'. He states that 'The articulation of vengeance leads us to new awarenesses about ourselves. That is, the yearning for vengeance belongs to any serious understanding of human personality.... The capacity for hatred belongs to the mystery of personhood' (1982: 58-59). Furthermore, Brueggemann (1982: 59) contends that the cursing psalms help to put rage in perspective. When we express in speech 'our intense thoughts and feelings' of rage, they are brought 'into a context in which they can be discerned differently'. We discover that our angry words are not as dangerous as we might have wished or feared, for they do not destroy the enemy, nor do they bring immediate judgment from heaven upon us. By articulating previously unspoken hate, 'the intensity is spent' and the way cleared to address 'the real agenda about attitudes about oneself'.

Norah's and Liz's readings illustrate this psychological function. Norah's interaction with the text can be construed as an act of self-discovery insofar as she finds the psalm helps her overcome the resentment against her absentee friends. 'This situation has happened a lot to me, but this time it was different. This time I understood' (D5). But what comes into her consciousness is not what Brueggemann calls a 'capacity for hatred', but rather a new knowledge of 'the peace or faith that I know is in my depths' (D5). Norah's resentment dissipates as she meditates, which is somewhat (but perhaps not altogether) different from Brueggemann's expectation (1982: 59) that 'the intensity is spent' when a person's rage is articulated. Liz's description of her reaction to her former boyfriend comes closer to vengeance than does Norah's account of resentment against her friends, for Liz speaks of 'wanting revenge' (D1). On the other hand, the correspondence with Brueggemann's function is not exact, for reporting (and reflecting on) an emotion that erupted some considerable time previously is not the same as articulating a new sense of outrage. Liz's journal is more reflective than Norah's and her readings suggest that revisiting the pain has helped her 'to put the rage in perspective', thus releasing the intensity of her emotions so she can address attitudes about herself which Brueggemann sees as 'the real agenda' (Brueggemann 1982: 59). This is particularly clear in her final journal entry: 'A very

thought provoking psalm, it has made me remember lots of things that are not very nice, but probably necessary to accept if I want to move on and be able to do things differently' (D6).

Third, psalms of vengeance fulfil a *socio-ethical* service. According to Brueggemann (1982: 63) the fact that 'God practices vengeance is one way the Bible has of speaking about *moral coherence and moral order* in which God is actively engaged'. The argument seems to be that, if the psalmist, rather than yielding to the hatred he undoubtedly feels against his enemy and retaliating, commits to God the hatred and the injustice that fuels it, the psalms of vengeance are a cry for public justice rather than for personal revenge. In the understanding of ancient Israel, Yahweh is the ultimate arbiter of justice, for 'the emergence of justice depends not simply on social structures but on a sovereign agent outside the system to whom effective appeal can be made against the system' (Brueggemann 1995: 108).<sup>16</sup> In addition, Brueggemann sees this judicial dimension as a feature of the lament psalms, qualifying them for use today as prayers on behalf of the subjects of injustice. Commentating on another psalm of vengeance (Psalm 109), and answering the question: 'Whose psalm is this?' he declares: 'If I am not able to pray that way today, then I can ask, who needs to pray that way today? Who is justified in praying that way today? It could be the voice of a woman who is victimized by rape, who surely knows that kind of rage and indignation and does not need "due process" to know the proper outcome. It could be the voice of a black in South Africa (or here?) who has yet again been brutalized or humiliated by the system. Or it could be a Palestinian peasant weary of war, resentful of displacement' (1984: 87).<sup>17</sup> Returning to the Psalm Journey, it is probably true to say that, while Psalm 55 prompts respondents to reflect on the morality of war, terrorism, etc., there is no explicit evidence of them regarding their meditative writing and speaking as an appeal to a higher power. The motivation seems to be natural, rather than divine, justice.

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<sup>16</sup> 'A community of faith that negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne (which is a conclusion drawn through liturgic use), they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility' (Brueggemann 1995: 107).

<sup>17</sup> Goldingay (1993: 14-15) and Tate: 89 also advocate the use of psalms of vengeance on behalf of others. C. S. Lewis (20-33) regards the utility of such psalms differently. For him they can be used to discern 'the hates which we fight against in ourselves', as warnings that the result of injuring a human being is 'to impose upon him the temptation of becoming what the Psalmists were when they wrote the vindictive passages', and as a reminder of the importance of righteous indignation at sin (but not sinners). Lewis also suggests the maledictory psalms may become moral allegories, by interpreting, for example, the Babylonian babies in Psalm 137 to signify 'the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred' (136).

Fourth, psalms of vengeance have a *theological* utility. Brueggemann (1982: 60) contends that in these psalms ‘vengeance is not simply a psychological but a theological matter’ in that through them the vengeance is referred to God. ‘And when vengeance is entrusted to God, the speaker is relatively free from its power.... That recognition of being in God’s realm and able to address God gives perspective to the venom’. From the journals of Tom, Luke and Liz it is clear that they are dealing with their own feelings of revenge theologically, while Norah does so anthropologically, but nevertheless religiously. Tom (D1-3, D5) and Luke (D3) regard God in the traditional (and psalmic) sense of a transcendent being and see God in a positive light. Liz (D2) on the other hand reflects negatively on the concept of a transcendent God, partly because she deeply resents her boyfriend claiming that God was on his side of their argument. Her scepticism about the existence of a transcendent God means that it would be illogical for her to consider handing over her vengeance to God. Luke (D3), on the other hand, is able to do this when he confesses to God his antipathy for Sharon, Bush, etc.<sup>18</sup> Tom and Luke do not explicitly indicate an awareness of handing over their feelings of vengeance to God in the way Brueggemann describes, but Luke’s confession of his antipathy towards Bush, etc, implies that he did.

A brief review of the previous five paragraphs reveals some correspondence between the experience of my respondents and Brueggemann’s four functions. The respondents show more evidence of Psalm 55 fulfilling the first three functions than of the fourth function. This reduced visibility of the fourth function is understandable, given that only two respondents indicate an active belief in God as a supreme, personal being. It is not clear whether interacting with the psalm has made such a belief more attractive for the others. The fact that the psalm appears to have fulfilled, at least in part, the four functions in the meditation of the two respondents who affirm belief in God as a supreme being, suggests the desirability of some further and more extensive empirical research that would test Brueggemann’s theory more comprehensively among a sample of respondents who are deeply hurting and revengeful and who have a viable faith in God.

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<sup>18</sup> Luke’s reaction is an example of the ‘identity switch’ that, according to Tate, such psalms provoke. (Tate: 90). Cf. Footnote 13.

*Section 3: Meditation and commentary*

As in the previous chapter, I conclude by making a comparison between topics surfacing in the audience's interaction with the text and themes identified by a modern commentary. The commentator on this occasion is G. A. F. Knight of Knox College, Dunedin, who contributed the two volumes on the Psalms in the popular series of commentaries in *The Daily Study Bible*.<sup>19</sup> The audience, as we have seen, is ambivalent about this text, but nevertheless most respondents have been able to contextualise, and some to internalise it. Respondents will be comforted to discover that Knight also is ambivalent. On the one hand, he dismisses the psalmist's vengeance as revealing a 'terrible misunderstanding of the plan and purpose of God for his children in this world he has created' (257), and, on the other, he warmly commends the counsel of the penultimate verse to 'cast your "lot" (RSV v 22, *ftn.*) on the Lord, and he will sustain you' with this exhortation: '[W]e are to tell God about things, all about the problems, the tensions, the pain and sorrow of our life' (261). Knight resolves the ambiguity by attributing verse 22 to editors who inserted it as 'an answer to all the above agonising situations for the congregation to sing' with the result that 'at last we meet with a worthy declaration of faith' (260). The respondents, on the other hand, take the integrity of the extant text at face value.<sup>20</sup> Knight is also more sympathetic than is Brueggemann to audience scepticism about the poet's moral integrity, for he compares the language of the psalm to contemporary self-righteous cries such as 'Horsewhip them all!' and 'Shoot the lot!' (258-9). I suspect Tom and John might raise a cheer for Knight's verdict that the psalmist's sentiments are 'a complete and horrible reversal of the will of God', and his likening 'his self-righteous prayer' to 'the specious nursery rhyme "Little Jack Horner"' (260). On the other hand, Luke would be disappointed that Knight does not seem to detect the positive potential that Brueggemann discerns in prayers of vengeance.

Knight would probably commend attempts by the audience to see contemporary situations in Iraq, Africa, etc., reflected in the text. He contextualises the psalmist's dejection about 'violence and strife in the city' by transposing it into the contemporary paranoia of megacities Knight seems to discern among some theological and political right wingers: 'It is an aspect of our deep depression therefore if we beg God to destroy the vast cities of

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<sup>19</sup> Coincidentally G. A. F. Knight's father, also G. A. F. Knight, was General Secretary of The National Bible Society of Scotland from 1926-37.

<sup>20</sup> Commentators are divided on whether v 22 is original to the poet or a later editorial gloss.

Jakarta, Calcutta, Tokyo, Lagos and Los Angeles' (258).<sup>21</sup> The audience would almost certainly support Knight (258) in seeing Wall Street as a modern equivalent of oppression and fraud in the market place (v 11). Knight's ready inclination to contextualise the psalm would almost certainly be appreciated by an audience of socially aware university students, and such transpositions are probably an essential component of any commentary that seeks to be popular. On the other hand, Knight might occasionally sound patronising to the Psalm Journey audience, as, for example, when commentating on 'O for the wings of a dove,'<sup>22</sup> he writes: 'Unfortunately, today a whole generation of youth is seeking to "stop the world – I want to get off", or opt out of what they call the rat race and seek the simple life. They remain unaware that unless they contribute to the cost of our communal services, sewerage, transport, and so on, they have no right to make use of them in their need' (257-8).

In terms of internalising the text, Knight tends to be attuned to a different set of resonances within the text from that of the audience. He suggests we internalise the psalm around the problem of theodicy which most of the respondents find great difficulty in accepting.<sup>23</sup> He suggests that people run away from trouble (cf. v 6) when they declare defiantly 'Why does God allow this and this to happen?' 'They do so because they do not accept the fact that they are living in a world where good and evil cohabit, and where the kingdom of God "is not of this world", as Jesus said. For God's kingdom emerges and grows out of the creative tension between the two' (257). It is not clear whether the audience would see the relevance of this comment for, while they are deeply concerned about violence and suffering, they are unsure of God and, therefore, they tend to approach society's problems in a sociological rather than a theological frame. In addition, the audience would probably respond somewhat cynically to Knight's advice to regard vengeance as 'God's prerogative, not yours. Leave him to deal with the wicked' (261). I suspect they would see this as advocacy of the *status quo*. On the other hand, the audience would probably find helpful Knight's expansion of 'enemies' to include 'a cancer, a fire, a flood' (257).

In this chapter I have demonstrated that the evidence arising from the encounter of the audience with Psalm 55 indicates that the respondents' are able to establish a significant measure of rapport with the psalm. However, respondent attitudes to the psalmist are more ambivalent in the case of this psalm than to the two previous poems, on account of the poet's

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<sup>21</sup> Knight is the only commentator consulted who understands v 9 as a desire to destroy the city in view.

<sup>22</sup> Verse 6, RSV

<sup>23</sup> Theodicy is 'the vindication of God's goodness and justice despite the existence of evil' (Article 'Theodicy', BDT: 517). I return to the problem of theodicy in chapter 9.

vengeful spirit. Nevertheless, respondents are able to contextualise the vengeance of the text in examples of personal, ethnic and political reprisals which they have experience or awareness of at various levels of society. All respondents express sympathy for the psalmist in his predicament as a victim of duplicity and treachery, and two of them are able to internalise up to a point his desire for revenge because this resonates with their own feelings on one or more previous occasions. In reviewing the data in the light of Brueggemann's interpretive paradigm for texts of vengeance, I concluded that this paradigm holds potential for enhancing appreciation of such texts by audiences with similar characteristics to the Psalm Journey respondents, but that this potential would be fully utilised only after audiences feel able to acknowledge a supreme God. This is an issue to which I return in chapter 7. Finally, I noted some similarities and contrasts between the readings of the respondents and the exegesis of the psalm offered by G. A. F. Knight in *The Daily Study Bible*. Having travelled with the respondents in their meditative journey through two psalms, in the next chapter I accompany them as they interact with the final psalm of the first Psalm Journey.

**Chapter 6: Suffering and self-identity****PSALM 22**

*To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.*

<sup>1</sup>*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*  
<sup>2</sup>*O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.*

<sup>3</sup>*Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*  
<sup>4</sup>*In you our ancestors trusted;  
they trusted, and you delivered them.*  
<sup>5</sup>*To you they cried, and were saved;  
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.*

<sup>6</sup>*But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.*  
<sup>7</sup>*All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;*  
<sup>8</sup>*‘Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—  
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’*

<sup>9</sup>*Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.*  
<sup>10</sup>*On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.*  
<sup>11</sup>*Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.*

<sup>12</sup>*Many bulls encircle me,  
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;*  
<sup>13</sup>*they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion.*

<sup>14</sup>*I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax;  
it is melted within my breast;*  
<sup>15</sup>*my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,*

*and my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
you lay me in the dust of death.*

<sup>16</sup>*For dogs are all around me;  
a company of evildoers encircles me.  
My hands and feet have shrivelled;*

<sup>17</sup>*I can count all my bones.  
They stare and gloat over me;  
<sup>18</sup>they divide my clothes among themselves,  
and for my clothing they cast lots.*

<sup>19</sup>*But you, O LORD, do not be far away!  
O my help, come quickly to my aid!  
<sup>20</sup>Deliver my soul from the sword,  
my life from the power of the dog!  
<sup>21</sup> Save me from the mouth of the lion!*

*From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.*

<sup>22</sup>*I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:*

<sup>23</sup>*You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;  
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!*

<sup>24</sup>*For he did not despise or abhor  
the affliction of the afflicted;  
he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.*

<sup>25</sup>*From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.*

<sup>26</sup>*The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.  
May your hearts live for ever!*

<sup>27</sup>*All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.*

<sup>28</sup>*For dominion belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.*

<sup>29</sup>*To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.*

<sup>30</sup>*Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord,*

<sup>31</sup> *and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.*

I employed Psalm 22 in the first Psalm Journey in anticipation that it would resonate with the strong interest of the audience in resolving pain. The desirability of resolving pain is one of the values identified in the pilot project (see chapter 3), and the experience of pain, both physical and mental, is regarded as a characteristic of Generation X (Beaudoin).<sup>1</sup> Suffering plays a central role in Christianity as, indeed, it also does in most religions (Corduan). Asceticism (self-denial or voluntary suffering) may not be as common as it has been at various periods in the history of Christianity, but Christians of all confessions have consistently affirmed that suffering can be redemptive.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I review the fascinating interaction with the psalm, exploring what it reveals of the respondents' experience of suffering. I next go on to compare my respondents' experience with the findings of Tom Beaudoin's study of the religious dimension of suffering reflected in American GenX consumption of popular culture. Finally, I set up a 'conversation' on Psalm 22 between the respondents and Artur Weiser, a distinguished 20<sup>th</sup> century German authority on the Hebrew Psalms.

### *Section 1: Resonance or dissonance?*

In this section I review the interaction between respondents and psalm, noting that Psalm 22 is the only psalm of the three that all six respondents contextualise. I discover that it also evokes the largest proportion (two-thirds) of audience internalisation of the text. This internalisation reflects a general embrace of suffering as well as four different types of personal suffering: homelessness, low self-esteem, ostracism, and stress.

**'During the breakdown of something it all seems meaningless, but it is merely transition' (Liz, D1).**

First, I examine suffering as an element in the milieu of human life. Liz adopts such a general view, seeing life itself as a repeating sequence of suffering and healing. It is because she conceives the psalm as reflecting this cycle that Liz is enthusiastic about it. 'It

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<sup>1</sup> Beaudoin provides many examples from popular music and art forms of GenX fascination with pain. An additional recent example is Californian hard rock band Rhino Bucket's release in February 2007 of the album *PAIN and Suffering*, which is a reissue of their 1994 album *Pain*.

<sup>2</sup> An example of the idea of redemptive suffering is Pope John Paul's *Apostolic Letter On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (1984) ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp\\_apl\\_11021984\\_salvifici-doloris\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris_en.html)).

is a grand psalm', she writes. 'It covers life and death, the newborn, the grown up, the dead and the unborn. It is a tale about humankind' (D3). And again the same day: 'The psalm is touching because it has got all the elements of a capturing narrative: the suffering individual (I guess we can all identify with that on some level) that in the end succeeds/gets rescued. It is the structure of a fairytale – of any good tale'.

Liz is able to identify with the opening cry of the Psalm:

*It feels as if God has forsaken you (or the poet in this case) but afterwards you realise that if he had forsaken you, things would have been much worse and you certainly would not be able to understand certain aspects of life. During the breakdown of something it all seems meaningless, but it is merely transition.... Whether God has a plan or not, I don't know, but I have certainly had to revise the sensibility of my own will and desires and recognise that where I ended up was not due to my own effort, but still it was a place much better for me' (D1).*

Liz maintains this broad understanding of suffering throughout the week's meditation. 'The psalm reflects the wonder that life has a will to carry on', she writes. 'That even though humans give up, something is there to restart the joy of life again – even though it may take a while or it is not discovered until much later'. On two occasions Liz considers suffering in more individual terms, first in her opening entry, by briefly alluding to the attribution of verse 1 to Jesus on the cross. Again, midway through the week, she offers an observation on the text with a people-oriented focus: 'The force of Christianity is that it cares for people who feel worthless. The faith alone concept is very generous. It is a shame that the church sometimes seems to forget about this'. The other respondents made even more specific allusions to contemporary suffering, and I now turn to the first of these.

**'This psalm reminds me of the hopelessness and suffering of some homeless people'**  
(Connie, D1).

Homelessness is a problem of a significant minority in UK society which attracts the attention of both government and of the voluntary sector.<sup>3</sup> Connie clearly has a deep concern to help homeless people. Not only are they the topic of her MSc dissertation, but

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<sup>3</sup> In August 1999 the Scottish Executive established a Homelessness Task Force to 'review the causes and the nature of homelessness in Scotland; and to make recommendations on how homelessness in Scotland can best be prevented and, where it does occur, tackled differently'. The recommendations of this task force were incorporated into the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 which requires local authorities to produce homelessness strategies for their area. The Task Force's final report in 2002 made a raft of wide-ranging recommendations on preventing, alleviating and resolving homelessness, as well as proposals for more radical change to Scotland's homelessness legislation (*Tracking Homelessness: A Feasibility Study* 1. 2, [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/03/16656](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/03/16656)).

they are the people who immediately come to mind in her meditation on Psalm 22. The word occurs in the opening sentence of Connie's journal for the week. She tells us that the words of verse 6 ('But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others and despised by the people') 'triggered this parallel in my mind, because through studying and helping homeless people, I realised just how shunned they are from society, to the point where they become a socially excluded group of people with a "culture" unto themselves' (D1).

Although Connie (D5) explicitly alludes to the desirability of resolving pain, the psalm's impact on her at the emotive level is ambiguous, perhaps because she considers herself more rational than emotional. She informs us that, were she forsaken by others, her reaction would be different to the psalmist's: 'I do not think I would pray for deliverance from my suffering.... I think I would rationally assess the situation and take things step by step rather than become so emotional' (D4). Yet, the psalm does make some impact on her emotions; the following day she writes: 'What I do notice, more and more after re-reading this psalm, is the level of intensity in the prayer, the utter desolation in suffering, and it makes me feel sad that some people experience such an emotion' (D5). Also she has more empathy with and respect for this psalmist (D5) than for the author of Psalm 55. On the other hand, the psalm impacts her intellectually; she acknowledges that engaging with the three psalms is challenging her to think deeply for the first time about her own spirituality as something distinguishable from being born Protestant (D2). She finds that the meaning she draws from the text changes slightly with each day and that listening to the chanted version on CD 'really intensified' for her the experience of engaging with verse 1. However, she concedes that, despite this, 'the psalm doesn't seem to change my day-to-day thoughts or behaviour much at all' (D4).

While Connie's readings are nearly all 'negotiated,' her one 'preferred' reading could be very significant: 'I have never really thought very deeply about the source of my spirituality, or what I might / might not believe in.... I am slowly realising that reading these psalms and consciously making an effort to think about the meaning, and understand the spirituality within them, is a good experience for me because it is something that I would not otherwise do' (D2). Connie's lack of early interest in spirituality contrasts with Tom who while at school considered training for the priesthood.

**'Sometimes my self-esteem is so low I feel everybody is looking at me in a negative way'**  
(Tom, D3).

Today self-esteem is considered to be a basic human need in the sense that it is essential for normal and healthy personal development (Branden: 1). According to Nathaniel Branden, 'Of all the judgments we pass in life, none is more important than the judgment we pass on ourselves'. Branden (2) claims that the higher one's self-esteem, the more ambitious one tends to be in many areas of experience, including spirituality. In this light, it is the psalmist's *low* self-esteem ('But I am a worm') that resonates with Tom; he tells us that his own self esteem sometimes is so low that 'I feel like everybody is looking at me in a negative way'. He goes on to explain that 'Sometimes it is like prejudice that is hidden and you half feel it, half ignore it, but when you go home to sleep, the pain is often real' (D3). Perhaps an attempt to counter a folk memory of the destruction of self-esteem inherent in the former colonial subjugation of his people lies behind the entry on day 2, which tells us that the phrase 'In you our ancestors trusted' (v 4) reminds him of discussions in high school about incorporating elements of African tradition in the Mass. 'I strongly feel,' he writes, 'that my ancestors also had a strong link with contemporary perceptions of God'.

The psalm also evokes for Tom memories of the suffering of others. He informs us that the phrase 'the poor shall eat' (v 26) 'struck a chord of acceptance and understanding of optimism in times of crises' (D7), reminding him particularly of the 'religious optimism' of some Ethiopians engaged in a development and relief programme he is studying. Despite this high degree of empathy with the psalmist, Tom probably reveals more ambivalence about this psalm than did the others, to the extent that he offers one oppositional reading:

The psalm makes the rest of the world appear as though it is full of people or things that are working against my relationship with God. I don't see it like that. I don't think I see that much negativity in other people. I do get angry and feel differently about what people do to me or to others, but it's been a long time since I have felt that amount of helplessness (D4).

On the other hand, his journal also provides several positive readings which suggest that Branden's correlation between high self-esteem and committed spirituality may be mistaken. On day 1 Tom recounts how the line 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' reminds him both of Jesus' words on the cross and also of occasions when he himself has felt like that, although with far less pain. Such memories bring alive the 'life-changing desolateness' when he had felt 'as if there was no one at my side'. Later in the week Tom admires the way the poet gives himself to God, demonstrating 'a complete faith that I find admirable' (D4). In this, as in his two previous meditations, Tom gives the impression of looking back nostalgically to the spiritual security of his Catholic school days. I now turn to

John, the other respondent reared as a Catholic and who is concerned about another type of suffering.

**‘I repeated the psalm today with her in mind’** (John, D6).

The social ostracism suffered by the poet is graphically described in verses 6-8. The term ‘social death’, which is today used by Zygmunt Bauman and others to describe severe cases of social exclusion, might be an appropriate description of the psalmist’s experience. These verses of the psalm become the catalyst that activates John into demonstrating deep concern for a friend who is suffering as a result of being ostracised by her friends. John indicates that he repeated the psalm on his friend’s behalf:

Today I am reflecting on a friend who over the weekend started to suffer because of some unfair actions by her friends. She has definitely been ‘scorned by others.’ Because she is an international student, she is feeling especially alienated and alone because of the experience. I repeated the psalm today with her in mind (D6).

John tells how at first it is the negative phrases of despair that stick in his mind because they seem to resonate with her experience: ‘I think resolution still seems very far for her’.

However, as he continued to meditate, he tells us that the second half of the psalm began to resonate with him: ‘It emphasized how I must continue to be part of her “congregation” and support her’ (D6).

That John should repeat the psalm with his friend in mind is remarkable, for he tells us that it took some time for him to get into this psalm (D1). The liturgical overtones of the psalm awoke negative memories of school, creating ‘a lot of baggage’ between him and the text. ‘Visions of Catholic school rush into my head,’ he explains. ‘I can even hear hymns, melodies sticking in my mind all day.... For me then, the memories must be addressed and confronted before I can get something further from the psalm’ (D1). John persevered and got past the negative associations by concentrating, not so much on the words as on ‘the tone of the psalm’ that shines through as a mood of ‘strength and power’. ‘Images of “breaking through” came into my mind’ he tells us, ‘like a person breaking through a brick wall that is holding him or her in confinement. I see this psalm as a testimony to the power of inner strength. Even when the author is suffering and feeling alone, I believe that he finds strength within himself to break through and rescue himself from his despair’ (D2).

By day 3 John is beginning to internalise the psalm’s suffering in his own experience: ‘I thought about times when perhaps I felt close to death, but very luckily for me, my life has

never felt so threatened'. By the final day of meditation he has overcome sufficiently the negative associations he attributes to his early exposure to the psalm in the liturgy, to use it in a prayer-like way on behalf of his friend.<sup>4</sup> If it is John who approximates most closely to a traditional use of the psalms as prayers on behalf of others, it is Luke who captures the significance of the lament genre to which verses 1-21 belong (Weiser: 219; Davidson: 79; Mays: 21; 106).

**'I play squash on a Friday night – this is the psalmist screaming at God'** (Luke, D4).

Stress is a common word in early 21<sup>st</sup> century western society. It is 'an unavoidable effect of living and is an especially complex phenomenon in modern technological society'. The article just quoted goes on to claim that one way of relieving moderate stress is 'any type of meditation'.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, it is interesting that Luke finds psalmic meditation helpful in coping with work stress: 'I get stressed. Monday-Friday is a cumulative process! Take this to be a shadow of the psalmist's gradual disillusionment and sense of lostness'. Luke goes on: 'I play squash on a Friday night – this is the Psalmist screaming at God. Then afterwards, all of a sudden, the week's little cares, things that though important have dominated my mind more than they should have, are set in place' (D4). Luke's explanation is that after screaming the psalmist and he are able to see themselves as small in relation to the greatness of God, even of the universe. At that point, Luke says: 'I am more able to reconcile my questions and fears with my inability to get immediate answers' (D4).

Luke is able to internalise Psalm 22 to help him cope with stress mainly because he feels that it 'is not first and foremost a spiritual text'. He explains: 'Psalms are snapshots into the minds of people who are generally exalted as being spiritually devout – but usually I find most comfort in their "flaws". Their helplessness, their fear, their torment, and most of all, their stubborn faith' (D4). 'I don't think all Psalms are necessarily an insight into the Divine as much as they are into the human, and that is why I love them' (D4).

However, this remarkable internalisation of the text does not lead Luke to certainty. In his final entry for the week, when he asks 'Is the point of the psalm then to say, although "they stare and gloat over me" (v 17), my God is the God who "all the ends of the earth shall remember" (v 27), so why should I fear in the direst circumstances?' his answer is a solitary

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<sup>4</sup> In his follow-up interview a month later, John said that his friend was by then doing much better.

<sup>5</sup> Entry 'Stress (psychol. and biol.)', *Encyclopedia Britannica* CD 2000.

'Dunno' (D4). If Luke is eloquent, but ambivalent, Norah is confident and affirmative about Psalm 22.

**'I never thought I would get through the pain.... but this week I finally overcame it completely'** (Norah, D1).

John Finney's retelling of some of the 500 stories of people who feature in the *Finding Faith Today* report that studies the reasons that motivate adults to make a first-time public profession of Christian faith, makes clear that a common reason is a need for emotional healing after the painful breakdown of a close relationship. When such relationships are finally broken, those involved are often left feeling extremely vulnerable and some seek spiritual help. Although Norah becomes a Buddhist rather than a Christian, there are parallels between her experience and that of some of the people of whom Finney writes. She speaks of being scarred emotionally and physically by a broken relationship. 'I never thought I would get through the pain' she writes. 'I thought it would never leave me and would stay forever.' She tells how friends helped her to get over the trauma to a certain extent, and then writes: 'This week I finally overcame it completely'. Psalm 22, by reminding her of how she felt at the time the relationship was broken, makes her 'feel extremely relieved and in a warm haze of happiness' (D1).

Meditating on the psalm completes the healing process, and Norah is convinced that Psalm 22 can help people of all faiths or none: 'It's a message of hope to people, a way out ... This is what the psalm is saying to me, and you most definitely don't have to come from a godly or Christian perspective to see it' (D2). Norah also finds that this psalm helps her empathise with the suffering of others. As she views some personal photographs of 'beautiful children in oppressed countries', the sung version of the opening words keeps going through her mind, enabling her to 'feel their strife' (D3).

In summary, I have indicated in this brief survey how all respondents use the suffering of the psalmist as a lens through which to view suffering in today's world. Connie contextualises the psalm in the suffering of the homeless (D1); Tom in the Africanisation of the liturgy (D2); John in the ostracism of his friend (D6); and Norah in the suffering of malnourished children (D2). In addition, I noted that four respondents relate the psalm to their own personal suffering: Tom (to low self-esteem), John (to a close-to-death experience), Luke (to stress) and Norah (to the pain of a broken relationship). Although only Connie refers explicitly to the audience value of regarding the resolution of pain as being desirable, the

comments of the other five reflect an implicit concurrence with this value. God is not cited as being involved in Connie and Norah's understanding of the resolution of suffering. On this issue Liz (D1, D5) is agnostic, but she seems to acknowledge receiving help from a higher power. Although John is still struggling against his Catholic upbringing he finds a liturgical use for the text. Tom and Luke clearly perceive God to be involved in the resolution of suffering, but their faith falls short of assurance. On the other hand, this lack of determinateness reflects the balance between the first and second parts of the psalm and comes close to being a preferred reading. Basically all of this confirms the pre-understanding gained from the pilot project that a desire to resolve suffering or pain is one of the common values of the audience.<sup>6</sup> But it does not tell us whether the respondents' reflection on the resolution of suffering has furthered their spiritual quest. I now go on to explore this question by comparing the respondents' interaction with Psalm 22 with the features of GenX spirituality outlined by Tom Beaudoin's study in which he contends that 'suffering is a key religious issue for Generation X' (Beaudoin: 96).<sup>7</sup>

### *Section 2: Suffering, Jesus and God*

This study is published in *Virtual Faith* (2002) and is based on a review and analysis of pop culture, rather than on qualitative audience research. Beaudoin, himself an Xer, identifies two reasons why a concern with suffering distinguishes Xers from their parents' 'boomer' generation. The first is sociological.

When a generation bears the weight of so many failures - including AIDS, divorce, abuse, poor schools, recessions, youth poverty, teen suicide, outrageous educational and living expenses, failure of governmental and religious institutions, national debt, high taxes, environmental devastation, drugs, parents that need to be parented, violence, unstable economic security, premature loss of childhood – how can suffering not be an important part of one's identity? (104: cf. 111).

The second reason for the preoccupation with suffering is more philosophical. Generation X, Beaudoin maintains, is 'overwhelmed by diversities of all sorts' that characterise 'this postmodern moment'. He goes on: 'In our contemporary situation it seems that everything we do and are is culturally "made" and not innately or divinely "given". In this moment of profound ambiguity, suffering is what unites Xers not only with each other but also with other generations' (120).

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<sup>6</sup> In this research report pain and suffering are used interchangeably, although strictly they are distinct in that suffering can be present when pain is absent.

<sup>7</sup> Although Beaudoin writes with American Xers in view, the dress styles and videos he explores enjoys popularity in Europe, Australasia and elsewhere.

According to Beaudoin, his generation's suffering and dysfunction 'expresses itself in psychological and spiritual crises of meaning. Clothing styles and music videos suggest feelings of rage, with the videos expressing this in apocalyptic images. Despair is common and occasionally leaps overboard into nihilism' (97). Such suffering sparks spirituality because 'suffering is a sort of "boundary experience" that forces us to confront questions about our own human limits'. When human beings suffer they want to know why, for how long, and who or what is responsible. 'If you ask that question broadly enough, you wonder about God and religious experience, whether it is in emotional, resentful, dismissive, ironic, debased, or intellectual ways' (97). The Generation X religiosity Beaudoin perceives is 'irreverent' when viewed from a conventional mainline standpoint.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, he argues that 'in and of itself, suffering makes Xers at least pseudoreligious' (119).<sup>9</sup>

There are significant similarities between the Psalm Journey respondents and Beaudoin's GenXers.<sup>10</sup> Both are conscious of a spiritual crisis of meaning. The longing of my respondents for 'connection beyond the immediate' and their awareness of a 'personal pursuit of meaning or of place and of enlightenment' (cf. chapter 3) resonates with Beaudoin's claim that the Generation X pop culture protest against suffering is symptomatic of the despair of human beings of finding any meaning for suffering in themselves (98). In addition, my respondents are also aware that the resolution of suffering is key to finding life meaningful. At this broad level there is convergence. But are the more specific features of Beaudoin's Generation X spirituality evident in the Psalm Journey audience? These features of Beaudoin's subjects are that they react against the churches' blindness to Generation X pain by 'finding solidarity with Jesus in suffering', and that they locate the meaning of human existence in God (98).<sup>11</sup>

The question whether my respondents' show empathy with Jesus is easier to answer than the question about whether in their search for meaning they turn from themselves to God, so I will begin with it. Although the minimal hermeneutic draws attention to Matthew's account

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<sup>8</sup> The subtitle of the book is *The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*.

<sup>9</sup> The religiosity of GenXers as described by Beaudoin corresponds broadly with Heelas and Woodhead's 'subjective-life' spirituality.

<sup>10</sup> Beaudoin is not claiming that all GenXers are interested in spirituality. 'Because Xers indulge so heavily in pop culture, one of our prime temptations is to abandon the spiritual quest for the satisfactions of the moment' (118).

<sup>11</sup> Beaudoin acknowledges that here he is following Salvadorean theologian Jon Sobrino (1993) who argues that the early church domesticated Jesus' suffering on the cross by subjecting it to theological explanation, thus robbing it of its mystery, a mystery which cannot be figured out by humans.

of Jesus quoting the first verse of the psalm on the cross, only Liz and Tom make reference to the Jesus connection in the journals. Tom clearly feels a degree of solidarity with Jesus; his first journal entry on Psalm 22 reads: ‘The line “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” reminds me strongly of Jesus’ words on the cross and made me question the humanity of Jesus, the pain that He underwent and sometimes the feeling of desolation’ (D1). In addition, Tom recalls the deep emotion he felt years before while watching Zefferelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth*, and he wonders what impact the shortly-to-be-released *Passion of Jesus Christ* would make on him. The psalm’s association with Jesus also features in the weekly *lectio divina* in a way that suggests the group as a whole is sympathetic to Jesus, although it has to be said that no one, apart from Tom and Liz, explicitly voice the sense of solidarity that Tom expresses in his reflection on the ‘pain that He [Jesus] underwent’. Tom tells us that he also has experienced a ‘life-changing desolateness, as if there was no one at my side’, but with ‘far less pain’ than Jesus (D1).<sup>12</sup> Although the pilot shows that Jesus is highly regarded by respondents, the Psalm Journey does not appear to have won him the spiritual allegiance that Beaudoin detects among GenXers. On the other hand, it is probably expecting too much of Psalm 22 to anticipate it awakening a fascination with Jesus among respondents who may have little if any detailed knowledge of the Gospels. There is no explicit reference to Jesus in the psalm itself so it is not surprising that two-thirds of the respondents make no reference to him.<sup>13</sup> It is the knowledge of Jesus Liz and Tom had gained from their exposure to readings from the Gospels in their religious upbringing that prompts them to follow up the comment about Jesus in the minimal hermeneutic.

I now turn to ask whether Beaudoin’s second feature of GenX spirituality is present in the Psalm Journey respondents’ interaction with the text. Does the Psalm Journey move my respondents to locate the meaning of suffering in God?<sup>14</sup> I made the point in chapter 4 that the ‘subjective-life’ paradigm identified by Heelas and Woodhead is operational within the group. It is most strongly evident in Norah whose search for meaning and identity is focused on the self rather than on a transcendent being. Neither she nor John make any mention of God in their journals on Psalm 22. Tom and Luke, on the other hand, while cultivating a

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<sup>12</sup> The structure of the *lectio divina*, with its focus on interacting with the psalm in its primary context (i.e. in the Psalter, not the Gospels), does not probe any possible sense of solidarity with Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> John’s Catholic schooling has made him aware of the link between this psalm and the New Testament (D1), but he does not follow up the Jesus link in the minimal hermeneutic; nor, surprisingly, does Luke.

<sup>14</sup> I consider in chapter 5 my respondents’ understanding of God on a broader front than in relation to the mystery of suffering.

subjective life, conduct their spiritual quest straining to look beyond and above themselves; they each refer six times to God in their journals for the week. Connie and Liz occupy the middle ground. Connie refers to God three times in her journal, always rather sceptically, but each time implying a 'life as' framework. Liz, whom we noticed in chapter 4 was 'halting between two opinions', by the third week seems to have moved closer to the 'like as' paradigm in which she grew up. Despite her previous suspicion that God is somehow against her because her ex-boyfriend claimed God's support in the argument that led to their break-up, she is by now considering her scepticism to be premature.<sup>15</sup> She looks back nostalgically to an occasion when she tried 'to totally surrender' and found the experience of 'being lifted and carried through it somehow profoundly moving' (D3).<sup>16</sup>

The evidence here confirms the tendency I noted in chapter 4 that the Psalm Journey is moving the respondents towards contemplating a 'life-as' mode of spirituality. But does it also move them towards locating the meaning of suffering in God? The answer on the basis of the evidence is 'hardly'. On the other hand, the disparity between the Psalm Journey and Beaudoin may not be as great as it might appear. Beaudoin makes striking claims for GenX religiosity, but the difference from the Psalm Journey may be in the rhetoric rather than the reality.<sup>17</sup> Beaudoin says GenXers 'wonder about God and religious experience' (97); so do the travellers in the Psalm Journey. Beaudoin, quoting Sobrino, claims GenXers locate the meaning of suffering in God. The question must be asked: What does he mean? How do GenXers do this? Beaudoin's answer appears to be that GenXers do this by obstinately persevering in a conviction that there is meaning to human existence, 'that history is not absurd, that hope continues to be a possibility' (98).<sup>18</sup> It is precisely such a conviction that motivates the spiritual quest of my respondents, although I suspect that few, if any, of them interpret this as expressing faith in God. This difference of rhetoric between Beaudoin and

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<sup>15</sup> Liz's journal reads: 'My sceptical side says "Yes, this is all a human invention, a capacity of the mind to rationalise a chaotic life and come up with the idea of God's plan; we create a meaning because we can't stand that there is none" ' (D3). The similarity of idea and dissimilarity of analysis with Sobrino (in Beaudoin: 98) is striking: The attempt to find a meaning for the cross 'at least in God, shows on the one hand the despair of human beings of finding this meaning for themselves, which is a sign of honesty in the face of what in itself is only tragedy and scandal. And it shows, on the other hand, the obstinacy of these same human beings in maintaining that there must be some meaning, in other words, that history is not absurd, that hope continues to be a possibility. They locate this meaning in God'. Without (presumably) any foreknowledge of Beaudoin's work, Liz identifies as scepticism what Sobrino (and Beaudoin) interpret as faith!

<sup>16</sup> Liz's pain on breaking up with her boyfriend has a theological dimension insofar as the boyfriend's claim to have God on his side created for her a negative image of God (cf. chapter 4).

<sup>17</sup> The difference of rhetoric between Beaudoin and the Psalm Journey may be the result of these being different types of study, Beaudoin being a broad brush review of trends in pop culture and the Psalm Journey being an empirical study focused on the single issue of Scripture engagement.

<sup>18</sup> Beaudoin is quoting Sobrino at this point.

my respondents is illustrated by Beaudoin interpreting the search for meaning as faith, while Liz identifies it as scepticism: 'My sceptical side says: "Yes, this is all a human invention, a capacity of the mind to rationalise a chaotic life and come up with the idea of God's plan; we create a meaning because we can't stand that there is none' (D3). All in all, the evidence points to considerable convergence between the Psalm Journey and the Beaudoin study regarding the relationship between suffering and spirituality and the search for meaning in GenXer experience. There is some disparity between the studies regarding the importance laid on achieving solidarity with Jesus in the process of spiritual development, but this difference is probably inflated by the focus of the Psalm Journey being on the Hebrew Bible.

In this section I have explored how the audience's common concern with suffering is manifested and handled by respondents, before comparing and contrasting fruits of my respondents' interaction with Psalm 22 with insights from Tom Beaudoin's study on GenX religiosity. I noted a considerable degree of convergence between the two studies with regard to the role the resolution of suffering and the search for meaning play in the unfolding of GenXers' spiritual journey. This summary brings us to the final section of the chapter.

### *Section 3: Meditation and commentary*

Following the pattern set in the two previous chapters, I conclude by making a comparison between the respondents' treatment of the text of the psalm and the exegesis of it offered in a modern commentary. I have chosen the commentary by the German scholar Artur Weiser, formerly of the University of Heidelberg which bears the simple title: *The Psalms: A Commentary*. Weiser's commentary on Psalm 22 is substantial without being extensive, covering eight pages of print; it offers a helpful summary of the two sections of the psalm (the prayer of lamentation, vv 1-21, and the psalm of thanksgiving, vv 22-31) without offering detailed explanations of the Hebrew vocabulary and grammar. As might be expected, there are similarities and differences between Weiser and the respondents. They both note the poet's struggle of faith, the intensity of his physical and psychological pain, the absence of vengeance, and the grand scale of the psalm's climax. The features unique to the commentary are that it highlights the fluctuating mood of the sufferer and sets the psalm in the wider context of Old Testament piety and theology. There are two distinctive features in the respondents' interaction with this psalm: the multiple present day contextualisation of the poem, and the different way in which the relationship between the individual sufferer and the community is conceived.

The most obvious similarity between respondents and commentator is the way both highlight the psalmist's crisis of belief. While the respondents tend to describe this as 'a struggle of faith' (Liz D5; cf. Tom D4; Norah D6; John D2 and D5), Weiser refers to 'religious doubts' (220), a difference of vocabulary that may reflect that the commentator wrote in a modern context while the respondents read in a postmodern setting. The intensity of the poet's pain, both physical and psychological, awes the respondents. Typical is Connie's comment: 'I can only try to *feel* his pain, but cannot completely understand what he went through' (D5). This pain is eloquently described by Weiser as an 'anguish of mind' and a 'fearful loneliness' which 'torment the psalmist's soul' while 'he struggles to find the bridge which will lead him out of his affliction and bring him to God' (220-221). Only Connie (D6) notes the absence of vengeance in Psalm 22, which is surprising in light of the problems vengeance caused respondents in Psalm 55. Weiser reckons that the lack of any spirit of revenge 'makes this psalm especially valuable to us in comparison with the others' (224). In addition Weiser (225) suggests that the psalmist's enemies may be included in his call to 'all you children of Israel'<sup>19</sup> and invited to praise God with him for his deliverance.<sup>20</sup> Four respondents are impressed by the vast perspective of the psalm's climax. Perhaps Liz expresses this most eloquently: 'It is a grand psalm. It covers life and death, the newborn, the grown up, the dead and the unborn. It is a tale about humankind' (D3; cf. Luke D4; Norah D3; and John D4). Weiser also emphasises the grand scale of the concluding verses, but in more theological terms: 'By virtue of his faith in God's omnipotence the poet is able to achieve that magnificent vision of the eschatological consummation of the Kingdom of God which embraces the past, the present and the coming generations, and thus the whole world' (226).

There are three key features of the psalm noted in the commentary, but undervalued by the respondents. First, the commentator has a more comprehensive grasp of the psalmist's emotions in the first part of the psalm (vv 1-21): 'The mood of the worshipper fluctuates to and fro between trembling fear and a yearning desire to seek his refuge in God' (Weiser: 219). Second, Weiser sees this ebb and flow of the psalmist's emotions as 'part of the essence of the Old Testament piety, as this is expressed in prayer, to be true to life at all costs and therefore not to hide from God the worshipper's conflicting emotions' (223). Third, the commentary is interested in theology as well as spirituality, so it interprets the psalm within the broad context of God's covenant relationship with ancient Israel. Commentating on v 3 ('Yet you are holy'), Weiser observes that '[I]t is precisely this God, who far transcends

<sup>19</sup> V 13, Weiser's translation; cf. 'all you offspring of Jacob' (NRSV)

<sup>20</sup> If Weiser is correct, the psalm here anticipates the Sermon on the Mount!

everything which is human and remains unapproachable whenever men endeavour to obtrude on him, with whom the people of God have nevertheless a special relationship' (221).

One of the distinctive features of the respondents in contrast to the commentary is the multiple contextualisation of the poem in today's world, but this is to be expected since meditation is closer to hermeneutics (what the text means) than to exegesis (what the text meant) (Mickelsen: 55). Another difference is that, while the commentary is naturally obliged to follow the individual-community relationship as this is portrayed in the psalm, i.e. the suffering is individual (vv 1, 6, etc.) and the rejoicing communal (v 22) with even the enemies who had scorned the psalmist in his affliction possibly joining the celebration (Weiser: 225), the meditation can take more liberties and be more creative.

In this chapter I have reviewed the data relating to Psalm 22, reviewing and interpreting it along three distinct lines. First, I considered in turn the understanding and experience of suffering revealed by each respondent. Second, I re-examined the experience of respondents in the light of some insights from Tom Beaudoin's study of American GenXer religiosity. Both these manipulations of the data have confirmed that the respondents in the first Psalm Journey see suffering as an important issue and acknowledge that its resolution involves a spiritual dimension. Third, I compared and contrasted the respondents interaction with the text with Artur Weiser's exegesis of the psalm.

**Chapter 7: Faith and Ultimate Being****PSALM 30**

*A Psalm. A Song at the dedication of the temple. Of David.*

<sup>1</sup>*I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,  
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.*

<sup>2</sup>*O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,  
and you have healed me.*

<sup>3</sup>*O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,  
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.\**

<sup>4</sup>*Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,  
and give thanks to his holy name.*

<sup>5</sup>*For his anger is but for a moment;  
his favour is for a lifetime.*

*Weeping may linger for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.*

<sup>6</sup>*As for me, I said in my prosperity,  
'I shall never be moved.'*

<sup>7</sup>*By your favour, O LORD,  
you had established me as a strong mountain;  
you hid your face;  
I was dismayed.*

<sup>8</sup>*To you, O LORD, I cried,  
and to the LORD I made supplication:*

<sup>9</sup>*'What profit is there in my death,  
if I go down to the Pit?*

*Will the dust praise you?*

*Will it tell of your faithfulness?*

<sup>10</sup>*Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!  
O LORD, be my helper!'*

<sup>11</sup>*You have turned my mourning into dancing;  
you have taken off my sackcloth  
and clothed me with joy,*

<sup>12</sup>*so that my soul\* may praise you and not be silent.  
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.*

In this chapter I begin the second Psalm Journey by exploring the interaction with Psalm 30. This psalm was selected because I expected that its focus on the poet's emotional uplift ('You have turned my mourning into dancing' (v 11) would have some resonance with the audience's placing a high value on human experience (see chapter 3). My task in the first section is to explore the interaction between audience and text in order to ascertain whether this assumption is well-founded. In the second section I utilise James Fowler's faith development theory to investigate whether the respondents' experience reflects an encounter with God and personal faith, which, as we saw in chapter 1, are regarded by the Bible agencies to be desired outcomes of Scripture engagement. In the third and final section I compare and contrast respondents' interpretation of the text with that of Robert Davidson in his commentary entitled *The Vitality of Worship*.

Before getting into the substance of the chapter I need to introduce my respondents who are all new. They are a lively group of seven who are more talkative than the group who undertook the first Psalm Journey, but no less reflective. Kate is a somewhat taciturn German postgraduate student, aged 25-29. A Protestant, she never attends a place of worship, although as a child she baptised herself in the sink. She describes herself as holding superstitious beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Ashok is a talkative Indian doctoral postgraduate student, aged 20-24, brought up a Hindu, he attends a place of worship once every six months or so, but has had no previous contact with Christianity. Ashok is very interested in the philosophy of Rama Krishna. Next, I want to introduce Saul. Saul is a Canadian Jew, aged 25-29, who maintains his liberal Jewish beliefs, and attends synagogue between two and four times a year. The next member of the group comes from New Zealand. She is Edith, a doctoral student investigating the piano in the American novel, and has a viable connection with the Presbyterian Church in which she grew up. Flora is British and younger, aged 20-24, and the only under-graduate in the group. She studies medicine and is an enthusiastic follower of the Baha'i faith. Joan is from Scandinavia and is doing a masters course. She is Protestant and attends church occasionally (about once a year). Unfortunately she drops out after week two because of illness.<sup>2</sup> In terms of frequency of journaling the pattern is substantially similar to that in the first journey, the average being 5.95 days' entries per respondent per week.<sup>3</sup> This is the group of young adults who are kindly allowing me to evaluate whether meditating on psalms advances their spiritual quest. The psalms in focus are, in week order, 30, 73 and 74.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate completes the Journey, but due to a misunderstanding does not keep a journal during week one.

<sup>2</sup> That Joan's withdrawal was reluctant is clear from an email message of 06/05/04: 'I have really enjoyed taking part and just wish I could continue.' She submits her journal only for week two.

<sup>3</sup> The average during the first Psalm Journey was 6.22 entries per respondent per week.

The respondents find Psalm 30 the most problematic; Psalm 73 evokes most positive respondent appreciation, while Psalm 74 is given a more mixed response.

*Section 1: Resonance or dissonance?*

In the second Psalm Journey, unlike the first, the audience values influencing the psalm selection are not explicitly shared with respondents. We shall see, nevertheless, that all respondents read Psalm 30 assuming it relates to personal human experience. This hymn, like many psalms, is directly addressed to Yahweh, and the question I wish to explore is whether this focus of the text makes respondents aware of being invited to enter into a divine encounter with someone or something invested with transcendent value and power.

**‘This is the first time I have read the Bible’ (Ashok, D1)**

At the 1972 world assembly of the UBS held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a new initiative was launched that led to an extensive programme of global distribution of ‘new reader Scriptures’ in the form of short Scripture portions that were translated in a simplified form of the receptor languages for use in literacy programmes. Eight years later in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the focus of the following world assembly shifted to the need to prepare Scriptures for ‘new Bible readers’ (Robertson: 181-82; 257). At Chiang Mai, Eugene Nida, one of the leading translation consultants of the UBS, presented to the assembly the need for ‘helps’ for readers coming to the Bible for the first time, by citing the case of a Buddhist who mistook the presence of four gospels in the New Testament to indicate that Jesus had experienced four incarnations. Two of my respondents in the second Psalm Journey are new Bible readers. One is Ashok and the other is Kate. How do they react to the psalmist’s ‘moves’ in addressing God?

Surprisingly, Ashok, as a new Bible reader, shows more respect for Psalm 30 than does Saul whose tradition has given the Psalms to the world. Nevertheless, Ashok expresses in his first journal entry difficulties in coming to terms with the ideology of a strange text: ‘Read the Psalm couple of times in fact it was the first time I have read any sort of passage from the bible. I have mixed feelings about it. Didn’t really appeal to me when I thought over it’ (D1). Because he interprets the psalmist’s healing metaphorically as ‘deliverance from earthly sins’, Ashok creates a theological problem for himself in light of a prior scepticism he brings to the text about the notion of forgiveness of sins, which seems to haunt his interaction with the text despite it containing no explicit reference either to sin or to forgiveness. This scepticism is well expressed on day 6: ‘A sinner prays to God and is

absolved of his guilt sounds pretty convenient to me. The idea that you put your faith in God just for this is too narrow for me'. In addition, Ashok seems to think that to ask God for anything is presumptuous; God is to be praised not petitioned: 'I presume,' he writes 'if you love and trust God, you pray to him thanking him that he has given you what you want' (D2). In addition, he tells us that 'I cannot relate to this rigid discrimination between good and evil – to me it's too puritan'. So it is not surprising to find Ashok stating rather emphatically: 'I don't think the psalm is impacting me in any way' (D4). He is, however, aware of the text inviting him to make a response, but it is a response he finds difficult to make because of the psalm's rigid ideas. 'The only thing I believe it is encouraging us to do,' he writes, 'is to sing praise of the Lord'. However, Ashok rejects the reasons the psalmist puts forward in support of his call to praise (D4). So unsurprisingly at the end of the week we find Ashok confessing that he 'couldn't put it [the psalm] in context with modern times' (D7). However, his 'oppositional' readings are relieved by consistent acknowledgement of the importance of faith. His final words on the psalm are: 'The only thing I could relate to in a small way was the idea of putting faith in God forever. I mean you should have some firm beliefs in your life' (D7). Ashok's difficulties in coming to terms with the text conceptually are not untypical and illustrate the problems people of non-Christian faiths frequently encounter in accessing a biblical text for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

The other new Bible reader is Kate. 'I thought it [the psalm] was very, very interesting', she says. Kate goes on 'This is my first psalm ever – I don't have any connection to religion at all, and it struck me as slightly worldly – a deal between you and God: you praise him and he'll be nice to you' (L: 6). Kate agrees with Ashok about the importance of having faith in yourself. However, she feels the psalm doesn't encourage this. 'I think this psalm is pretty much against the idea of faith in yourself and more for a shift in faith towards God' (L: 7). Kate finds it easier to identify the 'dominant code' of the psalm than Ashok, probably due to the residual influence of the folk Protestantism in which she grew up.

If Ashok illustrates the difficulties of coming to the Bible with no orientation, Flora illustrates the opposite, for at times her Baha'i perspective produces oppositional readings that construe the psalmist to say something very different from the consensus understanding among Hebrew Bible commentators of the psalm's theme. One example of Flora's

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<sup>4</sup> Nida 1963: 1-23. Had I anticipated Ashok's presence I would have included some annotations in the minimal hermeneutic for people from Asian cultures. We shall discover in the following two chapters a remarkable growth in Ashok's appreciation of the psalmic texts, but his confusing first encounter with a psalm well illustrates the point made by Nida at Chiang Mai.

predisposition in interpreting the text is her understanding that the psalmist's foes (v. 1) are, in fact, his ego:

I understand this as in God has helped him detach himself from his ego, which, in essence is every human's biggest test in life, one's biggest 'foe'. God has helped him detach himself from earthly things, materialism, which is the downfall and foe of humanity's spiritual advancement (D1).

Flora takes a similar approach when she rationalises the question Edith will find so challenging ('Will the dust praise you?') by reading it as a retrospective comment: '[H]e's looking back thinking that's what I was saying in those days' (L8). However, Flora appears to be genuinely appreciative of Psalm 30 and considers that her knowledge of Baha'i prayers explains why she can 'so easily relate to the psalms as a form of prayer or meditation' (D6).<sup>5</sup> Responding to Psalm 30 as an entity, Flora writes: I would like to feel this awe before God more often. I want to live in constant attitude of prayer and devotion to God' (D4). Between them, Ashok and Flora illustrate the need for a balanced minimal hermeneutic that will say enough to open the text while bearing in mind that saying too much might close it.

As I have already hinted, Saul, like Ashok and Kate, has difficulty in relating to the text. He writes on day three: 'I am finding it a real struggle to connect with this.' Apart from acknowledging 'some nice sentiments' (D3) his readings are consistently 'oppositional' ('[T]he wording is so dogmatic and religious', that it is 'a real turnoff'), and generates some sarcastic journaling:

I don't quite get what the speaker is so upset about in [v] 7. Prosperity and strength, why so dismayed, pal? Cuz your Lord hasn't made you suffer in a while. Oh, too bad. All the best. May he scorn you in due time (D4).

Saul's scorn is consistent throughout the week, and on the final day he records that, after speaking with others about the psalms, he has become convinced that 'the ideal of a Christian [*sic*] God is oblivious to prayer and piety, superficial, and outright mean. Is this what the psalm is telling us?' (D7). Perhaps Saul is being facetious here. Or he may be having a bout of the blues. Either way, he illustrates how a very real challenge to Scripture

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<sup>5</sup> 'Baha'is accept the scriptures of all major faiths as holy, inspired writings, and they are encouraged to study them' (Corduan: 19)

engagement exists within the biblical tradition of Judaism as well as in the Hindu tradition of Ashok and the popular superstition of Kate.<sup>6</sup>

**‘Agency in the here and now, not the hope of the hereafter’** (Edith, D5).

In his essay on ‘Psalms: Spirituality in Every Key’, Philip Yancy (128-132), a popular American Christian writer, identifies openness to ‘realignment’ as a key prerequisite to appreciating the Psalms. Edith knows what Yancy means. She tells us that despite initially ‘suffering from an inability to be moved by the text’ (D2), the psalm effects a theological realignment in her thinking. Although she knows the psalm well, she is surprised by the Hebraic view of death expressed in verses 9-10 which she discovers to be ‘a very different concept...to that taught in the Christian faith’ (D5). She tells the group that the psalmist’s rhetorical question ‘Will the dust praise you?’ (v 9) brings home to her the futility of a suicide bombing the previous day in Basra that killed 68 people. How, she asks, could this be an act of praise? As a result of this cognitive challenge from the text, she questions the Christian notion of heaven: ‘To dwell in the house of the Lord is a human and earthly existence, not the Christian notion of heaven. There is a real fear of death, because only the living can praise God’ (D5).

Edith reads to the group a full extract of her journal on verse 9, stressing that, although the Hebraic view of death ‘isn’t very comforting in some respects, it does put incredible credence on one’s earthly existence.... [I]t places agency in the here and now, not the hope of the hereafter’ (D5). Her interpretation resonates with the perspective of the psalmist and should, therefore, be regarded as a ‘preferred’ reading. But in some other respects Edith experiences dissonance with the psalm at the affective level because it seems to suggest that ‘it is almost as if we have to have super lows, so as to appreciate the Lord’s favour, and then if things are really good, we have to freak out that things are going too well.’ Journaling the day after she has been extremely ill with a temporarily infected foot, she asks: ‘Aren’t we just supposed to accept that sometimes things just don’t go so well, but that doesn’t mean that we are forsaken’ (D6).<sup>7</sup> However, although she finds that ‘the psalm as a whole is

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<sup>6</sup> Saul’s scepticism is not unique to Judaism; it is paralleled by many brought up in the Christian traditions (cf. Brown: 16-34). We shall discover that Saul’s initial scepticism begins to wane in the second and third weeks as he becomes positive, indeed, enthusiastic about Psalms 73 and 74.

<sup>7</sup> Edith’s perception of the up and down mood of the psalm arises because she assumes the verses reflect the chronological order of the psalmist’s experience. She appears to have missed the quotation in the Minimal Hermeneutic from the *New Interpreters’ Bible* that vv 6-12 ‘seem to be a flashback in which the psalmist reviews the former distress (vv 6-10) and deliverance (vv. 11-12), even quoting a portion of the prayer for help mentioned in v. 2 (vv 9-10)’. Edith does raise the possibility that vv 6-10 might be ‘chronologically set before the start of the psalm’ (D3), but doesn’t follow this up.

confusing' and 'a bit petulant' for her liking (D6), in the group meeting at the end of the week Edith acknowledges that 'maybe in the psalm you are allowed' to let your moods go up and down.<sup>8</sup>

Joan also is aware of a challenge to realign. In her case the challenge impacts at the affective level: 'It seems as if it [the psalm] is reaching out to you' (L: 6). She is also fully engaged cognitively, for she deduces that, if the psalmist can ask God for help, we ought not to be afraid of asking favours from others, and to be grateful for whatever help they give (L: 1). Joan also regards the psalm as an invitation to believe in God: 'For me,' she says, 'it was as if the psalmist was inviting, wanting me to believe in God, more or less giving you a promise that if you believe there is a reward for you' (L: 6).

It is unlikely that Elsie has any thoughts of realigning her life as she begins her meditation. 'I wonder,' she writes in her first journal entry, 'if I'm going to get bored reading the same psalm for a week' (D1). As it turns out, she finds the week-long meditation gives depth to her appreciation of the psalm. It is like looking into water: the longer you look, the more fish you see (D2). She discovers that writing the psalm out by hand helps her to see more in the text. She does not seem to be conscious of any disorientation within herself, but she is aware that in the text 'there's resolution all over the place', and finds that her sense of spiritual orientation is strengthened. The week's meditation coincides with a holiday in Austria where the natural surroundings of the Alps help her to sense the challenge of verse 7 ('By your favour, O LORD, you had established me as a strong mountain'). 'Mountains are so impressive, so immovable', she writes, 'that it's difficult to think of myself as such. I am something much more floaty and transient without the foundation with which God's favour has secured me to himself' (D5).

In this section I answer the question I posed at the beginning by showing that that respondents do attempt to relate the poet's experience to their own subjective life. This is true of all seven respondents, whether they are coming to the Bible for the first time or after many times, whether they already have or don't have a religious faith. Thus the finding of the pilot project that having a fulfilling experience is highly rated by the audience is supported by the week's meditation. The particular challenges facing new Bible readers are

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<sup>8</sup> Edith's initial diffidence may be due to her being cautious about laying too much stress on subjective experience: '[B]eing too happy about something is extremely dangerous: it'll all turn to custard, if you're not too careful, irrespective of thankfulness' (D3).

highlighted, and the demands of the text for realignment of thought and behaviour are noted. The psalmist's account of his personal encounter with God is noted by all respondents, and it is logical to ask whether they have any sense of being invited to seek a parallel experience of transcendence. This question is relevant as well as logical for the 2005 FOBAI definition of Scripture engagement already noted in chapter 1 assert that a key outcome of such engagement is encounter with God.<sup>9</sup> For these reasons, in the next section of this chapter I explore whether respondents, in interacting with the text of Psalm 30, exhibit any awareness of, or relationship with, God.

### *Section 2: Encounter and faith?*

In this section I first summarise briefly the psalmist's self-understanding of God. For him, God is a transcendental being who is to be extolled (v 1) and praised (vv 4,11) in the here and now (vv 8-9) for healing (literally or figuratively) the psalmist (vv 2-3) and filling his life with great joy (v 11). Although God's anger with the psalmist for asserting his human autonomy manifests itself in the psalmist losing a sense of the divine presence (vv 6-7), the poet is convinced that God's favour is hugely greater than his anger (v 5) and consequently he builds his faith on a sense of God's grace and faithfulness (vv 9d, 10). This focus on the psalmist's recent personal narrative invites respondents to reflect on ways that their own personal journey might or might not be motivated by faith. In order to explore the faith of my respondents I turn to James W. Fowler's faith development theory which has for two decades served as the dominant paradigm for faith-development studies (Jones: 1). Fowler, an American practical theologian, has worked at the interface of practical theology and psychology, drawing his theological insights mainly from Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, while building on the cognitive development theories of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg and Erik Erikson (Fowler 1992: 19-24). Don Browning reckons that Fowler's *Stages of Faith* has 'enormous relevance to practical theology and through it to the entire body of theological reflection' (Browning 1983: 124).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> FOBAI stands for Forum of Bible Agencies International.

<sup>10</sup> This faith development theory has been extensively critiqued. Fowler (1992) gives a robust response to charges of (a) religious imperialism in using biblical themes to describe generic faith, and (b) unscientific method in beginning with a normative end point determined by one interpretation of the vision of a particular religious tradition. After summarising a wide range of critiques of Fowler, Daloz Parks (115) concludes by observing that he 'has fostered a conversation which, though it takes form at the crossroads of religion and psychology, it is not confined to that sphere'. 'Faith development theory', she continues, 'now engages not only psychologists and theologians, but also ethicists, historians, clinicians, educators across the life-span – both parochial and public – spiritual directors, pastors, social theorists, social activists, and many others'.

Fowler's paradigm commends itself for the present purpose of evaluating the faith responses of my pluralist audience by his claim that it is 'confessional in a way... which avoids Christian imperialism and sectarian exclusivism and invites dialogue with persons of secular orientation as well as of other [religious] traditions' (1992: 34). For Fowler, faith is essentially 'trust in another and ... loyalty to a transcendent center of power' (1981: 11). Faith is generic and universal, and the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence, its content varying according to the individual's or group's understanding of the transcendent (1981: 14). Fowler's paradigm of faith development can be summed up in three propositions: (1) transcendence manifests itself in three major forms: (a) polytheism, (b) henotheism, and (c) radical monotheism (1981: 19-23); (2) Christian faith is a process of ongoing conversion or *metanoia* culminating in radical monotheism as the normative end point of faith development (1992: 7; 25); and (3) faith is triadic: the base line of the triad is a two-way flow between the self and others of love, mutual trust and loyalty that make selfhood possible, while the group's shared centres of value and power form the apex (1981: 17). Fowler borrows from H.R. Niebuhr (R.B. Miller: 242-262) the application to human faith of the terms polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism. By the first term Fowler (1981: 19-23) means 'a pattern of faith and identity that lacks any one center of value and power of sufficient transcendence to focus and order one's life'. 'Henotheism' indicates 'a pattern of faith and identity in which one invests deeply in a transcending center of value and power, finding in it a focal unity of personality and outlook, but this center is inappropriate, false, not something of ultimate concern... a limited and finite god'. The third term, 'radical monotheism', is 'a type of faith-identity relation in which a person or group focuses its supreme trust and loyalty in a transcendent center of value and power, that is neither a conscious or unconscious extension of personal or group ego nor a finite cause or institution'.

There is, of course, much more to Fowler's theory. A process of ongoing *metanoia* towards the grounding of persons' wills, visions, and patterns of living in the divine intention and modes of action disclosed in the 'kingdom of God' metaphor, provides the spectrum for six stages of faith identified by Fowler (Fowler, *et al.* : 25). For Fowler, *metanoia* is manifested by 'becoming a subject before God' (a phrase borrowed from Johannes Metz (1992: 29). Since I did not use Fowler's interview agenda with my respondents, I do not attempt to evaluate the data in terms of his stages.<sup>11</sup> His three affirmations suffice to provide criteria

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<sup>11</sup> Fowler's six stages have been found to be unhelpful if it is assumed that we outgrow each stage in turn. Many people are 'a mixture of all the stages' (Boyd-MacMillan: 5)

for evaluating both the faith statements and the God talk of my respondents. I employ these affirmations by asking three questions of the respondents' faith experience: (1) What is its focus? Is it multiple, dominant or radical?<sup>12</sup> (2) Is there evidence of *metanoia*? And (3) Is there a sense of community?

### Flora

Flora evidences Fowlerian faith in that she believes in the Baha'i religion and responds to the psalm as a call to *metanoia*, or, as she puts it a 'spiritual awakening' which she discerns to be symbolised in the psalmist's recovery from illness (v 2) (D1). In her view 'the spiritually dead cannot praise God because they are too attached to the things of this world' (D1). She thinks that 'luxuries are a test from God to see if we are detached from materialism or not' (D2). The summary title she gives to the psalm – 'Thanksgiving for God's help in the process of Detaching one's self' resonates with Fowler's understanding of conversion as 'a release from self-groundedness' (1984: 140). However, Flora is able to distinguish between 'faith in yourself and loving your ego' (L: 7). Moreover, for her, faith is much more than a negative attitude to self and to consumerism: 'This psalm shows to me the utter trust I should have in God, which I must cultivate' (D2). Her concluding meditation that day reveals a positive faith:

Faith in God has to be to the extent that after you have prayed for something to happen, you should assume that it has already happened or is about to take place. If you are still hoping for it to happen, then you don't really have complete trust in God (D2).

For Flora, God is transcendent and knowable; meditating on day 4 she writes: 'I would like to feel this awe before God more often. I want to live in constant attitude of prayer and devotion to God ... I also want to serve God, I want to serve humanity'. Like the psalmist Flora is aware of her dependence on God's favour: 'Essentially one can only progress through God's Mercy and Grace' (D3). She also displays trust in God and loyalty to her Baha'i beliefs; she tells us 'I decided to say the psalm using it as a prayer along with a Baha'i prayer for praise and gratitude' (D5). Although Flora's faith mirrors that of the psalmist in many ways, it differs in its focus on combating the ego and materialism which she regards as veils that shut us out from God (D1; D3). Again, while Flora recognises that in verse 9 the psalmist 'is sort of haggling with God' (D2), she tends to be much more passive than he is, and gives the impression of being uncomfortable with his 'daring

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<sup>12</sup> I am substituting 'multiple' and 'dominant' for the Niebuhrian 'polytheistic' and 'henotheistic'.

vocabulary' that assumes that 'God is able and willing to be addressed abrasively' (Miller 1995: 58, n23). Fowler would probably acknowledge that Flora exhibits an embryonic 'radical monotheism'. I say 'embryonic' because, according to Fowler, relatively few people represent radical monotheism (his Stage 6).<sup>13</sup> Implicit in Flora's writing and speaking is a sense of dependence on the wider Baha'i family.

### **Ashok**

If Flora's faith manifests itself primarily in submission to God, Ashok's expresses itself mainly in praise. 'I presume,' he writes on day 2, 'if you love and trust God you pray to him, thanking him for what he has given you and for what you want – at least for me that's the case.' Ashok tells the group that the psalm reinstates his belief in faith (L: 2) and has made him think about God (L: 6). Although Ashok refers to God in personal male terms, even with an initial upper case 'His' (D5), it is unclear if he considers God to be transcendent and personal in the sense the psalmist does. Indeed, in one entry he thinks of God as non-personal: '[T]o me the idea of God is more like what you have complete faith in – it is your belief that is your God' (D3). Despite this ambivalence, Ashok believes that faith is important and, indeed, makes us human (L: 4), but is critical of the psalmist's faith which he interprets as 'singing His praise for gaining His favour' (D4). Ashok doesn't capture the psalmist's dependence on God's favour and suggests that the poet is almost dictating terms to God by saying in effect 'If you save me, I will sing your praise' (D5). From Ashok's perspective such a view of faith is too narrow (D6); his faith is focused on multiple centres of value and power.<sup>14</sup>

### **Saul**

Saul also finds it difficult to understand faith as the psalmist expresses it. He is unable to sympathise with the poet in his emotional crisis: 'I don't quite get what the speaker is so upset about in [verse] 7' (D4), and his quotation from the Rheostatics indie rock band, that worshipping Christians are 'not all that sure about the object of their song' (D5) suggests that he considers the psalmist's sense of resolution in verses 11-12 to be confused. In Fowlerian terms, Saul is no 'radical monotheist', for he tells us: 'My biggest problem is this idea of Lord. On a personal level, some all powerful Lord who gives and takes is a difficult deity to

<sup>13</sup> As examples of radical monotheists Fowler (1981: 201) cites Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Dag Hammarskjöld, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton.

<sup>14</sup> We shall see in succeeding chapters that Ashok illustrates Fowler's statement that 'God has prepotentiated us for faith' (Fowler 1992: 22) as he steadily approximates nearer to a psalmic form of faith.

connect with' (D3). Saul struggles with the concept of 'a lord who earns his subject's trust by always offering the possibility of good times' (D5). In his final meditation of the week he tells us that he is more and more convinced that 'the ideal of a Christian [*sic*]God is oblivious to prayer and piety' (D6). Saul shows no awareness that God is transcendent or knowable or shows favour to humans. Yet, the fact that he finds verse 5 ('For his anger is but for a moment; his favour is for a lifetime') to be 'the stanza that is most didactic or whatever is nearest to touching' (D6) suggests that under the scornful exterior there is still a basic loyalty to Judaism acting as a 'centering power' in his life (Fowler 1981: 4). Saul's faith is more than generic; it has a dominant focus, but falls well short of being radical.

### **Edith**

Psalm 30 troubles not only Saul, the somewhat agnostic Jew, it also raises questions for Edith, the enthusiastic church choralist. She struggles with what she perceives to be the dynamic of the divine-human encounter in the psalm: 'The Lord appears to "hide his face" without due cause. The psalmist appears to have done nothing wrong; he was downtrodden and praising the Lord continually for drawing him up' (D3). Although Edith clearly assumes God is a transcendent and personal being, later in the same entry she returns to what she considers to be God's unreasonable treatment of the poet:

Unless verses 6-10 are chronologically set before the start of the psalm, it is very unfair that the Lord turns his back on a faithful one. However, things aren't fair, as we can see in the book of Job, and I don't necessarily need things to be fair, but I am obviously missing the point of the psalm. I am taking it too much personally (D3).

Moving from Edith's God talk to her faith, we find this is both threatened and enlarged by her encounter with Psalm 30. Her faith is threatened by the psalmist's emotional rollercoaster experience: 'It is almost as if we have to have super lows, so as to appreciate the Lord's favour, and then if things are really good, we have to freak out that things are going too well' (D6). 'Aren't we just supposed', she goes on, 'to accept that sometimes things just don't go so well, but that doesn't mean we are forsaken.' On the other hand, Edith's faith is stretched by verse 9 ('Will the dust praise you?'), producing a new awareness for her of the significance of the here and now. The verse strikes her on her first day of meditation: 'I've never really noticed it before, but I rather like the implication that these things need to be dealt with in the here and now, for the here and now' (D1). By day 5 her journal entry suggests she has experienced a Fowlerian *metanoia*. Commenting on the first line of verse 9, she writes:

This is a very different concept of death to that taught in the Christian faith. Whereas in the Christian heaven the souls of the departed are in the presence of God, there is no hope of the Lord in Sheol. This therefore forces me to reread the psalm as a praising of life and a true fear and abhorrence of death. You cannot praise the Lord after death. The life and the soul are united and you only have your life here on earth to have hope of the Lord's favour.

Her encounter with Psalm 30 has given Edith's faith a new focus: 'To dwell in the house of the Lord is a human and earthly existence, not the Christian notion of heaven' (D5). Like Ashok and Saul, Edith passes over the poet's focus on God's grace and favour towards wayward humans. But she is aware of the community support she receives from the church and from the group. In Fowlerian terms she should probably be categorised, along with Flora, as an embryonic radical monotheist.

### **Elsie**

Turning to Elsie, we find that her faith is also impacted positively, but deepened rather than stretched. She tells us that this psalm is already familiar to her and that she has always specially liked the second part of verse 5 about joy coming in the morning. But on her first day's meditation, it is verses 6-8 that catch her attention and awaken a nascent radical monotheism. They 'remind me of God's faithfulness to me in my brash arrogance' (D1). Along with Flora, she resonates with the psalm's focus on God's grace; she tells us that the image of 'a strong mountain' (v 7) is a symbol of God's favour to her and that it strengthens her religious experience (D5). She interprets the healing (v 2) as a metaphor of the resolution of the psalmist's emotional spiritual crisis, and finishes her third meditation entry by concluding that 'This psalm seems to be a lot about restoration – all the mourning into dancing and stuff – there's resolution all over the place' (D3). We saw in the first section that Elsie has a strong commitment to her church community. This paragraph on Elsie's faith concludes our study of the theology and faith of respondents in interacting with Psalm 30.

This rapid survey reveals that interaction with Psalm 30 has stimulated all respondents to talk about God and about faith.<sup>15</sup> In terms of James Fowler's faith development theory, the faith of Flora, Edith, and Elsie has a radical focus as each in their own individual way is in

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<sup>15</sup> I have omitted Joan and Kate from this survey because of the brevity of data they provide concerning faith. Joan, as we saw in section 1, is impressed by the psalmist's invitation to believe in God, but tells the group she is 'not 100% convinced by the message in the psalm' (L: 6). While Kate acknowledges that the psalm encourages faith in God and discourages faith in yourself, she opts for the latter (L: 7).

process of ‘becoming a subject before God.’ During the week’s meditation their faith develops in different ways; Flora’s develops by way of interpreting the psalm in Baha’i terms; Edith’s through discovering in verse 9 the primacy of the here and now; and Elsie’s through a deepened understanding of the power of the psalm’s metaphors. On the other hand, Saul, Ashok, Joan, and Kate all have multiple foci in that their faith lacks any one centre of value and power of sufficient transcendence to focus and order their lives. Engaging with Psalm 30 does not bring any of these four to faith in the transcendent personal God of the psalmist, but Ashok is probably more open than the other three to growth in faith. It is now time to move into the final section of the chapter by making the customary comparison of respondents’ readings of the psalm with the exegesis of a contemporary commentator.

### *Section 3: Meditation and Commentary*

For Psalm 30 I have chosen the commentary by Robert Davidson, professor emeritus of Old Testament language and literature at the University of Glasgow and formerly of New College, Edinburgh, because this commentary, *The Vitality of Worship*, is written with sensitivity to the ways in which the psalms resonate with today’s spiritual mood. According to Davidson, ‘the Psalms cover the whole gamut of human experience from praise to penitence, from quietly confident faith to agonized perplexity, from joy at the wonder of life in God’s world to the struggle to reach out to a God who seems remote or silent, from bowing humbly before the mystery of life to bitter and urgent questioning’. ‘It is all there’, he goes on, ‘and because it is all there we are there in our ever changing moods and needs’ (2). A review of the conversation between commentator and respondents concerning Psalm 30 can be broken down into three broad areas: theology, psychology, and translation.

#### **The theology of the psalm**

With regard to the respective understandings of God in the psalm, it is to be expected that Davidson, with his long experience of studying the text in the original Hebrew, has a much more sophisticated grasp of psalmic theology than do the respondents as relative newcomers to the Psalms. A second distinction is also discernible: the commentator has a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the psalmist’s faith than do the respondents. According to Davidson, the cause of the crisis engulfing the psalmist (vv 2-3) is that ‘his piety rested not on God who gave, but on the good things he had received. His own sense of security, his own status, was all-important’ (106). Ashok (D5) and Saul (D5)

read this very differently; they see it as signifying that God is expecting to earn his followers' trust through delivering them and sparing them from suffering. In addition to drawing attention to the confusion in the psalmist's mind between Giver and gifts, Davidson points to an emphasis in the text that eludes all respondents bar one, that is, the psalmist's eventual acknowledgement of his dependence on God's grace ('Be gracious to me ... be my helper', v 10). 'He can only appeal to God on grounds of God's grace,' writes the commentator, 'not on the grounds of any claim on God or any merit of his own' (106). In all the respondent evidence, only Elsie's reference to 'God's faithfulness to me in my brash arrogance' (D1) approximates to Davidson's reading.

There is greater convergence between commentator and respondents on the theology of the afterlife. Davidson confirms Edith's unsettling discovery of the Hebraic view of Sheol articulated in verse 9: 'That can only mean the end of any relationship with God, with no opportunity of praising God or of witnessing to his "faithfulness"' (106). The commentary draws out more sharply than does Edith, that here the psalmist appears to be challenging God 'arguing that there is no point in God condemning him to death, since God has nothing to gain from it – only the loss of one who, however, imperfectly, did worship him' (106). The commentary also asks whether verse 9 might have a different interpretation: '[I]s the psalmist admitting that he has nothing to gain by continuing along the self-centered road which can only lead to death?' On the other hand, Edith draws out an implication overlooked in the commentary, pointing out that if only the living can praise God this puts 'incredible credence on one's earthly existence.... [I]t places agency in the here and now, not the hope of the hereafter' (D5). The 'conversation' between commentator and respondents cover not only the words of the psalmist's mouth, but also the workings of his mind, to which I now turn.

### **The psychology of the psalmist**

The respondents are sometimes less than sympathetic to the psalmist's predicament. Edith is joined by Ashok and Sam in regarding him as rather huffy. Davidson, on the other hand, understands the psalmist in greater depth, recognising that he is at the end of his tether: 'The props of his piety having been taken away, he was left only with the God to whom he now turns in urgent prayer (v. 8)' (106). In Davidson's view, the psalmist's emotional 'ups' and 'downs' indicate, not petulance as Edith thinks (D6), but the poet's tendency to confuse God with his gifts (106). The commentator has not only a firmer grasp of the mood of the psalm, but also sees more clearly the dynamics of the poet's relationship with God. With reference

to verse 11 ('You have turned my mourning into dancing'), Davidson echoes Fowler's notion (1984: 140) of conversion as 'a release from the burden of self-groundedness' when he writes: 'Freed from the chains of his own self-esteem and self-importance, his life now takes on a new dimension. "Mourning" is replaced by "dancing"' (106). This resumé of the psalmic concept of the human self reminds us how much it differs from the notion of the autonomous self favoured in modernity (both early and late) and it may be that this difference explains to some extent the somewhat cursory interpretations by some respondents of the psalmist's mood.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps a more immediate reason for the respondents' somewhat loose grasp of the dynamics of the psalm is their assumption that the verse order is chronological. As we have already noted, Edith (D3) recognises (and then rejects) the possibility that verses 6-10 might be chronologically set before the start of the psalm. Davidson points out that in verses 6-12 'The psalmist now dots the "i"s and crosses the "t"s of his experience, recapitulating what he has had to live through and the steps that led him out of his crisis' (106), making clear that these verses are a flashback to the predicament outlined in the earlier verses. Davidson's ability to discover in the text insights into the psalmist's psychology would almost certainly have helped respondents to identify more clearly the psalmist's 'centres of value and power to the transcendent' (Fowler 1981: 11). Another huge advantage Davidson enjoys over the respondents as an acknowledged expert in the field of Hebrew Bible, is that he has the gravitas that enables him to question specific renderings of the NRSV and, indeed, of any other published English translation.

### **The translation of the text**

An example where knowledge of an alternative rendering commended in the commentary would have helped the respondents' interaction with the text is Davidson's preference for the REB's rendering of verse 6 as 'I felt secure and said, "I can never be shaken"'. The use of 'prosperity' by the NRSV instead of 'secure' or 'security' communicated to Saul (D4) and Ashok (D3) an image of wealth rather than protection. On the other hand, Ashok's difficulty in understanding the meaning of 'extol' in 'I will extol you, O Lord' (v 1) would not have been resolved by Davidson's explication that it 'means that God is being lifted up' (104). Such an explanation was, in fact, reproduced in the minimal hermeneutic for Psalm 30 as follows: 'The Hebrew word translated "extol" more literally means "to lift up,"' which prompts Ashok to ask: 'Why would anyone want to "lift up" God?' (D1). This is a case where a literal rendering of a Hebrew metaphor creates a problem rather than a solution, and in retrospect, it would have been better for the minimal hermeneutic to have been content to

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<sup>16</sup> For the notion of the autonomous self, see Lyon: 41-42; 75.

leave 'exalt' unexplained or to have provided, like Davidson, a fuller explanation: 'Such extolling means that God is being lifted up to his rightful place at the center of life, where his awesome greatness and majesty are acknowledged in a response that involves worship (99: 5, 9) and thanksgiving (18: 48)' (104). Ashok's problem with 'lifting up God' illustrates both the disadvantage of over-abbreviation in the minimal hermeneutic and the advantage of consulting a reputable commentary.

In summary, the conversation between Robert Davidson and the respondents divides into three areas: the theology of the psalm, the psychology of the psalmist and the translation of the text. First, Davidson's expertise in Old Testament theology made accessible to the public in *The Vitality of Worship* provides valuable insights into the text that would expand respondents' understanding of the psalmist's encounter with God and his experience of faith, as well as helpfully nuancing Fowler's paradigm of faith development in ways that would enhance its usefulness as a tool for analysing both the piety of the psalmist and the spirituality of the respondents. Second, Davidson's understanding of the psalmist's psychology would make it easier for respondents to interpret his mood swings and find parallels in their own experience. Thirdly, respondents would have been helped by the commentator's amplification of the NRSV translation in two places where some of them found it difficult to understand.

I began this chapter by introducing the seven participants starting out on the second Psalm Journey, and by indicating the three psalms to be covered, before going on to explain that Psalm 30 was selected because of the prominence the psalmist gives to spiritual experience which I had assumed would resonate with the audience's interest in this subject. A survey of respondents' interaction with the text confirms that this assumption is well founded, and prepares the way for a more detailed review of respondents' understanding and experience of faith, through a heuristic adaptation of James W. Fowler's faith development paradigm. This review reveals that in Fowlerian terms three respondents are at least nascent 'radical monotheists' while two are 'polytheists' insofar as they fail to focus and order their lives on any one transcendent centre of value and power. The chapter concludes with the customary dialogue between the respondents and a respected commentator, in this case Robert Davidson, which reveals convergences and divergences between respondents and commentator in interpreting the theology of the psalm, the psychology of the psalmist and the translation of the text. Having completed the first psalm in the second Psalm Journey, it is time to move on to the next, Psalm 73.

**Chapter 8: Disorientation and Reorientation****PSALM 73**

*A Psalm of Asaph.*

- <sup>1</sup>*Truly God is good to the upright,  
to those who are pure in heart.*
- <sup>2</sup>*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;  
my steps had nearly slipped.*
- <sup>3</sup>*For I was envious of the arrogant;  
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*
- <sup>4</sup>*For they have no pain;  
their bodies are sound and sleek.*
- <sup>5</sup>*They are not in trouble as others are;  
they are not plagued like other people.*
- <sup>6</sup>*Therefore pride is their necklace;  
violence covers them like a garment.*
- <sup>7</sup>*Their eyes swell out with fatness;  
their hearts overflow with follies.*
- <sup>8</sup>*They scoff and speak with malice;  
loftily they threaten oppression.*
- <sup>9</sup>*They set their mouths against heaven,  
and their tongues range over the earth.*
- <sup>10</sup>*Therefore the people turn and praise them,  
and find no fault in them.*
- <sup>11</sup>*And they say, 'How can God know?  
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'*
- <sup>12</sup>*Such are the wicked;  
always at ease, they increase in riches.*
- <sup>13</sup>*All in vain I have kept my heart clean  
and washed my hands in innocence.*
- <sup>14</sup>*For all day long I have been plagued,  
and am punished every morning.*
- <sup>15</sup>*If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way',  
I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.*
- <sup>16</sup>*But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task,*
- <sup>17</sup>*until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
then I perceived their end.*
- <sup>18</sup>*Truly you set them in slippery places;  
you make them fall to ruin.*
- <sup>19</sup>*How they are destroyed in a moment,  
swept away utterly by terrors!*

<sup>20</sup>*They are like a dream when one awakes;  
on awaking you despise their phantoms.*

<sup>21</sup>*When my soul was embittered,  
when I was pricked in heart,  
<sup>22</sup>I was stupid and ignorant;  
I was like a brute beast towards you.  
<sup>23</sup>Nevertheless I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
<sup>24</sup>You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterwards you will receive me with honour.  
<sup>25</sup>Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.  
<sup>26</sup>My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.*

<sup>27</sup>*Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;  
you put an end to those who are false to you.  
<sup>28</sup>But for me it is good to be near God;  
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,  
to tell of all your works.*

In the previous chapter we considered Psalm 30 because of its strong emphasis on individual experience. In this chapter I move to Psalm 73, which was covered with the same group of respondents, to explore spiritual experience from a different angle. The choice of the psalm was determined by my assumption that the psalmist's initial doubt about the justice of God in allowing 'the wicked' to prosper, is analogous to the recognition by many GenXers that moral issues are often ambiguous (Beaudoin: 121-142). My purpose in this chapter is to see whether the psalmist's resolution of his uncertainty helps or hinders the Psalm Journey audience in their quest for meaning and purpose in life in a morally ambiguous world. Before moving into the main topic of the chapter, I should report that I was persuaded by Wendland's emphasis on stylistic criteria as an indicator of communicative purpose, to place on the website an explanatory note on a feature of the psalm's structure which is not clear in the NRSV translation. This note contains an outline of the psalm by J. Clinton McCann which is based on the three occurrences of the Hebrew particle 'ak as the initial word in verses 1, 13 and 18 (McCann 1987 in McCann 1996: 968). McCann's analysis summarises the psalm's theme in terms of three stages: the problem (vv 1-12), the turning point (vv 13-17) and the solution (vv 18-28).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The website also published an outline of Psalm 22 which was covered in the first Psalm Journey.

This chapter follows the pattern set by the previous four. I will begin by exploring the interaction between respondents and text with a view to ascertaining the degree of resonance or dissonance achieved in the conversation. Next, in section 2, I will re-examine the data in order to ascertain whether it supports Walter Brueggemann's thesis that the text exhibits moves in the psalmist's experience that carry him out of disorientation into new orientation and whether it points to respondents being similarly moved through their interaction with the psalm. Finally in section 3 I set up a conversation between respondents and Cyril Okorochoa, the author of the commentary on the Psalms in the Africa Bible Commentary published in 2005 for popular use in the African churches. Having mapped out the chapter I now pass to the first section where I review respondents' reactions to the psalm.

*Section 1: Resonance or dissonance?*

**'I don't think this can ever be resolved'** (Kate, D2)

Kingman Brewster, a former President of Yale (1963-77), is reported as once saying in jest: 'If I take refuge in ambiguity, I assure you that it's quite conscious'.<sup>2</sup> My respondents are conscious of ambiguity in ethics, economics and war, but they seem strangely reluctant to find refuge there. Kate, for example, is more resigned to ambiguity than reconciled to it. Like many GenXers, she is sceptical of attempts to explain moral ambiguities by postulating solutions that remain in the future: 'I don't think this can ever be resolved' she writes of the psalmist's dilemma (D2). In addition, she thinks the ethical issues raised by the 'prosperity of the wicked' are more complicated than the psalm suggests. 'I wonder,' she writes, 'whether it is just to punish those people by envying and disliking them and avoiding them – if we didn't punish the wicked, would God punish them?' (D5). She then ponders the answer to her own question:

In the Psalm it says he [God] would put an end to them – if their crime is only arrogance, false speaking of God and pride – is that really a major crime, or is it worth being forgiven? And again, is it true that love and trust in God only works because of the threatening of punishment by God himself? Is that really necessary? Or am I just getting it wrong?' (D5).

Kate appears here to under-recognise the malevolence of the wicked by ignoring that they are also characterised by violence, malice and oppression (vv. 6-8). But when she goes on in the same entry to ask 'Who are the wicked today?' she recognises a criminal as well as a moral dimension. For her, the contemporary wicked are 'big company bosses who exploit

<sup>2</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 Oct. 1963.

their employees; [they] are immoral because they're egotistical and devious, but I suppose most of them aren't violent'. She suggests that 'soldiers who kill others' may also fall into this category. However, moral values are often complicated: 'What about street gangs,' she asks, 'who fight against each other – not for a higher moral value, but because they've never had a fair chance in life. Will they be punished by God, or will they be saved?' (D5).

From her stance near the opposite end of the religious spectrum, Elsie resonates with the psalmist's interpretation of the ambiguity that is confronting him. While initially she thinks that in verses 4-14 the 'psalmist really lets his envy hang out' (D1), two days later she records that verses 16-17 were 'really jumping out' at her, and goes on to say why: 'I think that in this confusing, relativistic world, it is comforting to find church as a place where answers are given and found. I like it when churches say biblical things that are a bit hard to swallow (like vv 18-20).' In her view '[P]eople want to hear truths and absolutes – but hardly anyone will speak such things because postmodernism, or whatever it is, says that's not what people want to hear – even if they really do deep down' (D3). In her final meditation Elsie wonders whether the psalmist's animosity to the wicked is that their prosperity is achieved 'at the expense of so many other lives' (D4).<sup>3</sup>

Edith's appreciation of Psalm 73 is more ambivalent than Elsie's, but less so than Kate's. From the beginning Edith is very enthusiastic about this psalm: 'This really is one of those brilliant psalms that immediately resonates with me'. The basis of the resonance is the psalm's universal theme: 'I find it hard to imagine someone who has never felt that everyone around them flouts the rules and has no respect for others, yet they come out on top. 'Here I am Lord, trying to do what's right, and never get ahead' (D1). Yet, while she concurs with the sentiment of verses 21-24 that 'bitterness will get you nowhere', she confesses that 'so often when I feel like things are going so well, despite my efforts to the contrary, I'm actually worrying about the wrong things' (D1). The psalm points Edith to a resolution of her dilemma: 'What I receive from this psalm is the assurance that if I am being true (to God or to myself) then things will work out as they ought to.' On the strength of this assurance she concludes her first meditation thus: 'Constantly fretting about the worthiness of others achieves nothing – if they are acting untruthfully and with malice then it will be found out. It is not your place to dismiss others' (D1).

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<sup>3</sup> In her follow-up interview, Elsie acknowledges that the Psalm Journey experience has persuaded her that resolution is not always apparent (I-8: 7).

Yet for Edith the dilemma remains. Four days later she tells us she is often tempted by ‘the desire not to care’ (which she considers an attribute of ‘the wicked’) (D5). Perhaps this unresolved dilemma lies at the root of her difficulty in meditating on this psalm, a difficulty to which she returns in her final entry for the week:

I like the psalm and I am moved by it, but the meditation isn’t working so well. I’m certainly responsive to the idea of this project, but maybe the application is not for me. I often wonder whether that sums up my Christianity: I like the idea, it just doesn’t always work for me as an individual. I enjoy Church, in fact I get a lot out of it spiritually, but I think my meditation with God is much more abstract and spontaneous, not a textual and repetitive thing.

Edith traces her latent antagonism towards daily devotions to the fact that as a teenager she had rebelled against their imposition. But despite this self-confessed bias, she tells us: ‘I found the group meeting last week remarkably enlightening. My faith is a personal thing, but I seem to only be able to express it in communion with others. The upright is the community’ (D6).

Saul is more wary of identifying today’s wicked than Edith. He tells the group that he finds the reference to a dream (in v 20) helpful: ‘The idea of that dream ignores the common reality of trying to separate foes into my kids and yours’ (L: 7). Surprisingly after his largely negative experience of Psalm 30, Saul eulogises Psalm 73, which he began reading on a flight from Edinburgh to Paris (it was ‘peaceful up there above the clouds’ (D1)). ‘Now this is a Psalm!’ he writes in his first entry. ‘Sure, my knowledge was pretty limited to begin with, but in comparison to last week, this is a Psalm that has some art and inspiration in it.’ He goes on: ‘My immediate impression was one of sympathy. Relation. Empathy. I could understand the speaker and did not at any point feel alienated by him’ (D1).

However, in the same entry he writes: ‘Still, I find no spiritual effect from participating in these readings.’ Such negative feelings are reinforced in a later enigmatic entry: ‘Got busted on Metro in France yesterday. Hoped to be able to extract something to comfort me in the Psalm, but it only made me feel the arrogant guilty customer. Probably because I am wicked’ (D4). Saul may be more sympathetic than the previous week, but he is no less droll. The day after this abortive attempt to find comfort in the text, Saul’s journal entry reveals empathy, but hardly excitement:

I am still unsure what ways this psalm even has the potential to speak to my spirit. I do identify, perhaps spiritually, with the speaker. Is that enough? I feel no new

connection to the greater good, or God, or an aversion to wickedness or lack of drive to succeed financially, be proud, etc.

I am surprised that these respondents appear so reluctant to welcome ambiguity. This reluctance raises questions in light of the positive value put on ambiguity in the pilot. Is this response a tacit acknowledgement by respondents that they are not altogether typical of their generation? Or, is Elsie right in suspecting that behind the relativism of postmodernism there exists a covert longing for greater certainty? (cf Lyon: 80; 103).<sup>4</sup>

**‘Tribulations are a blessing’** (Flora, D2)

The doctrine of divine Providence (which some claim has been transmuted into the modern idea of Progress under the influence of secularisation) explains Flora’s resistance to the psalmist’s sense of disarray.<sup>5</sup> She views the psalmist’s tribulations as a divine test. As with the previous psalm, most of Flora’s readings of Psalm 73 are ‘negotiated’ in terms of Baha’i beliefs. While meditating on verse 13 (‘All in vain I have kept my heart clean...’), she writes: ‘At times such thoughts come easily into one’s mind: why is God putting all these trials and problems on me, whereas “bad” people are not getting tested at all?’ (D2). However, she thinks that in moments of understanding one comes to realise that these tribulations are a blessing because they test good people. In reality, the wicked are not exempt from divine testing: ‘the “bad” people’s test is their own comfort. This is a very difficult test because it is not unpleasant and one does not have the same ardent desire to overcome it, and most of the time, one does not even realise that it is a test’. Like Elsie, Flora can identify with the psalmist’s new perspective in verses 15-20:

I can relate to the ‘change in perspective/understanding’ of the author, as this has happened to me, that I have found one day that my perspective on the world has completely changed and either it makes one understand better (as in the psalm) or it makes one more confused. In this case it was a comfort and the new perspective made the author stronger because he could understand, or he thought he now understood the reason behind the bad things which were happening and saw that there was justice in the seeming injustice (D3).

Although his interpretation is less rigid, Ashok has some sympathy with Flora’s approach to the psalm. He thinks ‘the concept of the wicked ... has been portrayed pretty well’ (D1). ‘Even in context of current times’, he goes on, ‘I can relate to some of the metaphors being

<sup>4</sup> In Lyon (80; 120) Susan Hekman is quoted as describing postmodernity as Janus-faced.

<sup>5</sup> For the relationship between Providence and Progress, see Lyon: 6-24.

used by the psalmist to describe [the] “wicked” (D1). He reckons that the material prosperity of the wicked is essentially superficial. ‘I have seen many poor people living simple lives more happy than I have ever been’ (D2), he writes.

Ashok’s ‘preferred’ readings resonate with the psalmist’s resolution of the ambiguity confronting him in his social milieu. But the reasons for this resonance differ from Flora’s; while she found resolution in the text by rationalising the economic inequality confronting the psalmist, Ashok considers a rational approach to be not enough: ‘While reading the part where the psalmist gains realisation – I felt pretty much one with his thoughts at least with the core of it – one needs more than logic to find personal meaning, peace and the balance in life between materialism and spirituality’ (D3). In this light, self-understanding becomes his priority:

Although I would say the fate of the wicked seems to me a bit too idealistic. In the current world there is seldom such retributions. But to me the plight of the wicked whether it happens or not is not the issue, but whether I gain insight into myself is more important (D3).

Like Kate, he sees the shadow of the wicked reflected in today’s commercial world, and extends the contextualisation of the psalm to family breakdown: ‘We cheat and lie in the corporate sector and call it business. There is disintegration of family and values and we call it independence or individuality; there is oppression, killing and genocides and we call it war for the good’ (D1).

If Ashok is ambiguous in his view of the plight of the wicked, Joan is sceptical about their bravado: ‘The psalm makes me think about a movie I saw recently about prison inmates’. She explains: ‘In such an environment it is important to put up a tough image of security and pretending to be cool about things, yet underneath the surface there are many regrets and worries’ (D1). Joan – who submitted her journal for this psalm before withdrawing from the project – is also a little dubious about the poet’s motives: ‘I think the mood of the psalm bears tendencies of uncertainty. It seems like the poet is constantly seeking some sort of reassurance for his choices and behaviour.’

In summary, all respondents find some resolution of the moral ambiguities raised by the pride and cruelty of many who wield power in human society, but all seem to do so in differing degrees. Elsie and Flora gain a greater degree of resolution than the others, with Sam probably attaining the lowest level, and Ashok, Edith, Kate and Joan coming

somewhere in the middle. Edith is the most reflexive in interacting with the text on moral ambiguity, while Sam finds interacting with the group more helpful than meditating on the text. The reaction of respondents raises questions about both attractiveness of ambiguity and the unpopularity of Providence. While Elsie and Edith acknowledge the reality of ambiguity, they seem reluctant to take refuge in it. Flora and Ashok are both attracted to some concept of divine Providence. While belief in Providence accentuates the ambiguity (Eichrodt: 17-41), might it provide a key to living with it?<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to interpret the data in greater depth, I now move on to review it in the light of Walter Brueggemann's well-known paradigm of psalmic spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

### *Section 2: From disorientation to reorientation?*

Walter Brueggemann, who is one of today's most prolific advocates for the popular rediscovery of the Psalms in late modernity, utilises a paradigm of 'orientation – disorientation – new orientation' as an organisational principle for understanding psalmic spirituality and facilitating its interface with 'the flow of our common life' today (Brueggemann 1984: 9-10). Brueggemann warns against viewing his paradigm as a straitjacket; rather, it is a heuristic device for helping the Psalms to 'function as voices of faith in the actual life of the believing community'. In his commentary (1984) – which divides the fifty-nine psalms covered into three categories: Psalms of Orientation, of Disorientation and of New Orientation – Brueggemann explains that he regards Psalm 73 as 'the last word on disorientation, even as it utters the first word of new orientation' (115). Disorientation is 'the loss of control of our lives' and 'the necessary precondition of new life (new orientation)' (11). The psalms of disorientation 'issue a mighty protest' against the denial by today's dominant consumerist culture of this loss of control, and call us to come out of denial, to enter the darkness and discover the One who promises to be in the darkness with us and marvellously give us new life (12).

Brueggemann's description of human disorientation resonates to a considerable extent with Beaudoin's explication of GenX ambiguity in terms of fragmented lives. 'For Xers, both our *experience* and our *imagination* of ourselves,' Beaudoin writes, 'are characterised more by

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<sup>6</sup> Eichrodt argues that it is the doctrine of Providence that makes theodicy such a key issue. I return to the problem of theodicy in the chapter 9.

<sup>7</sup> In evaluating respondents' interaction with Psalm 55 in the first Psalm Journey I used Brueggemann's approach to the psalms of vengeance as a heuristic device (see chapter 5). In this chapter I turn again to Brueggemann because 'his search for a new shape for Old Testament theology' in today's postmodern setting is widely acknowledged (See Linafelt and Beal).

incoherence than coherence, more by fragmentation than unity' (137). He argues that this lived out fragmentation is taken as evidence by Xers that they cannot be people of faith because they 'have too seldom heard from religious elders and institutions about the role of doubt and uncertainty in the life of faith' (141-142). In effect, Brueggemann's case for the Psalms is that by offering faith in the midst of ambiguity and doubt these ancient poems can fulfil the role that Beaudoin complains religious leaders are neglecting. And the value of Psalm 73 in this dialogue is that 'The very process of the psalm itself shows the moves made in faith, into, through, and out of disorientation, into new orientation, which is marked by joyous trust' (Brueggemann 1984: 115). More specifically, 'the psalm narrates two break points. The first is "surely" (v 1) ['truly', NRSV] and "but I" (v 2) ['But as for me', NRSV] which breaks with the premise of verse 1. The second is "surely" (v 18) ['Truly', NRSV] and the "but I" (v 23) ['Nevertheless', NRSV], which breaks with the destructive fascination' (119). The resonance between Brueggemann and Beaudoin encourages me to address two questions in this second look at the data. First, Does the 'disorientation' of the psalmist resonate with the self-identified 'ambiguity' of respondents (cf. chapter 3)? And, second, Do the respondents show signs of wanting to replicate the 'moves' of the psalmist that brought him into new orientation? I now go on to explore these questions in turn.

### **Disorientation?**

From Brueggemann's exposition of the psalm it is possible to discern three inter-related factors that cause the psalmist's disorientation. First, 'the personal experience of the speaker does not mesh with the claims of the tradition' (117). Second, the psalmist experiences keenly the tension between joining some 'genuinely autonomous people who look after themselves' (117) and being 'a member of the community who must act responsibly toward that community' (118). And, third, in the poet's eyes 'the "wicked" begin to look like a viable alternative way to live which makes the Israelite tradition seem terribly provincial and not "with it"' (118).<sup>8</sup> The question to be explored is: Do the respondents reflect any or all of these factors that cause disorientation? A straightforward way to answer the question is to review how each respondent interacts with the psalm in the light of each of these factors.

### *Experience versus tradition*

Kate is very aware that her experience of the world raises serious questions about the dominant western religious tradition. 'How can we believe in a benevolent God if the world

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<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann suggests that in verses 12 the label 'wicked' is 'simply a social identification' (118) rather a term of condemnation. The Israelite tradition commended living uprightly and caring for neighbours.

is in such a bad state?’ she asks (D2). Joan is conscious of another facet of this dilemma: ‘Is there much point to have clean hands,’ she asks, ‘if you are in a situation where you are not happy?’ (D4). Theodicy does not raise such acute questions for Elsie, but listening to the psalm being read on CD deepens her sympathy for the psalmist: ‘It felt very emotional to listen to. I could really sense the anguish in the first part and the peace in the second part of the psalm’ (D5).<sup>9</sup> It is not only those brought up within the western tradition who feel the tension between experience and tradition. Coming from the Orient, Ashok finds that the psalmist’s dilemma raises echoes in his experience: ‘I’d say the most important thing the psalms as a whole talked to me about was how you can keep your faith or belief in times of adversity’ (I3). Surprisingly in the light of his Jewish upbringing, Saul gives no indication that theodicy is problematic; perhaps as a liberal Jew he feels it is simply a non-issue. It also seems to be a non-issue for Flora because she reflects her Baha’i tradition’s view of adversity as a divine test: ‘Surely in moments of understanding,’ she writes, ‘one realises that tribulations are a blessing; because they are so unpleasant one has the ardent desire to surmount them’ (D2). Of all the respondents, Edith seems most aware of strains between experience and tradition. Reflecting on her experience of the world, she asks: ‘Is God really that interested? Are we actually dealing with a God who intervenes into individual lives?’ (D2). She is tempted, not by the prosperity of unbelievers, but by their liberty to be freethinkers. ‘Other people (that elusive fictional group),’ she writes, ‘probably have very similar anxieties and moral standards; it just seems to me at times that they live their lives without the yoke of a system of belief’ (D5). At the same time meditating on the psalmic texts reawakens Edith’s interest in the tradition. In her interview she relates that ‘The weeks I was doing the meditation... I was absolutely paying attention and listening to sermons and things like that.’ However, losing the routine of daily meditation led to the weakening of interest, for she goes on: ‘And now, not having that on a day to day basis has switched me off into my own thoughts and I find myself drifting away’ (I-11: 4). Edith’s admission that her own thoughts somehow compete with the tradition, leads naturally to a consideration of individual autonomy and its troubled relationship with community, which constitute the second factor contributing to the psalmist’s disorientation.

#### *Autonomy versus community*

All respondents struggle to balance the rival demands of autonomy and community. It is not that some are autonomous and others communal, but that most give evidence of feeling they want to be both, and the disorientation arises when they find it difficult to reconcile the

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<sup>9</sup> I consider respondents’ attitude to theodicy in chapter 9.

competing claims upon their lives. Edith is an example of someone exhibiting clear signs of this tension. Although actively involved in both the church and the university community, she loves her own privacy. The metaphor of ‘refuge’ in verse 28 prompts her to think of her room: ‘It really is the centre of the world here in Edinburgh.... I suppose this does represent the sanctuary [cf. v 17] because within my room I can distance myself from my perceptions of others’ (D4). Even church for her is primarily an individual experience: ‘As for church itself, I do find it a sanctuary. I don’t run away to church; I find it easy to be quiet there (I also get to sing – rather like my room, really) and that helps me put things in perspective’ (D4). At the same time Edith is very aware of the tension between the obligation at the heart of her Christian tradition to care for neighbour, and the temptation to prioritise personal interests and ambitions. ‘I worry so much about doing right by others... that sometimes it would be nice not to care’ (D5). Part of the tension evident in Edith between autonomy and community arises from Edith’s disappointment with the church as her community.

If I say ‘I’m a Christian’ that automatically implies a conservative stance to most people my age. So you end up going round saying ‘Well, I kind of go to church some of the time, but you know...’ We make these excuses and we shouldn’t have to be making these excuses. So in fact the church is letting us down. Because you’re never afraid to discuss your faith with people, but you are afraid of aligning yourself with the institution (I-11: 7-8).

Edith is deeply saddened by this failure of the church: ‘I sort of wish there was a more pragmatic way you could be a Christian at the moment. That doesn’t seem possible because of the polarisation of faith. Because there are so many people my age who really do want to express faith, but there’s no place to go’ (I-11: 6).<sup>10</sup> Edith finds the Psalm Journey group a more conducive environment in which to resolve the tensions of autonomy and community: ‘Just the act of meditating by myself wasn’t as fulfilling as meditating upon a text with other people’ (I-11: 8). One of the reasons Edith finds the group attractive is that the meditation and the informal discussion that follow it are open rather than closed: ‘[Y]ou can talk about Scripture in such a meaningful fashion without having to defend your stance. That was the nice thing. There was no “I might be making the wrong answer” or “I’m deliberately going to try and give the wrong answer to see what reaction I get” which is really how I used to look at these things at sixteen or seventeen’ (I-11: 9).<sup>11</sup> In a very real sense the group became the respondents’ community for the period of the project. Before considering to

<sup>10</sup> Edith does not appear to consider that psalmic meditation might help to renew the church. Perhaps she considers the church to be beyond change. In contrast, Luke, following the Psalm Journey has become very interested in the ‘emerging churches’. For more on this new ecclesial phenomenon, see Gibbs and Bolger; Neilson; and Ward 2005.

<sup>11</sup> I explore in chapter 10 the openness of the group’s dynamic.

what extent the gelling of the group contributes to dispelling a sense of disorientation I examine whether the third facet of disorientation is reflected in the respondents' interaction with the text.

*Wicked or upright?*

Another reason for the psalmist's disorientation is that he feels tempted to abandon 'the upright' and join the ranks of 'the wicked' (Brueggemann: 117-118). This dilemma fills the psalmist with doubt and anguish. As we have seen, the respondents for the most part identify 'the wicked' with today's big business which they perceive as characterised by exploitation and greed. They are less clear on who are the 'upright' in today's world, but the general assumption is that today they are tolerant of the views of others and concerned for the world's poor and marginalised. Respondents appear not to be disoriented by a desire to become aspiring millionaires. Again, Edith is a good example: 'I don't really think I am tempted by "wickedness" caused by jealousy of material possessions,' she writes. 'I expect not to have to think about where my money is coming from and to be able to get things as I see fit, but I do not desire great riches. I can daydream about wealth heaped upon me, but it's certainly not a defining aspiration' (D5).<sup>12</sup> Ashok is also uninterested in acquiring great wealth; he tells us that some time previously he had left the service of a big corporate company in order 'to find a more balanced approach to life' (D2). In his opinion, wickedness, while 'a very individual thing in the current world,' ought to be seen in its totality as 'loss of humanity' (D1).

If the respondents are not disoriented by the dazzling success of the rich acquired on the backs of the world's poor, they do demonstrate a measure of unease at their connivance in what they acknowledge to be unjust structures. While Edith is deeply offended by 'big business destroying the third world, but dressing it up as aid and global awareness,' she recognises that by drinking coffee in Starbucks she is supporting unfair trade (D5). Only Saul identifies himself as wicked (D4), a confession that may be facetious, but his acknowledgement at the end of the week's meditation that he felt no new 'aversion to wickedness or lack of drive to succeed financially, be proud, etc.' (D5) probably ought to be taken at its face value. Although Flora's readings on the whole tend to be idiosyncratic, on this issue she is in the group mainstream: 'For me the upright would be those who dedicate

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<sup>12</sup> Joan thinks verse 16 – 'But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task' – is applicable to modern society where 'It seems like there is little reward to act as a morally good citizen' (D3).

their deeds to the service of humanity, and the wicked would be those who concentrate their efforts on their own selfish desires' (D5).

The respondent evidence of the three features of the psalmist's disorientation may be summarised as follows. Respondents reflect to some extent the psalmist's bewilderment caused by lived tensions between experience and tradition and between anonymity and community. But the reflection of the psalmist's disorientation brought about by the temptation to change sides is less sharply defined. This disorientation falls short of the 'loss of control' attributed to it by Brueggemann (1984: 11-12), although the retention of a degree of control may be because the consumerist denial identified by Brueggemann is operational among the respondents ('we still go to Starbucks'), reducing the sense of disorientation. Respondents reveal a measure of ambiguity about their implicit acquiescence in unjust commercial structures. Having seen that respondents do resonate with the psalm's moves into disorientation, my next step is to discover whether a similar resonance exists with the psalm's moves out of disorientation into new orientation.

### **New orientation?**

Because the resolution of the psalm takes place in worship ('I went into the sanctuary of God,' v 17) one would expect those respondents who are actively religious to find most resonance with it. This is in fact what we find. Both Elsie and Edith acquiesce very readily (although differently) with the new orientation, and Flora negotiates a parallel version of resolution contextualised in Baha'i. The questions that arise are: Does the text encourage this acquiescence? Do the other respondents who are not actively religious find any new orientation? Or, do they move towards orientation? These questions I now address.

Elsie thinks the key to resolution is to recognise that understanding is more than knowledge and perception is greater than seeing. 'The psalmist recognizes that there is something deeper than empiricism and measurability' by noting the emotional and spiritual aspects of seemingly straightforward things. 'I think it's easy,' she goes on, 'to get caught up in knowing instead of understanding, and seeing rather than perceiving, unless you take time, not only for reflection and engagement with tough things, but also [make] time for centering and grounding – like what happened when the psalmist went into the sanctuary of God'. (D6). In other words, Elsie is claiming that worship provides an Archimedian point that makes orientation possible, although she seems to be speaking from the viewpoint of an alert and sympathetic observer. Edith, on the other hand, speaks very much as a participant; she

tells us how she finds new orientation in church (D4). She also shares her experience of listening alone to the contemporary metrical version on the CD which she and Elsie had sung and recorded for use by the group: ‘From the first line, “Surely the God is good to Israel” you are lulled into the overall feel of the psalm, right through until “So full of arrogance and foolishness”.<sup>13</sup> You do rather pass over the numerous verses. However, the music change makes it all worthwhile: all the worries and concerns are washed away with the wonderful reality that we are always with the Lord’ (D3). Flora’s perception that ‘the author is trying to say that ... those who are plagued with tribulations are actually those who become more pure in heart and upright because the tests and tribulations have made them grow spiritually’ (D1). Flora is making the psalmist an outsider to his own poem; surely this reading should be classed as ‘oppositional’ to the ideology of the text. Nevertheless, for Flora, her reading is a resolution (or new orientation) of the moral ambiguity that provides the psalm with its genesis. If Flora, along with Elsie and Edith, is acquiescing with the new orientation expressed in the second part of the psalm, how do the other respondents react?

While the psalmist resolves the ambiguity by finding new perspective in ‘the sanctuary of God’ (v 17), Joan thinks that it is society, ‘as much as God’ that produces ‘an underlying code of ethics,’ for ‘there is something in most people stopping them from behaving in “wicked” ways’ (D3). Saul does not comment on the moral disorientation occasioned by the success of the wicked, but Kate asks: ‘How can we believe in a benevolent God if the world is in such a bad state?’ (D2). But she fails to resonate with the way in which the psalmist resolves this ambiguity by affirming his belief in a divine judgment (vv 15-20):

I wonder whether it is just to punish people by envying and disliking them and avoiding them – if we didn’t punish the wicked, would God punish them? In the psalm it says he would put an end to them – is that really a major crime or is it worth being forgiven? (D5)

Kate’s scepticism is rooted in two convictions, one biological and the other socio-economic. First, she believes that, for genetic reasons, she cannot be self-fulfilled without being self-centred: ‘I don’t believe in selflessness,’ she writes. ‘I think all our actions are egotistically motivated, because it is in our nature and all nature whatsoever to guarantee our survival until we produce offspring, from which point on it is possible and sensible to sacrifice

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<sup>13</sup> The sung psalm on the CD is a duet by Edith and Elsie. The quotations in Edith’s journal entry are taken from *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Version of the Book of Psalms*, Edinburgh, 2003. Therefore they differ slightly from the ‘prose’ translation of the NRSV. In making the *a capella* recording Edith and Elsie changed tune at verse 17 to communicate the new mood of the psalmist from that point on.

yourself for them to make sure your genes survive'.<sup>14</sup> Second, she believes it is impossible to escape from the constrictions of the capitalist system: '[I]t is not possible to be outside the system, and whenever you try to be, you just re-establish the system' (D4).

Ashok agrees with Kate that the socio-economics are inherently ambiguous, for 'all prosperity is essentially in evil hands and the good get nothing' (D2). But, unlike Kate, he wants to resolve the ambiguity with religious faith: 'It is a fact that you are tempted to lose your principles and convictions on your way and then as you shed one after the other of your values, you rationalise it to yourself. But that's where faith and discipline help you out' (D3).

Although Ashok struggles to resolve the ambiguity by 'faith', the focus of his faith seems to be on the self.<sup>15</sup> For him, 'spirituality is more of finding your own self, faith and beliefs than anything else' (D5). He speaks in his interview of discovering that God can be questioned, but it is not clear to what extent he becomes aware of what Brueggemann (1984:178, n10) describes as 'the theological claim of the text.' 'The God addressed here [in the Book of Psalms]', writes Brueggemann, 'is not the self writ large'. However, one ought not rush to judge any theological shortfall in the experience of people coming to the Psalms from a 'subjective-life' perspective, because Ashok's exploration of Christianity subsequent to the Psalm Journey confirms the possibility, which was noted in chapter 4, of some such people moving slowly towards a 'life-as' mode of spirituality.

In summary the 'moves' of the psalmist into new orientation find some replication in the experience of Elsie, Edith, Flora and Ashok. Saul is less concerned about the moral ambiguity that perplexes the psalmist than the other respondents, so the need for resolution does not preoccupy him. It does, however, concern Kate, but her belief in a form of biological and economic determinism puts resolution beyond her reach.

Reviewing this second section of the chapter, it has become clear that the 'moves' of the psalm into disorientation resonate with most respondents' awareness of the moral ambiguity they face in making daily choices between experience and tradition, anonymity and community, and between perceptions of good and evil. The evidence for the 'moves' of the psalm into new orientation inspiring respondents to find resolution is less clear. Elsie, Edith

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<sup>14</sup> This leads Kate to conclude that 'even if we do good in an apparently selfless way, we only do so because our Christian or cultural values make us feel good about doing good' (D3).

<sup>15</sup> In his interview Ashok uses 'faith' and 'God' as synonyms.

and Flora all testify that the psalm confirms and enhances the orientation they already experience through their religious belief. Kate, in contrast, denies that new orientation is possible, while Saul finds sympathy for, but not resonance with, the dilemma addressed by the psalm. It is Ashok, who in one sense started farther from the Psalms than the others, who reveals the greatest degree of movement towards a new orientation. In chapter 10, where I review comprehensively the audience interaction with all six psalms, I seek to evaluate on a broader canvas the potential of the psalms to move respondents towards resolution. Following precedent set by the previous chapters in Part II of the thesis, I conclude this chapter by setting up a dialogue between respondents and a contemporary commentary.

### *Section 3: Meditation and Commentary*

In the case of Psalm 73 I am breaking the pattern followed with the other psalms of selecting commentators from the ranks of western academia. On this occasion I draw upon one of the exegetical resources produced by the African churches to encourage popular use of the Scriptures. The *Africa Bible Commentary*, edited by Tokunbo Adeyemo, covers all 66 books of the Hebrew-Christian canon, with a total of 69 contributors. The commentator on the Psalms is Cyril C. Okorocho, the Presiding Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri in Nigeria, who holds a PhD degree in Theology and Social Anthropology from the University of Aberdeen. Being a single volume covering the whole Bible and designed for popular use, the commentaries on individual chapters inevitably are much briefer and less technical than the other commentaries I have utilised in this study so far. On the other hand, the Africa commentary gives me an opportunity to conduct a conversation between my respondents and the leaders of the Christian church in a region of the world where it is characterised by rapid growth and exuberant worship.

While many commentators assign to Psalm 73 a title akin to 'The Justice of God' (HP: 632), Okorocho opts for 'The Mystery of Suffering', which may suggest that this psalm may be a source of strength to the Nigerian church during the frequent religious riots in which many of its people suffer.<sup>16</sup> Okorocho identifies the main theme of the psalm as faith, sub-dividing it as follows: Faith and Doubt (vv 1-2); The Tests of Faith (vv 3-15); How Faith Wins Through (vv 15-26); and Renewed Faith (vv 27-28). This sub-division of the psalm, while not inappropriate in itself, may sound too much like church for the Psalm Journey audience, so I

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<sup>16</sup> See 'Nigerian religious riots continue', 24/02/06. <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4749534>, downloaded 14/09/07.

am structuring the agenda for the conversation between respondents and commentator around four inter-related themes from the body of the commentary which are of more interest to my respondents. These are: pleasure, prosperity, purity and power.

### **Pleasure**

One of the lessons the psalm teaches, Okorocho suggests, is that God's goodness to us ought not to be measured in terms of sentient pleasures. The psalmist's temptation to be jealous of the wicked's trouble free life (v 3) 'will always be the difficulty of those who make the mistake of thinking of God's goodness only in terms of pleasurable experiences' (679). On the contrary, God's goodness can bring trouble and even pain, as it did for the psalmist while 'he endured God's discipline in his life (73:14)' (679). But through that pain the psalmist 'turned his thoughts back to to God' and 'found peace' and the conviction that 'There was no one like the Lord among the spiritual beings in heaven, and there was no one on earth to be desired more than him (73:25)' (680).

Pleasure as such does not feature highly in the respondents' interaction with the text of this psalm, which is surprising given the high value they place on having a good time (chapter 3). If they are tempted by hedonism, this does not surface in the journals or interviews. Rather, respondents tend to concur with the commentator's view that adopting the lifestyle of the wicked seldom brings pleasure. Ashok tells us that he has seen many poor people living simple lives enjoying great happiness (D2). While it is not clear how seriously Saul's remark about being 'busted' on the Paris metro should be taken, at its face value it suggests that being wicked causes unhappiness (D4). Both Elsie (D3) and Edith (D4) find comfort (and presumably also some pleasure) in going to church. Pleasure is important for Joan who thinks there is not much point in having clean hands (cf v 13) if you are unhappy (D4).

### **Prosperity**

The *Africa Bible Commentary* concurs with the generally accepted understanding of 'the wicked' as those who 'had wealth, health and strength and faced no pain in life.... [T]hey wore their pride as if it were a necklace and their violence or aggression was as obvious as the clothes they wore' (679). Okorocho interprets the psalmist's temporary fascination by the wicked as a warning against the wealth and health gospel that is common in large sections of African Christianity: 'It is a dangerous error,' he writes, 'to hold to a prosperity

theology that expects material blessings in direct proportion to good conduct or religious activities such as giving or church attendance' (679).<sup>17</sup>

Apart from Saul, who may be hinting at the attractions of wealth when he tells us that meditating on the psalm has not made him feel any greater aversion to strive for financial success (D5), most respondents join the commentator in questioning the value of great riches. Edith tells us: 'I don't really think I am tempted by "wickedness" caused by jealousy of material possessions' (D5), and Ashok has left big business in order to find a more balanced approach to life (D2). Kate regards the executives of large corporations as immoral (D5), and Joan questions whether material wealth indicates happiness (D1).

### **Purity**

The commentary makes clear that that being 'upright' (v 1) is more than external conformity to the Torah; it is being 'pure in heart' (v 1). For this reason Okorocho brings out repeatedly how the psalmist faces 'a temptation to his spirit', confronts 'a problem for his thinking' and meets 'a challenge to his feelings' (679). In contrast, he describes the wicked in contemporary language as 'fast guys [and] go-getters' who have no regard for God or concern for others (679).

On the whole respondents say little explicitly about purity of heart. None claim to be a paragon of virtue, but all appear to dislike hypocrisy and to respect people who are sincere. Most express a care for neighbour. Edith fights the temptation not to care for others (D5). Joan admits that 'It can be very tempting to let go of all responsibility and act immorally', and envisages that 'under some circumstances it might be necessary to let go and not follow mainstream values' (D4). Flora, on the other hand, affirms purity of heart, but believes that it is attained under the discipline of tests and tribulations (D1).

### **Power**

Okorocho highlights the differing perspectives of the wicked and the psalmist regarding the nature of power. The wicked enjoy great socio-economic power: 'They thought they could do whatever they wanted without God doing anything to stop them (73:11). Their credo was "money is power", and they believed that their wealth would always protect them. And they

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<sup>17</sup> For information on the 'prosperity gospel' in Africa, see the report in Anglican Communion News Service, 15/08/06, 'African Institute for Contemporary Mission and Research', ([www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/41/50/acns4175.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/41/50/acns4175.cfm), downloaded 24/09/07; 'The Prosperity Gospel in Africa', [www.nakedreligion.com/?p=231](http://www.nakedreligion.com/?p=231).

seemed to get away with things. No one stopped them; they were even popular' (679). The psalmist, on the other hand, came to see that 'real power belongs to God' and to realise that the wicked 'had no lasting strength (73:19). They were just like a dream that fades away when a person wakes up (73:20). What this affirms is that the psalmist realises that evil cannot endure in the presence of God who is righteous and just. Its triumph is only temporary' (679). The implication is that ultimately the power of evil will be brought down by God.

At this point there is some dissonance between respondents and commentator. Kate thinks the ethical issues surrounding the power of the wicked are not straightforward, and she has problems with the concept of divine punishment which both psalmist and commentator uphold. She wonders how the threat of punishment can evoke love and trust in God (D5). Ashok contends that such punishment seldom happens in the contemporary world (D3). Joan thinks that the psalmist in contemplating God's judgment of the wicked is employing a rhetorical device 'to convince God, or maybe himself, that he is doing the right thing' (D5). Edith seems to regard this judgment as self-inflicted: 'I don't necessarily believe you are damned if you transgress,' she writes. 'But I know that if I cross a certain line I do damage to myself' (D5). Sam and Elsie ignore the subject, while Flora appears to acquiesce in the idea of a future divine judgment.

In summary, in the conversation between respondents and commentator there is a remarkable degree of convergence on the understanding the implications for spirituality of pleasure, prosperity and purity, but more divergence on the nature of ultimate power.

This chapter follows the three-fold pattern previously established. In the first section, after investigating the meditative interplay between respondents and text, I conclude that all respondents are able to resolve to some degree the moral ambiguities emerging from the power conflicts that are common in all levels of society. It is clear that some respondents found resolution easier than did others. In the second section I go back over the data to ascertain whether, in terms of Walter Brueggemann's paradigm, respondents recognise and reflect the 'moves' of the psalmist into and out of moral and spiritual disorientation. Most respondents do in fact discern in varying degrees the psalmist's 'moves' and are able to recognise a measure of disorientation and ambiguity in their own understanding of moral values. However, the extent to which the interaction with the text moved respondents into

new orientation is found to be less clear and will require further investigation in chapter 10. In the third section a virtual dialogue on the text between respondents and Bishop Cyril Okorochoa of Nigeria reveals a measure of consensus on hedonistic pleasure, material prosperity and moral purity, while there are differences of opinion regarding the locus of power in human affairs. I am now ready to move on to chapter 9 to consider the audience-text relationship in the case of the sixth and final psalm, number 74.

**Chapter 9: Psalms and Qualms****PSALM 74**

*A Maskil of Asaph.*

<sup>1</sup>*O God, why do you cast us off for ever?  
Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?*  
<sup>2</sup>*Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago,  
which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.  
Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell.*  
<sup>3</sup>*Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;  
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary.*

<sup>4</sup>*Your foes have roared within your holy place;  
they set up their emblems there.*  
<sup>5</sup>*At the upper entrance they hacked  
the wooden trellis with axes.*  
<sup>6</sup>*And then, with hatchets and hammers,  
they smashed all its carved work.*  
<sup>7</sup>*They set your sanctuary on fire;  
they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name,  
bringing it to the ground.*  
<sup>8</sup>*They said to themselves, 'We will utterly subdue them';  
they burned all the meeting-places of God in the land.*

<sup>9</sup>*We do not see our emblems;  
there is no longer any prophet,  
and there is no one among us who knows how long.*  
<sup>10</sup>*How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?  
Is the enemy to revile your name for ever?*  
<sup>11</sup>*Why do you hold back your hand;  
why do you keep your hand in your bosom?*

<sup>12</sup>*Yet God my King is from of old,  
working salvation in the earth.*  
<sup>13</sup>*You divided the sea by your might;  
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.*  
<sup>14</sup>*You crushed the heads of Leviathan;  
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.*  
<sup>15</sup>*You cut openings for springs and torrents;  
you dried up ever-flowing streams.*  
<sup>16</sup>*Yours is the day, yours also the night;  
you established the luminaries and the sun.*  
<sup>17</sup>*You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;  
you made summer and winter.*

<sup>18</sup>*Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs,  
and an impious people reviles your name.*  
<sup>19</sup>*Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals;  
do not forget the life of your poor for ever.*

<sup>20</sup>*Have regard for your covenant,  
for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence.*  
<sup>21</sup>*Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame;  
let the poor and needy praise your name.*  
<sup>22</sup>*Rise up, O God, plead your cause;  
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.*  
<sup>23</sup>*Do not forget the clamour of your foes,  
the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.*

Psalm 74 is the third and final text meditated upon in the second Psalm Journey, by the group that ruminated on Psalms 30 and 73.<sup>1</sup> It was chosen because I thought its subject – a lament on the destruction of the Jerusalem temple<sup>2</sup> – would be an appropriate theme around which to explore the audience’s suspicion of institutions, for the psalm is an example of ancient Israel’s faith operating without the support of its key institution. Psalm 74 is unique in our collection of six psalms in that it recalls with deep pathos ‘the focal, exemplar case in which Yahweh failed in defense of Yahweh’s own dynasty, temple, city, and people’ (Brueggemann 1997: 321). The poem demonstrates that although the psalmic community was traumatised by the destruction of the temple the community’s faith in Yahweh, nevertheless, survived. In addition, this moving text raises fundamental questions about divine sovereignty in human history which, as we shall see, also deeply exercise my respondents.

The pattern set in the previous five chapters is repeated. The first section of the chapter is composed of a general overview of the data provided by respondents in journals, at the group, and through the follow-up interviews. In the second section I explore how some contemporary Hebrew Bible specialists might respond to questions raised by respondents about the justice of God, and in the third section I set up a ‘conversation’ about the psalm between the respondents and Erich Zenger, an internationally renowned authority on the Psalms and Professor of Old Testament at the University of Münster, Germany.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan missed Ps 74; she dropped out at the end of the second week due to illness.

<sup>2</sup> Three main events may lie behind the composition of Ps 74: the destruction of the temple in 586 BC, the hypothetical pollution of the sanctuary in the reign of Artaxerxes Ochus (359-38 BC), and the desecration of the Holy Place by Antiochus Epiphanes IV in 167 BC (Anderson 538).

*Section 1: Resonance or dissonance?*

As in previous chapters this overview of the data will move from respondent to respondent. On this occasion I begin with Edith.

**‘One burnt church would not destroy my faith’ (Edith, D5)**

French academic, Gilles Kepel in *The Revenge of God*, provides a forceful account of the resurgence of religious belief in the modern world during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and of the violence that this has generated.<sup>3</sup> The period following the publication of Kepel’s book in 1994 has seen religious violence escalate following the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this psalm lamenting the ruthless desecration of the Jerusalem Temple should evoke among respondents serious reflection on instances of contemporary religious violence. Sadly, as Edith says, it is ‘so easy to associate this psalm with things happening today’ (D4). The reference to the temple being set on fire (v 7) sets her thinking of the bombing of churches in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, which she interprets not as attacks on Christianity, but on western capitalism. ‘It’s only because we have messed up our definition of faith’, she writes ‘that other cultures mistake one for the other’ (D5). Verse 7 also reminds Edith of an occasion in her teenage years when someone deliberately drove a car into the door of her church in New Zealand, and of how the congregation’s greater concern for the driver than for the doors made an impression on her. While she views attacks on churches and mosques as not necessarily directed against Christianity or Islam, she thinks ‘an attack on a synagogue is just an attack on a synagogue’ (L: 4) and, despite her dislike for the policies of Sharon’s government in Israel, she considers that ‘one particular faith has been singing this lament for far too long’ (D5).

Edith does not see this lament as a plea for God to crush the enemy. God, she thinks, has that power, but the psalm asks him to rise up and plead his cause (v 22), that is, to turn the hearts of the enemy. But she sees a problem when people sing this lament ‘applying it wholly to themselves, without respect to others’ (D5). And the fact that it is sung over and over again implies ‘that there is no health in us, to coin a liturgical phrase.’ Edith goes on:

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<sup>3</sup> ‘This movement claims to represent a cultural break with the outlook and motivations of modern secularism, which it blames for all the ills of Third-World societies, from social inequality to despotism, and from endemic under-employment to widespread corruption. Many of its members are highly qualified, especially in science, and they aim to detach the most advanced technology – which they intend to master – from the values of secularization which they reject, in order to promote an ethics which submits reason to God’ (Kepel: 8).

As humans, we do not develop. Unfortunately, social conscience is not a natural process of evolution. You are not born conservative or liberal minded – you may be born more intelligent than others, but the way you apply that intelligence is entirely to do with your influences. Therefore, somehow, we just have to teach our children well (to quote Yusuf Islam, aka Cat Stevens) (D6).

While Edith finds Psalm 74 to be immediately relevant, for Kate it turns out to be the most difficult of all three to come to terms with. She quickly identifies that the key issue of the psalm is theodicy: ‘How can you still believe in God taking care of you when he leaves you alone in your darkest hours? When he lets the impious defeat you, without offering you redemption?’ Confronted with a world which is such a dark place for so many innocent people, believing in the existence of God ‘is still a problem for me and my faith’ (D2). The problem with Psalm 74 is its war-like tone. On Day 4 Kate affirms her lack of faith in religiously motivated wars where she thinks religion is used by political and military leaders to manipulate soldiers into thinking they are fighting for their religion when in fact they are serving the power ambitions of others. On Day 6 she returns to the *jihad* theme: ‘If there is only one God, and the non-believers were his enemies, why is this Psalm a cry for destruction of those enemies, why not a cry for enlightenment of those who do not yet see? Why all this aggression and violence and envy?’ Such emotions and motives, she tells us, are not at all important in her life.

For Saul this psalm comes alive.<sup>4</sup> ‘Words [in the psalm] have been jumping out at me’, he writes. ‘I have been finding parallels to events the BBC or *The Guardian* tell me about daily’ (D3). The psalm inspires Saul to consider Israeli-Arab tensions. He is able to envisage a more positive outcome than is Kate to unholy alliances between religion and violence. Conscious of his Jewish heritage, he makes the point that Jews and Christians at least share a common sacred text:

I have been thinking about this idea of two sides to a single coin, one text polarizing people, one bible or holy book serving the diverse needs of diverse people. This psalm is so full of phrases that are so subjective, or can be interpreted differently by different people, that, say, in one argument, people could oppose one another and use the same text to support their point (D4).

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<sup>4</sup> From the beginning Saul enjoys Ps 74: ‘The voice is consistent and I like that. Probably because it was a voice that never preaches, only verbalizes the sounds of sadness and pleads with God, the powers that be, the unknown worlds ... The words never make me uncomfortable with religious pomp or what could be seen as Biblical cliché’ (D1).

Saul also points out that Israelis and Palestinians share a common land. He regards verse 17 as a prayer for enlightenment of the enemy and thinks that encourages both communities, who share the land's natural resources and weather, to say to each other "This land is your land" – so what it asks me to do is address my congregation' (L: 6). His congregation is his synagogue in Toronto; he tells the others that he wants to get more involved there so as to be able to exert some influence towards increasing financial support for peace initiatives.

Reflecting on the question 'How long?' (v10), Saul comes up with an inter-faith answer: 'When will we all agree to love? And it can be understood, I think, to be as little as love, or as much as all believe in the one God.' However, Saul is also skeptical; he suspects that the end of religious rivalries may not be peaceful. 'It could be fate or karma or retribution, religious or otherwise' (D5). Such a chilling prospect prompts Saul to lay bare once again his facetious streak: 'Why have the horrible humans not been shut out, stopped, eliminated, wiped out in evolution, by the same hand who "made summer and winter" [an allusion to v17]'.<sup>5</sup>

**'The psalmist thinks that God does not know what he is doing'** (Flora, D2)

According to James Mays (30-31), the root metaphor of the Psalms is the kingship of Yahweh. He tells us that 'the psalms are the poetry of the reign of the LORD. They are the praise and proclamation and prayer of those who believe that confession "The LORD reigns" states the basic truth about the world and life lived in it'. The last extract from Saul in the previous paragraph tentatively alludes to such supernatural sovereignty. Flora, as we have seen, has an almost determinist view of God's power, and in her view the psalmist is denying that God is all-wise and all-powerful:

I will often find myself asking God why He let something happen, but inside I will know that He had His reasons for doing this, but that I would like for God to make these reasons clear to me. But in this psalm one has the impression that the psalmist thinks that God does not know what he is doing, and indeed, the psalmist is telling God what do to (D2).

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<sup>5</sup> Although the majority of Saul's readings during the previous week range from 'negotiated' to 'oppositional', preferred readings are not absent in the case of Ps 74, as we see from his affirmation of the opening line of the psalm's hymnic confession (vv 12-17): 'The main appeal to "my King" is to remember that he promised us something, he chose us....I think I can accept this appeal easier than ones substantiated by convincing God how worthy of good I am based on my piety, faith, loyalty' (D6).

Nevertheless, Flora can relate to the psalmist's emotions: 'The author is asking God why he is not helping them! He is questioning God's justice, questioning God's plan, questioning God's all-suffering and all-knowing nature, God's infallibility!' (D1). This comment on v 11 must surely be taken as a 'preferred reading' for it captures the essence of the psalmist's and the community's crisis.<sup>6</sup>

I suspect that Ashok also would be cautious about giving God advice, but he comes to the conclusion that the psalm legitimates asking God hard questions.<sup>7</sup> He reports on day 5 that one of the things that strike him while reading the psalm is that 'the psalmist questions God's actions and will'. He acknowledges this 'should be the case naturally'. 'But,' he goes on, 'then aren't we a bit too soft in our prayers?' Ashok finds he can relate to 'the passion and anguish of the psalmist' (D1). The poet's cry for help from God, Ashok continues, 'is quite moving and his descriptions of the work of the evil doers are metaphorical and can be read in context of the modern day world'. At first Ashok is bothered by the loss of hope in verse 9 ('We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet; and there's no one amongst us who knows how long'). His concern is that 'if you lose hope then there's nowhere to go' (D1). But later in the week he acknowledges that he was mistaken in his initial thinking that there is no sense of hope in this psalm. 'Yes,' he writes on day four, 'there is a passionate plea to God to stop being a spectator and help his flock, but there is a sense of hope in these cries of the psalmist that he still believes in God's power and remembers his glory'.

Elsie, like Ashok, sees the psalm as offering hope – not 'the glib hope of looking towards a better day, but the heavy hope of expecting resolution and redemption' (D5). She explains that for her 'a heavy hope' is one 'that bears the weight of great sadness.' Elsie also tells us that her hope was renewed as she used verses 12-17 as a reflexive hymn while listening to the sung version: '[W]hen I don't know how to pray or think and feel so discouraged that I have no words to pray, I turn to the psalms or my hymnal for hope and reflection and words' (D4). She considers one of the great assets of being involved in institutionalized religions to be that they provide such 'resources to support your faith' (D4). Elsie, reflecting on the fact

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<sup>6</sup> With Flora, negotiated readings prevail and are evident in the final words in her journal: '[C]ontrary to the psalmist, I still think God has a greater purpose that we don't understand, and so I would not think of giving God 'tips' on how He should run things.' Instead, 'We should pray to Him to let us catch a glimpse of this greater purpose and possibly understand a bit of what is going on' (D6).

<sup>7</sup> It is the legitimising of complaint before God that Ashok (D5) finds so liberating.

that the temple on Mount Zion is still in ruins, feels inclined towards a figurative reading of the historical features of the psalm.<sup>8</sup>

Psalm 74 evokes a variety of reactions from respondents. These cover a delight in being able to question God, inter-religious conflicts between Jews and Christians plus Israelis and Palestinians, an accusation that the psalmist is irreverent, the experience of ‘a heavy hope’ and doubts about the justice of God. This last issue – theodicy – is one of the most consistent features of audience reaction. It is expressed in Kate’s question (D2): ‘How can you still believe in God when he leaves you alone in your darkest hours?’ Ashok (D4) resonates with the psalmist’s plea that God should cease being a spectator of the disaster that had befallen his flock. Although not a personal issue for Flora (D1), she acknowledges that the psalmist is ‘questioning God’s justice’. Similar concerns were raised concerning earlier psalms. Edith finds difficult the fact that ‘The Lord appears to hide his face without due cause’ (Ps 30-D3); Tom is shocked by ‘the capacity of God to be so cruel and so thorough in defending a person who is claiming to be righteous’ (Ps 55-D1). Even apparently sanguine texts can evoke doubts about God’s justice. Liz complains that ‘The word “Lord” provokes me: a bloody, nasty church history in the name of a vengeful god is played out before my eyes’ (Ps 126-D1). Norah tells us that at the end of her first day on the Psalm Journey she felt held by a strong sense of ‘blame for god’ (Ps 126-D1). These journal excerpts make clear that Psalm 74 echoes one of the concerns about religion that deeply preoccupies respondents. The psalm also acts as a catalyst to fresh consideration of theodicy by giving respondents permission to raise these kinds of questions in a religious context.

### *Section 2: Theodicy*

I now briefly stand back from Psalm 74 to consider more closely the difficulties theodicy creates for the respondents and to ask what answers might they expect to receive from experts in the Hebrew Bible. Theodicy, a term composed from the Greek words for God (*theos*) and right or judgment (*dikē*), seldom finds its way into common English language; the 2005 edition of the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* fails to find space for it among its 40,000 plus entries. But the task it describes, the ‘vindication of the justice of God especially in ordaining or permitting natural and moral evil’, is widely regarded as no longer

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<sup>8</sup> ‘I guess the psalm can exist on multiple dimensions,’ Elsie writes on Day 2. ‘But I’d put more stock in the figurative temple being rebuilt than the literal temple.’ Elsie may be unaware that the temple was, indeed, rebuilt twice, in 522 BC by Zerubabel and in 6 BC by Herod the Great. Her comment here may reflect the unease felt in her conservative southern American Presbyterian background over dispensational claims that the Jerusalem temple will be rebuilt in our era.

‘a problem for experts in theological seminaries, but a universal religious nightmare’ (Jung:174).<sup>9</sup> Theodicy is the response of believers in an omnipotent God to the kind of questions I have highlighted in the previous paragraph from the data. The respondents identify readily with the difficulty of the psalmists in reconciling the reality of God with the presence of evil, but do they find convincing and helpful the responses offered by contemporary Old Testament theologians? The answer to this question could make the difference between respondents going on to undertake further psalm journeys and giving up on the psalms as a spiritual resource. For that reason, in this section I conduct a thought experiment by setting up an hypothetical panel of respected Hebrew Bible scholars who respond to questions about theodicy raised by my respondents who constitute the audience. My hope is that this may lead to at least a measure of resolution. A brief dialogue like this, of necessity requires me to be selective in terms of the experts I call and of the evidence they provide. What is in view is a popular theological dialogue, not an advanced seminar in biblical studies.

I begin by constructing the question and answer scenario around three basic questions that sum up the problems raised by respondents. The first question is *Does God really care?* which is the essence of Kate’s objection. The second question *Is God reliable?* lies behind Edith’s observation on Psalm 30 about the Lord hiding his face without due cause. The third question *Is God vindictive?* is short hand for both Liz’s complaint in her first meditation on Psalm 126 and Tom’s shock at the vengeful motivation of Psalm 55.<sup>10</sup> All three questions may reflect Norah’s sense of blame for God during the first week. In this final chapter of data analysis I would like to set up an imaginative exercise that will bring in a number of scholarly voices. In contrast to chapters 4-8 where I bring in one or two Hebrew Bible experts in the third section of the chapter to converse with respondents, on this occasion I am introducing a panel. In this imaginative exercise I put the three questions to nine Hebrew scholars, some of whom have already contributed to the discussion. I am extrapolating from their published work how they might respond to the questions raised by my young respondents. The panel consists of Walter Brueggemann of Columbia Theological Seminary, James Crenshaw of Duke University, Robert Davidson of the University of Glasgow, Walther Eichrodt of the University of Basel, J. Clinton McCann of Eden Theological Seminary, James Luther Mays of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, John Rogerson of Sheffield University, Samuel Terrien of Union Theological Seminary in New

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<sup>9</sup> The definition of theodicy is taken from *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*. P.B. Gove (ed.). Chicago, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> Tom understands the poet’s vengeance meets with God’s approval (Ps 55-D1).

York, and Claus Westermann of the University of Heidelberg.<sup>11</sup> All these authorities are aware that their comments must inevitably be qualified by the hermeneutical problems of moving from texts produced in an ancient, traditional society to situations in today's industrialised world (Rogerson 2000).

### **Does God care?**

If he does, why does he leave us in the lurch? In introducing the question I remind the audience that this complaint is common in the Psalms, giving Psalm 10 as an example where the author complains that when trouble envelops believers and the unscrupulous prosper, God goes into hiding! Samuel Terrien is the first of the panellists to speak. He acknowledges that the perception that God is indifferent to our calamities is a real problem, so much so that it tempted the poet of Psalm 73 to consider giving up his faith. However, Terrien (1978: 316) points out that a liminal experience in 'the sanctuary of God' (v 17) resolves the issue for that poet. Such an *existential* encounter with the presence of God can make social injustice and personal pain bearable. There are murmurs of surprise from the audience, but Terrien goes on: 'The psalmist did not offer any intellectual solution to the problem of evil, but it was the intellectual consideration of this problem which stirred his religious consciousness and led him to receive the dispensation of a new truth'. It is', he continues, 'as the poet becomes aware of his existential finitude and intellectual limitations that 'he no longer pursued his trend of thinking within the confines of his autonomous self, but pursued it instead in the presence of the Godhead'. At this point James Crenshaw interjects to say he takes a more sceptical view. The author of Psalm 73 is in fact relegating the reality of evil to illusion (Crenshaw 1983: 7). But Crenshaw acknowledges that resort to divine illumination in face of failure to find satisfaction in any theodicy, is a significant response in the Old Testament. The value of an existential response to theodicy is summed up eloquently by Walther Eichrodt (33-34): 'In this way even the poorest human life outwardly is given an incomparable inner worth which cannot itself be touched by death. How the supposedly unimaginable good fortune of the godless pales in comparison with this costly possession, particularly when one considers that in the end one stands before the horrors of death completely forgotten by God!'

### **Is God reliable?**

To begin round two I present Edith's difficulty to the panel: If God hides his face without due cause, can he be relied upon? (Ps 30-D3). James Crenshaw makes the first response,

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<sup>11</sup> Although some of these scholars have died their publications continue to be cited in the literature.

pointing out that sometimes the psalmists react to the absence of God by adopting an *eschatological* perspective. After explaining that the term *eschatological* come from *eschaton*, the Greek word for end, Crenshaw (1983: 7) explains that the eschatological dimension speaks to the need for a ray of hope by promising that the present calamity will soon pass away, and in its place will come clear signs of God's favour. At this moment James Mays (31) explains that this eschatological dimension determines that 'the time of the psalms is the interim'. J. Clinton McCann (1996: 668) interjects here to point out that although the word 'eschatological' literally means 'a word about last things,' it has present as well as future significance, for the psalms regularly affirm God's reign as a present reality amid circumstances that seem to deny and belie it, as well as anticipating its future consummation. Walther Eichrodt (27) intervenes to make clear that an eschatological focus is also found in the Hebrew prophets, emphasising that for them, theodicy must have been a meaningless endeavour because it contradicts their fundamental conviction that this world has departed from God's rule and lies under divine judgment.

### **Is God vindictive?**

Eichrodt's reference to the world being under divine judgment provides an *entré* to the third question. Does not the plea of the psalmists for God to judge their enemies imply that they see God as cruel and nasty? Claus Westermann (1998: 239) opens for the panel by asserting that such statements must be interpreted as being uttered in a *juridical* context. 'The [psalmists'] complaints are not statements but petitions and dialogic speech,' he says. 'They are accusations of God, not condemnations. They are appeals in order to bring about change'. Walter Brueggemann (1997: 117-403), who despite his prolific literary output has remained silent so far, indicates he wishes to contribute. He tells respondents he has explored extensively the metaphor of courtroom testimony and believes it to be the governing principle of the structure of much of the Old Testament's speech about God. He distinguishes between Israel's core testimony, her counter testimony, and her unsolicited testimony.<sup>12</sup> He gives a thumbnail summary of her core testimony to Yahweh as the God who creates, makes promises, delivers, commands and leads. This positive testimony to what God does, Brueggemann continues, is reinforced by noun metaphors of governance and sustenance that affirm 'Yahweh's capacity to establish a coherent, viable, life-giving, life-permitted order' (1997: 272). On the other hand, Israel's counter testimony cross-examines her core testimony in the form of complaints made in the face of situations of desperate need

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<sup>12</sup> 'The proper setting of testimony is a court of law, in which various and diverse witnesses are called to "tell what happened," to give their version of what is true' (Brueggemann 1997:120).

and unbearable injustice which ought not to arise if Yahweh's power and fidelity are operative (321).<sup>13</sup> In addition, there is the unsolicited testimony of witnesses who cast off the restraints of court protocol and forcibly plead with Yahweh to act on behalf of his human partners. Brueggemann (1997: 557) concludes his somewhat extended contribution by informing the respondents that verses 8-10 of Psalm 30, which they had meditated on during the first week, is an example of Israel's unsolicited testimony. My respondents' curiosity is aroused by Brueggemann's contention that the counter testimony and the unsolicited testimony are not expressions of unfaith. They listen attentively as he explains how it arises out of 'a deep confidence that the God of the core testimony, when active in power and fidelity, can prevent and overcome such intolerable life experiences' (321).

This prompts Elsie to stand up and ask 'Does this interaction of core testimony, counter testimony, and unsolicited testimony lead to a resolution of the desperate need? Does it produce a convincing theodicy?' Brueggemann replies to the effect that the core testimony has no ready or compelling response to such interrogation and interruption, except to reiterate its forceful and compelling claims (322). However, this reiteration can lead worshipers into a new orientation that enables them to move on (1984: 115-121). But sometimes they continue 'to live in unresolved dismay' (322).<sup>14</sup> At this point Claus Westermann intervenes in support of Brueggemann's earlier point about lament being an expression of faith. We find it difficult, he says, to understand texts like Psalm 22 where 'the individual may call out in despair, "God, why have you forsaken me?"' unless we take into account that 'not once does the caller say, "so I shall forsake you too, I shall also turn away from you"'. The sufferers', he says, 'continue to cling to God whom they no longer understand' (239).

The respondents are pensive. Kate has doubts about any existential approach, and tells the panel how during her meditation she had waited to be lifted to a higher sphere, and nothing happened (I-7: 2). Most respondents appear to be sceptical of any final judgment, and Edith has her doubts about the eschatology, which she describes as a parallel universe. 'Surely,' she says, 'agency is in the here and now' (Ps 30-D5). Edith's remark prompts Luke to say that he has been reading John Caputo's conversation with Jacques Derrida (151), which has convinced him that the eschatological perspective is very relevant to where many people are

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<sup>13</sup> Complaint is a prominent note in the Book of Psalms where lament is the most common genre (McCann 1996: 644).

<sup>14</sup> 'Those who raise this [the theodicy] question are given no comfort. It is as though fidelity to Yahweh must be its own reward' (Brueggemann 1988: 115).

at today. 'Postmoderns hope for justice and the gift', he goes on, 'knowing they are impossible in the present world order. Perhaps the messianic future which deconstruction dreams of ties in with eschatology'. Somewhat mesmerised by Luke's unexpected excursus into philosophy, Tom and Liz say they are not convinced that the scholars have exonerated God from the charge of vindictiveness. Nevertheless, all are impressed by the enthusiasm of the experts for their subject as well as by their expertise, and indicate they would like to put an additional question to the panel: How might we today use these ancient laments in pursuing spiritual meaning and enlightenment?

### **The Psalms and us?**

Walther Eichrodt is first to speak. He thinks our point of contact with the psalms is already established between God the creator and us as part of his creation. 'The freedom of God the creator', he says, '... includes a mysterious inner bond between the creator and the creation, on account of which people feel themselves addressed and seized in the depths of their being by God's rule, even when they do not understand it' (35).

Next, Claus Westermann says the key is to take psalms of lament and psalms of praise together. 'Polar thinking', he tells my respondents, 'is so characteristic of Old Testament theology. The one could not exist without the other' (1998: 241). Walter Brueggemann (1974: 6) comes in to say that the point of contact between the Psalms and today's spirituality of seeking is precisely the lament psalms, for they provide us with a vehicle to carry the hurtful side of experience into worship. Brueggemann (1995: 99) commends Westermann for showing that the lament psalms move from plea to praise. 'The proper setting for praise,' Brueggemann says, 'is lament resolved.' Robert Davidson (1983: 12), on being invited to give a final word, focuses on the ability of the lament psalms to enable us express virtually any kind of hurt or preoccupation: 'Granted the reality of this element of struggle in faith and the perplexity born of the apparent absence or unconcern of God', he says, 'such psalms of lament could be given an interpretation which would take them far beyond their original terms of reference'. He concludes by making the startling claim that the psalms provide us with a means of finding 'the courage to doubt'. This last reference to doubt strikes a chord with respondents. As they leave the meeting some at least are aware of a growing suspicion that the ancient psalmists may have more affinity with 21<sup>st</sup> century young adults than they had thought.

Our imaginary conversation with the experts has revealed that the Psalms contain a variety of responses to theodicy. There is no successful attempt to provide a rational explanation of why God tolerates evil, but in the psalms there are several ways of approaching this problem. The first is to see it from the vantage point of a liminal *existential* experience of the presence of God. The second is to adopt an *eschatological* perspective, treating the triumph of evil as an interim phenomenon that will ultimately be put right by God. The third viewpoint is to focus on the *juridical* structure of the language of lament, recognising that lament, as the right side of the vocabulary of faith is fully appreciated only in tandem with praise, the left side.<sup>15</sup> All three approaches have some appeal to the more religiously active respondents, but the less religiously active tend to be sceptical of the first two, although more open to the third. What the less religiously active do find attractive is the thought that doubt and faith need not be opposites and in fact coexist in psalmic liturgy. They are impressed by a new possibility - that the psalms may enable religious doubt to be sacralised. Our hypothetical dialogue on theodicy between the respondents and a panel of experts has prepared the way for me to consider the similarities and contrasts between respondent meditation and critical commentary in the case of lamenting the event that above all others in the Old Testament raises the issue of theodicy.<sup>16</sup>

### *Section 3: Respondents and commentator*

From our panel, we turn to another contemporary scholar in the person of Erich Zenger, Professor of Old Testament in the University of Münster, whose commentary on this psalm is found in *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, which Zenger co-authors with Frank-Lothar Hossfeld. This publication is one in the *Hermeneia* series of volumes that will make up a critical and historical commentary ‘designed for the serious student of the Bible’ (ix). In his analysis of the psalm, Zenger identifies three sections: verses 1-11; verses 12-17; and verses 18-23 – which I now follow in structuring his conversation with my respondents.

#### **Divine interrogation**

Zenger’s description of the first section (vv 1-11) as ‘a lament over the destruction of the temple and an accusation against God’ (241) is reflected in respondents’ appreciation of the psalm. Both Ashok (D5) and Flora (D1) emphasise how the psalmist interrogates God;

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<sup>15</sup> Such bi-polar expressions are carried over into the New Testament (Mark 9.24).

<sup>16</sup> This hypothetical conversation is inevitably a truncated consideration of theodicy in the Old Testament. It omits, for example, consideration of redemptive suffering, the approach of the wisdom literature, the Book of Job and Brueggemann’s contention that theodicy is social criticism.

Ashok regards this as evidence of the psalmist's desire to strengthen his faith, while Flora regards it as a sign of his failure to understand that God is testing his people. Zenger identifies the basis of the psalmist's question 'Why do you cast us off forever?' (v 1) as the fact that God had established Mount Zion on which the ruined temple stands 'as the locus of encounter with his "congregation"'. The commentator then pinpoints the rationale of the psalm: 'The memory of this primeval beginning should make him [God] aware of the contrast, indeed, the contradiction between that "once" and this "now"...; at the same time the memory should move God to put an end to the contradiction by an action that corresponds to the "primeval beginning"' (241). But the problem for both psalmist and respondents is that God seems to be abandoning, not just his people, but also his own 'name!' Zenger makes clear that a theme extending though the entire psalm is 'that this destructive action was aimed at YHWH himself' (245). However, Zenger believes that the psalmist is able to distinguish between God and his name, for verse 7b 'makes clear it was not YHWH himself *in* his divinity who was touched by this, but "only" his name; the Temple, as the place in which YHWH had, so to speak, deposited his "name"'.

All respondents capture the crucial nature of the theodicy issues raised by the psalm for religious faith, but like the psalmist they find more questions than answers. However, they are able with relative ease to contextualise these questions in early twenty-first century events ranging from Protestant-Catholic sectarian street violence in Scotland to terrorist atrocities of Palestinians and Israelis. While I appreciate that the respondents find in the psalm a lens through which to view and interpret religious violence, I am surprised that no respondent pressed the contextualisation a little farther by picking up on how, in the probable original context of the psalm, faith survived (albeit with difficulty) the loss of the institution. The reason for this may be that most respondents tend to envisage faith as something that nowadays operates in non-institutional, even non-religious, contexts (Hunt).

### **Human reflection**

Zenger describes verses 12-17 – where the adversative 'Yet' marks a new stage as 'a hymnic proclamation of God's universal kingship over the world', affirming that God (i.e. Yahweh, cf v 18) 'is "the king" of his people from the very beginning (something that cannot be abolished by the destruction of the temple)' (241-2). By making this strong affirmation of Yahweh's saving (v 12b) kingship, the psalmist renews and strengthens his faith in the midst of the crisis engulfing him and his people.<sup>17</sup> Zenger (242; 248) sees this affirmation as

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<sup>17</sup> Zenger (242) identifies verse 12a as an oath.

enshrining ‘the “fundamental principle” of YHWH’s tie to Israel and the world’ which is developed by the hymn in two moves, in vv 13-15 and 16-17, the first summarising Yahweh’s royal power in the exodus and the gift of the land, the second, in the establishment of the cosmic order. The hymn is a confession of faith and hope because ‘The enduring royal rule of YHWH can be read in the forward movement of these [two] processes even when the order of life in society is interrupted’ (249).<sup>18</sup> In other words, while the Babylonian desecration had shaken the Israelite community’s faith, it had not usurped Yahweh’s cosmic rule.

While Saul draws from verses 16-17 the significance of both Israelis and Palestinians enjoying the same land with its climate and natural resources (L: 6), he – not unsurprisingly – lacks Zenger’s appreciation of the theological significance of these verses, to the effect that, while the ‘spatial and temporal world order’ may have been disrupted by the catastrophe of 586, ‘the fundamental rhythm of cosmic time (“day and night”) and... the broad rhythm of the agricultural year (“summer and winter”)’ continue as ‘a cosmic proof... of this unshakeable rule of YHWH’ (Zenger: 249). Elsie (D4) comes nearer to grasping the theological import of the hymn by using it as a reflexive prayer at times when she finds faith difficult and does not know how to pray.

### **Dramatic tension**

Zenger (242) describes the last section of the psalm (vv 18-23) as ‘a chain of petitions to YHWH, appealing for his saving and militant intervention.’ This part of the poem attracts the attention of respondents, but understandably it is the commentator with his wealth of expertise who offers a succinct summary:

The third section of the psalm (vv 18-23) calls emphatically on YHWH, as the maker of the cosmos, to put an end to the chaos that has broken in upon it, and this in two respects.... YHWH is asked to take up the struggle against the Babylonian “destroyers of the Temple” (vv 18, 22-23), and to disempower the perpetrators of violence who are threatening the poor (vv 19-21). To the extent that these two movements are connected, the psalm underscores that violence against the poor is an attack on the cosmic world order and a destruction of the Temple that is *sui generis* (249).

While Flora (D1) suggests that this section reveals the psalmist’s fear of God’s anger, several other respondents attribute a more positive motivation to the poet. Edith (D3) understands

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<sup>18</sup> Zengler (242) draws attention to the mythical images in the hymn as also does the Minimal Hermeneutic offered to respondents.

verse 22 to be a plea for God to turn the hearts of the enemy from hate and violence. While Ashok's journal (D2) finds in it 'a sense of desperation', in the group meeting he tells the others he has changed his mind and now agrees with Edith (L: 2). Surprisingly the reference to 'the poor and needy' in verse 21 seems to have been overlooked by respondents, although there is an awareness of the plight of the poor and marginalised in the background when they contextualise the psalm today in the Middle East. Flora (D2) is the only respondent to complain about the lack of resolution at the end which causes her to appreciate this psalm the least of the three. The others don't comment explicitly on this, perhaps because they are content to leave the ambiguity undisturbed. If this is their motive, then Zenger (242) would concur:

Unlike the (related) Psalms 79 and 80, here there is at the conclusion neither a confession of trust nor a hopeful prospect. Either of these would destroy the specific dynamic of Psalm 74, which is that the psalm "lives" out of the dramatic tension of its address to God, which may not be eliminated: it is, in technical theological terms, the drama of theodicy, its laments related to one another in motif and language – namely holding fast to a confession of the saving God even though everything speaks against the "truth" of that confession.

This note of concurrence between the commentator and all but one of the respondents provides an appropriate conclusion to what has been a stimulating conversation in which both respondents and commentator have made an effort to interpret 'the drama of theodicy'. Both the enthusiasm of youth and the expertise of the scholar recognise with the psalmist that living with ambiguity is our lot and a burden with which we will continue to struggle. Perhaps interacting with this psalm has helped respondents to recognise that a religious faith that is prepared to live with ambiguity can survive when institutions are dissolved or destroyed.

In this chapter I have considered how the respondents in the second Psalm Journey interact with Psalm 74 which laments ancient Israel's greatest calamity (Brueggemann 1997: 321). In line with previous chapters, chapter 9 covers the ground in three distinct sections. In the first section I review the ways in which text and respondents in turn relate to one another. In the second, I set up a hypothetical panel of Hebrew Bible experts who respond to four questions put to them by respondents. These questions are: Does God care? Is God reliable? Is God vindictive? How can the psalms contribute to our spiritual journey? The experts between them present three approaches to the problem of theodicy – the existential, the eschatological and the juridical. Respondents are intrigued that a juridical perspective enables lament and praise to interact as dual expressions of faith, and they wonder whether

adopting such a bipolar approach might enable them to sacralise doubt. Finally, in the third section I coordinate a conversation between the respondents and Erich Zenger of Münster in which both parties agree that affirming faith in the claim that God is sovereign in a world where evil is rampant inevitably commits us to engaging with ambiguity and mystery.

### *Summary of Part II*

Since chapter 9 marks the conclusion of Part II it is useful to summarise the principal findings that have been inferred from the Psalm Journey data in chapters 4-9 and which will be evaluated in chapters 10-12. The six main findings arising from respondent interaction with individual psalms are encapsulated in the terse chapter headings employed. The first finding ('Self and Soul') is that the strong subjectivism of psalmic spirituality evidenced in Psalm 126 resonates with some respondents. For this reason it offers them a potential bridge to move on from the self-spirituality that is a manifestation of the 'subjective turn' in contemporary western human consciousness to the 'life-as' mode of spirituality (cf Heelas 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005) of the Psalms and the Bible as a whole. The second finding ('Vengeance and Non-violence') is that respondents tend to regard Psalm 55, one of the cursing psalms, as an expression of divine as well as human vengeance, making it difficult for them to resonate with this text. Brueggemann's thesis that the cursing psalms are vehicles for relinquishing personal hatreds by committing them to God is met with a mixture of scepticism and sympathy. The third finding ('Suffering and Self-identity') is that the lament genre evident in the first half of Psalm 22 resonates with respondents, prompting a three-fold response: to acknowledge suffering as part of their self-identity; to raise religious questions about the goodness and power of God; and to move their own experience of suffering towards a measure of existential resolution.

The fourth finding ('Faith and Ultimate Being') is that the invitation of Psalm 30 to become subjects before God resonates with respondents' longings for connections beyond themselves and beyond the immediate. However, while this invitation prompts renewed trust among respondents who are already believers and challenges the lapsed to renew their faith, it does not bring those respondents who lack faith into an encounter with God. The fifth finding ('Disorientation and Reorientation') is that the dilemmas facing the author of Psalm 73 serve to highlight respondents' awareness of a measure of moral ambiguity and disorientation in making daily lifestyle choices between experience and tradition, anonymity and community, consumerism and altruism. Respondents with a religious faith find meditation on psalms celebrating the ultimate kingship of God enables them to face and

address such moral dilemmas of life with a new resolve. The final finding ('Psalms and Qualms') is that meditating on Psalm 74 provides respondents with a window on the world, permitting them to complain about God's apparent indifference to social and moral issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This summary sets the scene for Part III.

**PART III: EVALUATING THE ENGAGEMENT  
WITH THE PSALMS**

**Chapter 10: The Dynamics of the Psalm Journey**

This chapter introduces Part III of my thesis in which I make an evaluation of the audience's engagement. This evaluation is in three stages. First, in this chapter I explore the dynamic of the Psalm Journey in order to ascertain why respondents are able to interact with the psalms in the creative ways described in Part II. Then I shall investigate in chapter 11 what the respondents tell us about the nature of Scripture engagement. Finally, in chapter 12, I infer from my work some strategic future directions the Bible agencies might follow in attempting to facilitate more effective programmes of Scripture engagement. I now turn to study the dialogue of the Psalm Journey and ask why respondents found it enjoyable and enhancing.

While exploring the dynamics of the Psalm Journey I attempt to provide an answer to the first of my two research questions (see chapter 1) by assessing the impact made on respondents' spirituality.<sup>1</sup> My exploration is organised into four sections. In the first section I select and describe Don Browning's model of practical reason, and explain why I consider it an appropriate heuristic instrument to help discern what is happening in the creative interaction between respondents and text described in chapters 4-9. In the second section I begin to interpret the data utilising the first of Browning's dimensions of practical reason, noting the extent to which the values of respondents resonate with the vision of the psalm texts. In the third section I make use of Browning's second and third dimensions in an attempt to understand why respondents are able to have a meaningful and relevant conversation with the texts. In the final section I employ Fritz Oser's theory of religious knowing to investigate one facet of this conversation: the extent to which respondents are able to establish rapport with the theistic focus of the psalms.

**The Browning model**

In order to probe below the surface to discover why respondents are able to interact so creatively with the psalms, I need a heuristic device to help me do this. I have selected Browning's five dimensional model of practical reason (or *phronesis*) for this purpose. My choice of Browning is determined by his schema having three characteristics that make it adaptable to both the postmodern presuppositions of the audience and the universal claims of the biblical text. First, it is set within an overall dynamic of the reconstruction of human

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<sup>1</sup> My first research question is: 'How far can creative engagement with specific psalm texts in the form of a semi-structured four-week meditative journey facilitate the spiritual quest of young adults for personal meaning and spiritual enlightenment?' (See chapter 1).

experience which resonates with the many contemporary postmodern attempts to develop new ethical schemas in the wake of what is often perceived by some as the failure of modernism and liberalism (Browning 1991: 2; 4). Second, Browning's schema has at its core a universal moral claim: it affirms that neighbour love (Lev. 19.18; Matt. 22.39) and the golden rule (Luke 6.31) can be identified within multiple narrative traditions shaping the self-understanding of differing communities.<sup>2</sup> Together they constitute the principle of equal regard ('mutuality in intimate affairs and brotherhood / sisterhood in public affairs') which has 'the deontological structure of reversibility, universalizability, and impartiality' (Browning 1991: 159; 189). Third, although equal regard is a common value of the diverse traditions in pluralistic societies (Browning 1991: 11-12; 105-106), it is descriptive rather than prescriptive,<sup>3</sup> enabling Browning to dismiss in advance any charge against his paradigm of leaning towards either relativism or foundationalism (Browning 1991: 69-70; 173-174).<sup>4</sup>

In the light of the pertinence of Browning's model to my project I expand here the brief description I gave when introducing it in chapter 2. Browning postulates that within its overall dynamic of experiential reconstruction, practical reason has an 'outer envelope' and an 'inner core'. What he describes as the 'outer envelope' is 'the fund of inherited narratives and practices' from which practical reason draws the vision that animates, informs and provides its ontological context (Browning 1991: 11). This 'outer envelope' constitutes for Browning the first of five dimensions of practical reason which he calls the *visional* dimension. Since a key component of the inherited western narrative tradition in which all my respondents have been educated is the Hebrew Bible – a narrative which has the Psalms at its heart – it is not untoward to ask whether in the Psalm Journey the psalms become a potential *visional* dimension facilitating respondents' exploration of their own self-understanding. Furthermore, the six psalms have a narrative shape; they are not a collection of abstract aphorisms. Rather they reflect the personal and communal narrative of their authors and editors who, in turn, lived within the wider biblical narrative.<sup>5</sup> As such, the psalms implicitly invite us to re-contextualise psalmic values and insights in the personal,

<sup>2</sup> "'The Golden Rule' activates the principle of neighbour love (Lev. 19.18). It is stated in a negative form by the rabbi Hillel (c. 10 B.C.)' (Ellis: 115). Similar sayings are found in Isocrates, the Stoics, and in Buddhism (Plummer: 186).

<sup>3</sup> In advocating a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach to ethical questions, Browning (40, etc) acknowledges his indebtedness to Hans-Georg Gadamer.

<sup>4</sup> Foundationalists are preoccupied with anchoring knowledge on pure and undistorted sense impressions or something like a priori first principles or transcendental notions, that is, something certain, objective and neutral' (Browning 1991: 40).

<sup>5</sup> The three great metaphors of the Christian narrative – God as Creator, Governor and Redeemer (Browning 1991: 194) – are all prominent in the Book of Psalms (Mays: 32). Cf. Luther's opinion that the Psalter 'might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible' (in Mays: 1).

communal, and international narratives within which we live our contemporary lives and to allow these values and insights to begin to shape our understanding of human life and destiny.

The second dimension is the *obligational* which according to Browning (1991: 11) forms part of the 'inner core' of practical reason. This dimension is constituted by the universal and reversible phenomenon of equal regard, and governs our moral principles and ethical claims, directing us to treat persons as ends rather than as means. Although the principle of equal regard was not enunciated by me to the respondents, either verbally or in the helps provided, both journals and transcripts make clear that this is a standard they all freely affirm. For this reason I am convinced they would consider it a fair benchmark to employ in evaluating their responses.

Browning's third dimension is the *tendency-need*, which covers the claims basic human needs make on our thought and behaviours. These needs include life, health, pleasure, joy, friendship, education peace, security, self-respect, and food (1991: 19; 107; 161-64; 166-69; 193-95; 271-74). 'In themselves they are neither moral nor immoral, although they can become organised so as to become either' (161). These 'pre-moral goods' (102-105)<sup>6</sup> play an influential role in the ongoing development of thought and praxis in all human societies, not least in our contemporary western society characterised by 'the subjective turn' (Heelas and Woodhead: 2-5).<sup>7</sup> According to Browning (1991: 107; 194), the obligational and tendency-need dimensions relate interactively to constitute the 'inner core' of *phronesis*, while the visional dimension forms an 'outer envelope' which 'enlivens, activates and fulfils' the core (234). Practical reasoning is, in effect, a 'conversation' between the inner core and the outer envelope, which conversation can be heard in the interaction between my respondents and the six psalmic texts.<sup>8</sup> These first three dimensions constitute the basic units of the conversation Browning envisages.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 'Premoral goods are not directly moral goods because we do not attribute to them moral qualities as such. But we do indeed see them as objects or experiences that are good to pursue' (Browning 1991: 161).

<sup>7</sup> Heelas and Woodhead (5) cite Hobsbawm, Inglehart, Taylor and Veroff as supposing that 'the subjective turn has become the defining cultural development of modern western culture.'

<sup>8</sup> The conversation metaphor helpfully encapsulates the relatively free and easy interfacing between audience and text that took place in the Psalm Journey.

<sup>9</sup> The fourth dimension is the *environmental-social* which covers the social-systemic and ecological constraints on human contemplation and action; finally, the *rule-role* dimension comprises concrete patterns of practices and behaviours resulting from reflection at the visional and obligational dimensions (1991: 107).

It is necessary to stress that Browning's dimensions are not separate water-tight categories. In fact they 'generally interpenetrate so smoothly we are unaware of them as differentiated aspects of experience' (Browning 1991: 108) – a feature that ought to encourage a degree of tentativeness in the use of the schema. With this proviso in mind, I now proceed to review the Psalm Journey in an attempt to evaluate how it contributed to the construction / reconstruction of respondents' spiritual experience. I make use of the particular focus of each of the dimensions in turn to create a series of lenses that hopefully will enable me to see clearly different components of the respondents' personal passage through the Psalm Journey.

### **Resonance**

My primary reason for selecting the *Book of Psalms* for this exercise in Scripture engagement was an assumption on my part that the robust spirituality of the psalms would resonate with the spiritual quest of GenXers as highlighted in the pilot and delineated by Brierley (2001) and Beaudoin (2002). In the pilot I identified the perceived primary life values of the audience in order that these values might guide me in my selection of psalms for use in the Psalm Journey. My hope was that the Psalm Journey would resonate with respondents, thereby signalling the potential of the psalms to fulfil a visional function for the respondents. Was my hope fulfilled? A brief answer is 'Yes, but...', for the fulfilment of my hope took place in a somewhat more complex manner than I had anticipated. In the following paragraphs I expand on this initial two-word answer, arguing that the data yielded clear signs of the psalms helping to shape the meaning-making processes of respondents. I explore whether respondents find the psalms sufficiently relevant to their perceived primary life values and the felt needs to persuade them to regard the psalms as a potential source of spiritual vision in their search for meaning and enlightenment.

#### *Psalms and GenX values*

I explore the extent of the resonance between respondents and the psalm texts by asking whether respondents confirm my choice of psalms to match audience values. The respondents from the first Psalm Journey are more focused on this issue because they had been alerted in advance to the pre-selection of psalms and values. So how does my juxtaposing of particular values with specific psalms fare in the eyes of respondents? Their answers indicate general confirmation of the matching while also signalling that the perceived resonance between psalms and values is more complex than I initially envisaged.

This complexity is most evident in the case of Psalm 126, which I had chosen in the hope that it would resonate with ideas of ‘having a good time’ (which scored highest among all the values) because it is a joyful song celebrating release from captivity in a foreign land and culture. However, for Liz, having a good time is something else; it is ‘not worrying about a thing in the world. Leaving the troubles behind, using the world for your own pleasure, living on top of it and in doing so not living in it but forgetting about it’ (D3). So not surprisingly, she feels psalm and value do not correspond. John agrees that ‘having a good time’ sits uneasily with Psalm 126, but his reasoning is different. In his view the value is not nuanced enough for a psalm which reflects ‘the cycle of ups and downs inherent in life’ and is ‘as much about hardship as it is about celebration’ (D3). Norah does not refer to the value I attached to Psalm 126, but her journal suggests that if she had, she would have roundly rejected the connection, for on the second day of meditation she is enveloped by a ‘massive feeling/sense of darkness’.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Connie affirms an association between Psalm 126 and feeling good. She begins her opening journal on a high note: ‘While reading this psalm, I felt a sense of hope and happiness – that it is possible to make the most of what one has’ (D1). So also does Luke (D1) who relates the poet’s ‘expectation of joy in the future despite current hardship’ to the ‘genuinely good time’ he has had with a close friend the previous evening. Turning to Psalm 55 (which I had associated with the value of being well thought of), Liz (D6) and Connie (D3) consider that the psalm does reflect this value, but both add that it also reflects some terrible potential consequences when the approval of others is not forthcoming.<sup>11</sup> There are no specific comments on the association of Psalm 22 with a desire to resolve suffering (the value I matched it with), but all the journals identify a correlation between value and text.

Respondents in the second Psalm Journey were not apprised of my preliminary association of psalms and values which was as follows: Psalm 30 (high valuation of experience); Psalm 73 (willingness to engage with ambiguity); and Psalm 74 (suspicion of religious institutions). Of all respondents, Elsie makes the strongest link between Psalm 30 and religious experience (D1). She also appreciates the psalmist’s struggle with ambiguity in Psalm 73, although she seems to find her own struggle in this area to be more quickly resolved in church than he did

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<sup>10</sup> Norah’s depressed mood continues throughout the first week and is reinforced by the sixth anniversary of a friend’s death when she finds it impossible ‘to stop reflecting on death’ (D6).

<sup>11</sup> Connie acknowledges that, like many, she is sensitive to what people think of her, but it is more important to her to respond rationally to every situation and to lead by example (Ps 55-D5).

his in the temple (D3)! Ashok (D2), Flora (D1), Edith (D5) and Kate (D5) also recognise that Psalm 73 engages with moral ambiguity, with Edith reflecting on the ambiguity of her own attitude to big business (D5).<sup>12</sup> Most respondents perceive a link between Psalm 74 and institutions, with Edith contextualising the psalm in Scottish sectarianism and the Israeli-Palestinian impasse (D2 and 5). Elsie, however, fails to make a link between Psalm 74 and contemporary anti-institutionalism, probably because she thinks the psalm should be interpreted figuratively (D2). So overall, respondents confirm the assumed correlation between values and psalms, while making clear that the correlation is more nuanced than I had foreseen.

As well as nuancing the pre-selected values, respondents also supplement them with additional values they discover the psalms evoking. Liz, for example, indicates that the Psalm Journey both challenges and reinforces her values. For example, it challenges her freedom to do what she wants. 'If I do what I want,' she tells me, 'like taking an aeroplane fourteen times a year, or going on an eco tourist trip to Kenya, what does that do for the locals?' The Psalm Journey brings to mind 'that there are lots of other people suffering because of what we hold as our rights to freedom'. But another of her values – that change is good even when it is painful – is reinforced rather than challenged (I-1: 5). While John discovers that the psalms challenge him negatively by evoking unpleasant memories of his Christian high school, the Psalm Journey helps him to reaffirm the importance of the golden rule despite his being 'a bit jaded about institutionalised Christianity' (I-4: 8). Similarly Connie's values are strengthened. 'I'm more self-aware now and I'll be more supportive of others – and try not to be vengeful, etc. And stronger because I've been encouraged to think about them' (I-5: 5). Psalms 73 and 74 reinforce for Ashok the importance of maintaining hope and faith in the face of economic exploitation and devastation (I-9: 8). Kate, on the other hand, finds that the psalms challenge the discrepancy between her values and her lifestyle (I-7: 5).

In the light of this review, I think it can be claimed that all in all the robust spirituality of the six psalms does indeed resonate with those values in life that respondents consider important, but that the correlation between psalm and value tends to be nuanced by somewhat differing understandings of the values among respondents and by some respondents being open to the values challenging as well as confirming their personal

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<sup>12</sup> Flora, however, in effect, removes the ambiguity by supposing the prosperity to be a test from God (D1).

hierarchy of values. The correlation of psalmic insights and audience values confirms my earlier tentative supposition that respondents are able to relate creatively to the psalms because these ancient hymns have a potential to fulfil a visional role informing their worldview and lifestyle.

### **Relevance**

To what extent do the respondents find the six psalms relevant to their aspirations and needs? I seek to answer this question by exploring the degree to which the principle of equal regard coordinates with the basic human needs of respondents to form the 'inner core' of their meditation on and with the six psalms. First of all, I look for indicators of the principle of equal regard.

#### *Equal regard*

The psalmist's imprecation of his enemy in Psalm 55 turns out to be an effective foil for equal regard, provoking respondents into affirming non-retaliatory attitudes. John, for example, expresses shock, anger and horror at the psalmist's vengeance, but its presence in the text prompts him to search his own life: 'I honestly cannot think of a time in my life when I have felt a strong desire for vengeance, at least not nearly as strong as that of the poet' (Ps 55-D2-3). His revulsion to seeking revenge is a mirror image of the golden rule which, in fact, is positively reflected in his ideal of praying before a sporting fixture that the opposing team might play their best (Ps 55-D5). At the conclusion of the Psalm Journey he explicitly states that the Psalm Journey brought to mind the golden rule and Jesus' command to turn the other cheek. 'There's something to these and I feel that so many people do not realise that' (I-4: 8-9).<sup>13</sup> However, respondents were not slow to recognise that equal regard is difficult to practise in an unjust and hurtful world.

Liz in particular feels that in circumstances akin to those of the psalmist the revenge motive is understandable, if not desirable. She understands the attraction of terrorism to those who feel constantly wronged and unheard. But turning the other cheek she considers goes too far,

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<sup>13</sup> In her interview Norah does not allude to the golden rule, but she thinks the Psalm Journey reinforces our basic humanity: 'If we do come together we can make a difference.' It also made her, she tells me, a little more tolerant (I-3: 6). In fact she shows a remarkable degree of tolerance towards the author of Psalm 55: 'I feel peaceful with this psalm,' she writes, 'as I know I have been in similar situations that I feel all frustrated and hurt, but then all I need to do is breathe and all is well'. The power of her memories of resolving frustration and hurt enable her to 'feel such a sense of peace today specially reading this' (Ps 55-D1). Her sense of peace survived being badly let down on her birthday three days later because the psalm helped her overcome her hurt and realise that her friends had not meant any harm (Ps 55-D5).

for it invites humiliation. Liz would prefer to seek a *via media* such as standing by your bitterness and expressing it without nursing revenge (Ps 55-D3 and 5). Tom recognises in the psalmist's strong reaction that sometimes faith can work against equal regard: 'Faith sometimes is so over-confident and so self-righteous that it gives one a special status that does not take into consideration what others would feel if you were the enemy that betrays' (Ps 55-D2). Of all respondents, Luke is the most sympathetic to the psalmist despite thinking that the text sounds 'as if some of the words were spat out' (Ps 55-D1) and express 'the kind of desperation and hatred that we don't want to empathise with' (Ps 55-L: 3). His sympathy springs from his knowledge of Bedouin culture (which he assumes is roughly similar to that of ancient Israel) in which 'if someone wrongs a brother you have to go out and right that wrong' (Ps 55-L: 4).<sup>14</sup> However, it is important to emphasise that Luke in seeking to understand is not condoning the psalmist's retaliation. Solid commitment to equal regard makes all the respondents taking part in the first Journey reject the psalmist's vengeance and motivates them to negotiate a non-retaliatory reading of Psalm 55.

But do respondents' actions back up their fine words? Do they in fact do to each other what they would have others do to them? Do the interpersonal relationships in the groups reflect the mutuality and brotherhood / sisterhood that are integral to equal regard? Before attempting to answer such questions it is important to recognise that both groups contain members who have already established friendships through university life. These friendships undoubtedly contribute to the healthy dynamic characterising the group meditations. In particular a strong bond of trust is evident, encouraging respondents to make themselves vulnerable to one another, most notably when Liz shares the pain of the break-up with her boyfriend (Ps 55-D2). Such trust encourages the practice of equal regard, for it's easier to do to another what we would have them do to us when we can trust them to accept our goodwill rather than abuse it. Meditating on this psalm (which could be construed as encouraging retaliation) prompts John (Ps 55-D2-3) and Connie (I-5: 1) to help a colleague who was having a difficult time. 'The influence of the psalms was very helpful,' Connie says, 'and enabled us to get closer to her.' Her summary of the impact of the Psalm Journey - 'I'm more aware now and I'll be more supportive of others' (I-5: 5) - suggests that this action will not be a one off.

Another example of equal regard in practice is Tom's concern for Norah when, after meditating on Psalm 126, she posts on the website bulletin board a message expressing 'an

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<sup>14</sup> Luke has spent some months working with Palestinians in Palestine.

overwhelming sense of blame and in a way hatred' for God.<sup>15</sup> Tom responds: 'I have sometimes felt that way.' The group experience has built up mutual respect during both journeys, even in the case of Kate, who is a bit of a loner,<sup>16</sup> and Flora, who is defensive of her Baha'i convictions.<sup>17</sup> Edith appreciates the openness of the group: 'You're never afraid to discuss your faith with people, but you are afraid of aligning yourself with the institution [the church]' (I-11: 8). She goes on: 'You can talk about Scripture in such a meaningful fashion without having to defend your stance' (I-11: 9). Thus we see that Connie, John and Tom react to the psalms by practising equal regard. Others respondents demonstrate mutual respect and trust, making it likely that, given opportunity, they would practise the golden rule and demonstrate neighbour love. Having found evidence of equal regard in action and an openness to it in attitude, I now move on to explore the data for signs of how the second component of Browning's 'inner core' – the tendency-need dimension - interacts with the obligational dimension as respondents and text inter-relate.

#### *Basic human needs*

According to Browning (107) there is a dual dynamic at work within the core: on the one hand, the moral principles of the obligational level organise and coordinate the needs of the tendency-need level, and, on the other, the tendency-need level gives content to the obligational level. In addition, according to Browning, a third dynamic is at work in that the 'outer envelope' (the visional level) shapes the interaction between the obligational and tendency-need levels by defining the worldview within which the 'inner core' operates. The relevance of this to the Psalm Journey is that should the data confirm that such a triple dynamic between equal regard, basic needs and text is operational in and among respondents, it provides an explanation of why they are able to conduct a creative conversation with the psalms.

It is clear from the data that the psalm texts help to highlight respondents' awareness and affirmation of such basic human needs as Browning identifies.<sup>18</sup> Respondents are not slow

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<sup>15</sup> Psalm Journey 1 Bulletin Board, 15 January 2004, posted at 6.24 a.m.

<sup>16</sup> I suspect Kate finds the intimacy of the group rather threatening, but the informal discussion afterwards over coffee, she says, 'was very interesting and very important for me' (I-7: 5).

<sup>17</sup> For Flora the heterogeneity of the group enhances its impact on her: 'It's really important to talk about it to other people because of how much I got from the discussions in the Psalm Journey and how people had completely different perspectives often this would change my perspective to some point. So I think it's really important to speak to other people' (I-12: 4).

<sup>18</sup> This awareness and affirmation is probably prompted by the psalmists' acute familiarity with such needs. In Psalm 30.2 the poet rejoices in his healing; in Psalm 126.1-3 the community delights in its recently-recovered freedom and security; in Psalm 22.26 the psalmist celebrates his rescue from his enemies by inviting his friends to a thanksgiving meal; Psalm 55 paints a grim picture of insecurity

to affirm the centrality of such needs. Liz considers that ‘when the trust in life as meaningful is rewarded, ... we feel well taken care of’ (Ps 22-D3), while Ashok recognises the importance of self-esteem: ‘To me self realisation and fulfilment are the key aspects of finding strength in times of adversity’ (Ps 73-D4). These two respondents are representative of the audience’s awareness of basic human needs. In a sense it would be surprising if the data suggested otherwise, given that we are looking at needs experienced in varying degrees by all humans to a greater or lesser extent. But what we find is more than a general awareness, for respondents take advantage of their meditation on the psalms to reflect on how they themselves organise such needs. For example, Edith is challenged by the psalmist’s rhetorical question ‘Will the dust praise you?’ to reflect on the importance of life itself - agency is placed in this life, not in the hereafter (Ps. 30-D1 and 5). Luke reflects the fact that all respondents find doing the Psalm Journey ‘fun,’ when he tells the group: ‘I have learned how to appreciate how important laughter is’ (Ps 126-L: 1) and ‘I should be more willing to share my happiness with others and shout with joy’ (Ps 126-L: 3). And we’ve already noted that Psalm 22 inspires John and Connie to support a friend who was having a hard time and that as a result she was doing much better. John tells the group: ‘I had a great conversation with her over a cup of coffee’ (Ps 22-L: 3).<sup>19</sup> Tom is prompted by his meditation on Psalm 55 to reaffirm his responsibility to return to Zimbabwe to ‘continue the struggle to make it a better country to live in’ (D7).

It is significant that in organising these basic needs, respondents call upon equal regard. Take, for example, Liz. She places a high value on the gift of life, reflecting on what it means to be human (Ps 126-D2-3; Ps 22-D3 and 6); she would value more ‘everyday enjoyment’ through finding a committed spirituality (Ps 55-D2), and would probably value a stronger sense of psychological security (Ps 55-D4). She appreciates equal regard and refuses to allow revenge to dominate her reactions following the break-up with her boyfriend (Ps 55-D1-3). The psalms play a visional role in reminding her of her Lutheran upbringing and an Alpha course, and persuade her to return to church. She goes to church despite her feeling, on a previous occasion when she ‘turned to a higher power for comfort,’ that God was for others, leaving her ‘to go somewhere else or call God by another name to find the place where I belonged’ (Ps 55-D4).<sup>20</sup> Kate is less well disposed to equal regard than Liz, confessing that she is self-centred (Ps 73-D3). In reflecting on how to help people in need

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spawned by urban violence and personal betrayal; Psalm 73 depicts disorientation brought about by violence and oppression; and Psalm 74 is the agonised cry of a community humiliated by its enemies.

<sup>19</sup> Is John here emulating the psalmist’s inviting his friends to a thanksgiving meal (Ps. 22.26)?

<sup>20</sup> It is not known whether subsequently Liz discovered church to be where she belongs.

Kate also struggles in her mind with the powerful constraints of capitalism (Ps 73-D4). Nevertheless, she is inspired by Psalm 73 to overcome her self-centredness to express genuine concern for a student friend ‘who is having a serious study crisis’ (Ps 73-D4).

Connie came to the Psalm Journey with a stronger commitment than Kate to helping those in need (her field of research is homeless people), and she finds this commitment is reinforced by her meditation: ‘I have a more grounded feeling that I need to believe in myself and others more strongly, and be supportive of others’ (I-5: 5). John, like Connie, is self-confident and seems emotionally secure: ‘I have never felt any major “betrayals” among my good friends’ (Ps 55-D3). But as he meditates on Psalm 22 he is moved to consider seriously practising equal regard: ‘It’s natural to think of yourself first – that’s natural, that’s kind of how we are. But when you think about their [i.e. people in trouble] troubles and strife and put yourself in their shoes you can’t do that without being called to action to support people’ (Ps 22-L: 3).<sup>21</sup>

I have described how respondents interact with psalm texts by affirming the principle of equal regard (or reversible reason) and by practising it, first in their own lives by allowing it to adjudicate their own basic human needs, and, second, by accepting responsibility in interpersonal relationships to meet the basic needs of others. The psalms’ ability to fulfil a visional role in a triadic interplay between text, equal regard and human need offers an explanation of why respondents are able to have a meaningful and helpful conversation with the psalms. However, this potency affecting the cognition, affection and praxis of respondents while they meditate on the psalms raises a further intriguing question; how do the psalms, with their primary focus on God, fulfil such a visional role for an audience that not infrequently expresses scepticism about religion? I must probe more deeply into the nature of the conversation in order to explain this paradox.

### **Rapport**

It is remarkable that ancient poems which are basically addressed to God should appeal to a young adult audience who live and work within a secular culture where God is often

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<sup>21</sup> John’s ideal of praying for both sides in a sporting fixture (Ps 55-D5) is also expressive of equal regard which, when taken along with his desire ‘to critically reflect on life, and not just live it’ (Ps 126-D1) and to ‘to spend more time “rejoicing” in the things that are going well’ in his life (Ps 126-D6), suggest that the inner core of practical reason is at work.

marginalised, if not excluded.<sup>22</sup> This theistic focus, which characterises the Bible as a whole, is particularly sharp in its songs and prayers.<sup>23</sup> Yet this feature does not appear to inhibit respondents conversing meditatively with the psalms. But is it possible to have a meaningful and creative conversation with the psalms without taking God seriously?<sup>24</sup> Do respondents establish some measure of rapport with God?

Perhaps the most appropriate place to begin our exploration of respondents' *modus vivendi* with the theistic focus of the texts is to recall that the processes of secularisation are today being challenged by a widespread interest in an extensive range of spiritualities which many observers see as the result of a subjective turn in westernised societies (Heelas and Woodhead: 1-11).<sup>25</sup> Both trends often coexist because spiritual practices tend to restrict themselves to the private sphere, allowing secularisation to proceed more or less unchallenged in the public sphere. Heelas (1996) and Heelas and Woodhead provide ample evidence of the current popularity of spirituality in British society, and the relative ease with which I was able to recruit respondents with a personal interest in spirituality (see Chapter 3, Section 1) reflects this. Confessing to be engaged in a spiritual quest for meaning and enlightenment implies an openness on the part of respondents to embrace experiences that defy rational explanation, an openness which in fact some respondents freely acknowledge throughout the Psalm Journey as well as before it. Ashok, for example, is convinced that more than logic is required to find meaning in life (Ps 73-L: 1), while Elsie senses that psalmic spirituality concerns 'something deeper than empiricism and measurability' (Ps 73-L: 6). But, similar kinds of statements are frequently made by New Agers concerning their search for transcendence in the self, and in chapter 4 we noted that such 'subjective-life' spirituality is reflected in the Psalm Journey journals and group sessions. We also noted in chapter 4 that some respondents are beginning to show an interest in the 'life-as' spirituality of the psalms (and of traditional Christianity) in which transcendence is perceived as emanating from a personal supreme being who is the creator, governor and redeemer of humanity (Browning 1991: 194).<sup>26</sup> So it is worth enquiring whether this interest in 'life-as'

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<sup>22</sup> Alastair Campbell's famous quotation about the Blair government – 'We don't do God' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 03/05/03) – illustrates the secularising tendency in British public life. J.I. Packer has spoken of secularisation as 'practising the absence of God'.

<sup>23</sup> 'God is the primary agent revealed in the biblical narrative' (Davis and Hays: 5).

<sup>24</sup> 'The foci of the psalms are God and the human being – God in God's way with the world and all who live in it, and human beings in their individual and historical existence under God' (Mays: 3).

<sup>25</sup> Heelas and Woodhead see the subjective turn as 'a turn away from life-as' and 'a turn towards subjective-life' (4). As a result the goal of 'the good life' 'is not to defer to a higher authority, but to have the courage to become one's own authority' (4).

<sup>26</sup> '[T]he Bible is not, in fact, about "self-help"; it is about God's action to rescue a lost and broken world' (Davis and Hays: 1?)

spirituality bears fruit. Do some respondents make a transition to ‘life-as’ spirituality? Are any ‘drawn up’ (Ps. 30.1) through the Psalm Journey into audience with the LORD? Given the theistic focus of the psalms and their original use in worship (Mays: 2, 9-11; Terrien: 278-280), surely a ‘preferred reading’ (in the Hall-Morley sense) would be one which reveals a felt challenge to become ‘subjects before God’ (Metz).<sup>27</sup> Any investigation of the Psalm Journey would be incomplete without asking the question: How do the respondents perceive the Ultimate Being to whom the psalms are commonly addressed in the first instance?

In answering these questions I draw upon the work of Fritz K. Oser of Friburg University, Switzerland, who has established an empirical grounding for a structural-developmental stage theory of religious knowing (Fowler *et al*). Oser, an educational psychologist, postulates that humans’ relationship with an Ultimate Being is ‘constructed by a dynamic, interactional cognitive activity by which a person copes with contingencies, gives religious meaning to situations, interprets religious messages, and engages in prayer’ (Oser: 37).<sup>28</sup> He identifies three key focal points that identify the ways in which people conceive the relationship between humans and an Ultimate Being (Oser: 38). The first is ‘Transcendence versus Immanence’, where ‘The subject who finds himself or herself in a life situation that stimulates religious interpretation, asks how the Ultimate Being might intervene in the world, in a human person, in society’. The second focal point is ‘Freedom versus Dependency.’ Here a person, aware of their natural limits, ‘balances freedom from the Ultimate Being with dependence on the divine.’ The final focal point is ‘Trust versus Fear’ where experiences of fear of death, illness, ruptures in life and loneliness ‘are coordinated with underlying trust in the Ultimate Being’ (38-39).<sup>29</sup>

I use these three foci as a diagnostic tool to help identify empirical evidence in the data of a personal belief in an Ultimate Being.<sup>30</sup> I infer from each of Oser’s focal points a practice

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<sup>27</sup> As Heelas and Woodhead have pointed out such a reading is not easy in the climate of contemporary spirituality that is deeply influenced by a massive turn away from ‘life-as’ towards ‘subjective-life’ mode (Heelas and Woodhead: 2-5; cf. Heelas 1996: 18-20). Cf. Fowler’s claim that the ongoing process of Christian conversion is ‘a release from the burden of self-groundedness’ (Fowler 1991: 28).

<sup>28</sup> Oser’s compares his theory with Fowler’s; both envisage various stages in the development of the human-Ultimate Being relationship (39-41)

<sup>29</sup> Oser identifies four additional ‘polar dimensions’ to these three. They are: the Holy versus the Profane; Hope versus Absurdity; Eternity versus Ephemerality; and Functional Transparency versus Opaqueness (39).

<sup>30</sup> Oser’s theory has been subjected to a vigorous critique. A range of continental scholars from the cognitive development tradition, including A. Bucher, R.L. Fetz, H.-J. Fraas, B. Grom and F.

which I take to be an indicator of belief in God as ultimate being. The practices are: asking how God might intervene in the world, in a human person, in society; achieving a balance between human freedom and divine dependence; and coordinating the common fears of human living with trust in God. For ease of reference I call these practices TP1, TP2 and TP3.<sup>31</sup>

I concentrate on the seven less religiously active respondents<sup>32</sup> on the assumption that they present a greater challenge in terms of the Psalm Journey effecting one of the desired outcomes of Scripture engagement, i.e. to impart to respondents a theistic vision of life and a focus for faith.<sup>33</sup> These respondents are: Liz, Tom, John, Connie, Ashok, Kate and Saul. When I apply Oser's criteria to them, three respondent groups emerge. The first group – composed of Liz and Tom - demonstrates in some measure all three theistic practices; the second – a threesome of John, Connie and Ashok - reveals two; and the third – made up of Kate and Saul - evidences one.

The two respondents making up the first group provide evidence of all three theistic practices. Taking Liz first, we note that throughout the Psalm Journey she exhibits the first theistic practice (TP1), albeit with a measure of scepticism, by asking how God might intervene in the world: 'The Lord as an agent for historical change seems unreal to me' (Ps 126-D4). In her final week she confesses that she doesn't know 'whether God has a plan or not.' But such doubts do not immunise her from a sense of divine involvement in her experience, for she goes on to say: 'I have certainly had to revise the sensibility of my own will and desires and recognise that where I ended up was not due to my own effort, but still it was a place much better for me.' (Ps 22-D1). In her follow-up interview Liz acknowledges that the Psalm Journey has made her more open to God's intervention: 'Earlier I was struggling with the image of God as the "father" figure, rewarding and punishing in equal measure.... During this [Psalm Journey] I have found other openings and images of God' (I-

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Schweitzer (Oser: 56-64) maintain that the theory neglects the affective aspects of religiosity, and that the notion of an 'Ultimate Being' has not been defined with sufficient exactness. Oser offers a robust response to these criticisms, which do not, in my view, diminish the usefulness of his identification of the three main focal points of religious experience.

<sup>31</sup> TP signifies 'theistic practice'.

<sup>32</sup> The less religiously active respondents are distinguished from those who are more religiously active on the assumption that their attendance at a place of worship is either non-existent or less frequent than once a month. While recognising that attendance at a place of worship is not the only criterion of religious activity, I have adopted it as a marker because the Bible agencies regard it as one of the desirable outcomes of Scripture engagement.

<sup>33</sup> For details of the current debate among Bible agencies on the outcomes of Scripture engagement, see chapter 1, section 1.1.

1: 4). Liz's doubts do not inhibit her from portraying an openness to dependence on God (TP2); she tells us of her belief that prayers work (Ps 126-D7), and of the immense gratitude experienced 'when God **does** listen, when you realise you are not alone, and that through hardship and deliverance you are taken somewhere you never dreamt of being, somewhere where you feel more human' (Ps 22-D1). Although she wonders whether faith in God might be an 'opting out when let down' (Ps 55-D4)<sup>34</sup> she appreciates the importance of balance between dependency and freedom: 'It takes help from God to conquer the impulses to remain passive and not take responsibility for my own life. I used to think that believing in God meant giving him responsibility and then sitting back waiting to see what tricks he would pull. Now it dawns on me that it is more about accepting his help to take the full responsibility and to fuller integration and happiness' (Ps 22-D5). In addition, Liz is able to coordinate trust and fear (TP3): although sometimes 'It feels as if God has forsaken you, ... afterwards you realise that if he had forsaken you, things would have been much worse and you certainly would not be able to understand certain aspects of life' (Ps 22-D1).<sup>35</sup>

Tom, the other person in the first group, does not share Liz's doubts about God's involvement in history (TP1); he believes that in the past God revealed himself in the ancestral religion of his fellow-Zimbabweans, and cites the moving witness of a contemporary Ethiopian to the effect that God was looking after him and his family during famine (Ps 22-D7). In his website dialogue with Norah, Tom acknowledges that when he is in trouble he prays to God (TP2), even if sometimes lack of answers makes him feel bitter (Posting 2). Although he admits to being 'immensely scared' by the psalmist's imprecation of his enemies (Ps 55-D1),<sup>36</sup> he finds that that psalm gives him courage to overcome his fears (TP3) before making a presentation to his class colleagues (Posting 6). Although he admires the 'complete faith' of the author of Psalm 22 in the face of intense suffering,<sup>37</sup> Tom admits that he found it difficult to coordinate trust and fear after an international telephone conversation with his mother concerning the responsibilities expected of him by his family in

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<sup>34</sup> '[I] felt "the world" did not understand me and therefore I turned to a higher power for comfort' (Ps 55-D4).

<sup>35</sup> Reflecting on the Psalm Journey, Liz has this to say: 'It has pushed me to take the question about my own spirituality more seriously. Am I a Christian or am I not? Am I religious or am I not?' (I-1: 1). Furthermore, the experience did more for Liz than raise questions: 'It has given me,' she says, 'a nice feeling of a coherent universe and this phenomenon which I thought was on the outskirts of my life was actually reflecting something deep inside me or in the universe' (I-1: 4)

<sup>36</sup> Tom appears ambivalent as to whether God will accede to the psalmist's prayer: 'Let death come upon them' (Ps 55.15). On the one hand, he is horrified to think that the psalmist's vengeance might reflect God's character but, on the other, he finds comfort in thinking that God is forgiving (Ps 55-D1).

<sup>37</sup> Tom acknowledges that his own faith does not encounter such antagonism (Ps 22-D4).

Zimbabwe. He tells us that he feels alone and unable to share the optimism of the psalm 'that all things shall be alright with the triumph of God' (Ps 22-D6). However, in attempting to monitor his fear with his faith, Tom is showing some evidence of TP3.

The second group is composed of respondents who show signs of two theistic practices as identified by Oser. John, like Tom, is Catholic, but he is much less positive towards Christianity; he appears to have a chip on his shoulder from his church school experience. However, he does assume that God might intervene in human affairs (TP1) to the extent that he thinks it inappropriate to ask God to give one sports team victory over another, or to attempt to convert others to our own religious viewpoint (Ps 55-D5-6). John may also demonstrate a dependence on God (TP2) when he repeats Psalm 22 on behalf of a friend who is 'feeling especially alienated and alone' (Ps 22-D6).<sup>38</sup> However, John, although something of a mystic, does not give any explicit evidence of managing his fears through an underlying trust in God (TP3).<sup>39</sup>

Connie is no mystic and comes across as one of the more logical respondents. She asks how God might intervene in personal and social affairs (TP1), but is unsure if the psalms give her a satisfactory answer. Commenting on the opening line of Psalm 126 ('When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion'), she asks: 'If the Lord has so much power to instigate change, why is it that so many people are in so much pain and... sorrow due to political situations?' (Ps 126-D3). A balance between freedom and dependency (TP2) is evident in Connie's acknowledgement that 'I sometimes pray to the Lord to help me resolve issues, which in turn makes me feel like I have support in resolving the situation'. The balance is, however, tipped towards her own freedom or autonomy: meditating on Psalm 55 does not inspire her to pray more often (Ps 55-D5); and even after reflecting on 'the level of intensity in prayer' found in Psalm 22, she thinks it more likely that in such circumstances of rejection and desolation she would turn more to her inner spirituality (Ps 22-D6). This hesitation recurs in

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<sup>38</sup> John is alone among all Psalm Journey respondent, in telling us that he performed a psalm. Cf. Davis and Hays' contention that Scripture is best interpreted when it is performed. John's repetition of the psalm on behalf of his hurting friend may indicate that the Psalm Journey has helped to make a rapprochement with the rejected theistic world of his youth nearer than he thinks.

<sup>39</sup> John's practice probably falls short of Fowler's 'radical monotheism', for at times his meditation has a 'new age' feel. 'When I was meditating I kind of feel that I am more in sync with the universe... it's almost like putting yourself in and floating through the universe... I am sort of putting myself into that flow... they're all leading somewhere abstractly towards enlightenment or whatever it is, and when I'm meditating on the psalms or otherwise [*sic*] I kind of put myself into that flow ... some days you flow more than others I suppose depending on how much is in your mind and every time I meditate moving forward' (I-4: 7). 'The way I sort of see my spirituality going', John continues, 'is that I see sort of different faiths as spokes in the same wheel, that lead to the same place' (I-4: 8).

Connie's summing up of the Psalm Journey: 'There were new concepts, but no epiphanies. I have a more grounded feeling that I need to believe in myself and others more strongly and be supportive of others' (I-5: 5). Given this tendency to be self-dependent more than God-dependent, it is not surprising that Connie shows no sign of TP3.

Unlike John and Connie, Ashok had no previous exposure to the Psalms and, indeed, had never before read a psalm or a song in praise of a god (I-9: 1). Nevertheless, like them he displays two theistic practices. Initially Ashok is confused by the metaphor of 'lifting up' God.<sup>40</sup> However, as the meditation proceeds, Ashok progressively empathises with psalmic spirituality and is surprised to discover that the psalms relate to everyday reality (I-9: 2). When journaling on Psalm 73, he moves towards TP1: 'The line – "I have made God my refuge" – is of great significance', he writes. 'This is the solution for the psalmist which delivers him from his self-pity, confusion and sorrow'.<sup>41</sup> In the midst of the desolation and desperation of Psalm 74, Ashok discerns hope in the psalmist's belief in God's power and recollection of his glory (Ps 74-D4). He is impressed that this hope does not inhibit the psalmist from questioning God's actions and purpose; in fact, he considers the discovery that God may be questioned as one of the highlights of the Psalm Journey (I-9: 3). Ashok approaches TP3 when he says that meditating on the psalms helps us to keep our faith in the face of adversity (I-9: 3).

Kate and Saul form the final group that affirms one theistic practice. In a way it is remarkable that they articulate even one, because both come over as religious sceptics. Kate has a superstitious belief in herself:

For me it is most important to believe in myself ... I would consider myself to be superstitious in a certain sense because I believe in self-fulfilling prophecies. I do certain things, for example, sometimes even praying, just because I believe that the fact that I pray gives me more hope, therefore makes me more self-confident, therefore I'm more likely to achieve my goal whatever that is (I-7: 4).<sup>42</sup>

Saul is cynical rather than superstitious, suggesting that faith is being sure of nothing (Ps 30-D5). In his first week's meditation he kicks TP1 into the long grass almost before he starts by telling us that his biggest problem with Psalm 30 is the very idea of God: 'On a personal level, some all powerful Lord who gives and takes is a difficult deity to connect with' (Ps

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<sup>40</sup> Ashok is also deterred by what he conceives to be a narrow focus on sin and forgiveness.

<sup>41</sup> However, at times Ashok finds it difficult to distinguish between God and belief (Ps 73-D3).

<sup>42</sup> Kate tells us that for a long time she has prayed to her own personal god (I-7: 5).

30-D2).<sup>43</sup> Yet both Kate's self-belief and Saul's cynicism are ambiguous. Kate claims not to believe in an Ultimate Being, but the veritable volley of questions she fires at the God of the psalmists suggests that, in fact, she may be portraying a sceptical form of Oser's first focal point.<sup>44</sup> Questions like: 'Is the only choice to believe in God and be happy or to dismiss God and be punished?' (Ps 73-D2) and 'How can we believe in God when the world is in such a bad state?' (Ps 73-D2), echo the kind of questions the psalmists ask God again and again.<sup>45</sup> The ambiguity of Saul's theology lies in the fact that, although he begins the Psalm Journey doubting God's omnipotence (Ps 30-D2), he later suggests that he himself may be open 'to appeal to God on the basis of being unified with his neighbours of different faiths against those who 'are harming this world, our city, my life' (Ps 74-D6).<sup>46</sup> So, although Kate has no epiphanies - 'I waited to be lifted to a higher sphere, but it just didn't happen' (I-7: 2),<sup>47</sup> and Saul feels 'no new connection to the greater good, or God' (Ps 73-D2), both indicate a tentative openness to the possibility of God intervening in their lives.

Ashok's final verdict on the Psalm Journey given in his interview - 'I'm not saying it has totally changed me, but it has made me think' (I-9: 10) - summarises well the outcome of the engagement with the psalms by all seven respondents under consideration in this section. None of these less religiously active students reports an epiphany or a Damascus road conversion, but all are moved some distance towards adopting theistic practices despite in some cases initial resistance or misunderstanding. This suggests that the audience is not uncomfortable with the theistic worldview of the psalms and might even find it attractive and is open to being influenced by it.<sup>48</sup> In Fowlerian terms all seven of these less religiously active people show possible early signs of conversion understood as 'an ongoing process...

<sup>43</sup> Saul dislikes the psalm because it needs the reader to buy into the idea of salvation (saved from the pit) and redemption' (Ps 30-D2).

<sup>44</sup> Oser's first focal point is asking 'how the Ultimate Being might intervene in the world, in a human person, in society' (38).

<sup>45</sup> Kate's other questions (making ten in all) are a mixture of modern scepticism and psalmic protest: Why can God not allow the wicked to be happy? If we didn't punish the wicked, would God punish them? (Ps 73-D5). Are we to love and trust God only because he threatens to punish us? (Ps 73-D5). Will God punish violent street gangs who've never had a chance in life? (Ps 73-D5). How can God not take action when his followers are defeated? (Ps 74-D2). Why is God so unfair as not to offer his followers redemption in the after-life? (Ps 74-D2). How can you still believe God takes care of you when he leaves you in your darkest hours? (Ps 74-D2). Is God infinitely benevolent or morally rewarding? (Ps 74-D3).

<sup>46</sup> Saul makes clear that he would find it very difficult to appeal to God on the basis of his own personal piety and religious loyalty (Ps 74-D6).

<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, in the immediate aftermath of the Psalm Journey Kate says 'The topic of religion is omnipresent in my life at the moment. I tend to talk about that more often to my friends now' (I-7: 2 and 4).

<sup>48</sup> I am using 'worldview' in the commonly accepted sense of 'the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual interprets the world and interacts with it' (*Wikipedia*, 'World view', downloaded 01/09/07).

in which people (or a group) gradually bring the lived story of their lives into congruence with the core story of the Christian faith' (Fowler *et al* 1991:28).<sup>49</sup> Whether this process of *metanoia* in the lived stories of these students has continued is unknown.

### **Conclusion**

In evaluating my respondents' experience of the Psalm Journey I conclude from the data that they were open to the psalms fulfilling a visional role in the meditation by helping to shape the interplay in their experience between a commitment to the principle of equal regard and attempts to satisfy various basic human needs. The dynamic triadic relationship between text, equal regard and basic needs enabled respondents to have a meaningful conversation with the psalms. In exploring the extent to which the conversation is theological, i.e. is referenced to God, I conclude that during the Psalm Journey the less religiously active respondents moved nearer to contemplating a relationship with God, although none claim to have had an encounter with Ultimate Being. But it seems that for at least four weeks in 2004 the horizon of the lived story and the core story had begun to intersect.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Fowler is here quoting from one of his earlier books: *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco 1984).

<sup>50</sup> This study does not explore the question of whether there are gender differences in the interaction of respondents with the text. I suggest in chapter 12 that this might be a fruitful area of further research with a larger sample of the westernised young adult audience.

## Chapter 11: What is Scripture Engagement?

Having identified some key factors contributing to respondents' ability to enter into a meaningful and creative conversation with the six psalm texts, I am now ready to investigate more precisely the nature of the conversation between respondents and text in an attempt to formulate an answer to my second key research question posed early in chapter 1.<sup>1</sup> In effect I explore in this chapter the extent to which the Psalm Journey helps to answer the question 'What is Scripture engagement?' - a question on which the Bible agencies have not as yet reached a consensus. As we saw in chapter 1 the definitions emanating from publications and international consultations on this subject reflect a variety of understandings. In the light of this range of views I intend to explore the extent to which the Psalm Journey data validate the various understandings alluded to and, in doing so, to contribute to the formulation of a more comprehensive definition of Scripture engagement. I ought to point out that, with the significant exception of Crockett's work among African Americans (Noss: 42-69), the current debate has to my knowledge not drawn on any empirical studies, although it has been extensively informed by the practical experience of the Bible agencies.

My first step must be to revisit the debate on the nature of Scripture engagement in order to recall the key concepts and processes being discussed. I identified in chapter 1 three key documents: the UBS Purpose Statement (*UBS Bulletin* 192/193, 2001), the *UBS Background Paper* (2003) and the FOBAI discussion paper 'Exploring "Scripture Engagement"' (April 2005). Viewed comprehensively, these documents identify five facets of Scripture engagement.<sup>2</sup> (1) It is an interaction. Scripture engagement occurs when 'people *interact* with the Word of God' (UBS). (2) It is a deference shown towards the text: people 'interact with *the Word of God*' (cf. the claim in Noss (2) that Scripture engagement makes 'the Bible recoverable and discoverable as sacred Scripture'). (3) It is transformational, making Scripture 'accessible as the place of life-enhancing and life-transforming encounter' (Noss: 2). (4) It is transcendental in enabling people 'to encounter God' (FOBAI). And (5) it is missional in that its aim is that people 'may come to faith in Jesus Christ, grow in Christian maturity, and become both committed members of the Church and servants of the world in need' (FOBAI). I now proceed to explore the extent to which these concepts are validated

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<sup>1</sup> 'Does this engagement [with specific psalm texts in the form of a semi-structured four-week meditative spiritual journey] contribute to the current debate among the Bible Societies and other Bible agencies about the nature of Scripture engagement?' (chapter 1).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to recognise that these documents do not enjoy an equal status. The definition in the UBS Purpose Statement articulates the official understanding of the UBS member Bible Societies. On the other hand, the *UBS Background Paper* is an interpretive reflection on that understanding, and the FOBAI formulation represents work in progress in a wider forum in an attempt to gain fresh understanding of how Bible agencies might help people engage with Scripture more meaningfully.

by my data and, in doing so, I attempt to formulate an understanding of Scripture engagement which reflects the findings described in chapter 10 and may contribute towards achieving a measure of consensus in the debate.

The results of my analysis in chapter 10 prompt me to provide some structure to the facets listed above by distinguishing those that are essential components of Scripture engagement from those that are its desirable consequences. My interpretation of the data suggests that the key components are for readers / hearers to enter a process of interaction (or conversation) with the text, and to accord the text a degree of deference. In other words, facets (1) and (2) are essential; if they are absent Scripture engagement does not take place. One desirable consequence (from the standpoint of the Bible agencies) is clearly articulated in facet (5) where faith-discipleship is stated as an aim of Scripture engagement. However, the Psalm Journey leads me to propose that transformation and divine encounter, i.e. facets (3) and (4), are also to be seen as desirable outcomes of Scripture engagement rather than as essential components (as the UBS *Background Paper* and the FOBAI document appear to regard them).

In the remainder of this chapter I attempt to substantiate the validity of my distinction between components and outcomes by exploring the following four distinct audience reactions to the psalmic texts. First, the Psalm Journey data are indicative of a ‘conversation’ between respondent and text, although, as we saw in chapter 10, the degree of resonance, relevance and rapport varies from person to person. Second, the Psalm Journey confirms the faith of the more religiously active respondents across the range of religious affiliations represented. Third, despite manifesting a degree of deference to the psalm texts, the less religiously active respondents hesitate to make the kind of commitment that would manifest in their experience the envisaged outcomes of Scripture engagement. Fourth, the conversation with the text, while not leading to life-transformation, encounter with God, or faith-discipleship, nevertheless does move the less religiously active respondents to approximate these desired outcomes of Scripture engagement. That is, these respondents are moved to consider the spiritual reality of God as a supreme, transcendent being, and to contemplate – but not adopt - some form of Christian faith-discipleship. In the four central sections of the chapter I describe in detail each of these audience reactions to the Psalm Journey under the headings of Conversation, Confirmation, Hesitation and Approximation.

### Conversation

It is possible to describe the interaction of all twelve respondents with the psalmic texts as a conversation for the basic reason that most of them find the text correlating with their everyday experience in ways that invite mental dialogue. Tom sees a parallel between the reference to urban violence in Psalm 55.9-11 and the socio-political crisis in his homeland (Zimbabwe). Liz finds that the psalmic community's affirmation that those who sow in tears shall reap with joy (Ps 126.5-6) evokes a vision of the future: 'There's always a forward direction, even if looking back,' she told the group. 'Somehow I would like to go there' (L: 1-3). At the end of his last *lectio divina* (on Ps 74), Ashok says: 'This is a communication between God and me. It relieves all my tensions' (L: 7). Elsie is able to discover very readily a correlation between Psalm 30 and her holiday in Austria, and builds a relationship with the text: 'When I felt emotional about the psalms, it felt like I identified with what the psalmist was saying' (I-8: 7).

Each interaction is unique to the individual, so it is not surprising that some respondents discover the correlation between ancient text and contemporary situation more easily than others. Saul, for example, finds it impossible to relate in any positive way to Psalm 30, but he is able to establish sympathy and empathy with Psalms 73 and 74 (see D1 for each psalm). Ashok initially also finds interacting with psalmic texts difficult. Psalm 30 'didn't really appeal' to him (D1). But in meditating on Psalm 73 he readily interacts with the text, discovering a correlation between it and his experience of what he takes to be today's equivalent of the 'wicked' (D2). He then finds himself affirming the psalmist's spiritual resolution of the ambiguity created by the prosperity of the wicked: 'While reading the part where the psalmist gains realisation – I felt pretty much one with his thoughts at least with the core of it – one needs more than logic to find personal meaning, peace and the balance in life between materialism and spirituality' (D3). Again, Ashok offers several 'preferred' readings of Psalm 74 which he finds to be 'more contextual than the rest' (D6) in the sense that he could relate to the passion and anguish of the psalmist. 'His cry for help from God,' Ashok writes, 'is quite moving and his descriptions of the work of the evildoers are metaphorical and can be read in context of the modern day world.' (D1). In his follow-up interview Ashok told me that previously he had regarded religious texts as 'always separated from reality', but the Psalm Journey 'was the first time I saw that it [a religious text] can be analysed in a particular context of your life' (I-9: 2).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John also has difficulties with the conversation, and for him, these seem to increase rather than decrease as the Journey progresses. He found his first day's meditation on Psalm 126 to be 'positive

Edith illustrates how an awareness of correlation between the text and modern everyday life generates a dialogue between the spirituality of the respondents and the spirituality of the psalms (or psalmists). Because she is impressed that ‘something that was that old [Psalms 73 and 74] could have such specific reference [today]’ (I-11: 3), she can write as follows in her journal: ‘I really liked Psalm 73’. She tells me later: ‘I really did relate to it’ (I-11: 4).<sup>4</sup> More surprising perhaps is that Ashok, coming with no previous biblical exposure, is also aware of the psalmist communicating with him: ‘I felt pretty much one with his thoughts’ he records in his journal (D3). ‘I am happy,’ he told me, [that] I attended this and had an opportunity to read religious texts for the first time in my life. Because it opened a new door to me and I feel a bit more peaceful now’ (I-9: 8). However, where the perception of a correlation is low, the dialogue is less exciting. Kate, for example, finds it difficult to form an intimate relationship with the text: ‘I have some problems with it [the Bible] and I don’t really like it. And that hasn’t changed’ (I-7: 4). Saul also finds it difficult to bond spiritually with the psalmists (I-10: 6), and Flora, as we saw in chapter 9, has real problems relating to Psalm 74.<sup>5</sup>

Norah’s conversation with Psalms 126, 55 and 22 is highly emotional. It begins with trauma and ends with euphoria when it confirms her in her intention to become a Buddhist.<sup>6</sup> She tells the group that meditating on the psalm touched her life by helping to make the impossible happen: ‘You dream about it. All tell you it’s impossible. Then it happens. The

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and calming,’ providing ‘a time to critically reflect on life and not just live it’ (D1). But the following week, he relates that the angry, vengeful tone of Psalm 55 blocked him from ‘relating to the psalm in any significant way at all’ (D1). Early in the third week he found that phrases in the Catholic liturgy borrowed from Psalm 22 created a lot of ‘baggage’ from negative memories of his schooling that got between him and the text. However, later in the week the psalm’s tone of ‘strength and power’ in the face of despair and imminent death enabled him ‘to draw together some energy’ during a stressful day (D3-4).

<sup>4</sup> Edith’s enthusiasm over Psalms 73 and 74 contrasts with the difficulty she encounters in finding a correlation between the text of Psalm 30 and her situation (Ps 30-D3).

<sup>5</sup> Flora, however, has no difficulty in conversing with the text of Psalms 30 and 73.

<sup>6</sup> It is clear from her follow-up interview that Norah had begun to move towards Buddhism three years previously. Norah had a non-religious upbringing in Scotland as a result of her parents coming from different sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide. While in high school she became interested in Tibetan Buddhism, an interest that had developed with the result that by the time she begins the Psalm Journey she is seriously contemplating converting. During her final meditation on Psalm 126 she makes her decision: ‘As from last night,’ she tells the group: ‘After a long time of indecision – I decided to take refuge in June.’ It seems that this is not what Norah expected to happen during the Psalm Journey and in her journal she expresses surprise that ‘this Christian [*sic*] psalm could help me with my Buddhism’ (Ps 126-D6). ‘Taking refuge’ is Buddhist terminology for formally converting to Buddhism in a ceremony involving taking refuge vows and saying the refuge prayer. (‘Going for Refuge’ on <http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/refuge.html>, downloaded 28 Nov. 06). The coincidence between this Buddhist terminology and the concept of refuge as ‘the controlling metaphor’ in the Book of Psalms (McCann 1996: 666-67) is striking, but coincidental.

happiness, sense of achievement, satisfaction for oneself this gives you'. Tom's dialogue with the text is considerably more cerebral, yet he finds himself laughing at his image in the mirror on realising that the vindictiveness of the psalmist in Psalm 55 towards an enemy is echoed in his feelings of apprehension as he contemplates making an academic presentation to a critical audience (D3). Liz is able to establish an extraordinary degree of rapport with the author of Psalm 55 because she also has been the victim of a deeply traumatic personal betrayal (D1-2).<sup>7</sup> Connie states: 'I am slowly realising that reading these psalms and consciously making an effort to think about the meaning, and understand the spirituality within them, is a good experience for me' (D2). Here is John's testimony to the reality of the dialogue: 'Empathy with the speaker's anguish was able to calm me somewhat, putting things in perspective' (D4). Finally Luke tells us that he loves the psalms because he is able to identify with the psalmists' 'helplessness, their fear, their torment, and most of all their stubborn faith' (Ps 22-D4). Thus we see that all six actively religious respondents are able to find a correlation between the horizon of the text and their own horizon that enables them to enter into a meaningful and helpful conversation with the text about their spirituality.<sup>8</sup> However, while this process is common to all respondents, its impact on those who were actively religious prior to undertaking the Psalm Journey differs significantly from those who are not, and it is to the varied outcomes of the conversation that I now turn.

### **Confirmation**

The five already actively religious respondents are confirmed in the religious direction their lives have already taken.<sup>9</sup> Luke, Edith, and Elsie seem at home with traditional Hebrew-Christian views of God as a supreme personal being who can be known (Gollwitzer: 38-49), and generally their Christian spirituality is affirmed during the Psalm Journey. Flora has a more deterministic concept of God than that normally entertained in the mainline Hebrew-Christian tradition, but along with the five actively Christian respondents she refers to God in her journal as a supreme being.

The actively Christian respondents all confirm their faith during the Psalm Journey. Elsie, for example, finds that personal meditation enhances her relationship with God (Ps 30-D5)

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<sup>7</sup> In her follow-up interview Liz says: 'I could now return to these three psalms and I know I have a relationship with them' (I-1: 4).

<sup>8</sup> The contribution made to the correlation and the conversation by the readers' 'helps' made available to respondents will be considered in the final chapter.

<sup>9</sup> On the assumption that the actively religious attend a place of worship at least once a month, Edith, Elsie, Flora, Luke and Norah come into this category. In making this assumption I have foregrounded attendance at a place of worship because the Bible agencies regard church attendance as a desirable outcome of Scripture engagement.

despite feeling that the structure of the *lectio divina* made the group meditation more clinical than spiritual (I-8: 2). Luke tells us that meditating on Psalm 22 makes him more able to reconcile his questions and fears with his inability to get immediate answers (Ps 22-D4).<sup>10</sup> Tom also confesses in his journal to have problems coping with fear (Ps 22-D6), but afterwards he indicates that he found the Psalm Journey a good experience (I-2: 2).

Edith, like Luke, is actively and regularly involved in church, but approaches the psalmic texts with a higher degree of doubt. Nevertheless, she seems no less influenced by the Psalm Journey. 'I may be a Thomas,' she tells me, 'but that doesn't mean that I'm not part of it [Christianity?]' (I-11: 7). Not only did the Journey spark a new interest for Edith in the lesser known books of the Old Testament (I-11: 5), it also made church a more intense experience: 'The weeks that I was doing the meditation...', she says, 'I was absolutely paying attention and listening to sermons and things like that' (I-11: 4).<sup>11</sup>

This general confirmation of Christian faith that is taking place is quiet rather than dramatic; no respondent gives the impression of encountering God in some radically new way. Any drama is reserved for the Buddhist, not the Christians! Norah passes through emotional trauma to euphoria as she confirms a life-changing course of action she has been seriously considering for some time. In the process of meditating on Psalms 126 and 55 Norah is deeply influenced at the affective level: 'Massive feeling/sense of darkness when meditating. Large feeling of being deserted and having no purpose to live for' (Ps 126-D2).<sup>12</sup> This psychological turmoil probably helps to advance Norah's decision to confirm her Buddhist commitment, for it is well known that life-changing decisions are not uncommonly prompted by intellectual and emotional crises.<sup>13</sup> Norah's case also illustrates how the degree of respondent appreciation of spiritual enhancement during the Psalm Journey can be related to

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<sup>10</sup> Luke traces an intriguing parallel between Psalm 22 and Jesus' Gethsemane prayer: the transition from the violent language of the psalmist's disorientation to the praise vocabulary of his new orientation makes for 'a very human, higglety piggity version of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane' (I-6: 9).

<sup>11</sup> In retrospect Edith says 'I think it [the Psalm Journey] gave me an even keel' (I-11: 11).

<sup>12</sup> Norah does not make clear the reason for her depressed state, but the psychological crisis seems to be resolved a couple of days later when she tells us that, although still feeling sad, she is by now feeling 'a connection with what the psalm is saying' to her. She goes on: 'It seems to be reinforcing the idea of things improving and now nothing in my mundane existence could be as bad as what some people have and still are, going through. In a strange way it makes me cheerful at the same time and allows me to appreciate what I have. I have so amazing people around me that really I don't need anything else in this moment' (Day 4).

<sup>13</sup> In the 32 case studies of Christian conversion taken from the *Finding Faith Today* (1992) research in the UK, and summarised in *Stories of Faith* (1995) by John Finney, 16 involved at some stage emotional crises occasioned by suicidal feelings, depression, divorce, addiction, etc.

the depth of a felt need for one's faith to be confirmed.<sup>14</sup> Flora, like Norah, came to the Psalm Journey from the standpoint of a non-Christian faith, although, being brought up in her faith from childhood, she has a deeper and less emotional commitment to Baha'i than Norah has to Buddhism. But, like Norah, Flora tells us that she is more relaxed in her faith following the Psalm Journey (I-12: 3).<sup>15</sup>

Thus there is evidence that the Psalm Journey has confirmed the faith of all those who were already actively religious. This is the case for the Buddhist and the Baha'i as well as for the three Christians. However, this is surely to be expected especially of the Christians and even from those professing other faiths.

But what of the eight others?<sup>16</sup> I explore their conversation with the psalms in the two final sections of the chapter, indicating that the response of the less actively religious to the Psalm Journey is ambiguous. It is both a 'hesitation' to embrace the outcomes of Scripture engagement as envisaged by the Bible agencies, and at the same time (in some cases) a tentative move (or moves) towards realising these. In other words, there is a dual response. Alongside a very real 'hesitation' to develop their spirituality in psalmic directions, respondents also show signs of being willing to approximate the outcomes envisaged by FOBAI. The individual responses exhibiting 'hesitation' or 'approximation' are complex, with respondents hesitating in relation to some outcomes and approximating to others. This complexity of response is compounded by some of the respondents who are confirmed in their faith in certain areas, being hesitant in others.<sup>17</sup> In the next section I will carry my

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<sup>14</sup> A further factor moving Norah towards conversion is the sixth anniversary of the death of a school friend. On Day 6 of the first week Norah makes this entry in her journal: 'After today's meditation I cannot seem to stop reflecting on death. This is rather relevant at this time period to me as my friend died 6 years ago on Monday. It also links into my Buddhist beliefs and previous meditation I have done about death, decay and the cycle of life'. The reference to 'the cycle of life' reflects her Buddhist understanding of existence, which the psalm seems to have reinforced for her by the strong contrast between the two stanzas of the psalm (vv. 1-3 and 4-5), suggesting to Norah a recognition 'that everything moves on from where it is in a cycle' (Day 2). She also found the contrast between sowing in tears and reaping with joy (v. 5) supported the view that life 'is all a circular cycle of existence' (Day 5). The severe illness or death of a close friend or relative played a formative role in 4 of the 32 case studies reported in *Stories of Faith*.

<sup>15</sup> In her follow-up interview Flora explains that, prior to the Psalm Journey she had been going through a period of religious questioning (I-12: 3), but that she is now more relaxed, realising that the answers she seeks will take time to come (I-12: 4). It is not clear if the Psalm Journey produced this greater relaxation, but it may have contributed to it.

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly all the less actively religious respondents regard themselves as having a Christian religious identity, except Saul who is Jewish. Only Kate never attends a place of worship. The others attend with varying degrees of infrequency. Liz attends church approximately once every three months, while Tom, Saul and Ashok attend a place of worship not more frequently than once in six months. Connie, Joan and John attend about once a year.

<sup>17</sup> I am using faith here in its generic Fowlerian sense (see chapter 7).

investigation into the meaning of Scripture engagement one step further forward by attempting to discover why some respondents engaging with the psalms are reluctant to go further in the direction they perceive the psalms to be pointing.

### **Hesitation**

While the five actively religious respondents are confirmed during the Psalm Journey in the pursuit of their religion, the other seven hesitate to express their engagement with the texts in the ways envisaged by the Bible agencies, noted in chapter 1. The reason for the hesitation is not lack of awareness of being in conversation with the text. Joan, for example, senses Psalm 30 'reaching out' to her. 'For me,' she says, 'the psalmist was inviting, wanting me to believe in God'. But she goes on to tell the group that she declined the invitation because she is 'not one hundred percent convinced by the message of the psalm' (Ps 30-L: 6). Joan engages with Scripture, but this does not produce the outcomes expected by the Bible agencies.<sup>18</sup> In order to ascertain why this is so I will investigate the data in the light of the facets of Scripture engagement which earlier in the chapter I drew from the wider debate, asking why less actively religious respondents are ready to enter into a conversation with the psalms but hesitate to accord to these poems a high degree of divine authority.<sup>19</sup> I will also enquire why they hesitate to open themselves to experience the other outcomes of Scripture engagement highlighted: life-transformation, encounter with God, Christian faith and discipleship.

### *Authority*

As we have already noted, the UBS purpose statement defines Scripture engagement as interacting not simply with the text, but with 'the Word of God'. Although the Bible Societies decline to define theologically the relationship between the text and 'the Word of God',<sup>20</sup> there can be little doubt that the wording implies a recognition of the text exercising a unique authority which, according to Joseph Crockett of the ABS, becomes operational when 'individuals afford [it] deliberative thought and continuous pledges of obedience'

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<sup>18</sup> According to Tracy (1981: 163), the disclosive power of a classic text depends not only on a willingness to enter a conversation of mutual questioning between respondent and text, but also on a willingness to recognise that in the conversation our existence as authentic or inauthentic is at stake.

<sup>19</sup> The tendency of some respondents to argue with the text may be a sign of the presence of Scripture engagement in the Psalm Journey rather than of its absence, for it indicates that the text is being taken seriously and respondents are weighing up the pros and cons of travelling further along the path they sense the psalm texts are pointing to.

<sup>20</sup> They take it to be the churches' responsibility to define biblical authority. See Chapter 1

(Noss: 5).<sup>21</sup> Crockett's explication provides two helpful criteria with which to measure the extent to which my respondents recognise the psalms as authoritative texts.

It is clear that all respondents – not only the less actively religious – express varying degrees of hesitation about ascribing divine authority to the psalm texts.<sup>22</sup> For this reason I will consider both religious categories of respondents at this point. Of all the respondents, Elsie probably displays the 'highest' view of the Book of Psalms, which she describes as 'my favourite place to turn to in the Bible' (I-8: 2). However, the Psalm Journey highlights for her that affording deliberative thought and continuous pledges of obedience to Scripture are not straightforward tasks, and brings out 'how complicated the Scripture is – how it can mean so many things to so many people: that can be confusing (I-8: 7). Edith, also brought up in the church, comes to the psalms with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'<sup>23</sup> perhaps by way of reaction to the views of some fundamentalist friends (I-11: 6). While Edith gives the psalm texts deliberative thought, her pledges of allegiance are more selective than Elsie's: 'You have to work through "Do I believe what I'm reading?" Maybe I don't. And that doubt is actually a good thing because it makes you think about everything you do' (I-11: 8). Luke also recognises that psalmic authority is ambivalent: 'I certainly question whether I should look at this [Ps 55] as an inspired text or as a profoundly human scream' (D4).<sup>24</sup>

Hesitation in ascribing divine authority to the texts is greater among less actively religious respondents. John finds it difficult to accord deferential authority to the psalms primarily because he perceives that those who acknowledge their authority portray a sense of superiority over others (Ps 55-D5). What Ashok finds appealing in the Psalm Journey is not an authoritative text, but the opportunity to question religion (I-9: 5).<sup>25</sup> For Kate (I-7: 13) and Saul (I-10: 8) the interaction with the group is more stimulating than the interaction with the text. This greater degree of hesitation among the less actively religious is to be expected.

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<sup>21</sup> The publishing title of the UBS Spanish 'Version Popular' – *Dios Habla Hoy* (God speaks today) – reveals an assumption that God speaks through the Bible and may be encountered there. Cf Barth's view that the God of the Bible is not 'somewhere else', but is given only in, with and under the text itself (Barth 1957: 43-5).

<sup>22</sup> This general conclusion requires qualification because poetic songs of thanksgiving, wisdom and lament tend not to ask ostensibly for the allegiance of readers / hearers as do prophetic oracles, dominical parables and apostolic epistles. On the other hand, classic texts *per se* call for a response of trust and command: trust in the reality of what the text discloses, and a command to live accordingly (Tracy 1981: 164).

<sup>23</sup> A phrase in common use in biblical hermeneutics, attributed originally to Paul Ricoeur (Thiselton 1992: 13-14).

<sup>24</sup> Flora regards the psalms as sacred writings, but it is clear that she sees them as subsidiary to the writings of Baha'ullah, regarded by Baha'is as final revelations.

<sup>25</sup> Neither Ashok nor Saul find authoritative religious texts attractive.

What is more surprising is that the less actively religious as well as the more actively religious fulfil Crockett's first criterion for the recognition of Scriptural authority, i.e. they afford deliberative thought to the texts. Also surprising is that the more actively religious, as well as the less active, show some hesitation in giving the texts continuous pledges of obedience (Crockett's second criterion). This ambiguity illustrates how, on account of the idiosyncrasies of human nature, Crockett's two criteria can get out of step, making Scripture engagement a complex process which cannot be analysed simply. Ambiguity also characterises any evidence of life transformation among respondents.

### *Transformation*

The validity of the distinction between 'life-enhancing' and 'life-transforming' (Noss: 2), suggesting that Scripture engagement might effect one but not necessarily the other, is supported by the evidence emanating from the Psalm Journey, for all respondents profess to enjoy the experience as something that enhances their lives, but none except Norah find it life-transforming. Connie's evaluation is typical: 'I enjoyed the Psalm Journey very much and it got better with each meeting' (I-5: 5). Also typical is her acknowledgement of its failure to make a difference: 'It did not change my behaviour much' (I-5: 4).<sup>26</sup> The close connection between 'life-enhancing' and 'life-transforming' in Noss suggests that the first is a stepping stone to the second, so that taking the first step, but not the second, implies a hesitation on the part of respondents to go further. I plan to explore this hesitation to embrace life transformation by reviewing the varying degrees of enhancement experienced by respondents. While it is not feasible within the theoretical framework of the current study to measure precisely the depth of the enhancement brought to each individual, it is possible on the basis of what respondents wrote and said to give an approximate qualitative value to each respondent's enhancement in terms of it being high, medium or low, and I shall now proceed to do this.

Ashok ends the Psalm Journey with a high sense of enhancement. 'I am happy I attended this,' he says in his interview, 'and had an opportunity to read religious texts for the first time in my life, because it opened a door to me, and I feel more peaceful now'.<sup>27</sup> I reckon Edith's enhancement also as high, even if she does not enthuse about the Psalm Journey to the same degree as Ashok. For her the experience was 'worthwhile' (I-11: 1) – less than a

<sup>26</sup> Is Norah the exception? She certainly experienced an emotional transformation while meditating on Psalms 126 and 55, confirming her in the way of Buddhism, but this is hardly the transformation envisaged by the Bible agencies.

<sup>27</sup> Ashok goes on: 'I'm not saying it has totally changed me, but it has made me think, and what more can you ask for' (I-9: 10).

ringing endorsement. However, it is clear from her interview that she enjoyed the Psalm Journey and that her muted appreciation is expressed in the context of her frustration with the church.<sup>28</sup> Above all, a ‘high’ rating is justified by the decisive impact the Psalm Journey had on Edith in giving her ‘an even keel’ by helping her bring closure to a relationship issue: ‘I deleted all the emails of the correspondence that took place so that there was no way I could go back and dwell on it.’ (I-11: 11). Along with Ashok and Edith, I place Liz in the high category. In her follow-up interview, Liz says the Psalm Journey gave her ‘a nice sense of a coherent universe’ (I-1: 4). The atmosphere of the group, which she describes as ‘very calm and engaging’ (I-1: 7), was probably a major factor in persuading her to share the deeply personal pain we observed in chapter 5.

Moving to the medium category, I place Elsie and Kate here. The Psalm Journey challenges Elsie to think about spirituality: ‘I’ve been a Christian for a really long time, but I’ve never really thought about spiritual goals or where I want it to take me’ (I-8: 6). Therefore, the Psalm Journey ‘probably had a big influence’ on her spiritual quest, although she confesses ‘I don’t think it ever really changed my thinking’ (I-8: 6). The discussion after the group meditations seems to be just as significant for Elsie as the meditation proper: ‘It was like one of those really good dinner conversations that spark off after people have been sitting round a dinner table for two or three hours or sitting in a pub for a couple of hours, and you begin to be able to talk about things that are more meaningful’ (I-8: 3).

I deem that Saul and Flora fall into the ‘low’ enhancement grouping. Saul finds sharing with the group after the *lectio divina* to be the most impactful aspect of the experience: ‘I don’t think the psalms themselves as far as I can remember challenged me, or challenged things about myself, challenged personality traits or demeanour.... The challenge was more being able to share something with you and a group of people talking about the psalms’ (I-10: 8). However, Saul acknowledges that the Psalm Journey forced him to recognise that he has values (I-10: 8). Flora’s enhancement is also low; it is difficult for her to acquiesce in the psalmist calling God to account probably because many of her readings reflect a fatalism that is often identified with the Baha’i faith.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Edith expresses this frustration as follows: ‘There are so many people my age who really do want to express faith, but there’s no place to go’ (I-11: 6).

<sup>29</sup> The following is an example of Flora’s fatalistic readings: ‘I often go through phases when I don’t understand what God is doing nor why He is doing things He does, but contrary to the psalmist, I still think God has a greater purpose that we don’t understand, and so I would not think of giving God “tips” on how He should run things. We should pray for Him to let us catch a glimpse of this greater purpose and possibly understand a bit of what is going on’ (Psalm 74-D6).

In summary, engaging with the psalms enhances the life of all respondents in varying degrees which I have broadly characterised as high, medium and low. This outcome raises the question whether respondents regard this enrichment as being conferred by the text, by the group or by a higher power, which brings me to the next facet of Scripture engagement envisaged in the debate.

#### *Encounter with God*

Although the religiously active respondents generally acquiesce in the psalmists' close association with God, no respondent claims explicitly to have encountered God in or through the text during the Psalm Journey.<sup>30</sup> Such a possibility is complicated by respondents evidencing a variety of perceptions of the divine. Liz finds it difficult to accept the psalmists' understanding of God as a divine being who intervenes directly in personal experience. At times she identifies God with the stream of life (Ps 126-D5-6). Although Joan 'hears' the psalmist of Psalm 30 saying 'If you're willing to let God help you, God will help you' she declines the invitation (Ps 30-L: 6). Flora has a deterministic understanding of God's power, while it is not clear if Ashok, who tells us he has found he can speak about God in a new way, has adopted the concept of a personal God that the psalmists envisage. Saul speaks of God, but his response focuses on understanding and respecting neighbours rather than worshipping a supreme being. So, all in all, it is probably fair to conclude that there is no evidence to suggest that any of the respondents experienced a new or renewed encounter with God during the Psalm Journey.

Norah's perception of God is entirely negative; indeed, Psalm 126 evokes in her a sense of antagonism towards God, prompting her on the third day into the Psalm Journey to post this message on the website:

After doing some meditation on Psalm 126 I have this overwhelming sense of blame and in a way hatred (that word may be too strong) for god. Does this mean that people only like god when something's going right for them and all is lovely? Is their faith really that shallow?

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<sup>30</sup> Some respondents consider that the psalmists' access to God makes them over-confident. See Tom (Ps 55-D2,5); Ashok (Ps 30-D6).

It is clear that Norah is very upset by the picture of God she understands herself to have received from the text.<sup>31</sup> As far as she is concerned, she has encountered God and doesn't like what she sees. Paradoxically she responds much more positively to Psalm 55 despite its revengeful tone, which other respondents – notably Tom – found distasteful.<sup>32</sup>

To sum up, meditating on the psalmic texts stimulates an awareness of God, but apart from Norah's negative perception of the divine, no respondent comes close to claiming a personal encounter with the divine. Interestingly, the prevailing absence of such encounter does not preclude considerable talk about faith.

### *Faith and Discipleship*

The question I want to ask here is: Do the respondents validate the stated outcome of Scripture engagement in the FOBAI definition ('that they may come to faith in Jesus Christ, grow in Christian maturity, and become committed members of the Church')? The short answer is 'Hardly!' The Psalm Journey does encourage the actively Christian respondents, like Elsie and Edith, to grow in their faith. It also challenges Tom and Liz, who are less active in their church involvement, to renew the faith they had known when much younger. Of the non-Christian respondents Ashok seems to be the most affected by the Psalm Journey. He becomes very interested in Christianity, but without giving up his Hindu background or Rama Krishna philosophy. As 'the voice of our own common humanity' the Psalms appeal to all faiths.<sup>33</sup> Flora finds that the Psalm Journey has helped her develop further her Baha'i spirituality (I-12: 5), while Norah tells us that it has encouraged her to be more tolerant of other people and other beliefs and helped her forgive someone (I-3: 7). It is not clear whether Saul's Jewish faith has been advanced by the Psalm Journey, for among respondents perhaps he is the most cynical about faith, quoting in his journal a lyric from 'Public Square' by the Canadian indie rock band Rheostatics:

Meeting on the public square  
In the churches they rejoice  
About something I feel nothing for  
And they're not all that sure about the object of their song but they keep singing  
Someone told me that's what faith is all about (D5).

<sup>31</sup> Norah is not the only respondent to suppose that the attitudes of the psalmist are attributes of God by projecting the perceived weaknesses of the poet on to their understanding of God (see chapter 5).

<sup>32</sup> In response to Tom's posting expressing his problems with the psalmist's vengeance, Norah writes: 'I see where you're coming from, but do you not get the feeling that there's pure trust in god at the end of this psalm and that there is a sense of peace?... Although there was frustration, it was let go.' (Posting 4).

<sup>33</sup> Brueggemann 1982: 13)

Both Norah (I-3: 7) and Flora (I-12: 4) say that the Psalm Journey has given them a greater understanding of Christianity. But, once all the above evidence has been noted, the fact remains that no respondents have come to faith in Jesus Christ during the Psalm Journey, and, indeed, Norah and Flora moved in other directions in respectively making a new commitment to Buddhism and being confirmed in allegiance to Bah' ai.

At this point it is appropriate to return to the question, already raised briefly in chapter 6, concerning whether using faith in Jesus Christ as a benchmark of Scripture engagement is applicable to a project like this one. The Psalm Journey focuses on texts that make no explicit reference to Jesus and is engaging respondents who may have little if any detailed knowledge of the Gospels. Furthermore, I question whether using Christian faith and discipleship as indices of Scripture engagement is appropriate even where the focus of engagement were to be a text from the Gospels. That said, I have to acknowledge that at one point the Psalm Journey material becomes explicitly Christological, i.e. where I provide in the minimal hermeneutic a reference to Matthew 27 as an inter-textual reading relating to Psalm 22. Several respondents commented in their journals on the fact that the Matthean text represents Jesus quoting from the psalm while on the cross.<sup>34</sup>

In this section I have demonstrated that, while more religiously active respondents on the whole find the Psalm Journey to be a confirming experience, others hesitate to follow through their engagement with the psalmic texts in the ways anticipated by the Bible agencies. In the case of the less religiously active respondents there is little or no indication of transformation, encounter with God or faith-discipleship in the sense these words carry as facets of Christian conversion, suggesting that they might be more appropriately regarded as goals rather than indicators of Scripture engagement. This inference raises the question of whether any progress towards these goals has been made during the Psalm Journey, so it is appropriate that I now go on to review any evidence suggesting that respondents are prompted through engaging with the psalm texts to move in varying degrees towards one or more of these anticipated outcomes, a phenomenon I am calling 'approximation.'

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<sup>34</sup> The link between Psalm 22 and Jesus was highlighted in the minimal hermeneutic as background information about how the psalm is viewed in the New Testament. The readiness with which some respondents commented on the role Psalm 22 played in Jesus' passion suggests that the Psalm Journey audience might find attractive Bonhoeffer's utilisation of the psalms (following Luther) as a means of listening to the voice of Christ praying with us and for us (Robertson 2002: 11). Conceivably Psalm 22 could supplement passages like John 17 and Mark 14.32-42 (and parallels) in a meditation on the spirituality of Jesus.

### **Approximation**

I conduct my review of this fourth type of audience reaction - that which approximates, but does not demonstrate, the outcomes of Scripture engagement - by re-using the four facets employed in the previous section as my sub-headings.

#### *Authority*

There are indications that the Psalm Journey gives the Psalms (and perhaps the Bible) a higher profile in the eyes of respondents.<sup>35</sup> In her follow-up interview, Flora acknowledges: 'I'd never gone in depth into the Psalms before. I hadn't studied them like that before and I found them very interesting' (I-12: 1). Although she doubts if the Psalm Journey will change her behaviour, Connie finds a new respect for the psalms (I-5: 4). Saul's response to the question 'What have you done differently as a result of the Psalm Journey?' is 'I have a Bible on my desk' (I-10: 9). This is not the only indication that the Psalm Journey created openings to other parts of Scripture which respondents may wish to follow up later. Norah indicates that she keeps her Psalm Journey Bible visible rather than putting it in a drawer or on a bookshelf (I-3: 4). Ashok's growing appreciation of the texts over the course of the Journey awakens his curiosity and prompts him to find out more about the Bible, the church and Christianity. Most respondents say that the Psalm Journey has encouraged them to explore more of the Bible in the future.<sup>36</sup> Only Kate is negative on this (I-7: 4), while Connie is unsure (I-5: 2). But the data suggests that all respondents would probably be willing to ascribe to the Book of Psalms the status of a 'classic text'.

#### *Transformation*

We have already deduced that when the UBS Scripture Engagement Project team determined that a key feature of Scripture engagement is 'making Scripture accessible as the place of ... life-transforming encounter' (Noss: 2), it is very likely that its members were envisioning such transformation as a process taking place over time. If this is so, then transformation as a benchmark of Scripture engagement is more applicable to longitudinal studies rather than

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<sup>35</sup> A classic text authenticates itself by codifying authentic and inevitable questions about the meaning of existence. (Tracy 1981: 155).

<sup>36</sup> Liz (I-1: 3); Tom (I-2: 5); Norah (I-3: 4); John (I-4: 5); Elsie (I-8: 5); Ashok (I-9: 5 - 'Totally, absolutely'); Saul (I-10: 5); Edith (I-11: 5); and Flora (I-12: 3). Luke's response to the follow-up interview question on whether the Psalm Journey encouraged him to look at other biblical texts was accidentally deleted during the recording, but I think a very positive response can be assumed in the light of the Psalm Journey inspiring him to become musical director of 'Soulgait', a street theatre production featuring selected psalms, in the Edinburgh International Festival Fringe in 2006 and 2007. I return to Luke and Soulgait in chapter 12.

to a four week project like the Psalm Journey. On this assumption I restrict this review to searching for any pointers indicating potential beginnings of a transformation process.

The psalms had already quite deeply impacted the lives of Elsie, Edith and Luke prior to the Psalm Journey, and their responses indicate that participation in the present study has reinforced and strengthened that impact on all of them. Saul had some previous exposure to the psalms in synagogue, but their impact on his life seems to have been rather low, and it is not clear whether the Psalm Journey will make a significant difference in this regard. Flora also, as a Baha'i, would have been previously encouraged to explore the Psalms, but, as we have seen, she tends to interpret them almost exclusively within a Baha'i perspective, making it difficult to distinguish the impact of the psalms *per se*.

Of those who came to the Psalm Journey with little or no previous exposure to the psalms, Ashok and Kate show more indicators of transformation than does Flora. Ashok discovers that it is permissible to question God (I-9: 3), and after the Psalm Journey he attends church at least once and participates in a session of 'Christianity Explored.'<sup>37</sup> Although Kate's response was more agnostic than Ashok's, she moved some distance during the Psalm Journey from her rather hostile starting point towards a more sympathetic view of the Psalms, Christianity and Christians. She explains that the Psalm Journey 'made me think an awful lot about religion.... I can see why many people turn towards religion and I don't, and I was a little bit scared to see that I can actually understand why they do. And, therefore, I feel more or less in danger to do so myself' (I-7: 4). This helps us to see why Kate thinks that the Psalm Journey 'did definitely enrich' her personal spiritual quest (I-7: 5). She tells us that during the Psalm journey 'My mind became preoccupied with religious topics. I tended to discuss them with my friends, and that was something that I didn't do before' (I-7: 6).<sup>38</sup> The higher degree of impact made on those respondents coming to these psalmic texts for the first time is significant, but ought not to be over-estimated, for moving someone five points up a scale who is already at point 50 reflects an impact of 10% while a similar move from point 5 to point 10 reflects an impact of 100%.

While a minority of respondents – notably Connie (I-5: 4) and Saul (I-10: 8) – doubt if the Psalm Journey will make any lasting impact on their lives, I think that in assessing the

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<sup>37</sup> 'Christianity Explored' is a course for people who wish to investigate Christianity. See [www.allsouls.org/ascm/allsouls/static/ministries/outreach/ce/home.html](http://www.allsouls.org/ascm/allsouls/static/ministries/outreach/ce/home.html)

<sup>38</sup> Kate is also impressed by the tolerance of the members of the group: 'I know I am not tolerant enough and I feel compelled to try' (I-7: 6).

potential of the Psalm Journey it can reasonably be claimed that for the majority of respondents it has either initiated or strengthened a spiritual process that has the potential to lead to life-transformation. If the Psalm Journey has, indeed, this capability to effect life-transformation, does it have a similar potential to bring about an encounter with God?

### *Encounter with God*

At least three respondents appear to be moved to explore God further. They are Tom, Liz and Ashok. Tom was educated in a Catholic school and once considered entering the priesthood, but more recently his Mass attendance has become infrequent. The Psalm Journey reawakened in Tom ‘a deep desire to pursue a spiritual perception of God that doesn’t seek a direct link with the material and physical reward’ (Ps 22-D3) and prompted him to attend Mass again. We noted in chapter 4 how Liz, from a Scandinavian Lutheran background, is moved by the Journey to explore the ‘life-as’ spirituality of her youth; she too reports returning to the church (I-1: 6).<sup>39</sup> Ashok, from a Hindu background and with an interest in Rama Krishna philosophy, by the end of the second week loses the ambivalence he had earlier shown to petitioning God specifically, for he reports that he is now struck by the way the psalmist questions God’s actions and will (Psalm 73-D5).<sup>40</sup> In his follow-up interview, Ashok acknowledges that until participating in the Psalm Journey he would never have questioned God, and discloses that immediately following the Psalm Journey he had, on his own initiative, attended a church service, but been disappointed that questions were not invited. In addition to noting these three respondents who show explicit signs of investigating God during and immediately after the Psalm Journey, we ought not to forget that in chapter 10 we discovered that all respondents exhibit at least one theistic practice, and, so to that extent, there are no atheists in the sample.

I am unaware if Tom has gone on to pursue a spiritual vision of God, or if Liz has continued in the church, or if Ashok is still exploring Christianity (or, indeed, if the latent theism of the others has become more visible since the Psalm Journey took place), but I think it can be said that these three respondents demonstrate the potential of the Psalm Journey to inspire people to embark on a new spiritual safari. A decision to do this involves faith and I now return to explore the question whether the Psalm Journey fostered trust in God.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Liz experiences a sense of awe while meditating on the association of Ps 22 with Jesus experiencing death. The importance of this psalm in the history of Christianity ‘made me a bit scared of the psalm ... because I didn’t quite know if it was alright to have an opinion about it at a personal level because it was a big spiritual thing.’ (I-1: 3).

<sup>40</sup> Ashok concludes that we ‘are a bit too soft in our prayers’ (Psalm 73-D5).

<sup>41</sup> See also chapter 10, section headed ‘Rapport.’

*Faith and Discipleship*

Faith features fairly frequently in the journals and transcripts, and there is further evidence that some respondents tentatively enquired further into the implications of Christian faith and discipleship. While Tom regards himself as a Christian believer from childhood and has a profound respect for the self-giving of the psalmist to God in demonstrating ‘a complete faith I find admirable’ (Ps 22-D4), he cannot relate to the optimism that ‘all things will be alright with the triumph of God’ which marks the second part of Psalm 22 (Ps 22-D6). He tells us that he doesn’t find faith an easy option as he contemplates returning to Zimbabwe at the end of the academic year. Ashok refers to faith repeatedly, but we have already noted that often it is not clear what he means by the term (Ps 30-D3). However, he clearly envisages it as involving praise for God: ‘If you love and trust God you pray to him thanking him for what he has given you and for what you want’ (Ps 30-D2). After the Psalm Journey he attended a ‘Christianity Explored’ meeting, where he found the discussion on faith to be stimulating.

Liz is another of the less actively religious respondents who during the Psalm Journey shows considerable interest in faith. In the first week she recognises that faith in God involves an element of risk; while musing on why a direct relationship with God remains closed to her, she wonders whether this may be ‘because it would include a stronger commitment, a more expressed faith than I dare’ (Ps 126-D6). Liz finds faith in God difficult because she doesn’t trust herself: ‘No one is trusted if you don’t trust yourself, God least of all’ (Ps 55-D2). Nevertheless, she believes that prayer works (Ps 126-D7), and that the faith-alone concept is very generous because it cares for people who feel worthless (Ps 22-D3). Grounds for my suggestion in chapter 4 that Liz might be described in biblical terms as ‘limping between two opinions’ are found in the following quotation from her journal:

When the trust in life as meaningful is rewarded then, even though it felt like many prayers went unheard, we feel well taken care of. My sceptical side says ‘Yes this is all a human invention, a capacity of the mind to rationalise a chaotic life and come with the idea of God’s plan; we create a meaning because we can’t stand that there is none.’ On the other hand, having tried to totally surrender only once, to feel like a worm, give up and say ‘It is all in your hands,’ and then being lifted and carried through is somehow profoundly moving and did make the stubborn scepticism seem premature’ (Ps 22-D3).

The fact that immediately following the Psalm Journey Liz, Tom and Ashok all went to church unprompted and independently of one another reveals a readiness to explore

Christian faith and discipleship further. Such willingness on the part of respondents to explore faith and discipleship, albeit tentatively, would be unlikely were they not engaging meaningfully with the psalms.

To summarise this section, there is strong evidence that the Psalm Journey has moved some respondents at least some way towards enhancement, transformation, encounter with God, and faith-discipleship, which I have preferred to see as desirable outcomes of Scripture engagement rather than as essential components of it.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, the evidence suggests that the terminology employed to describe the four outcomes has proved to be too rigid to capture all the facets of Psalm Journey respondents' experience in engaging with the psalmic texts. In other words, Scripture engagement is a more complex process than the current debate suggests. For example, it fails to cope with the 'Janus' nature of the data, and does not set respondents' engagement with Scripture in a broader context than their immediate relationship with the text. All of this brings me back to the question: What is Scripture engagement?

### **Conclusion**

What, indeed, is Scripture engagement? My experience in planning, coordinating and analysing the Psalm Journey leads me to offer a five-sided description. First, Scripture engagement takes place as respondents participate in a conversation with the text. As we saw in chapter 10, in this conversation the idealism of respondents - expressed in the golden rule and neighbour love - inter-connects with their human needs in ways that enable them to bring their explicit questions and implicit answers to the text, and in turn to respond to the implicit questions and explicit answers they sense the text to be communicating to them (Tracy 1975: 46). In interrogating the text and listening to what it is saying, Psalm Journey respondents have demonstrated the value of using both a hermeneutic of retrieval and a hermeneutic of suspicion (Browning 1991: 131; cf. Thiselton 1992: 344-78).

Second, Scripture engagement takes place as respondents become aware that the text is making a claim on their attention. Psalm Journey respondents ascribe at least some measure of authority to the text, in recognising its theistic focus and in using it as a window on

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<sup>42</sup> That Scripture engagement can occur without bearing fruit is evident in the Bible itself. In our Lord's parable of the Sower (Matt. 13.1-23) two of the three categories of those who 'hear the word' are unfruitful; and Paul's experience with his audience in Thessalonica, where 'he argued with them from the Scriptures', resulting in some being persuaded and others being stirred up to riot in protest (Acts 17.1-5)

contemporary events. The assumption that the six psalms are ‘classic texts’ helps us to understand this deference, for classic texts claim our attention by disclosing a radical gift and demand, that in the case of ‘religious classics’ express the reality of God (Tracy 1981: 68, 131).<sup>43</sup> I would go so far as to claim that unless there is such an awareness of the text addressing us with at least some measure of authority, we are not engaging with Scripture. Without this awareness we may converse with the text, but not with Scripture in the sense that this term has acquired in the history of theology. On the other hand, the Psalm Journey makes clear that engaging with Scripture is not dependent on respondents affirming a theological formula spelling out how biblical texts are, may become, or mediate ‘the Word of God.’ The evidence suggests that in popular Scripture engagement Scripture is self-authenticating.<sup>44</sup>

Third, Scripture engagement commonly takes place in the context of personal relationships. Again and again, the data manifests a deep appreciation by individual respondents of the role the group played in their engaging with the texts. In addition, their engagement is undoubtedly influenced by personal emotions and external events. While the journals witness to a very real psalmic engagement by individuals, much of the journaling reflects the impact of relationships with others.<sup>45</sup>

Fourth, while entering into a conversation with the text and showing deference to it constitute the essence of the Scripture engagement process, it is appropriate for the Bible agencies to consider life transformation, encounter with God and faith-discipleship to be desirable outcomes of Scripture engagement. As such, these outcomes provide a useful benchmark for measuring the success of Scripture engagement.

Fifth, these three outcomes are most appropriately applied relatively rather than absolutely in benchmarking the success of any given exercise in Scripture engagement. This is because, as the Psalm Journey has shown, these outcomes tend to be achieved by gradual process

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<sup>43</sup> In formulating my theoretical framework in chapter 2, I incorporated David Tracy’s Gadamerian concept of a ‘classic text’ as a category that helpfully explains to my audience why the psalms become authoritative for many who use them.

<sup>44</sup> Even the Westminster *Confession of Faith* (I.V), which articulates a high doctrine of Scripture, affirms that it is ‘the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts’ that fully convinces us of the divine authority of Scripture.

<sup>45</sup> Although many psalms are intensely personal, they are communal texts.

rather than by instant reaction.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, such outcomes are often ambiguous, as illustrated by Psalm Journey respondents evidencing both hesitation and approximation. From a Bible agency viewpoint another example of ambiguity is that engaging with the psalmic texts confirms both Christian and non-Christian believers in their faith.

In summary, Scripture engagement can be most appropriately defined as a process of holding a meaningful conversation with a biblical text while being open to its claims upon us as a religious classic. The desirable outcomes of this conversation are life transformation, encounter with God, and faith-discipleship. While these outcomes can be achieved through a single conversation with Scripture, more commonly they are the result of a process involving several, perhaps many, conversations. While individual interaction with the text is vital, this is frequently enhanced by sharing our conversation with others.

I began this chapter by identifying from the ongoing debate among the Bible agencies five facets of Scripture engagement, going on to articulate four types of audience response to the interaction with the text that is involved: conversation, confirmation, hesitation and approximation. I have contended that all respondents enter into a conversation with the text; that this conversation confirms those who are already actively religious and, at the same time, provokes and even confronts those who are less actively religious. The response from respondents to this provocation by the text is ambiguous; they both hesitate to embrace the desired outcomes of Scripture engagement and at the same time approximate to them. In reviewing the four different types of audience response I evaluate the validity of the key concepts surfacing in the current debate relating to Scripture engagement – interaction, authority, transformation, encounter with God, and faith-discipleship, concluding that, while the notions of interaction and authority capture the basic idea of a deferential conversation with the text, the other concepts are insufficiently nuanced to take into account the sociality, longevity and ambiguity that frequently characterise the outcomes of Scripture engagement. The alternative description of Scripture engagement which I have offered in the conclusion takes the notions highlighted in the current debate and reorganises them into a more open and flexible paradigm.

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<sup>46</sup> While the less actively religious respondents are all moved towards achieving the desirable outcomes, no respondent attains any of them. However, the potential of projects like the Psalm Journey to become a stepping stone to further Scripture engagement is made evident.

**Chapter 12: *Quo vadis?***

*God is our refuge and strength,  
Our ready deliverer in times of trouble.  
So we will not fear.*

These words of Psalm 46, sung by a choir led by one of the respondent's strong tenor voice, ring out in St Giles Cathedral to the accompaniment of violins, guitars, trumpet, saxophone, drums and pipe organ to provide an inspiring, thunderous climax to 'Soulgait'. Luke, the research respondent is now the musical director of a popular show in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival described by one website as 'street theatre at its best' ([www.lipservice.co.uk](http://www.lipservice.co.uk)).

Psalm 46 is one of the many psalms that are read as texts, sung as lyrics, chanted as liturgy, and offered as prayers, in every country of the world, and it was meditating on these ancient spiritual songs in the Psalm Journey that brought Luke to value their power to heal, renew and inspire, and made him want to perform them in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Luke, from the English Midlands, participated in the Psalm Journey with a committed Christian faith, an acute social conscience, and a deep desire to express his faith in ways that would make sense to postmoderns. He became involved in student politics and was serving as Vice President of Communication in the Edinburgh University Students Association during the time he did the Psalm Journey. 'Soulgait', a popular spiritual walk with the Psalms through Edinburgh's Old Town led by actors and musicians, was an unexpected by-product of the Psalm Journey, which raises the question: What other developments might flow from my research?<sup>1</sup> What can the Psalm Journey contribute to the practice of Scripture engagement? In what directions does it suggest the Bible agencies might fruitfully go forward in fulfilling their desire to make Scripture engagement more effective and more popular?

Before attempting to respond to such questions I wish to recognise several constraints. The smallness of the sample makes it hazardous to generalise from my findings, but, as I indicate in chapter 3, this in itself need not prejudice the value of the study. Another intentional limitation is my personal bias in favour of a Bible Society approach to Scripture texts, which must inevitably qualify my findings. It is also important to bear in mind that the academic character of my respondents probably makes them more representative of an academia sub-culture than of society as a whole. Nevertheless, students undertaking further education are

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<sup>1</sup> *Soulgait* ran for one week in the 'Fringe' in August 2006, and for two weeks in August 2007.

a significant proportion of the population in the UK and, as such, constitute an audience for the Bible agencies.<sup>2</sup> Another limitation is the omission of feminist issues; I judged that a study of Scripture engagement to be undertaken from the perspective of ‘a movement of such intricate diversity’ (Crotty: 162) would require a sharper focus and a larger sample than the Psalm Journey provides. With such constraints in mind, I now proceed to highlight six future directions for the consideration of those involved in, and committed to, the practice of Scripture engagement. These directions involve the following topics: meditation, imagination, formation, contextualisation, reinforcement, and facilitation.

### **1. Meditation**

The first strategic direction reflects the value of meditative reading of Scripture demonstrated by the Psalm Journey. We saw in section two of the thesis how a meditative approach to the text enables respondents to approach it with confidence and ease. At the same time, respondents are curious about the text’s background: ‘I wanted to know far more about exactly what was going on and who was attacking whom’ (Edith, I-11: 5). This dual approach indicates the potential of Bible meditation and Bible study complementing one another. The Bible agencies already promote many ‘helps’ designed to encourage an inductive exploration of the text, but meditative ‘helps’ are relatively few and would need to be developed if such a two-pronged strategy of Scripture engagement were to be implemented. The Psalm Journey has demonstrated that a successful meditative reading strategy can be created by adapting the ancient process of *lectio divina* to specific audiences and circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally *lectio divina* has been practised in Christian small group meditation with a focus on prayer and communion with God, and involves four steps.<sup>4</sup> First, participants listen for a word or a phrase that demands attention. Second, they ruminate on that word or phrase, allowing it to interact with their thoughts, hopes, memories and desires. Third, they converse with God in prayers of consecration and/or petition. Fourth, they rest in the presence of God, who has used his word as a means of inviting them to accept his transforming embrace. These steps can be adapted, as they are in the Psalm Journey, to facilitate a conversation with a biblical text by any group of people desiring to develop their spirituality.

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<sup>2</sup> Both the BFBS (‘Bible Society’) and LifeWords produce Scripture portions designed for use in Christian mission events among university students.

<sup>3</sup> That is ‘a spiritual (lit. divine) reading’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina’ by Luke Dysinger, [www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html](http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html), downloaded 16/09/05.

One advantage of the Bible agencies encouraging meditative readings of Scripture is that this would complement the prevailing inductive approach and thus ensure that both brain hemispheres are involved in the interaction with the text.<sup>5</sup> Meditative reading reaches the parts an analytical reading cannot.<sup>6</sup> Plain descriptive speech or rational argument are regarded as inadequate to evoke right brain activity which is such a vital part of the human personality. Thiselton (1992: 578-80) points out that *lectio divina* encourages participants to encounter the primary power of symbols. A key feature of symbols is that they are ambiguous and that any meaning attributed to them derives from external interpretive factors (Thiselton 1992: 579). Despite this ambiguity, the practice of *lectio divina* has been coherent because in Patristic and medieval times the symbols in the biblical text were understood within ‘a stable tradition of interpretation established on other grounds’ (Thiselton 1992: 578). Thiselton (575-582) – following Ricoeur – argues that practitioners of *lectio divina* who are outside given interpretive traditions – as are many of the contemporary audiences Bible agencies are seeking to reach - can be saved from succumbing to self-deception and promoting self-interest by adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion provided this does not lead to the removal of a symbol’s ambiguity by cerebralising it into a concept. In *lectio divina* the mind is not dissolved as it is in some forms of eastern mysticism, but is active and open to non-linear, intuitive interaction with its focus. The practice of *lectio divina* reflects in some ways the Old Testament understanding of meditation: the verb in the Hebrew Bible generally translated as ‘meditate’ (*hāgā*) carries the sense of vocally reciting something memorised, or reading something written.<sup>7</sup> Broyles (3) stresses that early users meditated on the psalms.<sup>8</sup> *Lectio divina*, by creating time and space

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<sup>5</sup> In popular psychology left brain functions are regarded as analytical and logical and find expression in the attempts of many respondents to go behind the text seeking its authorial intention. Right brain functions are taken to be holistic rather than analytical and intuitive rather than logical (Springer and Deutsch). When Edith says she would have liked ‘to know far more about exactly what was going on and who was attacking who’ (I-11: 5) her left brain is at work. But when she says that, while listening to the song version of Psalm 73, the repetitive plaintive call of verse 1-22 ‘is washed aside by this one line “I remain with you continually”’ (Ps 73-L: 3), it is her right brain that is dominant. (The line ‘I remain with you continually’ is not from the NRSV, but *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Version of the Book of Psalms*, Edinburgh, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Inner experience can be interpreted only indirectly by diagnostic methods (Thiselton 1992: 359)

<sup>7</sup> LeFebvre (217-18), citing Negoită and Ringgren, ‘*hāgāh*’, TDOT, vol 3: 321-324, suggests *hāgā* can also refer to singing. Cf. Elsie’s comment: ‘I did find a lot more by reading something a second, and a third, and a fourth day’ (I-8: 3).

<sup>8</sup> Psalms are more appropriately studied by considering their likely impact on early consumers than by analysing the motives of their original producers. ‘Psalms are not descriptive poems; they are prescriptive liturgies. . . . Psalms are more concerned with leading the worshipers’ experience than with following the composer’s’ (Broyles: 3).

for biblical words and images to catch our imagination, provides a modern equivalent by enabling us ‘to *hear* and *feel* the text as well as see it’ (Wendland 2002: 205).<sup>9</sup>

A second advantage of meditative reading is that its openness is particularly helpful when engaging audiences which may be endowed with a healthy postmodern suspicion of being manipulated by authority figures, be they preachers or commentators.<sup>10</sup> Many audiences do not engage with the Bible today because they suspect it as a metanarrative that has been used as an instrument of coercion by the powerful (Middleton & Walsh: 69-79). Elsie seems to be aware of such misuse of Scripture; indeed, she may have had first hand experience of it in the American South. Certainly she sees the advantage of leaving the text open. ‘The advantage of a meditative approach,’ she says, ‘is that there are no wrong answers’ (I-8: 3). In her view, non-Christians would feel more comfortable with a meditative engagement with the text than with traditional inductive Bible study. Not only does meditative reading allay postmodern suspicions; it also resonates with some postmodern approaches to literature. For example, Thiselton (1992: 142) points out that the practice of *lectio divina* in medieval monastic life ‘allows gentle contemplation to move amidst a kaleidoscope of ever-changing biblical imagery in a way which almost anticipates the post-modernist notion of textual play’.

A weakness of many ‘helps-for-readers’ currently available is that they begin and end with analysis of the text that induces ideas and behaviours. The Psalm Journey respondents acknowledge, as we have seen, the need for such textual induction, but they also strongly validate meditative reading. I hear my respondents saying they would like to see a cerebral appreciation of the text being creatively combined with naïve engagement. One way of accomplishing this in a Scripture engagement programme would be to plan for participants to have three exposures to a given text, the first meditative, the second inductive and the third meditative.<sup>11</sup> An alternative to one group meeting per week over the period of a month, might be for the group to look at a psalm over a weekend, spending, say, two hours on

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Berlin’s (302) observation that a Hebrew poem conveys thought through ‘a special structuring of language that calls attention to the “how” of the message as well as to the “what”’.

<sup>10</sup> The openness of my audience to a meditative approach validates the traditional practice of Bible Societies to refrain from advocating doctrinal interpretations while providing notes and comments. For Psalm Journey respondents the attractiveness of the traditional practice is not that it preserves Christian unity, but that it opens up the text for users rather than telling them what it means or demands.

<sup>11</sup> To allow adequate time for post-engagement reflection, it would be preferable for the three exposures to take place on different days. The third exposure would be equivalent to Ricoeur’s ‘second naïveté’. Ricoeur (349) expresses a desire ‘to be called again’ into a creative interaction with the text.

Friday evening, two hours on Saturday and a further two hours on Sunday.<sup>12</sup> For such an emphasis on naïve engagement to be successful, resources to kindle the imagination will be required.

## 2. Imagination

The second strategic direction coming out of my research is, in fact, the importance of stimulating imagination. Respondents' fascination with psalmic metaphors suggests that exploring such metaphors is a Scripture engagement strategy well worth investigating further.<sup>13</sup> Of the twenty-eight words or phrases identified in the psalm texts by respondents as having impacted them, eighteen (almost two-thirds) are figurative language.<sup>14</sup>

Pronounced reliance on figurative language is one of the formal resources of Hebrew poetry, along with parallelism and hyperbole (Alter: 160-1).<sup>15</sup> When combined with parallelism, figurative language heightens or intensifies the movement of meaning from the first verset to the second (Alter: 21). So perhaps it is not surprising that metaphors readily become a primary focus of respondents' attention. The focus on metaphorical and symbolic terms in the psalms makes it easier for readers to find themselves in the texts and contributes to the universal appeal of the psalms (Goldingay: 14). Brueggemann (1989: 3; cf. 1982: 23-31) contends that Hebrew poetic metaphor, in marked contrast with the positivistic language of 'our prose-flattened world,' stimulates us to give full play to our imagination. Metaphors catch the imagination, enabling us to engage with the text intuitively as well as logically.<sup>16</sup> For example, Norah's imagination fastens on the phrase 'We were like those who dream' (Ps 126.1) as the metaphor awakens within her 'the happiness, sense of achievement, satisfaction for oneself' she experiences when something that once seemed impossible happens (Ps 126-L: 1).

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<sup>12</sup> A weekend meditative programme was suggested to me by Tom, who found such events very helpful while attending his Catholic school in Zimbabwe.

<sup>13</sup> It is not uncommon for 'metaphor' to be used as a general category for figurative language as well as a particular figure of speech. See Caird: 131-183; Warren-Rothlin: 200. Hence it covers simile and hyperbole. Anthropomorphism is also included: 'When the Bible talks about God, it must speak by necessity, metaphorically' (Berlin: 312). The Bible's figurative language should be seen in the context of literary genre and literary symbolism.

<sup>14</sup> In the first Journey the popular metaphors are 'We were like those who dream' (Ps 126.1) and 'I am poured out like water' (Ps 22.14); in the second they were 'You hid your face' (Ps 30.7) and 'Rise up, O God, plead your cause' (Ps 74.22).

<sup>15</sup> Parallelism, the predominant feature of Hebrew poetry, was identified by Robert Lowth in 1753, and is defined as 'the repetition of similar or related semantic content or grammatical structure in adjacent lines and verses' (Berlin: 304).

<sup>16</sup> 'The biblical texts are concerned not only to teach truth by means of logical propositions, but to display the truth to the whole person with a veritable arsenal of imaginative communicative strategies' ('Biblical Literature and Literary Criticism,' a presentation by Kevin J. Vanhoozer to The National Bible Society of Scotland, 1990).

There are two particular aspects of metaphor in biblical poetry that enhance Scripture engagement. First, metaphor is vivid. Doyle (2001: 21), following L. Boadt, contends that when a metaphor links two fundamentally unlike referents the imagination of the reader is forced to draw conclusions. ‘The impact of the two when joined together produces a personal vision which cannot be adequately described by discursive speech alone’ (Boadt, cited in Doyle: 21). The vividness is underlined by most psalmic metaphors being metaphorical statements or speech acts (Doyle 2001: 17).<sup>17</sup> Such expressions of verbal imagery ‘encourage listeners (or readers) to mentally conceive and emotionally experience for themselves a particular situation or event by supplying them with a vivid picture or even an entire scene into which they can enter by way of their imagination’ (Wendland 2003: 218).<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, metaphors are expansive; they are ‘enormously elastic, giving full play to imagination in stretching and extending far beyond the concrete referent to touch all kinds of experience’ (Brueggemann 1982: 30).<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann’s contention that meditating on a psalmic metaphor gives us the opportunity to exploit it in terms of our own experience is confirmed by the Psalm Journey respondents, who frequently refer to the new perspective they gain from their meditation,<sup>20</sup> and who would agree that Hebrew poetry is ‘a particular way of imagining the world’ (Alter: 151). If the human person is indeed ‘a being who grasps and shapes reality, including the actuality of his own existence, with the aid of great images, metaphors, and analogies’ (Niebuhr 1963: 161), then the metaphors of the psalms provide a key resource for those who are seeking meaning and enlightenment for themselves and for life in general. That is why I perceive one of the strategic signals coming out of the Psalm Journey to be the potential of developing what might be called ‘a hermeneutic of imagination’ which could open the Psalms to a vast range of new contemporary audiences.

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<sup>17</sup> The concept of speech-acts comes from J.L. Austin, who distinguished in speech the locutionary act (uttering words, e.g. ‘Hello’) from the illocutionary act (what we do in saying something, e.g. promising) and the perlocutionary act (what we bring about by saying something, e.g. persuading) (Vanhoozer 1998: 209).

<sup>18</sup> Thus Psalm 126 helped Norah to think of something she thought impossible: ‘You dream about it. All tell you it’s impossible. Then it happens’ (Ps 126-L: 1).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Thus “table” does not mean simply what the speaker in Psalm 23 means, but it means all the good tables at which you have ever sat, the experiences of joy that happened there, and the subsequent vibrations you have from them’ (Brueggemann 1982: 30).

<sup>20</sup> Elsie (I-8: 5); Flora (Ps 73-D3); Connie (Ps 22-L: 2); John (Ps 22-L: 3; I-4: 5,8,10); Luke (Ps 22-L:4; I6: 6,7); Norah (Ps 22-L: 3).

### 3. Formation

The third strategic direction concerns the creative role the Psalms could play in self-formation. The Psalm Journey has shown that a psalmic *lectio divina* enables us to give vent to our frustrations and insecurities. In impacting us in this way, *lectio divina* is therapeutic, for reflecting on metaphor in biblical texts is recognised by Jung as offering a resource for self-integration (Jung 1971 in Thiselton 1992: 577).<sup>21</sup> According to Jung, the key to integration is to experience the healing power of deeper forces, especially the power of symbols.<sup>22</sup> Jung's claim seems to be substantiated by the therapeutic value of psalmic meditation experienced by Luke when stressed by overwork (Ps 22-D4), Norah when depressed (Ps 126-D2), and by Liz when reliving the devastation inflicted by a broken relationship (Ps 55-D1-2). In contemporary western culture, where detraditionalisation is leaving people confused and vulnerable (Heelas 1996b: 1-2), prompting many to embark on searches for meaning and enlightenment, the practice of meditating on the metaphors of the psalms could become a key resource in finding personal healing and fulfilment. For when enveloped in catastrophe, those 'experiences of life that lie beyond our conventional copings,' we find in the extreme metaphors of the lament Psalms (such as Psalm 22) 'the voice that dares to speak of these matters with eloquence and passion to the Holy One' (Brueggemann `1982: 16-17).

Meditating on metaphors is emotive also in a broader sense. Doyle (2001: 20) follows Macky in speaking of 'profound' metaphors where 'virtually nothing of the metaphorical statement can be reduced to literal language', and which challenge the reader to unite his or her own experience with the picture presented in the metaphorical speech act. The expressive metaphors of the psalms provide us with verbal vehicles for giving vent to feelings of joy as well as of catastrophe. When we lose a sense of disorientation and find our feet, the jubilant metaphors of the hymns and songs of thanksgiving (like Psalm 126) provide us with a medium to celebrate our newly found orientation.<sup>23</sup> Doyle (20) sees Psalm 133 not only as an *expressive* metaphor employed by the author to pour out his / her emotions, but also as a *relational* metaphor that invites us to build our relationships with one another. The Psalm Journey confirms that Doyle and Brueggemann are pointing to a rich seam within biblical texts that awaits further mining by the Bible agencies.

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<sup>21</sup> Heelas and Woodhead (115-16) discern a correlation between the process of 'individualization' and 'subjective-life spirituality.'

<sup>22</sup> Thiselton (1992: 577) suggests that the 'integrative and healing power [of biblical texts] operates optimally when they evoke "the depths of God ... not taught by human wisdom" (1Cor. 2.10, 13).'

<sup>23</sup> I describe in chapter 8 Brueggemann's paradigm of psalms of orientation, disorientation and new orientation.

My research also raises questions about the efficacy of what we might call ‘psalm therapy’. Do the psalms of vengeance help to eliminate, or even reduce, human rage and retaliation? The reaction of respondents to Psalm 55 is sceptical about the therapeutic hypothesis of Brueggemann and Goldingay.<sup>24</sup> They suggest that victims can be set free from the power of the deep-seated hate that victimisation often incites by reflecting on a psalm of vengeance and then reciting it as a prayer through which, in effect, they hand over their anger and hatred to God and leave it there. Thus, interacting with the psalm, far from fuelling retaliation, becomes the gateway to a non-violent response to oppression (Goldingay: 15).<sup>25</sup> Three respondents in the second group, reviewing the hypothesis in the context of Psalm 74, think it feasible (Ps74-L: 7). This ambiguity ought not to discourage further exploration of the Brueggemann-Goldingay hypothesis, especially at a time when the incidence of public rage in the UK is increasing.<sup>26</sup>

The ambiguity about the impact of certain psalms on our feelings of vengeance ought not to obscure the fact that my research has demonstrated how the psalms resonate with a whole range of young adult emotions, positive as well as negative. Indeed, I would claim that the Psalm Journey redeems the psalms from the charge, made by Hegel, that they encourage ‘a self-tormenting process’ of ‘minute and painful introspection’ that leads to a sense of ‘spiritual wretchedness’ (Hegel 1890: 442-43).<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly the psalms do provide opportunity for self-examination and penitence, but they are also used as vehicles for articulating a register of emotions identified by Browning as belonging to those basic human needs which play an important part in the process of practical reasoning that guides us in making and taking those everyday decisions that help to determine for us the meaning of life.

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<sup>24</sup> See chapter 8.

<sup>25</sup> We noted in chapter 8 that respondents were sceptical of Brueggemann’s suggestion that the vengeance of Ps 55 is an expression of non-violence. However, in informal discussion after the group meditation of Ps 74, three members of the group who undertook the second Psalm Journey (Edith, Elsie and Ashok) thought Brueggemann’s approach feasible. It is clear that for such psalms of vengeance to operate as Brueggemann envisages users would require considerable ‘note and comment’.

<sup>26</sup> In an article published in *The Scotsman* of 27 January 2004, Gillian Bowditch refers to road rage, air rage and work rage, going on to observe: ‘We have trolley rage, perpetuated by middle-class housewives; property rage, the preserve of gazumped yuppies, and web rage, the crime of choice for hi-tech geeks.’

<sup>27</sup> Hegel attributes such introspection to the use of the Psalms in the Protestant liturgy, but the earlier tradition of including three psalmic prayers for healing (Pss 6, 38, and 102) and one prayer for deliverance from persecutors (Ps 143), in the seven ‘penitential psalms’ may point to an alternative or an additional source.

#### 4. Contextualisation

The fourth strategic direction for Bible agencies arises from the potential of psalmic meditation to provide a perspective from which to view and respond to contemporary events. For some, meditation and information media are separate universes. Elsie, for example, tells me she didn't use the Psalm Journey online resources because 'It didn't strike me as meditative to use the website' (I-8: 4). On the other hand, most respondents are comfortable reflecting on what they have seen, heard or read on the news media while they meditate on the psalms.<sup>28</sup> Theologians have used various metaphors to facilitate this bringing together of the horizons of the text and the horizons of the reader. Calvin (1979a: 62), for example, speaks of the Scriptures as spectacles that enable us to see life encompassed by a biblical perspective.<sup>29</sup> I explore Calvin's metaphor further in this section because the psalms become spectacles for the respondents. During the *lectio divina* they readily respond to the prompt: 'Did the text of the psalm provide for you a window on the world?' Although the wording might suggest a closed question, the answers very readily identify details of a range of contemporary events and trends. As we have seen in the second section of the thesis, the war in Iraq, tensions in Zimbabwe, unfair Danish immigration policy, suffering in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, setting fire to places of worship, and economic exploitation by big business, as well as the tragic death of Chinese mussel-pickers in Morecombe Bay, all feature in the group transcripts or the journals.<sup>30</sup> This is no detached observation of events. Meditating on the psalm texts motivates respondents' commitment to equal regard: 'When will we all agree to love?' Saul asks against the background of hostilities in Israel-Palestine (Ps 74-D5). He recognises that action on his part is called for. The picture of 'enemies occupying a people's holy place and making a once holy sanctuary unholy' (Ps 74-D3) makes him recognise that he needs to get involved in his synagogue's Monday meetings and have a say in how synagogue funds are disbursed internationally (I-10: 5). John also manifests concern for his ostracised friend by visiting and encouraging her as well as repeating on her behalf Psalm 22 (Ps 22-D6; I-4: 11).

<sup>28</sup> '[T]he poetry of the lament psalms has power to reshape our world' (Holladay: 293)

<sup>29</sup> More recently, Christopher Wright (1998) has offered a triple analogy of window, painting and mirror to help us hold together the interpretation, contextualisation and actualisation of Scripture. He suggests that coming to Scripture as a window enables the user to see what is on the other side of the time and culture barrier that exists between us and the text, and to explore, where feasible, the circumstances and motives of the author. Viewing Scripture as a painting is to recognise that the text is a work of art and to allow its literary genre and any speech-acts or other rhetorical devices it may contain to impact our personalities at an intuitive level. Coming to Scripture as a mirror is to discover the meaning of the text for us: 'The meaning of the text actually only arises in the act of reading. It is when the reader reads that the text means, just as it is only when you look in a mirror that the mirror reflects you' (48-49).

<sup>30</sup> The concern about contemporary issues was also focused on powerful politicians like George W Bush, Tony Blair, Ariel Sharon and Saddam Hussein.

This openness to allowing the psalms to form a window on the world suggests that Scripture engagement programmes can provide a creative lens through which users could view contemporary affairs. There are multiple issues that attract attention on which there are a variety of viewpoints and much debate. These issues include the environmental debate, violence, hatred, anger, poverty and inter-communal enmity. On the *environment* a short series of meditations entitled, say, ‘The Psalms and the Planet’ interacting with Psalms 8, 29, 93, or 104 (cross-referenced with other relevant biblical texts) could encourage individuals and groups to reflect and act, in the light of God’s activity as creator and sustainer of the environment, on the ecological challenges the human race is facing. Another relevant issue is *violence* which might be addressed through a meditative programme on some lament psalms with the aim of empathising with victims of violence and motivating action on their behalf.<sup>31</sup> Rosemary Ruether’s ‘Rite of Healing for Wife Battering,’ cited by Holladay (294-5), is an example of what might be done.<sup>32</sup> Although Ruether’s intention is that this rite be used by battered women as a means of healing, it can also have a powerful effect on others in extending their sensibility concerning violence against women.<sup>33</sup>

Another contemporary issue is *poverty*, which could be viewed through a lens provided by psalms that express a deep concern for the poor. Texts like Psalm 12, which plead with God to alleviate the plight of the weak and marginalised, could become the heart of a meditation (or series of meditations) on listening and responding to the predicament of the poor in today’s world.<sup>34</sup> A fifth issue is *inter-communal enmity* such as we have seen in Northern Ireland and which continues to tear Iraq apart. A highly metaphorical text like Psalm 133 could helpfully become the focus of a meditation aimed at setting a biblical context for talks between believers from both sides of divided communities about finding ways to work for reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> Viewing some of the great moral issues of the day through the lens of

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<sup>31</sup> Such empathy is encouraged in the Psalter: ‘Blessed is the one who considers the poor’ (Ps 41.1, ESV).

<sup>32</sup> This rite is designed to be recited antiphonally by two groups of women. The first group reads a ‘Letter from a Battered Wife’ while the second group recites verses from Psalm 22.

<sup>33</sup> Another example is the use of lament psalms in the healing ministry of Margaret Hill and Harriet Hill among African women traumatised by rape, AIDS, war and natural disaster, in ways that enable the women to release their pain and, in some cases, compose their own psalm of lament (Hill: 12-73).

<sup>34</sup> ‘In laments the psalmist speaks for those who are innocent, whose rights have been ignored; the laments speak for those who are marginalised in the community. In these psalms, worshippers who are marginalized could find their voice’ (Holladay: 294).

<sup>35</sup> ‘The phrase “live together in unity” is a technical legal term for joint tenancy (cf. Gen 13:6; 36:7; Deut 25:5), but the psalm uses the phrase metaphorically. The joint tenancy refers to the united monarchy. The psalm is expressing an idealistic hope for the reunification of Judah and Israel, with Zion as the capital and focal point’ (Berlin: 313).

psalmic meditation has helped respondents to find a perspective on life, and may indicate a openness on their part to the psalms fulfilling a role in the public square as well as in personal spiritual consumption.<sup>36</sup>

## 5. Reinforcement

The favourable reception given by respondents to audio Scriptures as reinforcers of print points to a fifth strategic direction: the value of combining these two media in programmes of Scripture engagement. Read, sung and chanted versions of audio Scriptures were employed in the Psalm Journey, to complement print rather than compete with it.<sup>37</sup> Not only do the audio texts communicate well the emotions inherent in the text; they also stimulate the emotions (and imagination) of respondents.<sup>38</sup> In order to emphasise the power of media reinforcement in the Psalm Journey I cite several respondents as witnesses. Elsie tells us that: ‘It can be very leading for me to have appropriate music setting the tone for me for a meditation – especially if I’m not feeling particularly aligned with the mood of the scripture’ (Ps 74-D3). Edith is upbeat about the change of tune in the sung version of Psalm 73 to mark the new mood at verse 17: ‘[T]he change in music is perfect. I think the first tune is beautiful. From the first line... you are lulled into the overall feel of the psalm... [T]he music change makes it all worthwhile: all the worries and concerns are washed away with the wonderful reality that we are always with the Lord’ (D3).<sup>39</sup> For Liz the chants bring back memories: ‘The choir version of the psalm wakes more in me than the written: the emotions

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<sup>36</sup> John found answering the question ‘How am I being invited to respond?’ (included in the structure of the group *lectio divina*) to be particularly helpful because it gave him ‘a bit of perspective’ on life (I-4: 5). Luke tells me in retrospect that he benefited from immersing himself in a single biblical text for a whole week in that this provided him with ‘an element of perspective when getting to grips with the day to day issues and crises’ (I-6: 2,6,7).

<sup>37</sup> Each respondent received a print edition of the NRSV Bible and a specially prepared CD containing an audio reading of the six psalm texts used. The CD also contains the six psalms in Anglican chant (from *The Psalms of David*, EMI Music, Netherlands, 2003) and *Psalms from St Paul’s*, Hyperion Records Ltd., London, 1998) as well as the same psalms sung in a modern Scottish metrical version (from *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Version of the Book of Psalms*, Edinburgh, 2003) The sung psalms were recorded by three of the respondents who are musically talented: Luke, Edith and Elsie. The singing was *a capella* to ensure the text would be heard clearly. The reading of the psalms was done by Grant Campbell, a friend who helped produce the CD. All respondents accessed the audio texts and nearly all were positive, especially about the spoken and sung versions. For Elsie, the song and the spoken word were ‘far and away more meaningful than any of the other resources’ (Ps 74-L: 2). Kate, however, is negative; she found the CDROM not at all useful (I-7: 7). The sung texts were slightly more popular than the pre-recorded spoken texts, and the spoken and song versions are significantly more popular than the chants, with twice as many references in the data.

<sup>38</sup> ‘I felt the passion,’ says Ashok, describing his listening to the song version of Psalm 74 (Ps 74-L: 3).

<sup>39</sup> Connie found that listening to the song version of Psalm 55 ‘was more powerful. It wasn’t really at all how I pictured it in my mind. It surprised me it was really so much more powerful’ (Ps 55-L: 2). Liz discovered that it was the fact that there was ‘a voice behind it, that opened it [the text] up – put emotions into it’ (Ps 126-L: 2).

and spirituality are more accessible' (Ps 126-D7). Norah finds the sung version of Ps 22 compelling: 'Can't get Luke's singing of this psalm out of my mind' (Ps 22-D2). The significant role audio plays in the Psalm Journey is further illustrated by some respondents reading the text aloud as an aid to meditation, thereby creating an additional resource. I was surprised so many did this unprompted and that they found the practice so helpful.<sup>40</sup>

There is little doubt that the Psalm Journey confirms the usefulness of the audio media in meditative reading of the text in conjunction with a print version. However, further research is needed to explore and compare different ways of combining listening to audio Scriptures and reading the same text in print. Hosanna Ministries, one of the largest producers of audio Scriptures, whose 'Faith Comes By Hearing' programme is used in many countries, reports that when these Scriptures are used in church groups in the developing world it is not uncommon for many listeners to follow the audio text in a print Bible as a means of acquiring or improving reading skills, which, in turn, leads to increased distribution of print Scriptures (Sogaard: 28/4; 29/7). In 1999 and 2000 a Bible agency partnership undertook research in Ghana into the combination of radio and audio cassette Scriptures and, again, the report indicates the project stimulated print Scripture reading, but there is no indication of how the experiences of listening and reading enhanced each other (Sogaard: 11/1-8). The prevailing practice seems to be for the Bible agencies to develop print and audio Scriptures on the assumption that they will be used independently of each other. The Psalm Journey challenges this assumption and suggests that media combinations of Scriptures in focused programmes of Scripture engagement might prove to be a fruitful area for further research.

### **Facilitation**

The sixth strategic direction emanating from the Psalm Journey concerns the importance of providing appropriate resources to facilitate a meditative reading of the text. We noted in chapter 1 that annotations were studiously avoided in the early history of the Bible Society movement. The movement's 'fundamental principle' of providing Scriptures 'without note or comment' was missional in that it was 'the key to making the movement work' by enabling Christians to set aside their own 'particular doctrinal stances for the sake of advancing the cause' (Burke: 301). When this principle was revised in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the motivation was again missional, for it was an attempt 'to reach contemporary readers (who increasingly bring less and less background to their reading of

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<sup>40</sup> Five respondents (Luke, John, Norah, Flora and Ashok) explicitly say they read the psalm texts. 'I enjoyed the words, saying them over and over again,' says John (Ps 22-L: 2); Luke (Ps 126-L: 2) tells us that it was when he read the text aloud to himself that it became accessible.

the Bible)' (Burke: 311). Such 'helps for the reader'<sup>41</sup> were designed 'to allow the readers to discover applications [of the Scripture text] to their own situations'.<sup>42</sup> From the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards Bible Societies have sought to operate within these parameters (as also have I in preparing the 'helps' used in the Psalm Journey), and they recognise that one key aspect of the Scripture engagement challenge is to find the most effective helps for particular audiences.<sup>43</sup> Whatever contribution the Psalm Journey may make to meeting this ongoing challenge to help readers engage with Scripture, one conclusion is to suggest that the parameters ought not to be revised; in fact, omitting any credal assertions or advocacy for theological positions (Burke: 309) is helpful when facilitating meditative engagement with the text *per se*. My research highlights the value of providing respondents with a minimal hermeneutic and the importance of involving them in the selection / preparation of resources.

The most appreciated resource in the Psalm Journey is the minimal hermeneutic. Edith's enthusiasm - 'We wanted a sheet of paper beside us and our Bibles, and that was it' (I-11:5). - is shared by a majority of respondents.<sup>44</sup> The main part of this document is a series of 'cues' and 'prompts' designed to facilitate meditating on Scripture texts.<sup>45</sup> This resource is regarded as helpful in providing a useful introduction and orientation to the text (Elsie, I-8: 4), supplying the poet's context (Connie, I-5: 2) and giving some structure to the meditation (Liz, I-1: 2). Like Tom (I-2: 4-5), some respondents would have liked more of it, but John (I-4: 4) feels that more information would be too intrusive.<sup>46</sup> The risk in making it longer is

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<sup>41</sup> The article 'Marginal Helps for the Reader' by Eugene A Nida (BT 9/1 (1958)) popularised this phrase.

<sup>42</sup> UBS document 'Guidelines for Study Bibles', Reading 1992.

<sup>43</sup> My choice of the term 'minimal hermeneutic' reflects a desire to minimise notes and comments and allow the Scripture text to be the primary focus of readers' attention.

<sup>44</sup> Cf Connie's (I-5: 2) comment: 'The minimal hermeneutic helped me to understand the background detail and to further appreciate the poet's perspective... I think I reinterpreted my impression of the psalm after reading the minimal hermeneutic because of awareness of context.' A minority do not share this enthusiasm: for Norah it was too Christian (I-7: 4) and for Flora too literal (I-12: 2); three did not use it, one of whom (Kate) wondered afterwards what she might have missed (I-7: 3).

<sup>45</sup> I prefer 'Cues and Prompts' to 'Note and Comment'. The 'cues' are notes providing historical, cultural and linguistic background information, and 'prompts' are comments designed to stimulate respondents' imagination while meditating on the text. In compiling the 'cues' for the minimal hermeneutics I have sought to remain within the Bible Society parameters described above and my 'prompts' are deliberately cast in the form of open questions and suggestions designed to provide respondents with creative stimuli to meditating.

<sup>46</sup> 'More information would have left fewer questions in my mind and would have helped me to understand the focus of the psalm more easily (and perhaps have more sympathy with the poet in the case of Psalm 55' (Connie, I-5: 2). 'I wanted to know far more about exactly what was going on and who was attacking whom' (Edith, I-11: 5).

'I really enjoyed the 'minimal hermeneutic'. I did like having that much of structure because, you know, when you first read the psalms, you can seem a bit lost in the text and not really know how to. At the same time, that's about all the structure I want. Anything more than that I sort of hesitate and shy away from' (John, I-4: 4).

that it might become an alternative text rather than a short series of brief marginal notes. More extended information of a linguistic, cultural or historical nature is more appropriate on a dedicated website. Although the response to the Psalm Journey website is ambiguous, the value of this resource is borne out by the lively exchange on the bulletin board between Norah and Tom, which Liz and Luke joined.<sup>47</sup> The minimal hermeneutic is designed for personal use outside the *lectio divina* session; it would probably be intrusive and, therefore, counterproductive to the meditation if participants were to access it while the *lectio divina* is in progress. As already observed, it is important to encourage participants to sit in front of the text while meditating and listen to what it is saying to them.<sup>48</sup>

Another resource that proved invaluable to respondents is the practice of daily journaling. The Psalm Journey demonstrates that a *lectio divina* works well when integrated with a structure of prior personal daily meditation on the text. Respondents are clear on this. The daily meditation and journaling ‘were the core of it for me,’ says John. ‘That is what I got a lot out of, and, for me, after that I think the group meetings were helpful’ (I-4: 4).<sup>49</sup> The added value the journaling gives to the *lectio divina* highlights the advantages of readers becoming producers, and not simply consumers, of ‘helps’. The desire of respondents to read aloud the texts to themselves as well as listen to the pre-recorded readings similarly indicates the need to be actively involved in finding the means of facilitating their engagement. Lack of participation in the selection of visual images provided (line drawings, still pictures and video clips) contributed to the predominantly negative response to these. Flora’s view – ‘I didn’t want an interpretation made for me; I wanted ... to imagine it for myself’ (Ps 30-L: 3) – is fairly representative. Other reasons given for respondents’ coolness to the visual resources – that they were too many,<sup>50</sup> too provocative,<sup>51</sup> or too stereotyped<sup>52</sup> –

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<sup>47</sup> Tom is alone in finding the website the most helpful resource on offer (Ps 55-L: 2); this may be because he scarcely used the minimal hermeneutic (I-2: 5). John found that the note on the structure of Psalm 22 helped him to concentrate on bits of the text at a time (Ps 22-L: 2), but while it was helpful, ‘it didn’t click’ for him (I-4: 4). Liz (I-1: 3) also found the website helpful, but ‘at a fairly superficial level’; it didn’t open up the text for her. Appreciation of the website was lower in the second group: visiting a website didn’t strike Elsie as meditative (I-8: 4), and Edith felt the group had little interest in it (I-11: 5).

<sup>48</sup> The ‘cues’ are examples of the kind of note that I would encourage Bible agencies to continue to produce and, indeed, multiply in popular Scripture engagement materials. Similarly, my ‘prompts’ are exemplars of the kind of comment that stimulates readers’ imagination and helps them ‘interact with the Word of God.’ (From UBS ‘Purpose Statement’, *UBS Bulletin* 192/193 (2001): 55).

<sup>49</sup> ‘A journal is a great way to reflect on a text ... I think it’s a great way of juicing them [the texts] a bit more and getting more out of them’ (Luke, I-6: 4). ‘I have to say that proper journal entry helped me to structure my thoughts and to find my way through’ (Kate, I-7: 7). ‘There was no difficulty in writing my journal, and it came easily’ (Edith, I-11: 11).

<sup>50</sup> John (I-4: 4) finds it difficult to give serious attention to so many photographs and line drawings.

<sup>51</sup> Norah found a photograph of a starving child in a developing country ‘too powerful’ (Ps 126-L: 2). It made Tom ‘feel angry’ (Ps 126-L: 2).

would not have arisen had respondents been invited to find their own images. With a little imagination members of groups can be involved in selecting resources. For example, in preparing for the hypothetical series I earlier entitled ‘The Psalms and the Planet’, participants might be consulted as to whether as part of the process of engagement they would like to view a DVD of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* or Wag TV’s *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, or both, or some other. Some members might be asked by the group to source aid and development agencies for print and online resources.

To recapitulate, there are six strategic directions suggested by the Psalm Journey in which the practice of Scripture engagement may be taken forward among westernised young adults in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. If these are taken on board, there will be six consequences. First, *meditation* will become a key mode of accessing Scripture alongside induction. Second, the Bible agencies will develop ‘a hermeneutic of *imagination*’ to match the ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ that prevails in current inductive approaches to biblical texts. Third, the Psalms will become a major resource utilised by Bible agencies and churches in the *self-formation* of spiritual seekers. Fourth, Scripture engagement will be *contextualised* in relation to issues that arise in the public square as well as those affecting the private sphere, fulfilling Calvin’s metaphor of the Scriptures as spectacles. Fifth, audio Scriptures will be increasingly used in tandem with print in order to maximise and *reinforce* the impact of Scripture. Finally, sensitively prepared ‘minimal hermeneutics’ that relate to specific texts and focus on specified audiences will become increasingly popular.

I began this chapter with ‘Soulgait’. I now return to it and conclude my thesis by taking readers to a moving scene in Greyfriars Kirkyard in which two mothers – one Israeli, the other Palestinian – squat on the grass, each caressing a dead soldier son. In their grief they take turns to sing alternate stanzas of Michael Perry’s version of the melancholic 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The final verses (6-9), which are omitted by Perry, are spoken with great vehemence instead of sung, the Palestinian mother reciting verse 6, the Israeli mother verses 7 and 8a, and both women spitting out the imprecation of verse 9 before breaking down with emotion. As I watched this poignant scene I recalled how most respondents blanched at the vengeful cry of the poet of Psalm 55 calling for the death of his betrayer. I wondered had that psalm been performed rather than read and heard, if they would have been able to appreciate more the emotional pressures that explode into the poet’s outburst? After all, the psalms were

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<sup>52</sup> ‘The stereotype images of Africa – e.g. a lion, starving children – made me very angry’ (Liz, Ps 126-L: 3)

performed, not simply sung or chanted, in ancient Israel. Do we need to perform them today to experience their emotional power? This is another question for further research. Suffice for now to note that even without dramatic re-enactment, the psalms read, recited and heard by my respondents during the Psalm Journey offered them an alternative, *samizdat* spirituality that opens a way of bringing protest as well as praise, complaint as well as thanksgiving, ambiguity as well as confidence, into the sanctuary of God. It is a spirituality the churches to all intents and purposes have abandoned (Davidson 1983: 1-17; Brueggemann 1974: 6). It may be that a new generation of seekers living at, or beyond, the edge of our religious institutions will restore to the mainstream this ancient form of spirituality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**APPENDICES**

<b>1. The <i>Lectio Divina</i> Process</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>2. Minimal Hermeneutics</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>2.1.1 Psalm 22</b>	
<b>2.1.2 Psalm 30</b>	
<b>2.1.3 Psalm 55</b>	
<b>2.1.4 Psalm 73</b>	
<b>2.1.5 Psalm 74</b>	
<b>2.1.6 Psalm 126</b>	
<b>3. Follow-up Interview Script</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>4. Website Contents</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>5. Sample Contents of CD</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>6. Pilot Project</b>	<b>246</b>

**Appendix 1 The *Lectio Divina* Process**

1. Prepare
  - Sit in silence with you eyes closed, let your body relax.
2. Listen to the Psalm.
  - As the psalm is read twice, listen for the word or phrase that strikes you.
  - During the moments of silence that follow the second reading, repeat the phrase softly (or silently) to yourself.
  - The leader will say “Let us share our word or phrases.” When it is your turn in the circle, speak your phrase aloud. Say only this word or phrase with no comments or elaboration.
  - You may say “I pass” if you wish, at any point in this process.
3. Ask yourself “How is my life impacted by this word?”
  - The psalm will now be read by a different person.
  - Consider how the word or phrase connects to your life. Sometimes this will be an idea or a thought; at other times it will be an image or some other impression.
  - You will have two or three minutes for this meditation.
  - The leader will say, “Let us share our reflections” and you will share in one or two sentences the connection between your phrase and your life. Again, do not elaborate, explain, or justify what you sensed.
4. Ask yourself “Which of the resources provided helped the text to impact my life?”
  - You will have one or two minutes to reflect.
  - The leader will invite you to identify one of the resources and to describe in one or two sentences how it helped.
  - You may say “I pass” if you wish.
5. Ask yourself “Did the text of the psalm provide for you a window on the world?”
  - You will have two or three minutes to reflect.
  - The leader will invite you to highlight one news item of the past week which you’ve reflected on in the light of the psalm.
  - You may say “I pass” if you wish.
6. Ask yourself “Which extract from my journal do I wish to share with the group?”
  - You will have two or three minutes to reflect
  - The leader will invite you to read an extract of your choosing.
  - You may say “I pass” if you wish.
7. Ask yourself “Am I being invited to respond?”
  - The psalm will now be read for a third time (by yet another person).
  - Consider whether you are being invited to respond in some way in the next few days: “Am I being encouraged to do something?”
  - You will have two or three minutes of silence for meditation.
  - The leader will say, “Let us share our responses.” When it is your turn, share in one or two sentences, without elaboration, the invitation you are being given.
8. Conclude
  - Sit in silence with your eyes closed reflecting on the psalm and your interaction with it, and committing yourself to do what the psalm has invited you to do.

## Appendix 2 Minimal Hermeneutics

### 2.1 Minimal Hermeneutic: Psalm 22

#### Inter-textual Readings:

Exodus 13.17-14.31 and Matthew 27.11-61.

In the Christian Bible, the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) use Psalm 22 as the principal Hebrew Bible resource to interpret the suffering of Jesus.

#### Cues

Class of psalm: Lament (or prayer for help) of an individual.

See special feature on *The Structure of Psalm 22* on the Psalm Journey website

*To the leader:* Probably the temple choir master. The expression occurs in the title of fifty-five psalms.

*The Deer of the Dawn:* Maybe a musical melody.

*of David:* The Hebrew preposition can equally mean 'by' (i.e. David is the author) or 'to' (i.e. dedicated to David).

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** (v. 1): Similar questions appear often in prayers for help. According to the writers of the Gospels, Jesus recited these words during his crucifixion. See Matthew 27.46. In his agony, he may have meditated on the entire psalm.

**Yet you are... enthroned on the praises of Israel** (v. 3): The temple in Jerusalem (and before it, the tabernacle) contained the 'ark of the covenant' that was viewed as God's throne on earth (Exodus 25.17-22; 1 Kings 8.1-13). It was also seen as the place where earth and heaven meet, so it was a symbol of God's 'throne in heaven.' (Psalm 11.4).

**our ancestors trusted... and you delivered them** (v. 4): an allusion to the exodus in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE of the Jews from Egypt under Moses. See Exodus 13.17-14.31.

**mock at me** (v. 7): See Matthew 27.29. The stories in the Gospels of Jesus' crucifixion track a correspondence between his sufferings and those of this psalmist. See also above on v. 1 and below on vv. 8, 15 and 18.

**let him deliver** (v. 8): See Matthew 27.43. The same verb is used in v. 4 of the LORD having **delivered** the ancestors.

**you took me from the womb** (v. 9): God is portrayed as a midwife.

**bulls** (v. 12): Here and in vv. 16 and 20-22 animal metaphors describe the poet's enemies. Such figurative descriptions of enemies were common in ancient near eastern literature.

**Bashan** (v. 12): Rich grazing lands of the region east of the Lake of Galilee.

**my mouth is dried up** (v. 15): See John 19.28.

**My hands and feet have shrivelled** (v. 16). The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible renders: *they have pierced my hands and feet.*

**For dogs are all around me** (v. 16) .... **They stare and gloat over me** (v. 17): The ruthless enemies, like hounds and hunters, are closing in for the kill.

**they open wide their mouths** (v. 12): Note that the subjects of vv 1-11 (**you** and **I**) changes to **they** and **I** in vv 12-18.

**they divide my clothes among themselves** (v. 18): See Matthew 27.35 and John 19.23-24.

**I will tell of your name... in the midst of the congregation** (v. 22): A sudden change of mood. The poet foresees himself set free from his immediate troubles and becoming part of the congregation at worship and begins to compose a hymn of thanksgiving (vv 23-24)! .

**You who fear the Lord** (v. 23); cf. **those who seek him** (v. 26): The worshippers in the sanctuary whose devotion he intends to encourage through the testimony of his hymn in vv. 23-24.

**Jacob** (v. 23): The people of Israel were descended from Jacob's twelve sons.

**my vows** (v. 25): Vows of praise are common in lament psalms. The speaker solemnly promises to praise God publicly at an offering of a thanksgiving sacrifice, once he has been delivered.

**the poor shall eat** (v. 26): On the occasion of sacrificial offerings of thanksgiving and payment of vows in the temple, portions of the sacrifice were eaten by the offerer and his guests. Deuteronomy 16.10-17 implies that the poor should be invited to share in sacrificial meals.

**All the ends of the earth shall... turn to the LORD** (v. 27). This anticipated universal acknowledgement of God embraces time as well as geography. Both the dead, **all who go down to the dust** (v. 29), and those not yet born, **posterity** (v. 30), will serve him.

### Prompts

- **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** (v. 1). Think or imagine a situation in which you have felt/might feel in the depths of despair. Then slowly and reflectively go through the text of the psalm exploring how it impacts on the way you feel.
- **I am... scorned by others** (v. 6). Think of some experience of social alienation you have experienced. How does the psalmist's reaction to the scorn and criticism of others compare with your reaction?
- Many people today can resonate with the poet's complaint that God is (a) remote (**why are you so far?** v. 1) and (b) silent (**you do not answer**, v. 2)! Why, then, is there today a growing interest in spirituality?
- Try to imagine how Jesus felt as he recited this psalm while dying on the cross. What new insights (if any) does this give you of human calling and destiny?
- **From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me** (v. 21). Have you ever seen good come out of suffering of friends or family? How did you feel?
- If a friend of yours is at this moment suffering – emotionally or physically – reflect on this psalm verse by verse thinking of him or her. Explain in your journal whether you find this to be helpful.

## 2.2 Minimal Hermeneutic: Psalm 30

Inter-textual Readings: Ezra 6.13-18; Isaiah 38.1-20

Class of Psalm: Thanksgiving Song

### Cues

*Psalm*: From the Greek *psalmos*, derived from the verb to pluck a stringed instrument. The Hebrew is *mizmôr* from the verb to play an instrument.

*at the dedication of the temple*: According to the Talmud (a body of ancient Jewish law and tradition), this personal song was used as a national song in the Festival of Hanukkah (Dedication) inaugurated by Judas Maccabeus in 165 BCE to mark the purification of the temple after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. See 1 Maccabees 4.52; 2 Maccabees 10.1ff on Psalm Journey website; compare John 10.22). The psalm may have been originally used at the consecration of the Second Temple in 515 BCE (Ezra 6.13-18).

*Of David*: the Hebrew preposition could equally mean ‘by’ (i.e. David is the author) or ‘to’ (i.e. dedicated to David).

**I will extol you** (v. 1): The Hebrew word translated ‘extol’ more literally means ‘to lift up’.

**LORD** (v. 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12): ‘LORD’ translates *Yahweh*, the special and intimate name the ancient Israelites used for God.

**you have drawn me up** (v. 1): In Exodus 2.16,19 this verb is used of drawing water from a well.

**my foes** (v. 1): we are not told who these were.

**you have healed me** (v. 2): This song is a celebratory prayer of someone who has recovered from illness. It has many verbal connections with the prayer of King Hezekiah when he was sick (Isaiah 38.10-20). On the other hand, healing may be a figurative description of the resolution of either an emotional crisis or of a life-threatening situation.

**my soul** (v. 3): i.e. ‘my life.’ The Hebrews, unlike the Greeks, regarded the ‘soul’ as including a person’s whole being.

**Sheol** (v. 3): the world of the dead. Sometimes used figuratively of the grave.

**Pit** (v. 3): the lowest part of Sheol.

**Sing praises to the LORD...** (v. 4): In verses 4 and 5 the poet interrupts the prayer to invite the congregation to join him in the praise and thanksgiving. The prayer resumes in verse 6.

**his faithful ones** (v. 4): i.e. loyal worshippers.

**Weeping ... for the night, but joy... the morning** (v. 5): The transition from weeping to joy is as unailing as the move from night to day. It was common for the faithful Israelites to pray each morning and at other set times throughout the day (Psalms 5.3; 88.13; 92.2)

**I said in my prosperity** (v. 6): ‘Verses 6-12 seem to be a flashback in which the psalmist reviews the former distress (vv. 6-10) and deliverance (vv. 11-12), even quoting a portion of the prayer for help mentioned in v. 2 (vv. 9-10)’ (*New Interpreters’ Bible*).

**you hid your face** (v. 7): i.e. withdrew your presence.

**I was dismayed** (v. 7): The Hebrew verb has a strong sense; in Job 22.10 is rendered *overwhelmed by terror*, and in Psalm 6.2 as *shaking with terror*.

**in my death** (v. 9): literally 'in my blood' indicating death by violence.

**Will the dust praise you?** (v. 9): i.e. will dead people praise you?

**You have turned my mourning into dancing** (v. 11): Dancing was a sign of rejoicing (e.g. 1 Samuel 18.6), and had a place in temple worship in ancient Israel (Psalms 149.4; 150.4).

**sackcloth** (v. 11): coarse dark-coloured cloth made from goat or camel hair and used to make grain sacks. It was worn as a sign of mourning (Genesis 37.34; Psalms 35.13; 69.11).

**may praise you** (v. 12): literally, 'sing psalms to you.' Cf. **Sing praises** (v. 4): i.e. 'sing psalms.'

### Prompts

- Note the contrasting moods in this psalm, especially between verse 7 (**I was dismayed**) and verse 11 (**You have turned my mourning into dancing**). The poet obviously placed a high value on emotional experience. Reflect on how your spiritual quest affects your feelings.
- In verses 4 and 5 the poet interrupts his prayer to invite others to join him in thankfulness. Reflect on the ways in which other people contribute to your spirituality.
- **To you, O LORD, I cried** (v. 8). Ask yourself whether you have ever cried out for help to some higher power. And if you have done this, reflect on your motivation: Did you expect supernatural intervention? Or did you pray simply to feel better?
- **What profit is there in my death...?** (v. 9). For the poet spiritual fulfilment had to be experienced now and not postponed to an afterlife. Reflect on the extent to which this insistence on immediacy resonates with you.

### 2.3 Minimal Hermeneutic: Psalm 55

#### Cues

Class of Psalm: Individual song of complaint.

*To the leader*: Probably the temple choir master. The expression occurs in the title of fifty-five psalms.

*Maskil*: This term occurs in the titles of thirteen psalms. Its exact meaning is uncertain, but may refer to a well-crafted song.

*of David*: The Hebrew preposition could equally mean 'by' (i.e. David is the author) or 'to' (i.e. dedicated to David).

**I am distraught** (v. 2): The Hebrew suggests the poet is at his wits end, rushing about frantically.

**noise... clamour** (v. 2): The poet's enemies were shouting accusations against him.

**they bring trouble upon me** (v. 3): Lit. 'they spread out trouble over me' like a hunter's net.

*Se'lah* (v. 7): probably a liturgical or musical term, meaning 'pause,' or 'sing (or play) louder.'

**I see violence and strife in the city** (v. 9b): The poem is set in a situation (presumably Jerusalem) of civil unrest. The word picture in vv. 9-11 suggests lawlessness, looting and a black market.

**It is not enemies who taunt me.... But it is you** (vv. 12-13): The nadir of the poet's agony is his betrayal by a close friend.

**Let death come upon them** (v. 15): In his bitterness, the poet asks God to execute his enemies. This is a call for justice as much as a cry for revenge.

**Sheol** (v. 15): the world of the dead. Sometimes used figuratively of the grave.

**My companion... violated a covenant with me** (v. 20): In ancient near eastern society covenants were solemn agreements between two parties, sealed by both swearing an oath of loyalty.

**Cast your burden on the LORD...** (v. 22): Perhaps these words were spoken by a priest in the temple.

#### Prompts

- We all like to be well-thought of by others. Take time to allow yourself to sense the poet's abject horror when, in the midst of near-anarchy in the community and with his enemies clamouring for his head, his best friend turns against him. Have you been let down by a best friend? What was your gut reaction?
- Ask yourself: How do I react to life's conflicts ('the battle that I wage' [v. 18])?
  - Opt out (vv. 6-8)?
  - Curse those who attack me (vv. 9, 15)?
  - Ask God (or some higher power) to lighten the load (v. 22)?
  - If not these, what?
- Note how the poet oscillates between terror (vv. 1-5) and trust (vv. 16-19). Compare the Chinese proverb 'Sorrow is the child of ecstasy.' Reflect on how you cope with violent mood swings.

**I see violence and strife in the city** (v. 9). How do you respond to issues that threaten social order and undermine justice, like terrorism and economic globalisation? Reflect on whether your interaction with

the text of Psalm 55 increases or lessens your desire to do something to make the world safer and more just.

- **that I had wings like a dove?** (v. 6). Mull over how you respond when your personal world falls in around you? Academic failure, a broken relationship, parental divorce, loss of job are a few examples. Which route would you follow? Find an escape in drugs, alcohol, a Caribbean holiday? Or try to find a new inner resolve to carry on?
- **Let death come upon them!** (v. 15). The poet undoubtedly is very angry. But in effect he places the matter of vengeance(\*) in God's hands. Ponder on how you deal with desires for revenge when you are stabbed in the back.

\* See the special feature *Vengeance in the Psalms* on the Psalm Journey website.

## 2.4 Minimal Hermeneutic: Psalm 73

Inter-textual Readings: None

Class of Psalm: An individual lament/complaint or song of protest

### Cues

*Psalm*: From the Greek *psalmos*, derived from the verb to pluck a stringed instrument. The Hebrew is *mizmôr* from the verb to play an instrument.

*Of Asaph*: Asaph was appointed by David the leader of choral worship (1Chronicles 16.4-5). The Hebrew preposition 'of' could equally mean 'by' (i.e. Asaph is the author) or 'to' (i.e. dedicated to Asaph).

**Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart** (v. 1): This may be a proverb.

**Truly** (vv. 1, 18): This adverb translates a Hebrew emphatic particle which occurs three times in Psalm 73. In v. 13 our version translates it as 'all' because there it is coupled with 'in vain'. This Hebrew particle divides the psalm into three major sections: (1) the problem (vv. 1-12); (2) the turning point (vv. 13-17); and (3) the solution (vv. 18-28). For a more detailed analysis see the Psalm Journey website.

**I was envious** (v. 3). The personal experience of the poet may mirror some difficult experience of the Israelite community during the final years of the Kingdom before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian empire in 587 BCE. But most scholars think the psalm comes from the unsettled period following the return from Babylonian exile in 538 BCE.

**the wicked** (vv. 2, 12): 'those within the Israelite community who consciously and deliberately flout the law' (Stanley N. Rosenbaum). Cf **those who are false to you** (v. 27). Note how in vv. 4-12 their **prosperity** (*shalom* in Hebrew) is measured in terms of wealth, arrogance and social influence. They are contrasted with the poor in v. 5.

**If I had said...** (v. 15): From this verse to the end of the psalm the poet addresses God directly.

**'I will talk on in this way'**: (v. 15): the psalmist envied the prosperity of the wicked and was finding it difficult (cf. vv. 2-3) to resist the temptation to join them. Some of his companions had already succumbed (see v. 10).

**I would have been untrue to the circle of your children** (v. 15): 'Children' might be literal or figurative, referring either to the psalmist's sense of responsibility for future generations or his awareness of loyalty to the community of faith.

**the sanctuary of God** (v. 17): The temple in Jerusalem. Although destroyed by the invading Babylonians in 587, it was rebuilt in 515 BCE. Faithful Israelites made pilgrimages to the temple three times a year for the major Jewish religious festivals.

**then I perceived their end** (v. 17): The poet apparently had an epiphany in the temple which gave him a radically new perspective. Note the contrast between what the poet **saw** in v. 3 and what he **perceived** in v. 17.

**slippery places** (v. 18): Note the dramatic reversal. 'Whereas formerly the psalmist was on slippery ground (vv. 1-3) and the wicked were secure (vv. 4-12), now the wicked are on slippery ground (vv. 18-20) and the psalmist is secure (vv. 21-28). The reversal involves not a change in outward circumstances but a change of understanding.' (*New Interpreter's Bible*).

**like a dream when one awakes** (v. 20): In the new perspective of the poet, the economic wealth and political power of 'the wicked' will not last.

**soul... heart** (v. 21): In the psychology of the ancient Israelites, the Hebrew equivalent of these two terms represent respectively the seat of human cognition and emotions.

**I am continually with you** (v. 23): The poet's newly found sense of inner peace is based on his conviction that God is with him. See also Psalms 23.4; 46.7.

**you hold my right hand** (v. 23): Like a parent preventing a child from slipping (cf v. 2)

**afterwards you will receive me with honour** (v. 24): The precise meaning is unclear, but this phrase may indicate a promise of life and future beyond death.

**God is the strength of my heart** (v. 26). Literally 'rock of my heart'.

**my portion for ever** (v. 26): a metaphorical use of the 'portion' (i.e. share) in the land that was the right of every Israelite (see Joshua 15.13; 19.9).

**LORD** (v. 28): 'LORD' translates *Yahweh*, the special and intimate name the ancient Israelites used for God.

**it is good** (v. 28): the poet sums up his experience.

### Prompts

- Meditate on the description of **the wicked** detailed in vv. 4-12. Reflect on who or what in today's world might correspond to them, and whether their 'success' sometimes tempts you to abandon your values and convictions.
- The poet wrestles with the ambiguities of life. According to tradition, the world is morally coherent (v. 1). But experience suggests that in fact it is **the wicked**, not the good, who prosper (v. 3). Reflect on whether modern expressions of this basic ambiguity can ever be resolved.
- To think over: **But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task** (v. 16). The poet suggests that in a society where only the privileged few make it, more than logic is required to find personal meaning and significance.
- The mood of the poet changes from self-pity in the face of the arrogance and violence of the powerful in his society (vv. 13-14) to a deep sense of self-fulfilment in worship (vv. 23-28). Reflect on ways in which you might become self-fulfilled without being self-centred.
- Reflect on the extent to which your experience of contemporary spirituality (which researchers frequently describe as 'a project of the autonomous, reflexive self') relates to the spiritual odyssey of Psalm 73.

## 2.5 Minimal Hermeneutic: Psalm 74

Inter-textual Readings: 2 Kings 25.1-21

Class of Psalm: A communal lament/complaint, probably composed for services of national mourning held in the ruins of the Jerusalem temple during the period many Jews were exiled in Babylon. See Jeremiah 41.4-5; Zechariah. 7.1-3; 8.18-19.

### Cues

*Maskil*: a didactic poem. The word is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning to be prudent, wise.

*Of Asaph*: Asaph was appointed by David the leader of choral worship (1Chronicles 16.4-5). The Hebrew preposition 'of' could equally mean 'by' (i.e. Asaph is the author) or 'to' (i.e. dedicated to Asaph).

**O God, why do you cast us off forever?** (v. 1): At the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in 587 BCE the inhabitants of Judah lost three symbols that marked their religious identity: the land, the Davidic king, and the temple.

**sheep** (v. 1): A common metaphor for the people of ancient Israel (cf. Psalms 79.13; 95.7; 100.3; Ezekiel 34.31).

**Mount Zion** (v. 2): The temple mount in Jerusalem. The first temple, built by King Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, when the elite of the nation was taken by their captors into exile. A second temple was built by the returning exiles in 520 BCE. This temple was violated in 167 BCE by the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV (see 1 Maccabees 1.29-64; 4.36-61 on the Psalm Journey website). The temple mount is presently occupied by the Islamic Al-Aqsa mosque and its shrine, the Dome of the Rock.

Verse 2 reflects the two fundamental religious traditions of ancient Israel: the exodus from Egypt (**redeemed**) under Moses, and God's choice through David of Jerusalem (**Mount Zion**) for his earthly dwelling.

**Direct your steps** (v. 3): It is as if the poet is walking God through **the perpetual ruins** of the temple.

**the enemy** (v. 3): Probably the Babylonian army. The Hebrew word rendered 'enemy' in the Hebrew Bible denotes foreign powers almost exclusively (Stanley Rosenbaum).

**on fire** (v. 3): See 2 Kings 25.8-9.

**emblems... prophet... no one knows how long** (v. 9): 'The lost symbol, the lost word, the lost hope' (*The Interpreter's Bible*).

**there is no longer any prophet** (v. 9): Maybe a reference to the abduction of the prophet Jeremiah to Egypt (Jeremiah 42.1-43-7).

**How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?** (v. 10): The psalm probably originated in the small beleaguered community left in and around Jerusalem in enemy-occupied territory after the majority had been taken into exile.

**your hand** (v. 11): God's hand was commonly used as a metaphor of his power (see Exodus 15.6, 12).

**Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth** (v. 12): The lament is interrupted by a hymn (vv. 12-17) which the psalmist may have borrowed rather than composed. It praises God for his **salvation** – a reference both to the creation of the world and to the exodus from Egypt. The hymn borrows metaphors like **sea**, **dragons** and **Leviathan** from ancient near eastern mythology.

**God my King** (v. 12): Judah no longer had a human king. **My** indicates that the hymn was sung by an individual on behalf of **us** (v. 9) – the **congregation** (v. 2).

**You divided the sea** (v. 13): See Exodus 14.

**Leviathan** (v. 14): The chaos-monster of ancient near eastern mythology, figuratively employed here of the Egyptian Pharaoh defeated at the exodus.

**day... night** (v. 16): A reference to the creation of the world. See Genesis 1.

**Remember this** (v. 18): cf v. 2.

**O LORD** (v. 18): ‘LORD’ translates *Yahweh*, the special and intimate name the ancient Israelites used for God. This special relationship was expressed in the **covenant** (v. 20) Yahweh made with ancient Israel and Judah.

**an impious people** (v. 18): probably the Babylonians who, though no doubt loyal to their own gods, did not reverence Israel’s God.

**Have regard for your covenant** (v. 20): The poet asserts that Yahweh is failing to honour the covenant ancient Israelites believed he had made with them; he was allowing an impious enemy to **scoff** at his holy name and permitting **the poor and needy** (who are specially protected under the covenant) to **be put to shame** (v. 21).

### Prompts

- Social scientists detect in contemporary western society a ‘restructuring’ of religion away from religious institutions towards ‘personal autonomy’ as expressed in current spirituality. Reflect on both the similarities and the contrasts between our spiritual quest today and the poet’s search for meaning in a world suddenly bereft of religious symbols, spiritual leadership and future hope (cf. v.9).
- ‘The petitions show that the congregation does not yield its faith to experience but instead shapes its bitter experience by faith into poignant urgent prayer.’ (James L Mays). Mull over the way experience and faith interact in your life.
- The psalmist rather irreverently pictures God standing back with his hands in his pockets (v. 11) while his people’s world falls apart. Verse 22 has been paraphrased as: ‘On your feet, O God – stand up for yourself!’ Reflect on whether today’s believers are too polite in their prayers.

## 2.6 Minimal Hermeneutic: Psalm 126

Inter-textual Readings: 2 Kings 25 (the exile); Ezra 1 (the return).

### Cues

Class of Psalm: *A Song of Ascents*: The Songs of Ascent (Pss. 120-134) appear to be designed for pilgrims travelling to the three annual festivals observed in Jerusalem in which ancient Jews celebrated their faith.

**the LORD** (v. 1): ‘LORD’ translates the special word the ancient Israelites had for God.

**restored the fortunes** (v. 1): a reference to the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylonia in 538 BCE. The half-century-long exile was an intensely traumatic experience for the Jews.

**Zion** (v. 1): the place name of the temple mount in Jerusalem. The first temple, built by King Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, when the elite of the nation was taken by their captors into exile. A second temple was built by the returning exiles in 520. The site is presently occupied by the Islamic Al-Aqsa mosque and its shrine, the Dome of the Rock.

**and we rejoiced** (v. 3b): This is the central sentence in the psalm. Verbs preceding it are rendered in the past tense; those coming after it, in the present or future tense.

**watercourses in the Negeb** (v. 4b): the seasonal flash floods that make the dry wadis of the south of Israel run with water.

**those who sow in tears** (v. 5): the post-exilic period was a time of hardship. Attempts by the returned exiles to re-build city and temple were opposed by locals (Nehemiah 4); in addition, they suffered from drought (Haggai 1.6-11; 2.16-19) and locusts (Joel 1.1-2.27).

### Prompts

- The repetition of ‘fortunes’ (v. 1) in v. 4 has prompted the following comment: ‘What the pilgrims remember about the past they pray for in the present... they need ever-recurring rhythms of renewal that come like the seasonal freshets that make the dry watercourses of the Negeb run with water.’ (James L Mays). Be open to the text of this ancient song renewing your soul!
- Allow the images of this song – dreams and streams; sowing and reaping – to run in your imagination and see where they lead!
- Try to understand the joy of the returning exiles by reflecting on times in your life when you ‘were like those who dreamed’ (v. 1-2).
- ‘Those who sow in tears’ (v. 5). Some of the frustrations of sowing may be appreciated by reading Jesus’ Parable of the Sower (Luke 8.4-15). Reflect on the devastating impact in the developing world of failed harvests and unfair trade agreements.
- ‘[They] shall come home with shouts of joy’ (v. 6). ‘Joy builds on the past and borrows from the future’ (Eugene Peterson). In your imagination attempt to borrow from your future! When you do this what do you see?

**Appendix 3 Follow-up Interview Script****Introduction**

Thanks for participating in Psalm Journey. Explain purpose of interview (to evaluate the Journey and measure its impact). Make clear that the interviewee's comments will be valuable. Confirm confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to refuse to answer any question. Indicate that personal data from the Questionnaire will be incorporated into the interview questions. Obtain permission to audiotape.

**Meditation**

1. Had you engaged in any structured or semi-structured meditation prior to undertaking the Psalm Journey?
  2. If so, please explain how the meditative Psalm Journey compared with those previous meditations?
- OR
3. If not, describe briefly your reactions to the meditative Psalm Journey?

**Psalms**

4. In what ways did the Psalm texts resonate or not resonate with your values and felt needs?
5. Have you read and/or meditated on any other Psalms since completing the Psalm Journey?
6. Would you consider meditating on other Psalms in the future?
  7. If so, would you use a structured programme of Psalm meditation if one were available to you?

**Inter-textual Readings**

8. Tell me how you used the inter-textual readings suggested in the Minimal Hermeneutic for Psalms 126, 55 and 22.
9. Has participation in the Psalm Journey made you more or less likely to meditate on other texts from the Bible?
10. How has your participation in the Psalm Journey influenced your feelings about (a) the Bible; (b) the Church; (c) some other area?

**Spiritual Quest**

11. In what ways did the Psalm Journey affect your quest for personal meaning and enlightenment?
12. Describe how the fact that the Psalm Journey was undertaken with others influenced your personal quest during these four weeks?
13. At this moment of time, where do you see your spiritual quest taking you?

**General (\*)**

14. What new ideas and information did you receive through undertaking the Psalm Journey?

15. In what ways did the Psalm Journey either challenge or reinforce some of your personal and social values?

16. To what extent and in what ways did the Psalm Journey shape any new opinions, beliefs or values?

17. Describe the kind of emotional responses the Psalm Journey triggered in you?

18. What have you done differently as a result of the Psalm Journey?

19. Is there anything else you would like to add about the Psalm Journey?

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH**

\* Questions 14-17 will have a common supplementary question:

Did you find one psalm particularly powerful?

## Appendix 4 Website Contents

### Special Feature: ‘What is the Book of Psalms?’

The Book of Psalms is a collection of the religious songs used by the ancient Hebrews in their corporate worship and personal meditation. They are written, read and sung in the Hebrew language. They became known outside ancient Israel in a Greek translation (known as the *Septuagint*) which was produced by Jews in Alexandria in the second century BCE.

The word ‘Psalm’ is derived from the Greek term *psalmos* (which is a translation of the Hebrew word *mizmor*) meaning ‘song.’ These poems are traditionally attributed to David, but while some may well come from his time (tenth century BCE), others date from after the return of Israel from exile in Babylon (sixth century).

The *Book of Psalms* (referred to as PSALMS in this note) is a collection of 150 individual songs in which the Hebrew people expressed their relationship with God. Some are psalms of lament, others of praise. Both these categories can be subdivided by whether the speaker is an individual or the community.

PSALMS covers a wide range of emotions and responses – joy, sorrow, trust, doubt, hope, despair, contentment, anger, a willingness to forgive and a desire for vengeance. ‘As models of prayer and praise, PSALMS invites people to share every part of their lives with God.... When we read the many different types of psalms devotionally, we are exposed to a wide range of human emotions, as well as a deep faith in God.’ (*Psalms - The Learning Bible: Contemporary English Version*, p. 17)

### Special Feature: ‘Hebrew Poetry’

Hebrew poetry does not have rhyme or metre. Its most distinguishing feature is the use of parallelism. Parallelism is a literary device which places emphasis on an idea by repeating it in a slightly different way. Most poetic lines are made up of two (sometimes three) balanced components, with the second component echoing the first. In most English translations the first and second component are printed as separate lines, with the second slightly indented. A simple example of parallelism is found in Psalm 55.2:

*Hear my prayer, O God;  
give ear to the words of my mouth.*

Sometimes the second component contrasts the first, as in Psalm 1 which concludes as follows:

*For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish*

There is a sense in which parallelism allows us to say that Hebrew poetry ‘rhymes’ in its meanings rather than in its word-endings.

Of course, Hebrew poetry has many other features, but for the psalms being considered in the David Trail, perhaps, the only other significant device is a tendency to place key thematic lines in the opening stanza or at the very centre of the poem. Psalm 30.1 – *I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up* - is an example of an initial line acting as a marker for the main topic of the poem. An example of a centering line is the triplet in Psalm 23.4b - *for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me* - emphasising the Shepherd-King’s presence with his people.

### Special Feature: Psalms – Different Types

PSALMS reflect a wide variety of styles, moods, language, and themes. Many psalms can fit into more than one category.

#### Hymns of Praise

Praise – the overriding theme of most of the psalms. Psalms 149, 150: try to imagine large groups of worshippers accompanied by musicians, shouting these praises to God.

Many praise psalms include a reason for praising God:

- For his goodness in creating us, loving us, forgiving us. 100, 103, 135.
- For being the creator of the world and everything in it. 8, 104, 148.
- For being the ruler or king of the world (royal psalms). 29, 93, 96, 99.
- For acting in history to help his people. 78, 105, 106, 114.
- For giving wisdom and instructions (the Law) that guide people how to live. 1, 19, 37, 119.

#### Songs of Worship

Psalms that were written for particular times or occasions of worship. This can be deduced from the headings of many psalms.

Specific settings. 30, 38, 70, 92, 102. Imagine how they can still be used in similar settings.

‘Ascent psalms.’ 120-134. Probably songs to be sung as pilgrims went up to the temple on major festivals.

Antiphonal psalms. 24, 118, 136, 148. Written so that one group of worshippers answers a question or responds to another group with such refrains as ‘Praise the Lord’ or ‘God’s love never fails.’ To be read responsively or sung antiphonally (when a leader and a group take turns singing).

#### Laments

This type of psalm is usually very emotional and begs God to help in light of some disaster or terrible situation. The original Hebrew metre of these psalms is written in a dirge-like pattern.

##### *Individual laments.*

They use the first person ‘I’ (or ‘me’) and reflect a time of personal crisis. 3, 5, 22, 26, 42, 102. Be aware of the shifts of mood as the poet responds to God. They normally begin with a complaint, but often end with an expression of trust and praise that God will indeed respond with mercy. These are often called *I-laments*.

##### *Collective laments.*

Collective prayers of the community of worshippers. They use the first person plural ‘we’ or ‘us.’ They were voices especially in times of national crisis or tragedy. 44, 60, 74, 80, 83. Sometimes these are *They-laments* (the poet complains about other people); at others they are *You-laments* (the poet complains to God that he is failing to fulfil his covenant commitment to his people).

#### Prayers for God’s Help

Similar to the lament, but they lack the dirge-like metre of the lament.

Special prayers for help in desperate situations:

- For deliverance from enemies. 35, 68, 129, 137
- For help in time of trouble. 6, 25, 57, 61, 91

- For God's forgiveness. 32, 39, 51, 130

### **Psalms of Thanksgiving**

A large category.

The psalmist thanks God for deliverance or special help:

- For God's care and healing. 30, 126, 145. Remember when you thanked God for similar things.
- For victories over enemies and opposing forces. 21, 52, 76, 108, 124. God is in control of everything that happens and is on our side, always ready to give victory to those who love God.
- For rescue from cruel and unfair situations. 18, 70, 77, 98. God desires to deliver us from oppression and all forms of bondage.

### **Special Feature: 'Meditating on the Psalms'**

#### **Finding and Bringing**

The following quotation about praying the Psalms is equally relevant to meditating on them:

Praying the Psalms depends on two things: (1) what we *find* there when we come to the Psalms and (2) what we *bring* to the Psalms out of our own life.... The work of prayer is to bring these two realities together – the boldness of the Psalms and the extremity of our experience – to let them interact, play with each other, tease each other, and illuminate each other.  
- Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 23.

#### **Imaginative speech**

In either ecstasy or misery, the psalmists often employed enormous hyperbole. If we tone such speech down we will deny the ecstasy or the misery of the text.

#### **Metaphors**

Metaphors should be accepted as metaphors and not flattened into concepts. Try to explore and exploit the psalmists' metaphors in your own experience. Recognise their elasticity. They can be stretched and extended to touch all kinds of experience. 'The meaning of the metaphor is determined not only by what is there but by what we bring to it out of our experience and out of our imagination.' (Brueggemann, op cit, p. 30).

### **FOR JOURNEY 1**

### **Special Feature: 'Vengeance in the Psalms'**

Some psalms contain rather fierce expressions of vengeance. See, for example, Psalm 55.15. Walter Brueggemann, a leading Hebrew Bible scholar in America, does not find this surprising:

The Psalms explore the full gamut of human experience from rage to hope. Indeed, it would be very strange if such a robust spirituality lacked such a dimension of vengeance, for we would conclude that just at the crucial point, robustness had turned to cowardice and propriety. The vitality of the Psalms, if without a hunger for vengeance, would be a cop-out.  
- *Praying the Psalms*, p. 57.

Brueggemann makes three further observations about expressions of vengeance in the Psalms:

- First, while there are many speeches of vengeance, there are no acts of vengeance. ‘So far as we know, even in the most violent cries for vengeance, no action is taken.’ (*Praying the Psalms.*, p. 60).
- Second, these speeches of vengeance are spoken to God, not directly to the enemy.
- Third, the act of asking God to bring about the vengeance frees the speaker from its toxic power.

‘Vengeance is transferred from the heart of the speaker to the heart of God. And when vengeance is entrusted to God the speaker is relatively free from its power.... The rage is not removed. But it has been dramatically transformed by the double act of owning and yielding.’ (*Praying the Psalms*, p. 60)

### Special Feature: ‘The Structure of Psalm 22’

The psalm is composed by using the device of repetition or doubling. There is a twiceness in the arrangement from the opening vocative to the total structure itself. The whole is composed of a *prayer for help* (vv. 1-21) and a song of *praise for help* (vv. 22-31). These two types and the acts they express are distinct.... But here the two are joined in a unity as though the two acts of prayer and praise and the two situations of affliction and salvation must be comprehended in one arc of meaning to express what is happening.

The prayer moves in two cycles (vv. 1-11 and 12-19), each concluding in the petition “be not far” (vv. 11, 19). Each of the cycles is composed of a twofold alternation of elements. The first cycle is made up of two laments over the psalmist’s trouble (vv. 1-2 and 6-8), each followed by appropriately corresponding assertions of confidence in God (vv. 3-5 and 9-10). The second cycle is made up also of two laments (vv. 12-15 and 16-18), each composed of a description of surrounding bestial forces (vv. 12-13 and 16), followed by descriptions of the nearness of encroaching death (vv. 14-15 and 17-18). The second petition (vv. 19-21) intensifies the first (v. 11) by threefold repetitions.

The song of praise is also composed of two sections (vv. 22-26 and 27-31). The first section is a hymn in first person style whose focus is on the congregation who celebrate with the psalmist his deliverance and is made up of a summons to praise (vv. 22-23) and the subject or reason for praise (vv. 24-26). The second section widens the circle of praise from congregation to humanity itself, all nations (v. 27), the strong and the dying (v. 29), and even people yet unborn (vv. 30-31).

- From *Psalms* by James L Mays in the *Interpretation* series of commentaries. Louisville 1994. Italics inserted.

## FOR JOURNEY 2

### Special Feature: Analysis of Psalm 73

I.	vv. 1-12	The Problem	12 lines
	vv. 1-3	plight of the psalmist	3 lines
	vv. 4-12	prosperity of the wicked	9 lines
II.	vv. 13-17	The Turning Point	
III.	vv. 18-28	The Solution	12 lines
	vv. 18-20	plight of the wicked	3 lines
	vv. 21-28	prosperity of the psalmist	9 lines

- J. Clinton McCann, Jr, 'Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament Theology' in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms*, 1987.

### **Special Feature on Psalm 74**

#### **Passages from 1 Maccabees**

(In relation to Psalm 74)

Note: The First Book of Maccabees is one of the fifteen additional books contained in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, known as the *Septuagint*.

1.29-64

4.36-61

10.1-89

(These passages are reproduced on the website)

#### **Structure of Psalm 74**

'The psalm has three sections. The first (vv. 1-11) opens and closes with laments over the rejection of God (vv. 1, 10-11); petitions for God to remember his congregation and temple (vv. 2-3) are followed by a description of the destruction of the temple (vv. 3b-8) and the absence of any communication with God (v. 9). The second section is hymnic praise (vv. 12-17) based on the confession of God's ancient kingship manifested in deeds of salvation in the world (v. 12); the deeds are rehearsed in verses 13-17. The third section is an insistent series of petitions (vv. 18-23) for God to act to vindicate his name against taunts and insults of the enemy and to deliver his covenant people from their oppression.'

- James L Mays, *Psalms* in the 'Interpretation' series of commentaries, p. 244.

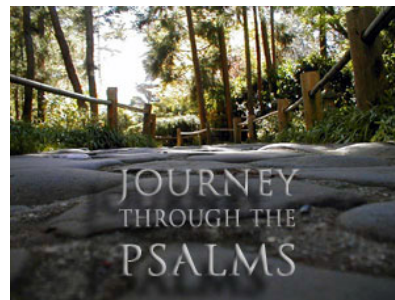
#### **Mythological language in Psalm 74. 12-17**

'It is not correct to say that myth has been historicized or that history has been turned into myth. Both dimensions are necessary. Myth elicits the cosmic dimensions of certain historic events. Historical reference furnishes concretions and revelations of universal and eternal depth.'

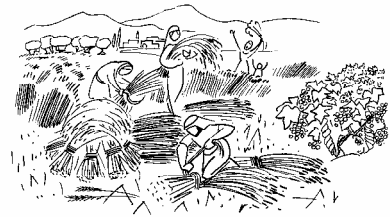
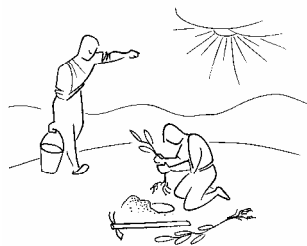
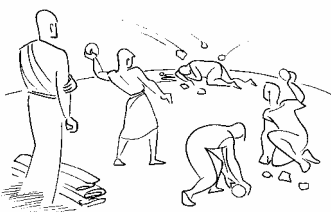
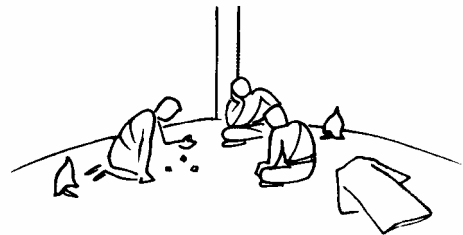
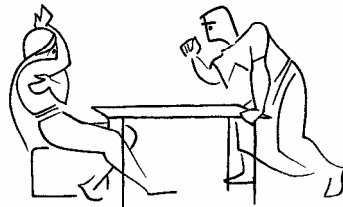
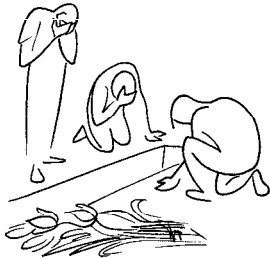
- James L Mays, *Psalms* in the 'Interpretation' series of commentaries, p. 245-2

**5. Visual Materials on CDs given to Respondents**

**Photographs**



Line Drawings



**Appendix 6 Pilot Project**

**REPORT  
FOR THE  
AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY  
ON**

***'THE LIFE OF CHRIST'***

***SERIES OF VIDEOS***

**4 August, 2003**

**by**

**Rev Fergus Macdonald**  
*Bible Engagement Consultant*

**113 St Albans Road, Edinburgh EH9 2PQ, Scotland, UK  
Telephone 0131 667 1546  
Mobile 0790 9911995  
Email – fergusfmac@aol.com**

**CONTENTS**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>Research Design</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>The Respondents</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>Four Videos</b>	<b>258</b>
<b>Two further Videos</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>Follow-up Interviews</b>	<b>292</b>
<b>Principal Findings</b>	<b>294</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>296</b>
<b>Pilot Project Supplements</b>	<b>299</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research project was commissioned by the American Bible Society in order to evaluate the series of The Life of Christ (LOC) videos. The research was undertaken in the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK.

The research question answered by the Report was as follows:

*Do the content and style of the LOC videos resonate with the target group's aspirations and values, and to they create an increased willingness to discover more about the story contained in the biblical text.*

Qualitative methods of data collection were employed in the form of interviews. These were mainly focus group interviews, but there were also some individual interviews. Some quantitative data was gathered through short questionnaires issued at the start and conclusion of the focus group interviews.

A judgementally selected sample of 61 respondents, composed largely of students at the University of Edinburgh in the 18 to 24+ age range and drawn from 11 nationalities, took part in the interviews.

After covering the design of the research project and the beliefs and values of the respondents, the Report reviews and analyzes the transcripts of the eight focus group interviews by four video titles in turn. It then covers the individual interviews on the two further video titles, analysing and evaluating these by question category. Next it makes a 'horizontal' study structured around the question categories rather than the video titles. This is followed by an analysis of the transcripts of five individual follow-up interviews held with selected members of the focus groups.

The **principal findings** of the research are:

1. All the videos have the potential to communicate the Scripture text to viewers coming to it for the first time.
2. The videos standing alone are, on the whole, not effective in communicating the power of the biblical text.
3. *Resurrection* is the most effective video in communicating the power of the Scripture text.
4. The videos are unlikely to be successful as stand-alone introductions to the rest of the Bible.
5. There was no consensus among respondents as to whether a historical or modern context is the better setting for a Scripture video.

6. The acting in the videos was not highly regarded.
7. The Bible is well regarded as part of our culture by today's young adults.
8. Young adults are less certain of the religious character of the Bible
9. Young adults tend to react negatively to the use of the Bible as a strict authoritarian code.
10. A majority of respondents affirmed the usefulness of the Bible in exploring spirituality.
11. Young adults believe that finding some measure of spiritual fulfilment in life is important.
12. Young adults strongly identify with the picture of life as a journey.
13. Finding a measure of spiritual fulfilment, while regarded as important, is nevertheless seen as a relatively low priority in young adults' hierarchy of values.
14. Young adults are open to using video in exploring spirituality.
15. Considerable confusion exists as to precise meanings of 'spirituality'.
16. There would be interest in using websites set up to facilitate engaging with Scripture in the exploration of spirituality.

The **recommendations** of the report concerning any future Bible video project are as follows:

1. Take more steps to achieve a positive degree of connectivity between the video and the text-context of the biblical passage.
2. Involve the target audience in prior research, planning and production.
3. Reconsider the appropriateness of the MTV *genre* for Bible videos.
4. Consider producing short video clips and related resources designed to invite viewers to create their own video of biblical passages.
5. Take steps to ensure these video clips are produced to high professional standards.
6. Introduce a greater degree of characterization in composing new videos.
7. Consider focusing the video clips on texts from poetic and prophetic books as well as from narrative passages.
8. Relate explicitly the biblical passages selected (and related resource materials) to the felt needs of the audience.
9. Develop and publish a 'popular hermeneutic' to help the audience move on to grapple with other Scripture texts.
10. Consider supplementing the profile of the 'American *Bible Society*' as video publisher by selecting and highlighting a dynamic program strapline in the video credits, related resources, etc.
11. When promoting new products to the young adult audience, sensitively position the American Bible Society in relation to the churches.

**REPORT FOR THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY  
ON**

***'THE LIFE OF CHRIST' SERIES OF VIDEOS***

**INTRODUCTION**

The research project which is the subject of this report was commissioned by the American Bible Society in order to discover why the series of *The Life of Christ* (LOC) videos published in the 1990s has met with limited success in communicating with their intended audience (Generation X).

The research was carried out in a British context where both Bible use and Church attendance have been progressively declining in recent years (Myers 1992:54-57; Brierley and Macdonald 1995:16; Brierley & Sanger 2000:2.4; Brierley 2003:15). During the same period popular interest in spirituality has increased (Hay & Hunt 2000).

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research question the report seeks to answer is:

*Do the content and style of the LOC videos resonate with the target group's aspirations and values, and do they create an increased willingness to discover more about the story contained in the biblical text?*

The objectives of the project were primarily evaluation of the videos and exploration of the context of declining Bible use and Church attendance in the face of increasing interest in spirituality. The project constituted *applied* research in that it sought to evaluate a series of products; it was also *basic* research in that it sought to contribute to the theoretical knowledge of both Scripture engagement and popular spirituality.

The *abductive* strategy was adopted because it is particularly appropriate for collecting qualitative data through focus groups. The qualitative method of data collection was necessary to collect the in-depth and detailed data being sought. Two brief questionnaires were used to gather descriptive quantitative data relating to the participants.

The concepts employed in the research are detailed in Appendix 1, along with other aspects of the research design.

The sample from the target population was selected *judgementally*. A randomly selected sample would have been ideal, but such a selection was not necessary in view of the exploratory nature of the research which set out to make informed impressionistic judgments rather than generalise to the population. In addition, limited time and resources did not allow using the qualitative method of data collection to be employed with a randomly selected sample.

## METHODOLOGY

The sample was composed of students – under- and post-graduate – in the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. They were self-selected through a recruitment drive by word-of-mouth and email undertaken by two post-graduate students who volunteered to help. In order to reduce a Christian bias, no recruitment took place in churches, the chaplaincy centre, Christian Union, etc. The possibility of broadening the recruitment base by including non-students was explored with a staff member of the Edinburgh West End Churches' Oasis Project who works among clubbers. In the end he advised that the sensitive nature of the current state of rapport between the churches and the clubbers might be put under strain if he were to invite clubbers to participate in the research project.

It is impossible to make any informed judgment about the extent to which the sample represented the population. It obviously had an elite bias, being composed of university students. On the other hand, the significant proportion (49%) of international (non-British) participants helped to make it more representative of global youth culture.

Eight focus groups were held and four of the six videos screened so that each of the four videos was viewed by two different groups. The four videos shown were: *Father and Two Sons*, *Resurrection*, *Out of the Tombs*, and *The Neighbor*. The schedule of the focus groups is in Appendix 2.

Participants were requested to complete two brief individual questionnaires, one at the beginning and the other at the conclusion of the focus group. All 61 participants completed Questionnaire 1 (Supplement 6.2); two fewer completed Questionnaire 2 (Supplement 6.3) due to their having to leave the group a few minutes before the end. Because anonymity was promised, respondents were not invited to enter their names in the questionnaires. This plus the fact that the questionnaires were distributed and collected at different times in the focus group programme means that it was not possible to correlate the data across the questionnaires.

All the focus groups followed an identical agenda (Supplement 6.4). The only exception was question 7 ('In what ways is video format an effective tool to help young adults explore more and more spiritual values?'). Experience of the first four focus groups revealed something that the initial pilot did not, viz - that this question was not producing significantly different data from some of the other questions. As a result in the second four focus groups, the question was amended to read: 'In what ways can engaging with the Bible help young adults to explore more fully spiritual values?'

The discussion in the groups was recorded, transcribed and analysed. The analysis was written up both by video and by interview category.

Five follow-up individual interviews (for the interview agenda see Supplement 6.5) were held with selected participants to look back to the video with the benefit of reflection and to explore in greater depth the issues involved in engaging with Scripture through a visual medium in a context where interest in spirituality is increasing.

The reasons for showing only four of the six videos to the focus groups were limitation of resources and of time. The two videos not shown – *The Visit* and *Nativity* – were evaluated

through individual interviews with two of the focus group participants who had both extensive experience in media and active involvement at the interface between the churches and Generation X. The agenda for these interviews is in Supplement 6.6.

All of these follow-up interviews were transcribed, written up and analysed. Insights from them have been incorporated into the report.

### THE RESPONDENTS

There were 61 participants over all. With two exceptions, all were students studying in the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

#### *Nationality*

The group was surprisingly international; there were 32 British, 13 Americans, 5 Canadians, 4 Germans, and 1 from each of the following countries: Australia, Austria, Hong Kong, Italy, New Zealand, South Africa, and Switzerland. More details are found in Appendix 8.

#### *Gender and age*

Of the 61 respondents, 25 were male and 36 female. The age profile is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Age of Respondents

<i>Under 18 yrs</i>	<i>18-21 yrs</i>	<i>22-24 yrs</i>	<i>Over 24 yrs</i>
0	24	22	15

The recruiting invitation assumed recipients would be between 18 and 24 years; and with two exceptions the participants appeared to be in this age group, suggesting that the great majority of the 15 who indicated they were older than 24 years were probably only marginally so.

#### *Social background*

46 of the 61 (75%) respondents had lived longest over the previous ten years in an urban environment; the others in a rural context. Over half (52%) indicated their background as middle class. Of the others, just over a fifth (21%) regarded their social background as upper middle class and over one quarter saw themselves as coming from lower middle or working class origins.

*Religion*

The religious breakdown of the respondents is given in Table 2:

Table 2: Religion (if any) of Respondents

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Christian	36	59
None	20	33
Jewish	3	5
Unitarian	1	1.5
Buddhist	1	1.5

Although almost 6 in 10 (59%) said their religion was Christian, from the discussion it was clear that very few were church attenders. This is not surprising in view of the results of other studies: in the 2001 UK national Census, 65% of people in Scotland, 72% of people in England and Wales, and 86% of people in Northern Ireland, professed to be Christian (*Religious Trends 4, 2003-2004*, Brierley Ed.), yet only 11.2% of the population attend church regularly (2002 Scottish Church Census, Brierley, 2003) and 7.5% in England (1998 English Church Attendance Survey, Brierley, 1999). On reflection, to have included a question about church attendance in one of the brief questionnaires would have helped to put more in context the apparent tension between the view of respondents that the churches were friendly and welcoming, on the one hand, and their low regard for being religious as a life value on the other. It would also have indicated how many of the Christian responders were regular church attenders.

Of the 36 Christian respondents, 10 offered unsolicited information about their religious confession – six indicated they were Roman Catholic and four that they were Anglicans. Given their numerical strength in the UK, it is likely that there were additional representatives of these denominations in the sample.

*View of life*

Over two-thirds (69%) said *Journey* was the primary term that most accurately described life for them, and a further 15% selected it as second or third choice. Ten percent preferred the word *Battle* as first choice, and 8% opted for *Maze* as their first choice. Only 5% chose *Dream* as first choice. Of the six specific options offered on the questionnaire, both *Computer program* and *Heartache* had no takers. The four returns under 'Other' (each a first choice) were: a 'Good Journey', 'Joy', 'Choice' and an 'Undecidable Logarithm'.

*Picture of God*

On the whole the respondents' picture of God was theologically orthodox. Multiple answers were given and the most common pictures were Creator (52%), Love (48%), Father (34%), Saviour (33%), Judge (30%). The least common were: Old man (16%), Mother (8%), followed by Spoilsport and Policeman (both only 3%). Other alternatives were invited and the following suggested, each by different respondents: Guide, Life, Energy, Forgiving, Help, Guardian, Connection, Everlasting Child, Wisdom, Universal, Invention.

*Jesus Christ*

Most respondents had a positive view of Jesus. Each made a single choice from six options (including 'Other'); the results were as follows:

Table 3: Who do you think Jesus Christ is/was?

	%
'The Son of God'	41
'Very wise human being'	32
'Ordinary human being'	14
'Someone who never existed.'	3
'Other'	7.
'Not sure'	3

The suggestions made under the 'Other' option were: 'Chosen' more than very wise; Very special human being - planted; Prophet; and charismatic preacher; two respondents entered 'Not sure.'

It's interesting that the proportion (4 in 10) respondents who took the traditional and orthodox Christian view that Jesus is the Son of God, is exactly half the proportion of those who took this view in a survey of English teenagers (aged 15-18) published ten years ago (Brierley, 1993). However, it is unwise to make too much of this in the light of the relative smallness and statistically unrepresentative nature of our sample.

#### *The Churches*

What did respondents think of the churches? Eleven options were offered and multiple answers were invited, so the following percentages total over 100%.

Table 4: What do you think of the Christian Churches in general?

	%
Old fashioned	49
Friendly	44
Welcoming to strangers	37
Boring	26
Challenging	20
Depressing	20
Enjoyable	20
Irrelevant	17
Difficult to understand	10
Lively	8
Modern	7

Although no 'Other' option was provided, seven additional and mostly negative views were offered: Varied; Coercing; Community-cresting; Challenged; Domineering; Hypocritical; Lack of understanding.

*Bible*

Not a single respondent indicated the Bible to be no longer relevant to our culture, and none completed the ‘Don’t know’ box. The most popular view – adopted by just over half (51%) - was that the Bible is part of our cultural heritage. Over one-quarter thought the Bible to be the unique word of God. The detailed results of the multiple answers are in Table 5.

Table 5: What do you believe the Bible to be?

	%
Part of our cultural heritage (like Shakespeare)	51
A holy book like others	41
The unique word of God	28
Moral tales/nice stories only	28
No longer relevant to our culture	0
Don’t know	0

Two of the sixteen respondents who ticked the ‘Moral tales/nice stories only’ box, deleted the words ‘nice stories.’ Three respondents volunteered additional views: Historical record; Holy Book; and Word of God.

*Truth*

The responses to the final question in the second questionnaire which asked respondents to indicate which of three phrases came closest to their understanding of ‘truth’, are found in Table 6.

Table 6: Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of ‘truth’?

	<i>Number</i>	%
A universal law	22	37
A complex mystery	21	36
A cultural custom	11	19
Other	3	5
Not completed	2	3

Three additional views of truth were offered: Circumstances/progress; Maths; Decided by the individual.

Although the primary purpose of the questionnaires was descriptive rather than analytic, it is instructive to see what happens when the four views about Jesus are treated as experimental variables. Tables 7, 8, and 9 reveal the results of doing this.

**Jesus - the Son of God**

Not surprisingly, the 25 respondents who had a conservative or 'high' view of Jesus, regarding him as the Son of God, also had a 'high' view of God and of the Bible.

However, they were less homogeneous in their understanding of truth. And, although they had a higher view of the churches than the respondents who held other views of Jesus, over one-third thought the churches are old-fashioned.

Table 7: Views of the respondents who regarded Jesus as the Son of God

	<i>Number%</i>	
God as Creator/Love/Father/Saviour	17	68
Bible – unique word of God	16	64
Truth – universal law	13	52
Truth – complex mystery	11	44
Churches - friendly	12	48
Churches - welcoming	12	48
Churches - old fashioned	9	36
Churches – enjoyable	9	36
Churches – challenging	7	28
Churches - depressing	5	20
Churches - lively	4	16
Churches – boring	4	16
Churches - irrelevant	3	12
Churches - difficult to understand	2	8

**Jesus – a very wise human being**

Over half of the 19 respondents who viewed Jesus as a very wise human being had a 'high' view of God and respected the Bible as a holy book – but not as unique word of God. However, their prevailing views of truth and of the churches were much less positive.

Table 8: Views of the respondents who viewed Jesus as a very wise human being

	<i>Number%</i>	
God as Creator/Love/Father/Saviour	10	53
Bible – a Holy Book	11	58
Bible – unique word of God	0	0
Truth – universal law	5	26
Truth – complex mystery	7	36
Churches - welcoming	5	26
Church – old fashioned	5	26
Churches – boring	3	16
Churches - difficult to understand	3	16

Churches - irrelevant	2	11
Churches - friendly	2	11
Churches - challenging	1	5
Churches – depressing	1	5
Churches – lively	0	
Churches – modern	0	
Churches - enjoyable	0	

### **Jesus – an ordinary human being**

The 8 respondents who regarded Jesus as an ordinary human being were more consistent than the two previous groups in that their ‘liberal’ views on God, the Bible, truth and the churches were more or less in line with their ‘liberal’ view of Jesus. Having said that, at least a quarter had a ‘high’ view of God and of truth as universal law, and respected the Bible as a holy book.

Table 9: Views of the respondents who regarded Jesus as an ordinary human being

	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
God as Creator/Love/Father/Saviour	3	37
Bible – a Holy Book	2	25
Bible – cultural heritage/moral tales	8	100
Truth – universal law	2	25
Truth – complex mystery	1	12.5
Truth – cultural custom	4	50
Churches – old fashioned	4	50
Churches - irrelevant	2	25
Churches – boring	2	25
Churches – welcoming	1	12.5
Churches – challenging	1	12.5
Churches – depressing	1	12.5
Churches – friendly	1	12.5
Churches – difficult to understand	1	12.5
Churches - lively	0	
Churches – modern	0	
Churches – enjoyable	0	
Churches - alternative suggestions	4	50

- good for some people
- the church is challenged
- domineering; not understanding; think it’s the only answer
- unsure

**Jesus – never existed**

The views of the two respondents who thought Jesus never existed contained no surprises. God is either a Judge or an Old man, the Bible is part of our cultural heritage and truth is a cultural custom. The church is either old fashioned or a combination of irrelevant, friendly and boring.

**FOUR VIDEOS****Father and Two Sons**

This video was viewed by two focus groups - Groups 1 and 2 - comprising in total seven British, three American, one Hong Kong Chinese, one white South African and one New Zealander. Eight were male and five were female. There were six in Group 1 and seven in Group 2.

**First reactions**

Both groups agreed that the video was 'cool' for its time (i.e. the early to mid-1990s). However, neither group liked the rural 'cowboy-like' setting and felt the video would have been more effective if the setting had been transposed into a modern urban middle class family life where 'prodigals' are by no means unknown. Both groups strongly disliked the singer and the music, which were perceived as dated, and the singer's movements ('over dramatic') were found to distract from the storyline.

The question asked by a number of respondents - 'Whatever happened to the older brother?' - revealed that maybe unwittingly they stumbled on what, according to some interpreters, is the punch line of the parable. American participants tended to think the video had been produced for 'the Bible Belt.'

Some participants thought the video was patronising to non-whites – 'The first time you see anyone of a different color is when there is a bad guy - when they were rejecting this white guy.' Some also reacted very negatively to what they perceived to be a homophobic stance (the younger son wears a left earring).

**Visual shots**

While one group found the video 'cinematically quite good', the other was more critical. In particular, the shot where the horse turns from white to black was regarded as 'campy'. One participant, commenting on the violent camera movement in that shot, said. 'I felt he was killing the horse... because he was really hungry at that point.' There was criticism also of the shots of the singer – 'she was just so melodramatic you couldn't believe her if you tried.'

**Acting**

The second group rated the acting significantly more highly than the first. This may reflect a favourable bias since the second group was the only one of the eight groups that had a majority of church-involved people. The ratings for the two groups were as follows:

Table 10: What did you think of the acting?

	<i>Grp 1</i>	<i>Grp 2</i>
Excellent	0	0
Good	0	5
Fair	3	1
Poor	3	1

**The lyrics/voice-over**

Some felt that the song was aimed at children or teenagers rather than at 18 to 24 year-olds. The line ‘He was lost and now is found’ was recalled by all except one. The memorability of this line was reckoned to be helped by the fact that the story is one of the best known in the Bible. But Table 11 indicates that the majority resonated with the view of one participant that ‘The line “He was lost and now is found” was the only remotely memorable bit of the song.’ However, one participant – a post graduate student of English Literature – acknowledged that it is more difficult to remember the words of a song which has been paraphrased from a narrative, than it is to remember the words of what is a song from the beginning, like, for example, a Psalm.

Table 11: How much of the lyrics can you remember?

	<i>Grp 1</i>	<i>Grp 2</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Most	0	3	3	23
Some	2	0	2	15
Few	3	4	7	54
None	1	0	1	8

Those who claimed to be knowledgeable about music felt there was a lack of unity between the lyrics and the music. ‘All of it (the music) was quite mediocre,’ said one, ‘there was no crescendo to it, no climax, in order to say “This is what we’re saying now.”’ The same person thought the song was ‘not a great song, but it was OK’ apart from the lack of a climax.

The singer’s voice came in for criticism from several. One commented: ‘I was really annoyed at the way she started singing “lost” at the end and sort of adding “h” into “lost” – “lo-h-st”, and I was saying “Stop doing that. Please stop doing that.” It grated on me.’

The high proportion of respondents who knew the story very well in advance of the viewing (Table 12) reflects the composition of Group 2 which – uniquely - was predominantly made up of church-related people.

Table 12: How well did you know the story before viewing the video today?

	<i>Grp 1</i>	<i>Grp 2</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Very well	2	5	7	54
Moderately well	0	1	1	8
Slightly well	2	1	3	23
Not at all	2	0	2	15

In the light of these numbers one might have expected a higher degree of recall (see Table 11). Perhaps the dislike of the singer’s voice contributed to this relatively low memorability of the lyrics.

**Motivation behind the video**

In answer to the question ‘Why do you think the American Bible Society would want to produce a video like this?’, both groups were in agreement that it was an sincere attempt to reach the MTV generation. However, this motive was also seen as one of its chief weakness, because MTV fashions in music and video are so ephemeral mean that a video produced in 1994 is seen as dated in 2003. On the other hand, many in the first group said ‘Yes’ when one American female participant said: ‘I’m quite sure that in 1994 it would still not appeal to me.’

The fact that the musical idiom was perceived as ‘country’ seemed to reinforce the impression that the video was produced by Bible Belt Christians for their children (who the group perceived to be devotees of ‘country’ music). One American post-graduate student (who works as a probation officer in a city in the American Mid-West) commented: ‘I live in a city of two million people; there are no farms in my city.... Teenagers in my city are in gangs and doing drugs, going to movies, going to the mall, but not watching “Malborough man” run around on a farm.’

A group-generated question ‘How much market research was done with the intended audience?’ was asked in a tone that implied ‘Not much!’

**Improving the video**

When asked to suggest and rank changes that would make the video worthy of an ‘oscar’, members of both groups spontaneously identified two common themes. Table 13 reveals these as: use a popular personality as the singer, and make the story more relevant/specific by giving it a different setting (‘like *West Side Story* or *Romeo and Juliet*’). (Each member had two votes).

Table 13: What one change would you propose to make this video worthy of an oscar?

<i>Group 1</i>	<i>Votes</i>
Use a popular personality as the lead actor	5
Use spoken word rather than song	3
Choose a different setting	2
Make specific	1

Cut in half (too long!)	1
<i>Group 2</i>	
Give clear theological meaning/bring out message	7
Use a well-known personality	2
Tell story visually OR in straight forward dialogue	2
Make relevant	2

The suggestion ‘Give clear theological meaning/bring out the message’) came exclusively from the group with a majority of church people, and probably reflects a misunderstanding about the restricted nature of a Bible Society’s mandate. An additional suggestion from Group 1 (‘Do in full colour’) and another from Group 2 (‘Change the sound track’) dropped out in the voting process.

**The story of the video**

In response to the question ‘What do you think is the story of the video?’ most – probably all - saw the story as relevant. Relevance was perceived in two facets of the story identified by two different participants, the one female, the other male. First, in the waywardness of the younger son: ‘How many families has everyone known where one of the children has gone off, and then at some point come back, and it’s a traumatic and emotional experience.’ The second comment on relevance focused on the resentment of the elder brother: ‘If I was to come away with anything from the story, it was that his elder brother was upset that his younger brother was having a party. And he never got a party. I could see why it was happening and I understood it, and I realised that this happens all the time everywhere and why these feelings were felt, and I came away thinking, “Well, he was justified in his feelings being hurt.” That was the main point of the story for me.’

The video succeeded in communicating the story of the parable. ‘I didn’t know the story at all before,’ said one. ‘And at least now I could tell you basically what it was about.... The main gist was communicated well enough that people will get it.’ The relationships in the story were understood and the video was felt to ‘handle the right sort of emotional pulls’ even if ‘strong emotions are difficult to engage with in 10 minutes.’ In addition, the video’s brevity was appreciated.

However, both groups felt the video would have told the story more effectively if the improvements suggested in the previous section had been incorporated in the planning and production stages. A majority felt that, while putting the story to music is theoretically a good idea, in practice it didn’t work. As the Table 14 shows, the great majority of both groups judged merely as ‘fair’ the effectiveness of the video in communicating the power of the story.

Table 14: How do you judge the power of the story communicated to you in the video?

	<i>Grp 1</i>	<i>Grp 2</i>
Excellent	0	0
Good	1	1
Fair	5	5

Poor                      0                      1

The lack of closure to the video story concerned many. This uncertainty about the elder brother’s final reaction is, of course, an essential component in the biblical parable, and the groups’ reaction illustrates the need for a package of ‘helps’ to accompany the video, especially when it is viewed outside a church context. Having said that, one participant who obviously knew the parable well, felt the video did not show the father saying to his older son ‘All I have is yours.’ What respondents liked most about the story was that it was clear.

**Video and spirituality**

Both groups answered affirmatively the question ‘In what ways is video format an effective tool to help young adults explore spiritual values?’ In support, the popularity of videos on Yoga and TV programs on witches was cited. But they added that video communicates spirituality better when it does so obliquely rather than frontally. They thought catching viewers off-guard may help to overcome the common bias against Christian videos. One participant strongly recommended using short clips akin to TV ads to facilitate the exploration of spirituality. On the other hand, another participant contended that the target audience is ‘quite capable of sitting and watching an hour-long documentary, taking it in and getting things from it.’ There was also expressed an awareness of the need of producers to take care not to allow video to dilute the story.

**Values**

Of the 24 values presented in the course of the focus group interview, participants individually identified ‘Having a good time’, ‘Keep up personal appearance’ and ‘Get on well with friends’ as the most common in their peer group. The two least common were ‘Be religious’ and ‘Forgive others’.

The participants’ ranking of the importance of finding some measure of spiritual fulfilment is recorded in Table 15.

Table 15: How important is it for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment?

	<i>Grp 1</i>	<i>Grp 2</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Very important	1	0	1	8
Moderately important	3	0	3	23
Slightly important	2	5	7	54
Not at all important	0	2	2	15

It’s fascinating that the largely non-church group were more positive than the group composed of church people! Although too much cannot be read into the opinions of a single group, there may be some corroboration here of the findings of Hay and Hunt that those who don’t go to church are more likely to consider themselves to be ‘spiritual’ than are those who do attend (Hay & Hunt 2000).

**Suffering**

Some participants doubted whether the video would help people who suffer. But the majority felt that it would resonate with those who feel pain. The point was made that broken relationships are prominent in popular songs today. One person felt that street begging would have contextualised the biblical story for today.

**The video as gateway to the Bible**

Table 16 shows that both groups were fairly negative regarding the possibility of the video becoming a gateway to the wider biblical message for today’s young adults. One participant said: ‘You’re just as likely to read the Bible if you find a Bible on a coffee table.’

Table 16: How likely is it that viewing this video would encourage today’s average young adult to explore more of the Bible?

	<u>Grp 1</u>	<u>Grp 2</u>
Very likely	0	0
Fairly likely	0	0
Slightly likely	6	1
Not at all likely	0	6

The following were the most popular responses to a request to suggest three things that the producers of the video might do in the future to increase the likelihood of viewers going on to explore more of the Bible:

- Exploit current affairs/events
- Be upfront. Don’t apologise
- Use emotion more to touch people’s experience
- Use a leading Christian music band
- Make the message clear

**Anything else?**

In response to the final question – ‘Is there anything we should have talked about and didn’t?’ – the following additional points were made:

- Spirituality was defined as ‘something beyond both the intellectual and the emotional.’
- The need to balance extremes of an uncritical acceptance and a coldly scientific approach to the Bible.
- The need to define and research the intended audience.

**Resurrection**

This video was viewed by two focus groups – Group 3 and Group 4 - comprising a total of 20 participants: 10 of these were British, 7 mainland European (all of whom spoke and understood

English), 2 Americans and 1 Canadian. Nine were female and 10 male. There were ten in Group 3 and also ten in Group 4.

### **First reactions**

These were very varied ranging from ‘brilliant’ to ‘manipulative.’ Some found the imagery to be ‘very aggressive’ – the music was overloaded and the narrator’s acting overdone. They felt the story was sufficiently emotional in itself, making the depiction of emotion by the narrator seem artificial. One female participant summed up her first reactions as follows: ‘I wouldn’t have minded him telling the story in that way, but I didn’t need the images, I didn’t need to see him crying. I didn’t need the music. I think the story itself is emotional enough without all that – I really felt patronised.’

Others felt that the emotions of an occasion of mourning were truly reflected in the video. One male participant put it this way: ‘It was reflecting the real kind of feelings people have. When somebody dies people are quite upset.’

The mainland Europeans had some difficulty in relating to US religious and cultural features in the video. But on the whole the modern setting was appreciated and placing the ‘call to belief’ at the end, rather than the beginning, was appreciated as an expression of sensitivity to the audience.

### **Visual shots**

The interpretation of the abstract camera shots (e.g. the wind shield wipers, telephone poles, trumpet, leaves rising to the tree rather than falling from it) fascinated both groups, not only initially, but throughout the entire discussion. However, it was felt that some of these – particularly the broken glass – disturbed the flow of the video. The shot of the fallen (but not dead!) leaves rising back onto the branches of the tree was regarded as a beautiful symbol of life beyond death.

### **Acting**

Despite some criticism of the narrator’s visual portrayal of emotion, Table 17 shows that the acting was well appreciated, with almost 58% rating it as ‘Good’, and all but one regarding it within the ‘Good’ and ‘Fair’ categories.

Table 17 What did you think of the acting?

	Grp 1	Grp 4
Excellent	0	0
Good	4	7
Fair	5	3
Poor	1	0

### **The lyrics/voice-over**

The participants were divided on the quality of the voice-over (narration). Some regarded it as having a ‘good voice tone’ and appreciated that the slow delivery facilitated understanding.

Others felt it was not convincing enough. One felt the narration was ‘full of pathos,’ while another (in a different group) commented: ‘There wasn’t any emotion in the voice. He showed emotion on his face, but not in his voice – it stayed the same.’ One respondent said the narration reminded her unpleasantly of the American tele-evangelists on Sky TV, and one male participant felt that casting the narrator as a news reporter with a BBC accent would have made the narration more believable.

However, the fact that seventeen (85%) of the participants remembered most of the narration (Table 18) must be a tribute to the effectiveness of the narrator, notwithstanding that 18 of the 19 had known the story before hand (Table 19).

Table 18: How much of the voice-over can you remember?

	<i>Grp 3</i>	<i>Grp 4</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Most	7	10	17	85
Some	3	0	3	15
Few	0	0	0	
None	0	0	0	

The minority felt the voice was ‘manipulative’ and ‘totally out of context,’ but the majority appreciated that it ‘made you listen,’ ‘enabled me to empathise’ and generally ‘enhanced the video.’

Table 19: How well did you know the story before watching the video today?

	<i>Grp 3</i>	<i>Grp 4</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Very well	6	2	8	40
Moderately well	0	4	4	20
Slightly well	4	2	6	30
Not at all	0	2	2	10

**Motivation behind the video**

Both groups were in substantial agreement that the objective of the producers was to take advantage of the popularity of the video medium within the target audience in order ‘to create an awareness of Christianity among people who haven’t heard the story or who haven’t been to church.’ The video would make the story ‘more accessible’ in an age of declining reading habits. More specifically, one participant felt one of the motives in the production was to meet the needs of mourners. Another saw the video as ‘an attempt to make people think about the story’s relevance by stimulating their emotion as well as creating awareness.’

### Improving the video

Each participant was asked to suggest one change that would get the video an oscar, and then the groups were asked to rank these. Since the groups were both large and produced more suggestions than previous smaller groups, each member was given four votes, instead of only two. (Note 3 of the 40 votes allocated to Group 3 were not used). The ranked suggestions are recorded in Table 20.

Table 20: What one change would you propose to make this video worthy of an oscar?

<i>Group 3</i>	<i>Votes</i>
Less 'cheesey' music	10
Less sentimentality	8
Relate visuals to story	4
Get rid of heavy imagery (candles, lights)	4
Change most of it a British audience	4
Tie up 'the accident' – know what happened to Jesus	3
Clear enough without text at the end	2
Not bad for the USA!	2
 <i>Group 4</i>	
Change the soundtrack	8
Make more stark/realistic	8
Modernise further – outdated	6
Make more like 'Romeo and Juliet'	5
Use more characters – act out the story	4
Make less emotional, more rational – ask questions	3
Have a younger narrator	2
Relate pictures more to story	2
Use a famous actor, e.g. Marlon Brando	2

Changing the sound track - particularly the music - was by far the most popular suggestion in both groups, receiving 45% of the votes. Next in popularity was 'use less sentimentality' (28%) which, in turn, was followed by 'modernise it a bit further, e.g. feature mobile phones' and a clearer relation of visuals to the story (both 15%). Apropos the final suggestion from Group 4, it is surprising that none of the participants in either group appear to have recognized Jim Caviezel!

### The story of the video

Members of both groups identified the point of the 'story' of the video as 'having faith' and being about Jesus (the first group mentioned his death, the second his resurrection). One group also recognised 'Suffering following the death of a loved one' and the other group, 'victory over physical death' as the 'story.' One person doubted the relevance of the resurrection for some people.

As Table 21 indicates, slightly more than half the participants rated the communication of the power of the story to be in the good to excellent range, and just under half in the fair to poor range.

Table 21: How do you judge the power of the story communicated to you in the video?

	<i>Grp 3</i>	<i>Grp4</i>
Excellent	1	1
Good	3	6
Fair	1	3
Poor	5	0

One respondent who judged as ‘excellent’ the power of the story communicated through the video said: ‘The video makes it current and able to be related to. I can relate to someone dying – I’ve been to funerals. I know how painful it is.’

When asked what they liked *most* about the story, the groups reacted differently. In the first group, the fact that the story was from the Bible was the most liked feature, attracting 40% of the total number of votes (each participant had two votes), while in the second group, the story’s message of resurrection (both Jesus’ and ours) received 55% of the votes. In Group 4, the fact that ‘recognition of doubt makes the story accessible’ gained 35% of the votes. Additional likes included the attempt at making the story relevant (20%) and the story’s accessibility by people of other faiths - the afterlife is ‘something that is dealt with in all faiths’ (15%).

**Video and spirituality**

The general feeling of both groups was that video can be an effective tool to help young adults explore spiritual values. The success of the ‘Alpha’ course was given as an example. There were two main reasons offered for this positive correlation. First, the target audience relates well to images, and images can add to the element of mystery and of the abnormal. Second, video allows for private access to spirituality which for many is something internal and personal.

**Values**

The perception of group members of the most common felt needs out of the 24 presented on cards, were: having a good time, getting a good job, and getting on well with friends. Those perceived as least common were: be religious, find living to be a fulfilling spiritual experience, and support animal welfare.

The results flowing from the question on the importance of spiritual fulfilment are found in Table 22.

Table 22: ‘How important do you feel it is for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment?’

	<i>Grp 3</i>	<i>Grp 4</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Very important	5	4	9	45
Somewhat important	5	4	9	45
Slightly important	0	2	2	10
Not important	0	0	0	0

An overwhelming majority (90%) of the participants of both groups felt that it is either very or somewhat important for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment. Only 10% felt it slightly important, and no one thought it not important.

This finding appears to be inconsistent with the perception that finding living to be a fulfilling spiritual experience was held by half of the participants to be one of the four least common values. However, this apparent inconsistency is explicable when it is borne in mind that the table reflects the participants personal values, while their evaluation of the cards reflects their perception of the majority of people in their age-group.

### **Suffering**

There was a marked contrast between the two groups as to whether the video story was relevant to people who suffer. Members of Group 3 were open to the possibility of the video helping people conscious of internal pain, as is evidenced in these two comments: First: 'It might show an alternative way to cope with suffering or personal distress, and show the advantage of belief in Christianity.' Second comment: 'Someone who's just broken up with his partner is probably searching and might be ready for the message of this video.'

Group 4 turned out to be much more sceptical. Members felt the video either 'neglected the suffering in the story' or it failed 'to resonate with people in pain' through 'trying too hard.' One member felt the music glossed over the pain in the story. Some felt that in order for sufferers to empathise with the video, the characters have to be brought to life more through dialogue rather than be communicated through the narration of one person.

### **The video as a gateway to the Bible**

Table 23 indicates that both groups were reluctant to regard the video as a likely gateway into the wider message of the Bible.

Table 23: How likely is it that viewing this video would encourage today's average young adult to explore more of the Bible?

	<i>Grp 3</i>	<i>Grp 4</i>
Very likely	0	0
Fairly likely	0	0
Slightly likely	7	9
Not at all likely	3	1

When suggestions to increase the likelihood of any future video becoming a gateway to the Bible were received and ranked (each participant getting two votes) the following results emerged:

Table 24: What do you suggest to increase the likelihood of viewers of any future video going on to explore more of the Bible?

<i>Group 3</i>	<i>Votes</i>
Tell Bible story in modern context	12
Arouse curiosity	4
Adopt an MTV format	2
Have less Bible at the start	2
 <i>Group 4</i>	
Ease viewers into the story; take care not to scare them off	7
Choose a story that relates to experiences of the target audience	4
Don't go in at the deep end – resurrection is controversial	4
Arouse more curiosity and convince the Bible has credible answers	3
Don't make viewers' lifestyle 'a wedge between them and the Bible'	1
Use a parable	1

### **Anything else?**

Only Group 3 chose to raise matters that, in their view, should have been discussed and weren't. They felt the video's intended audience was unclear. They reiterated the comment that the strong North American cultural background limited the usefulness of the video in the rest of the English-speaking world.

### **Out of the Tombs**

This video was viewed by two focus groups – Group 5 and Group 8 - which together comprised eight British, five Americans and three Canadians. Eleven were female and 5 were male.

### **First reactions**

Members of both groups found the video confusing/difficult to understand and were particularly critical of the narrator's voice; one commented: 'It was quite hard trying to get past her voice to hear the words she was saying.' The amount of background noise was regarded as too intrusive for easy listening.

One group felt the video with its random images was mirroring music video culture, but that the transition between the visuals and the Scripture was not done well. In particular the reference to pigs in the narrated text and absence of pigs in the visual track was noted.

Some regarded the 'spirituality' of the video as 'weird and wacky' which they thought would be 'quite off-putting to someone coming from a non-Christian background.' 'They've gone over the top with strangeness' was the comment of another. At least one member of each group

found the video ‘scary’ or ‘disturbing’ in that viewers might get the impression that mental illness is evil. One American female participant was very upset about what she saw as an identification of mental illness with demon possession. (It might be observed in passing that had the USER’S GUIDE been used in the group, the treatment of demon possession on pages 8 and 9 might have unwittingly reinforced this perception!).

One member felt that the final scenes suggested that the redemption experienced by the oppressed man was ‘to middle class suburbia.’ On the positive side, one member got general agreement from her group when she said: ‘It was definitely the most contemporary video I’ve seen on a Bible issue.’ Another member commented: ‘It was good how they related it to our time.’

Other comments:

- ‘I thought the devil was like Marilyn Manson.’
- ‘It was interesting how they made Jesus an attractive young Hispanic guy.’
- ‘They did project a sense of dispossession, they did make him (Legion) look like a beggar, like a pauper - someone who was economically dispossessed rather than spiritually dispossessed.’
- ‘There were a lot of good ideas – I liked the apparition that was representative of the evil spirit or the affliction of the troubled man. But I didn’t think the acting was particularly convincing when he was up in his tree and stuff.’
- ‘It was quite surrealistic – it was quite hard at times to tell what was going on.’

### **Visual shots**

Both groups highlighted the shots of the apparition (‘that weird silver person was quite disturbing and effective’) and the final shots on the suburban street (which one group found contrived). These apart, each group was impressed by a different set of shots.

The shots which most impressed the first group were:

- The contrast between the loneliness of the hacker in his basement and the figure at the end surrounded by a multiracial community in a suburban street suggesting the isolating influence of technology.
- The vacant space the troubled man ran to from the cemetery ‘was a good choice because that’s a place we all recognise.’
- The suburban street scene was first seen in what some regarded as ‘the rear view mirror of a car’ and others then made the point that it was ‘an old style television monitor – an icon of suburban existence.’

Those which most impressed the other group were:

- The afflicted man drooling from the tree, which one participant described as ‘horrendous’.
- The exorcism
- The sunset over the water was ‘irritating’

### **Acting**

Table 25 indicates that the members of Group 5 (who overall turned out to be more perceptive viewers) had a significantly lower appreciation of the acting than those of Group 8.

Table 25: What did you think of the acting?

	<i>Grp 5</i>	<i>Grp8</i>
Excellent	0	0
Good	0	3
Fair	2	4
Poor	6	1

Group 5 felt the symbolism was much better than the acting. The Jesus figure ('very insipid'/ 'like some sort of corporate America guy') and the apparition ('very silent movie') were not perceived as convincing. One member of the group wondered if the editing had contributed to the acting looking unconvincing.

Group 8 was less critical. But nobody on the group gave the acting an 'excellent' rating, and some felt that the lack of dialogue and people interaction contributed to the melodramatic acting and music going 'overboard.'

#### **Voice-over**

Both groups were very critical of the narration. Some participants felt the tone (long intonation of vowels) did not match the images, apart from in the apparition scene. They felt a normal voice-over would have been better. One male participant commented: 'All credit that it wasn't a typical tele-evangelist kind of voice-over, and that it was a female (possibly ethnic) voice - all very PC. But with the amount of reverb, when she started to talk about Jesus and his disciples getting into a boat and going over the lake to the Genesarenes, there's nothing ethereal about that, and yet there's this way-over-the-top ethereal voice saying "And he got into a boat..."' The same person observed that the video would have been more effective if it had mirrored Mark's journalistic, matter-of-fact style.

Others found the background noise too intrusive. 'I was concentrating so hard on trying to hear what she was actually saying that I missed half of it,' said one. One lady member said: 'I don't usually have a problem watching things like that on television. But with that I was completely lost after about two seconds.' Another female participant commented with some feeling: 'I felt it was talking down to you like story time. "Oh listen, children, don't question this story. Just listen to it. Oh isn't this great!" I just thought it was hokey and melodramatic.' The same lady complained that some background knowledge of the story is assumed: 'I'm not Christian, I'm not Catholic, and I've never actually read the New Testament, so I was lost - like there's pigs running into the ocean.'

The disjoint between narration and image was seen as particularly acute in two scenes: First, the rebirth on the shore, where the narrator was talking about the town casting Jesus out. Second, the final suburban street scene ('Why do we need to have a crazy street preacher instead of the actual Jesus? Why did there have to be mediation?'). In addition, the presence of the disciples in the text and their absence from the video was noted.

Some felt that the voice-over ‘just didn’t render the text comprehensible.’ One participant said, with agreement from another: ‘It struck me as a very neutral tone of self-help which I thought completely defeated the purpose which was to make a point with clarity to which you could respond. But I got so caught up in trying to place this disembodied voice that I lost sight of the text – what it was actually saying.’

Group 8 found the voice-over more memorable than Group 1 (Table 26).

Table 26: How much of the voice-over can you remember?

	<i>Grp 5</i>	<i>Grp 8</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Most	0	0	0	
Some	2	4	6	37.5
Few	3	3	6	37.5
None	3	1	4	25

The irritating voice of the narrator and the fast-moving images contributed to this low memorableness of the narration and subtracted from the message of the video. ‘I actually don’t want to remember her talking’ said one member of Group 8. A female member of Group 1 commented (somewhat paradoxically): ‘I wasn’t paying attention very closely to the story because I was trying to figure out what was going on.’

The better performance of Group 8 in recalling the voice-over probably relates to the fact that over 62.5% of that group knew the story either moderately or slightly well before viewing the video, compared to only 40% in Group 5 (Table 27).

Table 27: How well did you know the story before watching the video today?

	<i>Grp 5</i>	<i>Grp 8</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Very well	1	0	1	6
Moderately well	2	2	4	25
Slightly well	2	3	5	31
Not at all	3	3	6	38

As already noted (see section *Voice-over* above), a higher proportion of Group 8 knew to some degree the story beforehand.

### **Motivation behind the video**

In the discussion, the following motives were assumed to lie behind the production:

- To engage a new audience (viewers who are not readers) and get them into the Bible
- To contextualise the passage into modern life and demonstrate the relevance of Christianity.

- To enhance existing knowledge of the story by arousing viewers' curiosity and stimulating them to think more about it.
- To recruit more young people to the Christian faith.
- To show that if you do wrong, Jesus and Christianity will take you in and accept you.

At this point one of the male participants, referring back to a female member's admission that she listened to only some of the words because she had to pay so much attention trying to work out what was going on, commented: 'I think abstraction engages this kind of audience (young adult) more than didactic exposition of Scripture.' Most felt that the video assumed some degree of prior familiarity with the story.

One male member of Group 5, who was obviously an involved church member, pointed out to the other members the dilemma facing the Bible Society in wishing to be faithful to the ancient text and relevant to the modern context. How, he asked, do you transpose into a modern context the incident of the pigs jumping into the sea?

The listing in the credits of a Lutheran minister in New York raised a question as to how inter-denominational the American Bible Society is.

### **Improving the video**

The most popular suggestion to improve the video was to enhance the character development and portrayal (Table 28)

Table 28: What one change would you propose to make this video worthy of an oscar?

#### *Group 5*

Better character development and portrayal (Legion & Jesus)	5
Have more coherence/unified focus in the direction	7
Make voice-over more straightforward and intelligible	4

#### *Group 8*

Better character development	5
Make more relevant	2
Tone it down	2.5
Make it more realistic/less surreal	4.5
Don't scare viewers	2

Some comments from this section:

- 'There was nothing with which you could associate and nothing with which you could identify with in the characters on screen, whether the Christ figure, the troubled man, or the apparition representing evil. It was just very caricaturing.'
- 'Change the portrayal of the troubled man to make it a clearer character development.'
- 'Use a well-known actor e.g. Tom Hanks.'
- 'Make it less stereotypical.'
- 'If I can't understand what's going on in the first two seconds, why do I want to sit through a whole five minutes?'

**The story of the video**

The story of the video was summarised as follows:

- A marginalized, troubled person can be rehabilitated into society.
- Jesus accepts us as we are – he doesn't care if we're good, bad or ugly.
- Jesus could exorcise and heal.
- Affliction can be overcome
- Go to evangelise/do missionary work
- Man asked to stay with Jesus, but was told to go on his own

Comments included:

- ◆ 'I understood it to be about a healing process, but I wasn't quite sure what the ailment consisted in.... The story would have been better communicated if there was some sense of how the troubled man became troubled.'
- ◆ 'I agree that the troubled character was seeking conformity – Sears catalogue clothing – but I don't think the story was very compelling.'
- ◆ 'In the end was the troubled man really helped? Or was it Jesus who was helped by having a new evangelist out on the streets? To me there were ulterior motives. OK he was obviously troubled, drooling in the tree. But he had whatever that hangout basement was. Was it really so bad? Was going to a multicultural community of all ages really what he was seeking? So basically, watch out when people come offering you help. Ask, is it really the help you need? Or are they really out to help themselves?'

The power of the story communicated in the video was not highly rated (Table 29)

Table 29: How do you judge the power of the story communicated to you in the video?

	Grp 5	Grp 8
Excellent	0	0
Good	0	1
Fair	3	4
Poor	5	3

Comments at this point included:

- 'The hand reaching out was used too many times and the rebirth on the seashore reminded me of *Little Mermaid*.'
- 'Two over-riding things signally failed. The attempt to communicate the liberation of individuals from demon possession or any kind of dependency – spiritual, emotional, narcotic, or anything – didn't work. This crazy guy is cutting himself with irons; the people lose their herd of pigs - both scary things – are in the text, but not the video. So is the fear everyone had of Jesus after the liberation. But you're not going to be afraid of a Christ-character who should be advertising jeans. The real power of the story – the very frightening nature of it – just didn't come across at all.'
- 'This guy out there spreading the word frightened me more than when he was drooling.'

Jesus' willingness to forgive, accept and welcome us was what the majority liked most about the story.

### **Bible and spirituality**

In discussing the ways engaging with the Bible can help young adults explore spiritual values more fully, both groups came up with a variety of responses. Some felt that the recognition of metaphor in the biblical stories encourages spiritual exploration of the text. Translating biblical passages into music video can be particularly helpful, even if the message is abstract and doesn't cohere all that well.

Most participants saw the Bible playing a positive role in exploring spirituality. But some felt that the age of the Bible and the questionable accuracy of the text as a result of centuries of manual transcribing prior to printing, would prevent them from taking the Bible as relevant to modern life. And others felt that fanatical extremists have given the Bible a bad reputation which unfairly turns many off from looking to it for help.

The point was made that the Bible is most helpful if considered as a whole, as a story, and not as a self-help book which will fix all your problems. An epic rather than a cure-all. 'You need to have a context and the idea of a general project; otherwise you get a single metaphor, a single verse and take it out of context, and all of a sudden we're persecuting homosexuals and things get bad.'

Other comments included the following:

- 'If the Bible is not part of your world view and you come to it just to fix a particular problem, it's going to seem full of platitudes. But if it's part of your world view, your relationship with the Bible is more like a continuing dialogue.'
- 'You can't use it like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* where you find something that cheers you up a little. The Bible is certainly useful for that, but you can use it as a way of mediation that enables you come to terms with your problems.'
- 'The best way to engage with the Bible is to keep within its boundaries and to live there for a while, not just use it as a self-help guide. It demands a specific sort of interaction that you don't usually use just reading literature or searching for help.'
- 'The reservations about the Bible come from the fact that it's imposed by others. But it's personally accessible as well as didactically given.'
- 'The best thing about the Bible is the accessibility. There is actually something for everybody and something relevant to every single person in the world. If people took time to read it they could gain some different perspective on life.'
- 'If anyone explores Christianity and that aspect of spirituality, the Bible is a natural place to go for exploration.'
- 'The Bible restricts you to a very particular kind of spirituality, and I think probably a lot of people have a problem with that.'
- 'The Bible has the Psalms and things – so much nature, and so many different styles. There's poetry, prayers, letters and more. It's so broad.'
- 'Are we all living according to the morality which leads to spirituality?'
- 'Morality in the Bible becomes more and more confusing because it needs more knowledge to be able to read it.'
- 'Aren't there a lot of contradictions? You can interpret what you read in the Bible whichever way you want to which is dangerous.'

**Values**

The values perceived by these groups as most common were: have a good time, get a good job, and care what others think about me. Those perceived as least common were: be religious, be polite, and support animal welfare (closely followed by ‘be an active family member’).

Table 30 indicates that 14 out of the 16 of the members of these two groups (i.e. 87.5% of the participants) feel that it is either very important or somewhat important for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment.

Table 30: How important do you feel it is for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment?

	<i>Grp 5</i>	<i>Grp 8</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Very important	4	5	9	56.25
Somewhat important	3	2	5	31.25
Slightly important	1	0	1	6.25
Not important	0	1	1	6.25

**Suffering**

Some felt that it was unlikely that this video could help someone experiencing internal suffering because the afflicted person is too passive. It doesn’t emphasise the importance of helping yourself and, therefore, might create a sense of dependency. One person disputed the idea that Kevin is too passive, pointing out that in the narrative he challenged Jesus saying ‘What do you want with me, God? I don’t want any of that!’ But the same person acknowledged that ‘It’s very difficult to translate what’s going on there into common everyday loneliness or insecurity or whatever.’ Some felt that drooling in the tree might have been helpfully dropped in favour of a modern presentation of depression, addiction, misery, poverty, etc. One participant said: ‘I was raised an atheist, so if I were to watch that while feeling pain I would think they were trying to recruit me for religion, not that they understood me.’

Another commented: “‘Believe in Jesus and everything’s going to be fine” is not true.’

Some were more positive. ‘I should have thought that the red and the black and the throbbing was quite reminiscent of people in despair’ said one person.

**The video as a gateway to the Bible**

As can be seen from the following table, a very large majority (87.5%) felt it not at all likely that viewing this video would encourage young adults to explore more of the Bible. Various reasons for this were given. First, it was felt that the video confuses rather than arouses curiosity. Second, it does not invite you to form some kind of identification with the characters which would make you wish to learn more about them.

In responding to the question posed in Table 27, the second group suggested that if the video was shown in the context of a wider package, such as a discussion group or a follow-up programme, this would significantly enhance the likelihood that viewing the video would be fairly likely to lead to further exploration of the Bible.

Table 31: How likely is it that viewing this video would encourage today's average young adult to explore more of the Bible?

	<i>Grp 5</i>	<i>Grp 8</i>
Very likely	0	0
Fairly likely	0	0
Slightly likely	2	2
Not at all likely	6	6

Regarding ways and means of increasing the likelihood of viewers of any future video going on to explore more of the Bible, a variety of suggestions were made and ranked (each participant had two votes) by both groups (Table 32).

Table 32: Suggest three things the producers of any future video would need to do to increase the likelihood of viewers going on to explore the Bible.

*Group 5*

Greater focus on Jesus character. Here he is too bland and didn't seem a major character	4
Better contextualisation– a slum rather than a graveyard; modern tombs different from the man's cave.	3
Provide wider context of biblical story – find out more about beginning and end	3
Bring other Scriptural allusions into story to extend interest	3
Use periodic subtitles referring back to biblical text	0
Use dialogue rather than voice-over/modify voice-over	3
Be less patronising – don't assume what people will like	3

*Group 8*

Pick a relevant Bible story with issues that could be embraced	6
Better contextualisation	4
Have a discussion afterwards with cookies	5
Avoid a scary/threatening approach	1

Some further comments on this issue included:

- 'Have the voice-over as Mark reading or recounting the story.'
- 'Pick a story that's relevant. Talk about depression, or something that most people go through. We're not all junkies. We don't all have demons. But there are other issues that would help us understand [the story].'

- ‘The whole things seems to be new-agey – lots of colours floating around and stuff. ‘You need to make it more concrete.’
- ‘The video confuses rather than intrigues.’
- ‘You need to identify with the characters to make you want to go to the Bible.’
- ‘Use periodic subtitles that refer back to the biblical text.’

### **Anything else?**

- ‘I look sceptically at the Bible.... I don’t want to hear that one religion is better than another. I want to talk about what is relevant to me in my morality which leads to spirituality.’
- The Bible has negative connotations. ‘If you’re trying to get people to use the Bible as a form of spirituality, this is a major hurdle, because if you said to a lot of non-spiritual, non-religious 18-24 year olds, “Here, have a read of this” they’d go “No, it’s the Bible”.
- ‘I think most young people will think they are spiritual even though they would reject Christianity outright. So if the Psalms are labelled as “pre-Christian” that might make things a lot more approachable.’

### **The Neighbor**

This video was viewed by two groups – Groups 6 and 7 - comprising a total of twelve participants, six male and six female. Six were British, three American, two Canadian and one Australian. Three indicated that their religion is Christian, two atheist, one Jewish, one Buddhist, and two still thinking/searching. Three put down ‘No religion.’ There were eight in Group 6 and four in Group 7.

### **First reactions**

Members of both groups were confused as to why child actors had been used. It wasn’t clear to them whether this was because the target audience was intended to be children or because the producers wished to communicate innocence. A second area where confusion was expressed concerned the setting of the video. Was it the American west of the 1880s or was it today (as the modern train would suggest)?

One member said that the video was ‘as good a Bible rendition as I’ve seen.’ Others were more critical, registering that the video was sentimental; one suggested that the producers were trying to make the Good Samaritan into ‘just a cute little story.’ Another felt that the scene featuring the kids fighting over the clothes thrown from the train ‘seems a tortured way of saying that the two gangs didn’t like each other.’ One member felt it was the train that created a chasm between the two groups.

Additional general reactions expressed later in the interview included:

- ‘I just don’t want to see it any more, it was so bad, so irrelevant.... Who is going to think “Oh yeah, I’m now going to help people in the street”?’
- ‘It’s a good story to tell. You might not have a great epiphany as a result, but it gets you thinking about how you treat your neighbor.’
- ‘I don’t think it would work for anyone above the age of 12 or 13.’

### **Visual shots**

The visual shots highlighted by the groups as impressive were:

- The train scene which dominated the opening scene. Some members felt that the length of this scene made it more impressive than the rest of the film. One said he had wondered if it represented God. Another felt that this was the only part of the video that wasn't too slow and dull; in the rest 'everything was beige.' Yet another indicated he didn't understand the things flying off the train.
- The opening of the inn doors and the light shining in. Some members in Group 7 found this scene 'cringing.' One member said: 'I thought they were trying to trick your emotions into feeling "Oh, that's really, really nice." To me I just felt "Oh for God's sake!"' The same participant felt that 'a simple, powerful story doesn't need that sort of emotional heartstring pulling to make it work.'
- One member thought the landscape was beautiful.

**Acting**

Table 33 indicates that both groups were unanimous in judging the acting as only 'fair'

Table 33: What did you think of the acting?

	<u>Grp 6</u>	<u>Grp 7</u>
Excellent	0	0
Good	0	0
Fair	8	4
Poor	0	0

The principal reason for this low rating seems to have been that both groups felt the use of child actors to be inappropriate. Group 7 thought it was hard for child actors to be believable when portraying adult emotions; members felt that when he was cleaning up the victim, the Good Samaritan was too bland ('quite dry') and passive. However, the same group felt that the rivalry of the two gangs at the train track was done better 'because this related more to children's experience.' On the other hand, one member of Group 7 thought the acting in this scene was wooden and 'underlined how pointless it was to use children.' Another member of the same group felt that in the inn scene, the scowling glares of the children to one another were 'clearly contrived and very artificial.'

**Voice-over**

Members were divided as to the effectiveness of the narration. On the positive side, one thought 'It worked pretty well. It wasn't too grey and it wasn't too flippant.' Another made the point that the narrator captured the hostile intent of the questioner whose question Jesus answered by telling the story. One member said she found the voice to be very calm and soft and easy to listen to. But the majority tended to agree with remarks like these: 'I found the story generally too grey' and 'He sounded painfully sincere about the whole thing.... It was too dull.' One lady felt the voice was 'smug.'

Another criticism that attracted support was that the voice-over did not match the visuals. 'I thought it could have been better if the voice wasn't there at all, and the visuals were allowed to speak for themselves.' One member thought 'an older voice would have had more impact and would have gone better with the children portrayed on screen.' Some members of Group 1 made

the point that it would have been better if the voice was either much older or much younger. If older, it would contrast with the children; if younger, it would have coordinated with the actors.

Despite these criticisms of the voice-over, Table 34 reveals that its memorability was rated considerably higher than was the acting:

Table 34: How much of the voice-over can you remember?

	<i>Grp 6</i>	<i>Grp 7</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Most	0	1	1	8.33
Some	2	2	4	33.33
Few	6	1	7	58.33
None	0	0	0	

This moderate degree of memorability is surprising in the light of the high proportion of respondents knowing the story very well or moderately well prior to viewing the video (Table 35).

Table 35: How well did you know the story before watching the video today?

	<i>Grp 6</i>	<i>Grp 7</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Very well	2	1	3	25
Moderately well	4	2	6	50
Slightly well	2	1	3	25
Not at all	0	0	0	

It may be that the comparatively small amount of voice-over remembered is attributable to the negative impact made on many by the voice of the narrator.

Most respondents in Group 7 felt that, in the absence of dialogue, the voice-over was essential to move the story forward. But in Group 6, a majority seemed to think that the visuals were good enough to speak for themselves and did not need the voice-over. The voice-over was seen to distract from the story by some members of both groups. Some in Group 6 thought the voice-over was patronizing ('insultingly obvious' as one put it, especially for those who know the story). One person in Group 7 felt the narration in the inn scene was overdone: 'With the strange camera shots and sweeping music, in order to get some relief from the awful sentimentality, I wanted to say, "Please, voice-over, stop this now!"' One person in Group 6 thought the voice tried too hard to sound like 'accidental conversation around the subject.' He felt that if it would have been more manageable if it had said, "Now we're going to read the Bible to you while we play this.'

One member recognized the rationale for the absence of dialogue: 'If they had been trying to look into the Samaritan and study his motivation and the reasons and morality behind his actions, dialogue would be effective. But if they were content simply to tell the story, then it would have been dangerous to try to develop the dialogue for risk of getting it wrong.'

### **Motivation behind the video**

When asked ‘Why do you think the American Bible Society would want to produce a video like this?’ both groups agreed that it was to persuade people to care for their neighbor. One member felt that this was more likely to be the motivation if the intended audience was children for whom the video ‘would make the story immediately accessible and understandable in a way that plonking a Bible in front of them, or just reading it to them, would not.’ However, he added: ‘But if produced for people aged 18 plus, I don’t know what its purpose could be because it wasn’t accessible to me.’

The second Group also identified the broader objective of promoting the Bible in a non-reading society which is obsessed with television. And a female member of the first group said she felt the purpose of the video was to raise the idea of racial tension.

### **Improving the video**

The prioritized suggestions of each group (participants had two votes) to improve the video are recorded in Table 36.

Table 36: What one change would you propose to make this video worthy of an oscar?

#### *Group 6*

More interaction – show tension; make enemy more recognizable	1
Make it more real, more modern	5
If for adults, make more symbolic; if for children provide more framework	3
Change the music or use it less	2
Use dialogue, with two languages to emphasize tension	5

#### *Group 7*

Don’t use children to represent adult characters	5
Make it visually more exciting – brighter	1
Make it more real, more modern	1
Change the music or use it less	1

Although the suggestion to avoid the use of child actors was made in both groups, Group 7 clearly saw this as a greater priority since no one in Group 6 voted for it. During the discussion in both groups, members felt the use of children would have worked better in a symbolic rendition of the story (e.g. using children to convey the innocence of the main protagonists). Group 6 felt the video fell between the two stools of symbolism and realism. But the second group made the additional point that if the audience is children, the use of child actors works. With regard to the suggestion to make the setting more modern – which received strong support in Group 6 – members of both groups felt the setting needs to be one with which viewers can empathize. The music also was not favourably viewed, and the point was made by one that there was a need for better integration (‘moulding’) of the voice-over, the music and the actors. Using a well-known actor and clarifying who is the target audience were proposed by Groups 6 and 7 respectively, but neither received a vote when it came rank the suggestions.

**The story of the video**

There was a high degree of consensus in the way members summarized the message of the video:

- Help those in need
- Love your neighbor
- Your neighbor is anyone in trouble, even your enemy
- Don't discriminate between your group and the next group. Don't be prejudiced
- Help those in need regardless of what you think of them
- Reassess the way you live

The overall evaluation of the power of the story through the video (Table 37) was that this did not come across well.

Table 37: How do you judge the power of the story communicated to you in the video?

	<i>Grp 6</i>	<i>Grp7</i>
Excellent	0	0
Good	0	0
Fair	1	3
Poor	7	1

Two comments will suffice to illustrate this rather negative assessment. The first is: 'I think the story stands alone. They could have read it without the film at all. It wouldn't have mattered.' The second is: 'The Samaritan's dilemma in deciding whether he should help the robbed man was not portrayed. That is the emotional part of the story, not the arrival at the inn.'

The parts of the video liked most by the participants included:

- The opening frames – dialogue and scrolling text
- It was visually stimulating – bright and lively, but dark when necessary.
- Child actors symbolized the future.
- The lingering shots of the children were memorable.

Group 7's response was that the video was easy to watch, and the story was short and clear.

**Bible and spirituality**

The question: 'In what ways can engaging with the Bible help young adults explore spiritual values more fully?' evoked answers which were largely positive:

- 'I should think so. The Bible is regarded as a holy book by millions of people through 2,000 years.'
- 'You could certainly give it a shot.... I personally wouldn't use it to guide me, but it's probably not a bad way.'
- 'I think it works for some people.'

- ‘I think it depends on which stories are picked. If you can relate them to the everyday things you do in your life, then emphatically yes.’
- ‘I know a lot of people who think it’s kind of trendy to do spiritual devotions every day.’
- ‘It can be a help if only to generate the working of your thought processes, even if you disagree with what you’ve read.’
- ‘I’m not a religious person; I’m not that familiar with the Bible. But I can see how people would think that because they appreciate this video that maybe religion is something they would be interested in.’

There were a few slightly more negative comments, like:

- ‘I would be loathe to trust something that doesn’t justify its premises.... I’m not inclined to follow something purely based on faith.’
- ‘The Bible affects morally more than spiritually. I don’t see the Bible as a great source of aid to spirituality.’
- ‘In terms of spirituality I would say a book like the Book of Psalms, if that could be made more accessible to people.’
- ‘Better to use less well-known stories.’

**Values**

The most common among the values perceived to be popular among contemporary young adults were: have a good time, get a good job, and care about what others think of me. The least common were: find living to be a fulfilling spiritual experience, be religious and support animal welfare. Additionally, ‘tell the truth’ was identified by one-third of the participants as one of the least common.

In the evaluation of the importance of young adults finding some measure of spiritual fulfilment (Table 38) the two groups had very different views.

Table 38: How important to you feel it is for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment?

	Grp 6	Grp 7	Total	%
Very important	3	0	3	25
Somewhat important	5	1	6	50
Slightly important	0	0		
Not important	0	3	3	25

The comparatively negative scoring of Group 7 may partly be the result of an inconclusive discussion by members of that group on the precise meaning of ‘spiritual fulfillment.’

**Suffering**

Only one member of Group 7 ventured the view that the video would help people who are conscious of internal suffering, and even he qualified his opinion with both ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps’! Recalling Jesus’ initial reply to the teacher in the lead-in to telling the parable, this same participant commented: ‘Perhaps if you’re suffering inside and you take that on board,

maybe it works.’ Like several other groups, Group 1 felt that overcoming suffering is something you do for yourself, not something done for you by Jesus or by the Bible.

Members of Group 6 were scarcely less negative. But one made the point that the story reminds us to keep our eyes open for people who are suffering. Another felt that the video’s treatment of suffering was trite – it was so easily treated. And the point was made that the focus in the story is on physical suffering, not on internal pain, which is more common. Yet another member made the point that, had the video treatment been more symbolic, viewers would more easily be able to interpret the mugging and robbery broadly and see caring for someone suffering internally in terms of going to visit and having coffee with them once a week.

**The video as gateway to the Bible**

As can be seen from Table 39, both groups – especially Group 7 - were rather negative on this issue.

Table 39: How likely is it that viewing this video would encourage today’s average young adult to explore more of the Bible?

	<i>Grp 6</i>	<i>Grp 7</i>
Very likely	0	0
Fairly likely	0	1
Slightly likely	8	0
Not at all likely	0	3

The only positive comments in the discussion on this question were: ‘I think children might find it more inspiring,’ and ‘If I was a teenager, having watched that, I think it would be fairly likely that I would go [i.e. to the Bible] and have a look. But only fairly likely.’

The two main negative comments were:

- The Bible ‘just tells you those obvious things that you do in life.’
- ‘I didn’t find that the video did anything that would make me more curious than any other experience I’ve had.’

**Improving the video**

The suggestions to improve the video offered by each group are listed and rated Table 40:

Table 40: What one change would you propose to make this video worthy of an oscar?

<i>Group 6</i>	<i>Votes</i>
Be very clear who the audience is	0
Involve the target audience in the planning and production	2
Challenge the audience more – don’t underestimate viewers	8
Pick less well known stories	1
Arouse curiosity of viewers.	5

*Group 7*

Arouse curiosity of viewers	3
Pick less well-known stories	3
Use a story that makes a good intron to the Bible/Christianity	1
Include 'where to go next'	1

## Comments included:

- On choosing a less well-known Bible story. 'I pre-decided that I knew this one. The video just flashed before my eyes. I don't honestly feel any more familiar with it than I was before.'
- Present a story that will make people say: 'Is that really in the Bible?' and prompt them to go and look it up.
- The Good Samaritan is very self-contained. The video gave no indication and no incentive to go on and find more. 'They told you everything about the story. There's nothing left.'
- End with a cliff-hanger!
- 'Challenge us. Give us something to think about!'

One again members in one of the groups (Group 6) raised the importance of being clear about who is the intended audience, but it received no votes in the ranking process.

**Anything else?**

Group 6 had questions about whether the target audience was a particular ethnic group (Hispanics?) and where the producers expected it to be shown. Group 7 felt that, unless people already have some interest in the Bible, the video would be unlikely to persuade them to become interested.

**TWO FURTHER VIDEOS****The Visit and Nativity**

These two videos were not reviewed by focus groups due to limitations of budget and time. They were evaluated separately through an additional interview with two of the follow-up interviewees. Each interviewee had a degree of relevant specialisation in that one is actively involved as an amateur actor in a prominent theatre club in the University of Edinburgh, and the other is an amateur singer of gospel music who has performed in secular venues in Scotland and South Africa. (Additionally, the singer is the editor of the principal student newspaper in the University). Both the actor and the singer had earlier participated in a focus group, so each had already seen one of the four videos submitted to the focus groups. The actor had seen *Father and Two Sons*; the singer *Out of the Tombs*. Both respondents are from the minority of respondents who profess to be practising Christians, and the smaller minority who are working as Christian volunteers with un-churched young adults.

The agenda of the interviews covering *The Visit* and *Nativity* (Supplement 6.6) was made less extensive than that for the focus groups by omitting general questions which the respondents had already had an opportunity to answer during the focus groups and in the follow-up interview to the focus groups. These were questions such as 'Why do you think the American Bible Society

would want to produce a video like this?’ and ‘In what ways can engaging with the Bible help young adults explore spiritual values more fully?’ Because *The Visit* and *Nativity* translated closely related biblical texts and because they both focus on the genre of gospel music, the following evaluation covers them together rather than separately.

### **First reactions**

Interestingly, the actor’s overall personal preference was for *Nativity*, while that of the singer was for *The Visit*. Both felt these two videos were superior to the one seen by their focus groups (*Father and Two Sons*; the singer *Out of the Tombs*).

Both respondents felt the singing in *Nativity* was better than in *The Visit*, although the singer felt that the percussion gave *The Visit* focus, and that its visuals had more authenticity and were less distracting. He felt that aspects of the choreography of *Nativity* tended to undermine the authenticity of the performance. The actor’s view of *Nativity*’s choreography was similar; he felt the singers should have been moving as they sang. The actor’s principal criticism of *The Visit* was that it lacked characterization which, in his view, helped to make it impossible to know from the video who Elizabeth and Mary were and why what was happening was exciting. Without this information, he said the video felt ‘random.’

Both respondents were in agreement that the singing in the videos was good, although the actor found the background singers in *Nativity* to be too low for the lyrics to be heard. On the other hand, the singer indicated he had no problem understanding the words; this may well be more the result of a lot of exposure to gospel music than of more acute hearing! The singer strongly believed that the clear words and emotional body language of the singers greatly helped to make the music authentic in both videos.

Each respondent was critical of the production of both videos, especially that they attempted to be too sophisticated. The singer felt strongly that, unless special effects employed are the best on the market, they are better not used. In the actor’s opinion, the rippling effect on the image of the singers was outdated and off-putting. Both respondents suggested that shooting the videos on location rather than in studio would have made the videos three-dimensional. The actor observed that both lacked a natural landscape, and felt that the stories lent themselves to being shot in, say, a street in Bethlehem (or wherever!). The singer would have preferred the core of both videos to have been shots of a live concert of gospel music interspersed with contemporary interviews and/or drama.

### **Visual shots**

The actor liked the first scene of *Nativity* – ‘It got me interested,’ and in *The Visit* the shot of Mary going through the ‘tunnel’ – ‘You get an interesting insight into the mood of Mary running to meet Elizabeth, almost trying to escape from whoever was around.’ The singer liked the window shot in *Nativity* and in *The Visit*, the shots of the percussion instruments as well as the silhouette of an African-looking woman towards the end (but not the fact that the silhouette got bigger and bigger). Both felt the silhouettes of the singers didn’t work.

### **Acting**

Both respondents thought the acting was good in both videos. The singer felt that in *The Visit*, the acting was ‘more spontaneous, corporate and effective,’ and that in *Nativity* it was slightly overdone (‘vaguely extempore individuals floating around’). As already noted, the actor was

critical of the lack of characterization in both videos, but he acknowledged that in some scenes of *The Visit* ‘you get to see the emotions of the characters.’ The actor also felt that in *The Visit* the move from happy to jubilant ought to have been more impactful. He also thought that the use of African American women in both videos to represent biblical characters was preferable to using Hollywood actors.

### **Lyrics**

The two respondents thought the singing in both videos was good. However, they disagreed about whether the repetitive nature of the lyrics was desirable (the singer thinking it was, the actor feeling there was too much repetition), and on the audibility of the lyrics – the actor at times found them difficult to hear – ‘When the singing was too quiet I switched off and looked at the pictures.’

After viewing both videos, the actor said he remembered ‘some’ of the lyrics of both videos, although he felt that in *The Visit* ‘the words were lost underneath the music.’ On the other hand, the musician remembered ‘some’ from *The Visit* and ‘few’ from *Nativity*. The musician appreciated the fact that *Nativity* took time over the words ‘And Mary treasured these things in her heart.’

Both respondents agreed that the lyrics were central to the message of both videos, especially *Nativity*, but that in this video the background images could have helped more than they did to focus the attention of viewers on the lyrics. But both felt that the visuals of *The Visit* were stronger: the actor felt that the visual shots had more impact than the words, and the singer thought that ‘the movement and rhythm gave a certain impetus to the message.’

### **Improving the videos**

As already noted, the singer suggested building both videos around a live gospel choir performance. He believed that singing with passion conveys the sincerity of the words through facial expressions and other body language. He felt that this would obviate the need for special effects (the best of which, he argued, are now so expensive as to be out of reach). ‘Go for anything with real authenticity,’ he said, ‘That’s why gospel music works by itself.’

The actor felt that greater characterization would allow a more nuanced presentation of the biblical text and thus emphasise its significance (God’s protection in *Nativity* and the miracle of the incarnation in *The Visit*). He felt that the focus on jubilation in *The Visit* was premature: ‘Viewers will experience the jubilation only as they understand the story.’ He added that the pattern of the musical film *Chicago* – lyrics follow action – might profitably be followed.

### **Provisos**

Both respondents felt there are inevitable difficulties in attempting to communicate biblical texts through the medium of music videos. The singer felt that the high standards of MTV audiences and the colossal cost of good special effects makes it well nigh impossible to produce a good Christian video. The actor felt that music video is the wrong medium, as its primary aim is to advertise a song, not to communicate a message.

### **Suffering**

Both respondents felt these two videos were unlikely to resonate immediately with victims of internal suffering. However, both thought such resonance to be possible indirectly, either through empathising with the difficulties of Mary or through the historical associations of gospel

music in bringing spiritual relief to oppressed people. In the view of the singer, this would be more true of *The Visit* because its rhythm and percussion is more overtly African. He also felt that, in addition, victims of suffering would find the evident joy of the performers in *The Visit* to be attractive. On the other hand, the actor was more optimistic about the potential of *Nativity* in this regard. He felt *The Visit* 'might soothe, but not resolve' suffering.

### **The Videos as gateways to the Bible**

The respondents were somewhat negative about the potential of either video to become a gateway to further exploration of the Bible by young adult viewers. They both thought it only 'slightly likely' that *Nativity* would encourage this. In the singer's view this was because 'the bad things [which I take to be technical] about the video are quite memorable' and, therefore, off-putting. The actor felt that this biblical text does not draw people in as much as texts like, say, the Resurrection or the Prodigal Son. *The Visit* was regarded as having even lower potential to become a bridge to the wider biblical story. The singer again felt such was only 'slightly likely' ('A huge leap is required from a passive experience to Bible reading'), and in the actor's view it was 'not at all likely.' 'It would not engage someone not already engaged with Scripture,' he said.

## **A 'HORIZONTAL' REVIEW**

Having looked at how the groups reacted to the individual videos, the report will now take each question in the focus group script in turn and review how the different groups responded to it. This section of the report should be read in conjunction with Supplement 6.9: Summary of the Tables.

### **First reactions**

These revealed sensitivities to outmoded fashions of dress, music and even cinematic technique, underlining the ephemeral nature of styles and the limited shelf-life of video products. First reactions also revealed a propensity of Gen X audiences to interpret as patronising the roles assigned in the acting to representatives of minorities. In *Resurrection* and *Out of the Tombs* both imagery and music were considered to be overloaded and manipulative. The singer in *Father and Two Sons* and the narrator in *Out of the Tombs* were seen as melodramatic.

All but two groups indicated that they were confused as to what was the intended audience for the video viewed, and said their impression was that little audience research had taken place prior to planning and production of the videos. In particular some in both groups who viewed *Father and Two Sons* and *The Neighbor* felt these videos were aimed at children rather than young adults. And in the case of *Resurrection* and *Out of the Tombs*, one group in each case expressed its confusion about the intended audience.

### **Visual shots**

Preferences here were inevitably very subjective and idiosyncratic. But it is worth noting that there was more discussion of the symbolism employed in *Out of the Tombs* and *Resurrection* than of that used in the other videos.

### **Acting**

The data in Supplement 6.9 tells us that none of the respondents considered the acting in any of the videos to be excellent. Less than one-third (31%) considered it to be good, and almost half (49%) regarded it as fair. But one-fifth (20%) thought it poor.

With regard to evaluation of the acting, the order of merit was: *Resurrection*, *The Neighbor*, *Father and Two Sons* and *Out of the Tombs*.

*Resurrection* was the only video where a majority (55%) thought the acting was good, and 40% of those who viewed it considered the acting to be fair. Only 5% thought the acting was 'poor.' Despite the viewers' verbal criticism of the decision to use child actors, none of those who viewed *The Neighbor* considered the acting to be poor; both groups viewing this video unanimously evaluated the acting as fair. *Father and Two Sons* came third with two-thirds (67%) thinking the acting to be good or fair. *Out of the Tombs* came last in the foursome with 58% finding the acting good or fair, and 44% regarding it as poor.

### **Lyrics/Voice-over**

One would naturally not expect a high level of memorability after only one hearing. On the other hand, the positive correlation in Supplement 6.9 between figures in lines 2 (Lyrics/Voice-over) and 4 (Story – how well known?) is to be expected. The memorability of the lyrics/voice-over was understandably related to the degree to which each biblical story was known beforehand to viewers. But the proportion of those unable to remember any of the lyrics or voice-over (8%) was half the proportion that did not know the story at all before the viewing (16%). Leaving aside *The Neighbor* (where all viewers indicated they had some prior knowledge of the story), the proportion of respondents unable to remember any lyrics/voice-over was significantly lower than the proportion that lacked a prior knowledge of the stories. This suggests that all these videos have potential to communicate the biblical text to people coming for the first time to the biblical passage in question.

The research has underlined the importance of the voice. Although voice appreciation is highly subjective – the same voice could evoke very different reactions in a single group: one participant regarding it as 'manipulative'; another as having 'enabled me to empathise.' But the high degree of 'reverb' in the voice-over in *Out of the Tombs* and the intrusiveness of background noise in *Out of the Tombs* and *The Visit* were generally regarded as off-putting.

The importance of close correlation between narration and image was stressed by those who viewed *Out of the Tombs* and *The Neighbor*. Most viewers appeared to prefer dialogue to narration.

### **Motivation behind the videos**

The motivation of the producers was widely interpreted as a sincere attempt to communicate specific biblical texts to the MTV generation in an age of declining reading habits. Most participants regarded the videos as commendable attempts to demonstrate the relevance and attractiveness of the biblical text.

### **Improving the videos**

Six of the eight focus groups suggested the use of well-known personalities as singers and/or actors, but this was regarded as a priority in only three. Dialogue and even simple visuals with a subtitled biblical text were, on the whole, preferred to the use of songs, but there were some

strong advocates of song. Many suggested better direction and production as well as more character development in the script. The use of a modern context for the setting of the story was also the preference of many, some suggesting the model of TV news journalism. Those who viewed *The Neighbor* felt that child actors should be used only in very specific circumstances.

### **The story of the videos**

The relevance of the biblical story was clearly captured by viewers of *Father and Two Sons*, *Resurrection* and *The Neighbor*. The relevance of *Out of the Tombs* was less clear to viewers.

Almost one-quarter (23%) of participants indicated that the videos communicated to them the power of the story in a way which they considered to be either excellent or good. However, 41% felt that the communication of the power of the story was only 'fair', and over one-third (36%) thought it poor.

None of the four videos were considered to be outstanding in this regard. *Resurrection* came top with 55% of those who viewed it considering that it communicated the power of the story in a way that was either excellent or good. Next – but a long way behind at 15% - came *Father and Two Sons*. *Out of the Tombs* and –especially – *The Neighbor* were considered least effective with respectively 50% and 67% of their viewers considering their ability to communicate the power of the biblical story to be poor.

### **Values**

The respondents' perception of what are, among young adults, the most common and the least common values, is reproduced in the list found in Supplement 6.8. Each respondent was asked to select the four most common and the four least common, from a list of 24 values which can be found in the endnote to Appendix 5.

Those values perceived as the most common were: Having a good time; Get a good job; Care about what others think of me; Get on well with friends; and Keep up personal appearances.

Those perceived as the least common were: Be religious; Support animal welfare; Find life a fulfilling spiritual experience; and Be polite.

All the five most common values also appear in the top six of the least common.

Finding life as a fulfilling spiritual experience comes low (number 20) in the list of the most common values, and high (number 3) in the list of least common values.

### **Spirituality**

Most respondents who were asked indicated that the video format can be an effective tool to help young adults explore spiritual values because we are accustomed to visual media and images can add to the element of the paranormal.

Respondents asked a similar question about the Bible were less unanimous. Several felt that the Bible is perceived as tainted because of some of its fundamentalist advocates and conjures an authoritarian image. At least one respondent felt that the Bible was more relevant to morality than spirituality. However, a majority were affirmative; some stressed the importance of exploring spirituality by recognizing the role of metaphor in the text, and others emphasized the appropriateness of the Book of Psalms in this regard. Some underlined the importance of seeing

the big picture and the complementary danger of interpreting Scripture out of context. This suggests that the development of some form of popular biblical hermeneutic might be welcomed by young adults.

Almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents indicated that they considered young adults' finding a measure of spiritual fulfilment to be either very or somewhat important. Only 10% of all respondents considered this to be not important. This appears to contradict the relatively low value given in the card exercise to finding life as a fulfilling spiritual experience (see previous section on Values). However, it has to be borne in mind that in the card exercise respondents were asked to rank the multiple values of their peers, while in this question on the importance of spiritual fulfilment they were invited to indicate their own personal assessment of one particular value. The disparity between the two perceptions may suggest that the respondents considered themselves to be more open to spirituality than are the majority of their peer group. However, there is an alternative - and probably more likely - explanation in that the contrast may reflect the likelihood that, while spirituality is deemed to be increasingly important (Hay & Hunt 2000; Spencer 2003), it is not considered to be of the same level of importance as many of the other values appreciated in contemporary young adult society.

### **Suffering**

Overall, participants felt that people experiencing internal suffering could relate positively to the videos. However, some felt more care is needed to avoid giving the impression of patronising sufferers. In the case of *Father and Two Sons*, they might resonate with the video more than being helped by it. Perhaps in this regard the verdict on *Resurrection* was the most emphatically positive, especially in the case of one group. Both groups which viewed *The Neighbor* were positive, and in one the relationship between self-help and external help was raised.

### **The Videos as gateways to the Bible**

None of the respondents felt it very likely that viewing one of the videos would encourage further exploration of the Bible, and only one respondent considered this to be fairly likely. However, a majority (57%) did think such exploration would be slightly likely. But just over 4 out of 10 respondents (41%) considered such a response to be not at all likely.

To increase the likelihood of viewers subsequently exploring more of the Bible several suggestions were offered, including the following:

- Set the story in a strong modern context
- Be upfront. Don't apologise
- Find the balance between the extremes of an uncritical acceptance of the Bible and a coldly scientific approach to it.
- Ease viewers into the story; don't scare them off at the beginning.
- Challenge the audience.
- Arouse curiosity and convince the audience that the Bible has credible answers
- Pick relevant biblical stories.
- Set the video in a wider communication event.

### THE FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

Five one-to-one follow-up interviews took place 8 to 10 weeks after the focus groups. Their purpose was two-fold: (a) to gather any further suggestions relating to the production of Bible videos which may have come to mind after further reflection on the focus group experience, and (b) to examine in more depth the issues involved in facilitating Scripture engagement by young adults interested in spirituality.

The five interviewees remain anonymous, but it will make this section of the report more meaningful to give them some form of identify. Accordingly, they shall be referred to, respectively, as the actor, the singer, the journalist, the Jew and the Presbyterian. The videos viewed by each in one of the focus groups were as follows: the actor (*Father and Two Sons*), the singer (*Out of the Tombs*), the journalist (*Out of the Tombs* and *Resurrection*), the Jew (*Resurrection*), and the Presbyterian (*Out of the Tombs* and *Resurrection*). The journalist and the Presbyterian viewed two videos, but participated in the group discussion only of the first mentioned in each case.

Two of the interviewees – the actor and the singer - are active members of local churches and are engaged at the interface between their church and postmodern youth culture. The Presbyterian was brought up in the church, and, although now less involved, continues to sing in the church choir. The journalist is not a practising Christian, but is deeply interested in the message of the New Testament. The Jew is a Canadian who respects his religious heritage and is studying the origins of Italian fascism. Unfortunately, only one of these – the Presbyterian - is female; two other female participants in the focus groups were invited to take part in the follow-up interviews, but did not respond.

The follow-up interviews were built around the seven questions listed in Supplement 6.5. The following summary is structured around these questions, with the responses to questions A and H being taken together since they both relate to purpose (a) above.

#### **Advice/suggestions on further reflection**

The actor found the song in *Father and Two Sons* distracted from, rather than enhanced, the message. In his view it is the ability of cinema to communicate emotions that makes it successful, and that characterization and dialogue are necessary to make this happen.

The singer urged the ABS to avoid the patronisation of the viewers he thought he detected in *Out of the Tombs*, resulting from what he perceived to be the use of ‘tacky’ and ‘cheap’ production techniques. In his view, the sophisticated audience will find video convincing only if it is very well produced. He thinks the term ‘Gospels’ might appeal to the audience more than ‘Bible.’

The journalist expressed strong reservations about the suitability of the music video medium to communicate a serious message due to its strong associations with entertainment, and a widespread cynicism about MTV as exploitative. He advises the ABS in any future productions to underline the challenge of Christianity rather than make it easy. He thinks that the re-emergence of protest among young adults presents a new opportunity to communicate what the Bible has to say on public issues of popular concern.

The Jew felt that the focus of any new videos should be to encourage viewers to care for others. In his view young adults are more ready to spend money helping others than spending it on themselves.

The Presbyterian felt that the focus groups she had attended had been hypercritical in their evaluation of the videos. Her advice to the ABS in any future video productions is to let the biblical text speak for itself rather than interpret it. In the vast range of types of spirituality evident today, she suggests the ABS narrow the focus and target those who are seeking to define life in order to understand what's going on.

### **Making the right connections between spirituality and the Bible**

Both the actor and the Presbyterian suggested avoiding presenting Christianity as a set of rules. The journalist felt it important to distinguish between the Bible's message and institutional Christianity. The Jew suggested substituting terms like 'ancient parables' for 'Bible' which, he thought is perceived as encouraging conformity. The singer proposed presenting the poetical parts of John's Gospel and Ecclesiastes. He thought the exclusive claims of Jesus, as well as justice issues, would make a good connecting point. The Presbyterian felt that the Psalms and other poetic passages would resonate with those who protest against the status quo and want to make the world a better place.

### **Potential points of contact in contemporary spirituality**

The follow points of contact were identified: the search for individual fulfilment, the sense of homelessness and the need to belong, the quest for something exciting and exotic, and the need to move from selfishness to valuing others.

### **Parts of the Bible with which to begin**

The actor and the journalist thought the New Testament (especially the Gospels) more appropriate than the Old, with the actor also suggesting the Psalms and Lamentations. The singer felt that postmoderns could relate to the theme of Psalm 86.11 ('walking in truth... an undivided heart') and Psalms that enable us to express anger to God. The Presbyterian advocated the Psalms as well as the Passion readings from the Gospels and Paul's letters ('if they can be lifted from the set of rules within them') and Ecclesiastes. The Jew preferred abstract to narrative passages.

### **Suffering and spirituality**

All interviewees except one agreed that developing an empathy for those who suffer internal pain is one of the keys to communicating with the target audience.

- 'One of the greatest problems in reaching Gen X is where does Christianity fit in a world of pain?' (The actor).
- 'This is crucial at every level. In the Gen x, post-materialist world where everything should be great, internal suffering is basically the common problem.' (The singer).
- 'We expect to be happy all the time and feel anguish when we're not.' (The Presbyterian).

- ‘For some a sense of internal suffering is the central cause for the pursuit of spirituality.’ (The Jew).
- ‘There are many people who undergo internal suffering, but I don’t think this is true of the vast majority.’ (The Journalist)

Although the journalist was a lone voice in questioning the extent of internal suffering among young adults today, he did identify ‘an internal sense of dis-ease (rather than suffering) which is apparent in many people as they realise they are complicitous in the unjust current state of affairs simply by living their lives in the way they do.’ He also identified a sense of inadequacy and insecurity created by our consumer society persuading individuals that they need a product in order to make themselves of value again. Although he himself is a not a church member, he says ‘It will be through an appreciation of the current feelings of inadequacy that the Church will be able to reconnect with people. Through the emphasis on man’s basic dignity and worth, people can define themselves as being of worth using different criteria.’

#### **Using video effectively**

The actor felt ABS should aim for producing one-and-a-half minute sequences similar to TV ads. The singer suggests riding on the back of Mel Gibson’s forthcoming film on the Gospels. Although he felt that video lacks ‘aura,’ the journalist felt that effective Bible video will focus on how Christians’ beliefs affect their everyday actions. Both the Jew and the Presbyterian would prefer ABS going for ‘reality TV’, either by showing a group of young adults discussing, say, a Psalm, or by giving the camera to the audience and asking them to make a video of a biblical text.

#### **Website**

In response to a question whether a website would be helpful as part of a Scripture engagement project, all interviewees responded positively, and most did so enthusiastically. They suggested that the website contain information about the Bible in easily digestible sections. The site would require to be easily navigable and kept updated. The presence of links to other sites would be preferable to attempting to create a site which would be a self-contained fount of all knowledge. The journalist felt that visitors to the site should be able to interact with the biblical text in a variety of ways – linear or non-linear; biblical ideas or public issues. The Jew thought the message board would be crucial; users of the site would decide its fate. On the other hand, the actor felt that a question and answer board would be more useful than a message board which all too easily gets filled with extraneous material. The Presbyterian echoed this, making the point that increasingly visitors to websites are reluctant to give their name and email address for fear of being inundated by spam. It would be important to build trust between the managers of the site and its users.

### **PRINCIPAL FINDINGS**

The principal findings of the study are inevitably tentative given the smallness of the sample as well as its elite bias and the predominance of the qualitative method of data collection. Therefore, what follows should be taken as informed impressionistic judgments rather than replicable scientific findings.

### The Videos

1. All the videos have the potential to communicate through voice-over or lyrics the *words* of the Scripture text in question to viewers coming to the text with little or no prior knowledge of it.
2. The videos standing alone are, on the whole, not effective in communicating the *power* of the biblical stories to viewers. Over three-quarters of the respondents (77%) felt the videos' ability to communicate the power of the biblical story was either poor or only fair.
3. *Resurrection* is easily the most effective video in the series in communicating the power of the biblical text. It is followed by *Father and Two Sons*, *Out of the Tombs* and *Neighbor*. Both *The Visit* and *Nativity* were rated as either good and fair in this regard.
4. The videos are unlikely to be successful as stand-alone introductions to the rest of the Bible. All but one (i.e. 98%) of the respondents felt it would be either only slightly likely or not at all likely that viewing one of the videos would in itself encourage further exploration of the Bible. The two viewers of *The Visit* and *Nativity* also said it would be slightly likely or not at all likely that these videos would lead to further Bible exploration.
5. Respondents were divided as to whether the original historical-cultural context or a modern context offered the better setting for a Scripture video.
6. The acting in none of the videos was highly regarded. One-fifth of the respondents considered it poor and almost half thought it only fair. Less than one-third considered it good, and none thought it excellent.

### The Bible

7. The Bible is favourably regarded by today's young adults. Over half (51%) of the respondents held the view that the Bible is part of our cultural heritage (like Shakespeare), and not a single respondent thought it no longer relevant to our culture.
8. Young adults are less certain of the religious character of the Bible. Just over 4 in 10 respondents (41%) regarded it as a holy book like others. Only slightly more than one-quarter (28%) thought of it as the unique word of God.
9. Many young adults react negatively to the use of the Bible as a strict authoritarian code which they perceive is made of it by Christian fundamentalists.
10. However, a majority of respondents affirmed the appropriateness of young adults using the Bible as a tool to help them explore spiritual values.

### Spirituality

11. Young adults believe in the importance of finding some measure of spiritual fulfilment in life. Almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents regarded this as either very or somewhat important.
12. Among young adults there is strong identification of life as a journey. Eight out of ten respondents made this identification.
13. Finding a measure of spiritual fulfilment, while being regarded as important, tends to be accorded a relatively low priority by young adults. It came 20 out of 24 in the respondents' ranking of the perceived common values among young adults.

14. Young adults are open to using the medium of video in exploring spiritual values.
15. Considerable confusion exists among young adults as to precise meanings of spirituality.

### Other

16. There would be considerable interest in exploring the use of websites established to facilitate the role of Scripture engagement in exploring spirituality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow relate to the shape and direction of any future Bible video project ABS may wish to consider.

1. Take more steps to achieve a positive degree of connectivity between the video and the text-context of the biblical passage being communicated. The USER'S GUIDE on CD-ROM, and accompanying booklet, produced for *Out of the Tombs* does this for individuals and groups, but as far as I am aware, such a guide was not produced for the other five videos. (Dr Habecker, in conversation with me on 30 June, indicated that a similar user's guide exists for *Father and Two Sons*). I understand it was the aim of ABS to design the videos to stand alone as well as to be used along with a user's guide. However, the research undertaken seriously questions the ability of any of the videos to stand alone, and the results imply both the desirability of encouraging group use (personal relationships are very important for young adults), and need for a user's guide to be produced and marketed as an essential component along with the video as part of the communication package.
2. Involve the target audience in prior research, planning and production. The research detailed in the CD-ROM sent to me with the videos seems to have been largely done in-house, and the perception of several focus groups was that little audience research had been conducted prior to production of the videos. I strongly recommend that any audience research cover the user's guide materials as well as the shape and contents of the videos themselves. My perception of *A Compelling Story* CD-ROM and the accompanying USER'S GUIDE booklet produced for *Out of the Tombs* is that they are very good. However, my research did not cover these materials, and naturally my opinion is much less significant than that of the target audience. Of course, they may well have been market tested before publication. But if not, and if ABS intends to re-publish *Out of the Tombs*, my recommendation is that the four sessions envisaged in the Multi-Week Outline for Groups (p. 17 of booklet), be tested with at least two groups of young adults.
3. Reconsider the appropriateness of the MTV *genre* for Bible videos. While the desire to reach the MTV generation is highly commendable, choosing an MTV format confronts several problems. These problems are: (a) the object of MTV is to market a song rather than to communicate a message; (b) the use by MTV of very sophisticated special effects is making that video format very expensive to emulate; (c) there is a growing cynicism among young adults (confirmed in my research) about the exploitative nature of MTV; (d) it is highly debateable whether the short shelf life of most videos would justify the exceedingly high cost of MTV *genre* production.

4. Contemplate using video in a very different way to communicate the text of Scripture to Generation X. My suggestion is that you think seriously of producing professionally a series of much shorter (from 30 to 90 seconds) videos, learning from good and honourable TV advertising techniques. These videos would aim to arouse viewers' curiosity and interest in a specific biblical text and invite them to participate in a group to be set up to create its own video to communicate the text to Generation X (or any other defined audience, for that matter). By doing so, ABS would build on the suggestions for doing precisely this which are already published on p. 15 of the USER GUIDE for *Out of the Tombs*. The relevance of such an approach is that today reality TV is popular, there is a new focus in media on the importance of user interpretation of texts, and reasonably priced digital TV cameras are readily available on the market. Some guidance could be given on rudimentary editing so that the end-product could be shown in churches, at young adult interest groups, etc. In addition, non-church groups of people interested in spirituality might well regard such a product as a useful tool to facilitate their spiritual quest. A professional standard of production would not be required, as the most creative engagement with the text is likely to be in making more than in viewing the video. However, it would be important to provide a CD-ROM containing resources in the form of different English (Spanish, etc.) versions of the text, factual background data, DVD footage, works of art, music, etc., together with lists of references where more relevant information could be obtained. A web page could be provided to facilitate interaction between different groups creating their own videos. The precise nature of the contents of the CD-ROM and the design and lay-out of the web page should be market tested before publication. This approach would have the advantage of utilizing at relatively low cost the popularity of video viewing.
5. Produce to high professional standards the video clips envisaged in the previous paragraph. While I realise that ABS very seriously sought to do this in the six videos in the LOC series, the report reveals that perception of the focus groups was that the videos were lacking in good professional direction. Some respondents felt that that the treatment in a number of videos was 'over the top'. Others said they felt patronised by the use of outmoded techniques – perhaps an inevitable critique, given that some of the videos shown were produced ten years earlier. I recognize that for those who worked so hard on making these videos, this will come as a 'hard saying', but, in the light of respondents' reactions, my recommendation must be that ABS take this feed-back very seriously and consider using a different director for any future videos.
6. Introduce a greater degree of characterization in composing new videos. The report reveals that the low level of characterization in the six videos in deference to prose and lyric narration, was felt by many respondents to be a weakness of the LOC series. ABS' reluctance to go for a high level of characterization is understandable, given its traditional and principal stance to communicate the biblical text *per se*, rather than the text interpreted. However, if the burden of interpretation is placed on the user – as paragraph 4 proposes – the difficulty becomes less acute. Nevertheless, it would be appropriate for ABS to provide in the users' resource pack some guidelines for employing characterization responsibly in any video adaptation of the text.
7. Consider focusing the video clips on biblical texts from the poetic and prophet books as well as texts from narrative passages and the parables. One of the questions put to the

respondents was: 'What three things would the producers of the video – or any future video they produce – need to do, to increase the likelihood of viewers going on to explore more of the Bible?' Those respondents who were knowledgeable about the Bible suggested making videos of texts like Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and (especially) the Psalms. In passing, it is worthwhile noting that the emerging fascination of Generation X with 'tradition' and 'roots' is creating a new openness to the Old Testament Scriptures.

8. Relate explicitly both biblical passages and resource materials selected for use in any future video projects to the felt needs of the target audiences. For example, where the target audience is Generation X, both the significance of the resurgence of 'protest' and the prevalence of a sense of internal suffering ought to be borne in mind. It is not difficult to think of passages in the Psalms and Prophets which resonate with these felt needs. Similarly the research project's striking confirmation of the popularity among young adults of seeing life as a 'Journey' suggests that biblical narrative texts might resonate with where the audience is today.
9. Produce a pamphlet containing 'a popular hermeneutic' which would help the audience move on to grapple with other Scripture texts. This could also be inserted in Scripture book and perhaps even portion products. A number of respondents underlined the importance of seeing the big picture in the Bible and expressed an awareness of the dangers of interpreting the Scriptures out of context.
10. Consider supplementing the profile of the 'American Bible Society' as the publisher of the videos by selecting and highlighting a dynamic program strap line (I recommend the focus be on verbs rather than nouns!) in the video credits, related resources, etc. Although the research revealed that the audience's view of the Bible is by no means negative, it also showed that the word *Bible* is often associated in its mind with a harsh authoritarianism which is an immediate switch-off for postmodern young adults.
11. When marketing new products to Generation X, position sensitively ABS in relation to the churches. Strong suspicion of institutions is a key characteristic of Generation X, and the research revealed that the audience's view of the churches, while regarding them as welcoming and friendly, also sees them as boring and out of date. Of course, the relation between ABS and the churches is vitally important and I am not at all proposing that it be deliberately obscured. But it would help to make ABS appear more friendly to young adults if somehow it is made clear to them that, while ABS serves all the churches, it is owned by none. In addition, some attempt to distinguish the biblical text from traditional interpretations and dogmas of the churches would be welcomed by the audience. However, obviously great care would require to be taken so as not to alienate from participating in the video project those Christian confessions that rate Christian tradition very highly.

Respectfully submitted, 4 August 2003.

FERGUS MACDONALD

Scripture Engagement Consultant

113 St Albans Road, Edinburgh EH9 2PQ, Scotland, UK

Telephone: + 44 131 667 1546; Email: fergusfmac@aol.com

**PILOT PROJECT SUPPLEMENTS**

<b>Supplement 6.1</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>Supplement 6.2</b>	<b>Questionnaire 1</b>	<b>305</b>
<b>Supplement 6.3</b>	<b>Questionnaire 2</b>	<b>306</b>
<b>Supplement 6.4</b>	<b>Agenda of Focus Groups</b>	<b>308</b>
<b>Supplement 6.5</b>	<b>Agenda of Follow-up Interviews</b>	<b>311</b>
<b>Supplement 6.6</b>	<b>Agenda for <i>The Visit</i> and <i>Nativity</i> Interviews</b>	<b>312</b>
<b>Supplement 6.7</b>	<b>Focus Groups – Nationalities</b>	<b>313</b>
<b>Supplement 6.8</b>	<b>Focus Groups – Values</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>Supplement 6.9</b>	<b>Focus Groups – Summary of Tables</b>	<b>315</b>
<b>Supplement 6.10</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>316</b>

## Supplement 6.1 Research Design

### Statement of the Topic/Problem

The project set out to evaluate the impact on the target group of four videos – part of a series of six under the overall title of ‘The Life of Christ’ (LOC) - produced in the 90’s to communicate specific biblical texts to young adults, and is modelled on an MTV format. The ABS as the publisher of the LOC videos wished to know why the videos met with only partial success in communicating with their intended audience.

### Research question and objectives

The research question as formulated when the proposal was submitted to the sponsors read as follows:

Do the content and style of the LOC videos resonate with the target group’s aspirations and values, and do they create an increased willingness to discover more about the story contained in the biblical text?

### **This is essentially a ‘what’, rather than a ‘why’ or ‘how’ question.**

My objective was two-fold: *evaluation* and *exploration*. *Evaluation* [comparing ‘what is’ with ‘what should be’ (Weiss, 1972:6, in Blaikie: 79)] of the videos was specially important because the market research undertaken prior to publication appears to have been somewhat less than rigorous and, as far as I know, until now, little has been done by way of follow-up research. This summative evaluation [Blaikie: 80] was undertaken within a British context and the opportunity this afforded to *explore* the wider issues in a social population where many young adults are increasingly interested in spirituality (Hay & Hunt 2000), but their pursuit of spiritual meaning is made largely without reference either to the churches or to the Bible (Brierley and Sanger, 1999).

The project constituted *applied* research insofar as it sought to evaluate a product; it was also *basic* research [cf Blaikie: 49-52] in that it sought to contribute to the theoretical knowledge of Scripture engagement and popular spirituality.

### Literature review

The study built on the work of David Hay of the University of Nottingham who has been engaged empirical research on the nature of religious or spiritual experience for over 25 years, and on the analysis of Generation X spirituality by American Catholic writer Tom Beaudoin, himself a Gen Xer. Hay’s recent research indicates that in 2000 as much as 76% of the national British population were likely to admit to having had a spiritual or religious experience. This was almost a 60% increase over a similar survey conducted by Hay and Heald in 1987, 13 years previously (Hay & Hunt 2000: 12f). Beaudoin’s work, although academically based, is not the result of empirical research. It is rather an analysis of the songs and videos of contemporary pop culture, and is particularly relevant to the study because of its evaluation of a number of popular MTV videos (Beaudoin *Virtual Faith* 1998). According to Beaudoin four themes underpin his generation’s spirituality. First, all institutions are suspect – especially organised religion. Second, direct personal experience is all important. Third, suffering is spiritual. Fourth, ambiguity is central to faith.

Brierley's *Reaching and Keeping Teenagers* provided data on the religious attitudes and values of the target population when it was ten years younger and was a source of some of the concepts I utilized in the questionnaires.

The study also takes into account literature indicating that, in contrast to the increase in the acknowledgement of spiritual experience among individuals, 'an increasing number, especially in the under forty age group, are very remote indeed from the Christian institutions' (Hay & Hunt 2000:12). All reports indicate that the overall trend in church attendance in the UK is downwards. The Scottish Church Census of 1994 reported a fall in regular attenders from 17% to 14% of the adult population between 1984 and 1994 (Brierley & Macdonald 1995:16). The results of the 2002 Scottish Church Census, published in May 2003 (Brierley 2003:15) confirmed that this decline continues. The UK Christian Handbook *Religious Trends 2000/2001 No 2* (Brierley & Sanger 2000: 2.4) reports that regular church attendance in Britain fell from 4.38 million in 1990 to 3.75 million in 2000; a drop of more than 14% in ten years.

The literature also indicated that the practice of Bible reading is declining. The 1990 *Scottish Church and Social Concerns Survey* (Myers: 54) reported that only 10% of the non-church population read the Bible privately, with over one quarter (28%) of this population acknowledging that they had given up the practice. The analysis of the survey concluded that lack of motivation would seem to be the main reason why people do not read the Bible, not that they find it difficult to understand, meaningless, unbelievable or boring (Myers: 55). The *Changing Scotland* report (1999), an internal document produced for the Board of Ministry of the Church of Scotland by The Governance of Scotland Forum, indicates that one of the features characterising Scotland today, is that 'attachments to grand narratives, be they religious, political or even scientific, are not especially popular' (Reports to the General Assembly 17/10). It's possible to infer from this that behind the decline in Bible reading there may be cultural, as well as pragmatic, factors. Other surveys have revealed that even among adult churchgoers, the proportion of those reading the Bible three times a month or more declined from 42% in 1989 to 37% in 1997 (Brierley & Sanger: 6.4).

### **Research strategy**

The *abductive* strategy (Blaikie: 114-19) was selected because it is appropriate to gathering in-depth personal data and is particularly appropriate for collecting data through focus groups.

### **Concepts**

Concepts are important in establishing links with the social world, in forming the theoretical framework that sets a context for research, in stating the research problem, in designing the collection and categorization of data and in describing the findings (Blaikie:129).

Both *sensitizing* and *operationalizing* concepts (Blaikie: 133-138) were chosen.

The *sensitising* concepts were: '*video*', '*story*', '*spirituality*' and '*suffering*'. They were used as open-ended themes in the focus group interviews without being transformed into operational definitions.

*Video* was used with reference to the particular video viewed and to each group's reaction to it. *Story* was used to represent the storyline of both the videos viewed and of the Bible as a whole. But that apart, no semantic content was offered.

*Spirituality* was left open apart from asking the groups to think of it in a broad, rather than a narrow, sense; to help achieve this, the example of New Age and Neopaganism were offered verbally. However, participants were invited to indicate the relative importance of spirituality first in their own hierarchy of values by the group voting on the relative importance (*very-somewhat-slightly-not*) of young adults finding some measure of spiritual fulfilment, and, second, in a hierarchy of peer values by including ‘*Find a satisfying spiritual experience*’ in a list of 24 value options from which focus group participants were individually invited to identify the four most common and the four least common.

*Suffering* was included because analyses of Generation X culture suggest that a sense of internal suffering is a key religious issue for many young adults as a result of exposure to parental divorce, child abuse, AIDS, etc (Beaudoin: 96-120). At first, I initially left the concept of ‘suffering’ without any content, but an indication that internal suffering was in mind was added after pilot testing the focus group questions. Hopefully this was an example of establishing the meaning of sensitising concepts by ‘exposition rather than by definition’ (Baikie: 137).

Ten *operationalizing* concepts were included as variables in two short questionnaires; they are:

- *gender*: socially defined.
- *religion*: undefined apart from the addition of ‘(if any)’.
- *age*: number of years since birth.
- *social background*: where respondents have lived longest over the previous 10 years and how they describe their social class background.
- *life*: selection of word(s) that most accurately describe life to the respondents.
- *truth*: selection of a phrase that comes closest to the respondents’ understanding.
- *God*: selection of verbal images that come into the respondents’ picture of God.
- *Jesus Christ*: selection of a phrase that reflects the respondents’ view.
- *Bible*: selection of phrases reflecting the respondents’ belief.
- *churches*: selection of phrases reflecting the respondents’ view of the Christian Churches in general.

These concepts were operationalized as follows:

*Gender*: by asking respondents whether they are male or female.

*Religion*: by inviting respondents to indicate with which religion (if any), they identify.

*Age*: by asking respondents to indicate their age band: under 18/18-21/22-24/24+

*Social background*: by asking respondents to identify if they have lived longest over the previous 10 years in an urban or rural area, and whether their background is working, lower middle, middle, upper middle class or other.

*Life*: by asking respondents to indicate which of the following word(s) most accurately describe life for them: Maze / Journey / Battle / Computer programme / heartache / dream / other. If more than one is chose, respondents are asked to rank their choices.

*Truth*: by asking respondents which of *one* the following descriptions comes closest to their understanding of truth: a universal law / a cultural custom / a complex mystery.

*God*: by inviting respondents to indicate which of the following images come into their picture of God: Creator / Love / Father / Old man / Judge / Saviour / Mother / Spoilsport / Policeman / Other (specify).

*Jesus Christ*: by asking respondents to select *one* phrase from the following that reflects who they think Jesus Christ was: The Son of God / very wise human being / ordinary human being / a demagogue / someone who never existed / other (specify).

*Bible*: by asking respondents which of the following phrases reflect their belief: a holy book like others / the unique word of God / no longer relevant to our culture / part of our cultural heritage (like Shakespeare) / moral tales/nice stories only / don't know.

*Churches*: by inviting respondents to select whichever of the following descriptions reflect their view of the churches.

Theories were not introduced to the design because they are considered premature at the beginning of both the *abductive* strategy (Blaikie: 180). And I have ignored hypotheses since 'what' questions do not need them to direct the data collection (Blaikie: 164).

#### Data sources, types and forms

Data was obtained from individuals in semi-natural settings. They were asked to report on their beliefs, values and attitudes. Some tertiary data was accessed for comparative purposes, but the main focus was on primary data.

The population included individuals who were aged between 18 and 24, had little or no active church involvement and were willing to explore contemporary spirituality and the Bible.

#### **Selection of data sources**

The sample from the target population was selected *judgementally* (Blaikie: 103). While obviously it would have been ideal to have had a randomly selected sample, judgemental selection was, I think, satisfactory in this project for two reasons: First, the *exploratory* nature of the research means that the study did not need to generalize to the population, and, secondly, the time and resources available did not allow the *qualitative* method of data collection – required to collect the in-depth and detailed data being sought – to be employed with a randomly selected sample. The sample was composed of 61 university students – under- and post-graduate – making up eight focus groups. They were self-selected through a recruitment drive by word-of-mouth and email undertaken by two other post-graduate students who volunteered to help. In order to reduce a Christian bias, no recruitment took place in churches, the chaplaincy centre, Christian Union, etc. I would have liked to have broadened the recruitment base by including non-students, and, in fact, explored this possibility with a staff member of the Edinburgh West End Churches' Oasis Project who working among clubbers. In the end, he advised that the sensitive nature of the current state of rapport between the churches and the clubbers might be put under undue strain if he were to invite clubbers to participate in research on spirituality at this time.

It is impossible to make a judgement about the extent to which the sample represented the population. It obviously had an elite bias, being composed of university students. On the other hand, the significant proportion (49%) of international (non-British) participants probably helped to make it more representative of global youth culture.

#### **Data collection and timing**

This study was cross-sectional. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used.

Eight focus groups took place during February and early March. All focus groups viewed one video and followed the same agenda of questions. Each video was viewed by two groups. Focus groups were considered appropriate because of the generally recognised assumption that their dynamic enables people to become 'more aware of their own perspective when confronted

with active disagreement and be prompted to analyse their views more intensely than during the individual interview.’ (Millward 1995:277 in Blaikie: 235)

Two brief self-administered structured questionnaires were used with the members of each focus group, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the group interview. The data produced by this survey provided additional relevant information on the beliefs, values and attitudes of the social actors.

**Data reduction and analysis**

The data was manipulated and analysed manually.

**Supplement 6.2 Questionnaire 1**

**Sex:**

Male  Female

**Occupation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Religion (if any):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:**

Under 18  18-21   
 22-24  24+

**Background:** Area you have lived longest in over the past 10 years

Urban  Rural

Describe your background

Working class   
 Lower middle class   
 Middle class   
 Upper middle class   
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Life:** Which word(s) most accurately describes life for you?

Maze  Computer program   
 Journey  Heartache   
 Battle  Dream   
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

[If you choose more than one, please rank your choices 1,2,3]

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS!**

**Supplement 6.3 Questionnaire 2****Religious Beliefs****1. God**

Which of the following comes into your picture of God.  
[Tick all that apply]

- |         |                          |                      |                          |
|---------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Creator | <input type="checkbox"/> | Saviour              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Love    | <input type="checkbox"/> | Mother               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Father  | <input type="checkbox"/> | Spoilsport           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Old man | <input type="checkbox"/> | Policeman            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Judge   | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other [specify]_____ |                          |

**2. Jesus Christ**

Who do you think Jesus Christ is/was? [Tick one box only]

- |                       |                          |                           |                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| The Son of God        | <input type="checkbox"/> | A demagogue               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Very wise human being | <input type="checkbox"/> | Someone who never existed | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Ordinary human being  | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other [specify]_____      |                          |

**3. Churches**

What do you think of the Christian Churches in general?  
[Tick all that apply]

- |                        |                          |                         |                          |           |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Old fashioned          | <input type="checkbox"/> | Modern                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | Friendly  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Lively                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | Challenging             | <input type="checkbox"/> | Boring    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Irrelevant             | <input type="checkbox"/> | Depressing              | <input type="checkbox"/> | Enjoyable | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Welcoming to strangers | <input type="checkbox"/> | Difficult to understand | <input type="checkbox"/> |           |                          |

**4. Bible**

What do you believe the Bible to be?

- |                                   |                          |   |                          |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| A holy book like others           | <input type="checkbox"/> | Part of our cultural heritage<br>(like Shakespeare) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The unique word of God            | <input type="checkbox"/> | Moral tales/nice stories only                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No longer relevant to our culture | <input type="checkbox"/> | Don't know  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**5. Truth**

Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of 'truth'?  
[Tick one box only]

- A universal law
- A cultural custom
- A complex mystery

**MANY THANKS FOR COMPLETING THIS!**

**Supplement 6.4 Agenda of Focus Groups****QUESTIONS**

[Note: Follow-up questions are in small typeface]

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Opening      | <b>1. By way of introductions, briefly say who you are, what you're studying and what you most enjoy when you're not being a student.</b>               |
| Introduction | <b>2. What is your favourite film of all time? What did you like most about it?</b>   |
| Transition   | <b>3. What was the best religious film you've seen? Tell us briefly – no more than fifteen words – the name of the film and your impressions of it.</b> |

*The Medium [i.e. the Video]***VIEWING**

- |     |  |
|-----|--|
| Key | <p><b>4. What are your first reactions?</b></p> <p>4.1 Which visual shots impressed you most?</p> <p>4.2 What did you think of the acting?<br/> <i>[Using PRE-DETERMINED SCALE ON FLIP CHART: Excellent-Good-Fair-Poor]</i></p> <p>4.3 What did you think of the lyrics/voice-over?</p> <p>4.4 How much of the lyrics/voice-over can you remember?<br/> <i>[Using PRE-DETERMINED SCALE ON FLIP CHART: Most-Some-Few-None]</i></p> <p>4.5 In what ways did the lyrics/voice-over affect the message of the video?</p> |
| Key | <p><b>5. Why do you think the American Bible Society would want to produce a video like this?</b></p> <p>5.1 What one change would you propose to make this video worthy of an oscar?<br/> <i>[Transferring changes to flip chart].</i></p> <p>5.2 Which of these changes do you reckon to be most important?<br/> <i>[Using SELF-DETERMINED SCALE; rank changes by giving each participant 2 votes]</i></p>   |

### *The Story*

Key

#### **6. What do you think is the ‘story’ of the video?**

6.1 How do you judge the power of the story communicated to you in the video  
*[Using PRE-DETERMINED SCALE: Excellent-Good-Fair-Poor. Transfer results to flip chart]*

6.2 How well did you know the story before watching the video today?  
*[Using PRE-DETERMINED SCALE: Very well-Moderately well-Slightly well-Not at all. Transfer results to flip chart]*

6.3 I want you to tell me what you liked most about the story.

*[After answers are captured on flip chart, use SELF-DETERMINED SCALES asking group to rank each list in turn by each participant casting 2 votes]*

Key

#### **7a. In what ways is video format an effective tool to help young adults explore more and spiritual values?**

#### **7b. In what ways can engaging with the Bible help young adults to explore more fully spiritual values?**

7.1 I am now going to give each of you a set of 24 cards. Each card has printed on it a felt need which other research has found to be experienced by young adults.\* I would like you to do two things with these cards. First, select the cards containing the four felt needs you believe to be most common. Once you’ve done that, I’ll collect these four cards from you. Second, select the cards containing the four felt needs you feel are least common. Then I’ll collect these. Finally, I’ll ask you to hand back the remaining cards for use with later groups.

7.2 How important do you feel it is it for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment?

*[Using PRE-DETERMINED SCALE, pre-printed on individual sheets: Very-Somewhat-Slightly-Not]*

Key

#### **8. What do you feel this video story says to people who suffer?**

[Referring to a character in the story, e.g. the victim in ‘The Good Samaritan’]

8.1 What prompts you to say that?

Key

#### **9. How likely is it that viewing this video would encourage today’s average young adult to explore more of the Bible?**

*[Use PRE-DETERMINED SCALE: Very-Fairly-Slightly-Not at all]*

9.1 I now would like each of you suggest three things the producers of any future video would need to do to it, to increase the likelihood of viewers going on to explore more of the Bible.

*[Using SELF-DETERMINED SCALE: Once answers are captured on flip chart, ask group to rank these by each participant casting 2 votes]*

- Ending      **10. We've tried to evaluate the video and we've looked at the felt needs of the people it is produced for. Is there anything we should have talked about and didn't?**
- Postscript      **11. [First Focus Group only]. We're planning to hold several more focus groups over the coming weeks. What advice do you have for us?**

---

\*

Avoid/clear debt  
 Be an active family member  
 Be generous  
 Be polite  
 Be religious  
 Be truthful  
 Become famous  
 Care about the environment  
 Care about what others think of me  
 Concerned for others  
 Find a satisfying spiritual experience  
 Forgive others  
 Get a good job  
 Get on well with friends  
 Have a good time  
 Keep up personal appearance  
 Maintain health and fitness  
 Overcome loneliness  
 Resolve personal anguish  
 Save money  
 Support animal welfare  
 Wear latest brands  
 Work hard  
 Work for world peace and justice

### **Supplement 6.5 Agenda of Follow-up Interviews**

Looking back to the video you saw with other members of your focus group, have you – on reflection – any further advice to give about producing a new series of videos?

As you know, this project, in addition to evaluating the videos, is exploring whether the Bible can help people explore spirituality.

How would you advise us as we try to help people make the right connections between spirituality and the Bible?

What particular aspects of contemporary spirituality do you think will prove to be potential points of contact?

What parts of the Bible are the most appropriate places to begin?

How relevant in the current quest for spiritual fulfilment is a sense of internal suffering?

How might video be most effectively used?

Would a website be helpful? If so, what do you think its role should be?

**Supplement 6.6 Agenda for *The Visit* and *Nativity* Interviews**

1. What are your first reactions?
2. Which visuals impressed you most?
3. What did you think of the acting?
4. What did you think of the singing/music?
5. How much of the song can you remember?
6. In what ways did the song affect the message of the video?
7. What one change would you suggest to make this video worthy of an ‘Oscar’?
8. How did you judge the power of the story communicated to you in the video?
9. What did you like most about the story?
10. What do you feel the video says to people who suffer?
11. How likely is that viewing this video would encourage today’s average young adult to explore more of the Bible?
12. Suggest three things the producers of the video would need to do to increase the likelihood of viewers going on to explore more of the Bible.
13. Anything else?

**Supplement 6.7 Focus Groups – Nationalities**

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Brits</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>HKong</b>	<b>Canada</b>	<b>NZ</b>	<b>Aust'lia</b>	<b>SAfrica</b>	<b>Austria</b>	<b>Swiss</b>	<b>German</b>	<b>Italian</b>
<b>Grp1</b>	2	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Grp2</b>	5	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
<b>Grp 3</b>	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	4	0
<b>Grp 4</b>	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Grp 5</b>	2	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Grp 6</b>	4	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Grp 7</b>	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Grp 8</b>	6	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total:</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>

**Supplement 6.8 Focus Groups – Values**

VALUE	SCORES (out of 24)		% of TOTAL VOTE	
	Most Common ascending order	Least Common descending order		
Have a good time	1	24	0	22
Get a good job	2	20	0.4	16
Care what others think of me	3	19	0.4	13
Get on well with friends	4	21	0.4	11
Keep up personal appearances	5	23	0.4	11
Avoid loneliness	6	18	1	4
Maintain health and fitness	7	22	0.4	4
Avoid/clear debt	8	5	7	3
Work hard	9	17	2	2
Resolve personal anguish	10	16	2	2
Save money	11	12	3	2
Wear the latest brands	12	15	2	2
Become famous	13	10	5	1
Care about the environment	14	13	2	1
Be polite	15	4	8	0.8
Concern for others	16	14	2	0.8
Work for world peace and justice	17	9	6	0.8
Be an active family member	18	6	7	0.4
Be generous	19	11	4	0.4
Find a fulfilling spiritual experience	20	3	10	0.4
Tell the truth	21	7	7	0.4
Be religious	22	1	16	0
Forgive others	23	8	6	0
Support animal welfare	24	2	10	0

**Supplement 6.9 Focus Groups – Summary of Tables**

	<u>Father &amp; Two Sons</u>		<u>Resurrection</u>		<u>Out of the Tombs</u>		<u>The Neighbour</u>		<u>Totals</u>	
	13 Viewers Vote	%	20 Viewers Vote	%	16 Viewers Vote	%	12 Viewers Vote	%	61 Viewers Vote	%
<b>1 ACTING</b>										
1.1 Excellent	0		0		0		0		0	
1.2 Good	5	38%	11	55%	3	19%	0		19	31%
1.3 Fair	4	31%	8	40%	6	37%	12	100%	30	49%
1.4 Poor	4	31%	1	5%	7	44%	0		12	20%
<b>2 LYRICS/ VOICE-OVER</b>										
2.1 Most	3	23%	17	85%	0		1	8%	21	34%
2.2 Some	2	15%	3	15%	6	37.5%	4	33%	15	25%
2.3 Few	7	54%	0		6	37.5%	7	58%	20	33%
2.4 None	1	5%	0		4	25%	0		5	8%
<b>3 STORY-POWER</b>										
3.1 Excellent	0		2	10%	0		0		2	3%
3.2 Good	2	15%	9	45%	1	6%	0		12	20%
3.3 Fair	10	77%	4	20%	7	44%	4	33%	25	41%
3.4 Poor	1	8%	5	25%	8	50%	8	67%	22	36%
<b>4 STORY - WELL KNOWN</b>										
4.1 Very well	7	54%	8	40%	1	6%	3	25%	19	31%
4.2 Moderately well	1	8%	4	20%	4	25%	6	50%	15	25%
4.3 Slightly well	3	23%	6	30%	5	3%	3	25%	17	28%
4.4 Not at all	2	15%	2	10%	6	38%	0		10	16%
<b>5 SPIRITUAL FULFILMENT</b>										
5.1 Very important	1	8%	9	45%	9	56%	3	25%	22	36%
5.2 Somewhat	3	23%	9	45%	5	31%	6	50%	23	38%
5.3 Slightly	7	54%	2	10%	1	6%	0		10	16%
5.4 Not important	2	15%	0		1	6%	3	25%	6	10%
<b>6 VIDEO to BIBLE</b>										
6.1 Very likely	0		0		0		0		0	0%
6.2 Fairly	0		0		0		1	8%	1	2%
6.3 Slightly	7	54%	16	80%	4	25%	8	67%	35	57%
6.4 Not at all	6	46%	4	20%	12	75%	3	25%	25	41%

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