



EXPLORE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

GOD
PEACE
FORGIVENESS
SILENCE
HOPE





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COURSE INTRODUCTION

THE GIFT OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

In a letter written in the middle of the 1st century to a community in the region of Galatia (modern Turkey) an early Christian leader called Paul of Tarsus wrote about the fruits of the spiritual life that he had discovered, and that he was teaching to others around the Greek speaking world of the Mediterranean. What he had discovered was a spiritual path that was founded in the person of Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus Christ. He had discovered Christian spirituality.

He wrote: ‘...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’

Christians believe that the fruits of this spiritual life are indeed love, joy, peace, and more. For two-thousand years people have found the practice of Christian spirituality to be an incredibly powerful way to grow in love, in joy and in peace.

On this course, we are going to explore how we can develop these spiritual ‘fruits’. We will do this through the practice of imaginative meditation as taught by another famous Christian; the 16th century Spanish saint Ignatius of Loyola. Using discussion, explanation and meditation, we will explore 5 major themes of Christian Spirituality that invite us into love, joy, and peace. These themes are:

God
Peace
Forgiveness
Silence
Hope.

It is important to stress that participants need not believe anything in particular or even anything at all, during what follows. They will not be required to pray; nothing will be required from them except the shared need to engage generously and positively with others who may have different views or beliefs.

What follows is not intended or claimed to be a complete introduction to Christianity. Naturally there is more that could be said (and more that might need to be said) if someone wanted to further explore Christian faith or become part of a Christian church.

Rather, this course is intended to offer an *experience*; an experience of the practices that Christians use; and the treasures that we find as we tread our spiritual path. Because we believe that Christian spirituality is an extraordinary *gift*, this course is designed to be a *gift* to all; to those of all faiths or none. I sincerely and passionately hope that those who engage with this course do indeed experience it as gift, and that they are able to find themselves growing in love, joy and peace.

Timothy Fox



THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

A thought experiment...

Imagine, if you will, that you discovered that there was a group of people in your community who believed that they, and they alone, were *right*.

Imagine then if those people thought that they, and only they, had a 'correct' worldview; that is, they and only they understood the true nature of reality. Imagine now that those people had meetings, once or twice a week, in a building of their own, where they discussed the fact that everyone else in their community was profoundly wrong in their beliefs, and that they would suffer eternal consequences for this wrongness. Imagine now that this group thought that, therefore, the kindest thing that they could do for anyone in their community would be to make them exactly like *them*; that is, to convince everyone else to think what they think and believe what they believe.

Imagine next that every activity or event that the group organised in their wider community (no matter how friendly and generous it seemed) was actually aimed at making everyone else see the error of their ways, change their belief systems and become like *them*. Finally, imagine that this group would not engage generously with those who disagreed with them, or modify their practices for anyone. Would you think that such a group sounds like a positive element in the wider community?

Of course, we don't have to imagine this scenario. It is not far-fetched; I would suggest that it is, in fact, exactly what Christian churches can *seem like* from the outside.

Now, you may not agree with this characterisation of Christian belief and evangelistic intent, and in a sense you would be right not to; most Christians I know don't spend their time feeling superior to others and thinking about how everyone who doesn't share their beliefs is eternally condemned. Rather, the evangelistic intent of most Christians that I know is rooted in a desire to generously *share* something that is of tremendous value to them.

But as much as it may be a little 'over the top', I do think that the thought experiment above has some important insights; after all, just because the evangelistic urge of Christian churches may be well-intentioned, it doesn't mean that it can't be *experienced* as problematic or oppressive. As the proverb says, if you bless your neighbour loudly in the morning, 'it will be taken as a curse'.^[1] Good intentions are not always enough.

The idea that Christian outreach could be experienced as oppressive (no matter how well-intentioned) must surely be taken seriously by churches that do indeed want to generously share the great gift and hope of their faith with others in their community. This, I would suggest, is particularly important when considering courses or sessions with overt evangelistic purpose; such as what may be called 'Christian enquirer courses'.

Many churches offer such enquirer courses, and many churches will enthusiastically share the exciting stories that emerge from them after they do. However, it is easy to observe that churches tend not to share *every* story that results from offering a Christian enquirer course in their community. If a course participant comes to Christian faith; perhaps in a dramatic 'conversion' experience, this story will of course be shared; and no doubt will be seen as important



encouragement and vindication. Perhaps rightly so. But how many non-Christian people participate in a Christian enquirer course and leave *without* such a conversion experience? Furthermore, how many leave without any sort of positive experience at all? How often do we reflect upon and share *those* stories?

I wonder how many people, in fact, leave our enquirer courses puzzled, or confused, or regretful; 'put off' from any further engagement with the Christian church? We cannot say; but it will certainly not be zero (I have spoken to a few with just such experiences). After all, what proportion of non-Christian participants in a particular enquirer course in a particular church would be *expected* to make a lasting commitment to the Christian faith?

If any of the above is true, then it may be that a significant number of people have, despite the best intentions of churches, been put off the Christian faith by the Church's attempts to offer them something that is supposed to be *gift*. Going back to the proverb, we may have been attempting to 'bless our neighbours', but in a significant number of cases, that blessing may have been 'taken as a curse'.

The Love Joy Peace course has been written to facilitate generous and transparent sharing of faith; with the confidence that such sharing can be received as *gift* by *all* participants and by a wider community; not just those who 'come to faith'.

It has been written to offer gift to a diverse community in the expectation of diverse responses. It has been written to offer, as transparently as possible, an insight into the *experience and practice* of Christian spirituality, rather than a presentation (or defence) of the claims and doctrines of the faith. It certainly does not intend to be a complete statement of everything that a particular Christian church or denomination may believe. It is, as it were, 'pre-Creed'. But that, I believe, is where faith starts for most people.

It is a focus on *experience*, rather than doctrine, which is at the heart of this approach. If we believe that our experience of faith is one that leads us into (as St Paul suggests in his letter to the church in Galatia) *love joy, peace* and more; then that is an experience which we should be confident to offer to all, as gift and open invitation.

This course is an attempt to do just that.

Theological Rationale

Many may wish to stop reading here, and to move on to the course material itself. But for those who are interested, the theological rationale behind the course can now be explored more fully.

At the heart of what follows is an attempt to satisfy four criteria that are suggested to be helpful marks of generosity and transparency. These criteria are as follows:

1. That success is not measured by assimilation: The success of the course is not measured by agreement with the worldview of the Church.
2. That attention to the needs of the learner is embodied by the course material, so that the course may be experienced as *gift* by all.



3. That genuine agency is offered to course participants, in order that learning may be held in community.
4. That the teaching of 'closed' doctrinal elements (that must simply be agreed with) should be minimised.

I will now explain how these criteria have been discerned.

Education through 'Enquirer Courses'

'Every community that wants to last beyond a single generation must concern itself with education'.^[2]

In 'The Creative Word', Walter Brueggemann claims that education is of fundamental importance to the maintenance and extension of the community of faith. It is observable that, for most UK churches with the ambition, personnel and ability to offer them, the standard mode of education for the maintenance and extension of the Christian community seems to be a 'Christian enquirer course'.

With this in mind, I will consider the challenge articulated by educationalist Paulo Freire, who claimed that education can operate as a mode of oppression if insufficient attention is given to the freedom, autonomy and self-authorship of the learner.^[4] Freire's desire that education be a site of liberation rather than oppression forms the background to the Love Joy Peace course.

Two related questions will be considered. The first is this: What would constitute a genuinely respectful educational model (pedagogy) for a Christian enquirer course? The second follows on from this: What would an enquirer course that embodied this respectful pedagogy look like? The Love Joy Peace course is an attempt to create one that represents a satisfactory answer to these questions

First criterion: That success is not measured by assimilation

In 'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed', Paulo Freire describes a 'banking' model of education, where the role of the student becomes limited to the retrieval of information deposited by a teacher, and whose role in the learning process is restricted to a process of 'receive, memorise, repeat'.^[5] Freire argues that a system of education that relies on such a 'banking' model can act as a site of oppression, in that it runs the risk of turning people into passive recipients (he uses the term 'automatons'), rather than active participants in a process of becoming more fully human; and is therefore a pedagogical model that is primed for the de-humanisation of learners.^[6]

The possibility of education acting for, rather than against, de-humanisation or oppression should be of great relevance to Christians, as a strong theme (or claim) of the Christian faith is of course liberation and freedom for the oppressed. If there is a possibility that enquirer courses (that are intended to lead people into a liberating awareness of faith) may utilise an oppressive educational model, this would indeed be of concern. But how would this be assessed? Freire himself suggests 10 statements that describe this pedagogical model of 'banking'. Whilst not all of these statements would apply directly to the context of the Christian enquirer course, some do seem potentially relevant. For example; 'The teacher teaches and the students are taught'; 'The teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing'; 'The teacher chooses and enforces this choice, and the students comply', and 'The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.'^[7]



If a particular enquirer course could be shown to be representative of the above statements, that would naturally indicate a potential for oppression. However, it is unlikely that an analysis of a particular enquirer course designed to be welcoming and attractive for participants would neatly reduce to such clear (and clearly problematic) statements. What is of deeper significance is what these statements reveal about the sort of educational program that they would characterise. They demonstrate both a clear power imbalance towards the teacher, and the presence of a desired outcome of imitation or assimilation, where the student becomes like the teacher in worldview and cognition. In any educational program which could be characterised by Freire's statements, the success of the project would surely be linked to this outcome of assimilation. In other words, if the program was a success, it would be demonstrated by the student thinking what the teacher thinks and believing what the teacher believes. Thus, it seems likely that the linking of such outcomes to the successful delivery and reception of the course would be a sign that there was indeed a mode of oppression in operation.

This is especially important in the context of Christian enquirer courses, where there may be a presumed temptation to measure the success of a course through 'converts' to the faith, or increased attendance in a church. This leads to a stark conclusion; the existence of any such metric could be an indicator of an oppressive pedagogy. But caution is required here; it is not that the expansion of the community of faith (or the desire for such expansion) is necessarily problematic in itself. It is rather the use of education as a 'means to an end' that is the concern. It would certainly be concerning if that end is either the measurable growth of a particular church community or the enquirer becoming a facsimile of the teacher; such a motivation must be absent in order to distance a course from such an oppressive pedagogy.

A way to lessen the oppressive effects of a pedagogical model of 'banking', if present in an enquirer course; would be that it should be able to be considered successful even if the participants *do not become like the teacher*; believing what the teacher believes and thinking what the teacher thinks. A refusal to link a successful outcome to identification with the teacher's worldview is therefore the first element of a truly respectful educational model: Success should not be measured by assimilation.

Second and Third Criteria: Attention to, and agency for the learner

In his 1972 essay 'Towards a definition of Christian Education' John Westerhoff builds towards a broad and open definition of Christian education, arriving at the conclusion that Christian Education should maintain a whole-life, holistic focus on the formation of praxis in community.^[8] Westerhoff offered a definition of Christian education as something that 'focuses on the total life of persons in the faith community' and also involves 'the deliberate, systematic and sustained efforts of that faith community [to] enable persons and groups to evolve Christian life styles.'^[9]

Underpinning this definition are two insights in particular that will be helpful in suggesting further elements of a truly respectful pedagogy for a Christian enquirer course. They are as follows: That Christian education should focus on the needs of the learner, not the agenda of the teacher, and that the goal of such education should be *praxis, in community*.

Regarding the first insight, Westerhoff suggested that a key feature of Christian education was that it should 'begin with the learner'; their needs, their problems, and their questions.^[10] He linked this to the need to affirm the particularity and personhood of each learner by allowing the learner to see the



educational program as deeply relevant to their own concerns. It is essential, we may thus agree, to a respectful pedagogy, to place a consideration of the needs and concerns of the learner at the centre of the educational exercise. But how may this be done? Even (or perhaps especially) in an oppressive educational context such as Freire described, the teacher may still feel they are addressing the genuine needs of the learner, however misguided this may be. What matters here then, is a deep attention to the experience and needs of the 'other'. Here some of the riches of the Christian narrative may be helpful. What could it mean for a Christian enquirer course to pay the sort of radical, de-centering attention to the 'other' (in this case, the learner) that reflects the story of incarnation through attention, descent (kenosis) and presence?

Such a gift of attention to the genuine needs and experience of the learner in both the composition of the course and its delivery would surely address a problematic power imbalance between teacher and learner. How might this be done? At the very least, the course should be constructed in such a way that it would be considered to be a gift to its participants, rather than (or as well as) its deliverers. By identifying the need for the course to be experienced as 'gift', whether the participant is ultimately impressed by the claims or narratives of the Christian faith or not, a necessary focus on the experience of the participants will be created.

The second insight mentioned above is that Christian education should have the goal of developing praxis, in community. Here, Westerhoff potentially offers an intriguing challenge for an enquirer course to move away from the teaching of doctrines (orthodoxy), to the teaching of praxis; orthopraxy. Whilst it must be recognised that underpinning or central understandings regarding the Christian faith (that may be considered to be doctrinal) must always be expected to be present, and thus to emerge in any catechetical context, the challenge for Christian education to teach and embody *praxis* is an important and ultimately helpful one, and will be considered below.

If course participants have no power or agency to bring something of themselves and their own concerns to the course material, and the host is not able to respond with genuine attention, a communal practice of respect could not be said to be present. In this case potential for oppression would emerge; particularly between the (empowered) host and the (disempowered) participants. Again, it must be recognised that some power imbalance between host and participant must always be assumed to be present in an enquirer course (and is even necessary in practical terms and administrative terms); however a praxis of attention and respect would mitigate problematic aspects of this imbalance.

The second and third criteria for a genuinely respectful pedagogy have now been identified. They are:

That attention to the needs of the learner is embodied by the course material, so that the course may be experienced as 'gift' to all.

That sincere attention is paid to the particularity and agency of the course participants, both in the course material and the hosting, in order that learning may be held in community.



Fourth criterion: Minimising closed doctrinal elements

Perhaps the biggest challenge of a respectful pedagogy, in the context of an enquirer course, is the challenge around what can be held 'open', when speaking of the faith, and what must be held 'closed'.

When considering the power of creativity in Christian education, Jerome Berryman succinctly lays out this challenge by describing two extremes of pedagogical approach. He describes teaching for the 'closure' of a strict doctrinal orthodoxy and an opposite approach of teaching for the 'openness' of student-led self-direction. Berryman starkly suggests that the first approach, which emphasises the authority of the teacher and the simplicity of 'clear' doctrine, can ultimately lead to a 'rigid, closed-minded, defensive and sometimes violent' faith; and that the second approach (which emphasises the freedom and authority of the student) can lead to a 'rootless' religion of existential anxiety that lacks identity. ^[11]

For Berryman, such pedagogical extremes must be resisted and a middle way found between an openness that relativises faith, and a closure that restricts meaning; whilst maintaining the ability to clearly describe and explore the faith as it actually is. ^[12] This must be strongly affirmed. But we must also affirm that there must be some 'core' content to any educational program that teaches or explores the Christian faith. This would be content that enables the faith being explored to be *recognised as Christian* by a wider faith community.

It follows that such 'core' content could not be open to significant alteration without risking the ability of a wider faith community to recognise it as *Christian*. This may seem self-evident: to teach the Christian faith, there must be an attempt to teach that which is definitive of that faith, and that which is definitive must presumably be described as such. Consequently, the question of what it is that is definitive of the Christian faith begins to become important. However, it is important first to identify the deep implication of any such 'closed' or 'core' content for a respectful pedagogy: if there is content that must simply be taught, which is not open to negotiation, then a clear power imbalance towards the teacher of that content re-emerges, and the strong possibility that Freire's challenge will not be met remains.

This is significant; it seems clear that any Christian enquirer course that is structured largely around the teaching of 'closed' or fixed non-negotiable doctrines (however constitutive of Christianity they may appear to be) must therefore, in Paulo Freire's terms at least, be likely to operate as a mode of oppression. Hence, when seeking to construct a respectful pedagogy, the importance of minimising closed doctrinal elements is clear. To what extent this is possible may seem to remain, at this point, an open question. However, I believe that such an approach *is indeed* possible; and (as suggested by Westerhoff) is linked to a focus on orthopraxy, rather than orthodoxy. But for now, we can simply identify the fourth element of a truly respectful pedagogy for a Christian enquirer course that has emerged:

That the teaching of closed doctrinal elements must be minimised.

Although this may seem to be a somewhat controversial statement, it need not be. If one were to consider a hypothetical enquirer course that focussed solely on the teaching of fixed Christian doctrine, is it difficult to imagine such content being offered in any way that would not embody an oppressive pedagogy. It is also difficult to imagine it being a particularly engaging experience for a participant! However, if doctrine is thus to be minimised, we must go on to consider what content, or



what sort of content, would replace it: What would *actually* be taught by a Christian enquirer course that maintains a respectful pedagogical approach throughout? And to what extent would doctrinal positions inevitably re-emerge through the selection of such content?

These important questions are discussed further below. Prior to this, some of the further implications of such a minimising approach to the teaching of doctrine must be examined.

These consequences must be examined because it does not necessarily follow that it would be possible to minimise 'closed' doctrinal elements *enough* to create a truly respectful pedagogy without removing the ability of an enquirer course to truthfully represent the Christian faith. Two dangers thus emerge. The first is that such a minimal selection of doctrines would simply hide closed elements of the faith 'out of sight' of enquirers and would therefore fail to offer a full or honest picture of what Christian faith actually involves. This in itself would strongly demonstrate an oppressive pedagogical approach; as fundamentally it would be dishonest.

The second danger that follows on from minimising doctrine is perhaps even more fundamental: That such an approach would likely lead towards the relativising pedagogical 'extreme' and consequent loss of identity that Berryman identified. How then, to avoid such a danger?

Walter Brueggemann considers the dangers of a relativising pedagogical approach when discussing the process of canon formation in ancient Israel. In his volume 'The Creative Word', Brueggemann's project is to demonstrate how the formation of the canon of the Hebrew Bible illuminates the educational method of the community that formed it, and how that method is able to form clear community identity. He describes the tension between the need for the community to assure continuity of self-identity through the generations, and the need to allow itself the freedom to adapt to new and unforeseen circumstances as a balance between 'fossilising into irrelevance' and 'relativising into disappearance'.^[13] Like Berryman, Brueggemann's description of the challenge a respectful pedagogical approach must meet is clear and succinct.

Brueggemann then moves on to describe the pedagogical method of the community of ancient Israel that he suggests was able to meet this challenge. This could be summarised as follows: A praxis of open reflection on closed narrative.^[14] It is important here to note that ancient Israel means just that. Brueggemann is here exploring the teaching method of the ancient people whose stories and customs lay behind the biblical canon itself. He references the story of the people of Israel being commanded to lay stones to mark the crossing on the Jordan river as illustrative of this method.

The text in Joshua 4.6 states 'When your children ask in time to come, "What do these stones mean to you" ' then you shall tell them...' and goes on to require the community to relate the narrative of God's action at the crossing of the Jordan.^[15] Brueggemann describes five other occasions in the Hebrew Bible when a question from a child to an adult relating to the faith of the community is anticipated in like manner.^[16] The key here is that Israel's primary method of *education* was narrative because Israel's primary way of *knowing* was narrative. The people of ancient Israel were a people formed by the practice of telling and re-telling these foundational stories of God's intervention and rescue.^[17] It is in the concrete 'given-ness' of the story (which is not open to being altered), and the openness in the telling and interpretation of the same 'closed' story that Brueggemann sees the potential for a pedagogy that neither 'fossilizes or relativises'. He describes the place 'imagination' has in the use of narrative in Israel and moves on to an articulation of the way the community used the practice of



imagination to open new meaning and insight in the old stories that made them relevant to the concerns of the later community. ^[18]

What emerges then, is the possibility that *narrative* may offer a resolution to the pedagogical challenges I have identified above. The method Brueggemann describes potentially has the power to avoid either fossilisation or relativisation and is focussed not on teaching doctrinal exactness and orthodoxy, but rather teaching *praxis*; a praxis of communal reflection *on* and imaginative application *of*, narrative. But would such a method be applicable to a 21st Century Christian enquirer course? I strongly suggest that it would be. Brueggemann himself perhaps would agree, suggesting (as he did) that just as in ancient Israel 'the primary mode of education in the church... is story'.^[19]

Shaped by stories: An alternative pedagogical approach

In 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down*' Stanley Hauerwas also explores the power of narrative to form and sustain community. Hauerwas reflects that, as the rabbits in the 1972 Richard Adams novel discover, the ability to sustain a community (and ultimately to survive) is connected to that community's ability to tell and re-tell their foundational stories; the stories that 'serve to define who they are'.^[21] In 'Watership Down' the foundational stories of the community in question are folk stories of the 'Prince of Rabbits', El-ahairah. Hauerwas points out that it is by reflecting on these 'closed' stories (which themselves are not open to renegotiation or change) that the community is able to respond with freedom and creativity (but also with deep authenticity) to the new circumstances that it finds itself in.^[22]

Hauerwas further makes the point that this reflection is deeply relevant to Christians. He suggests this is because Christians are people whose lives are also shaped by ancient stories 'of a prince'. For Christians, as with the fictional rabbits, these stories are not open to renegotiation or change, and must be read in necessarily different surroundings to their original contexts.^[23] It is important to note that this practice of open reflection on closed narrative would also go a long way towards meeting Westerhoff's requirement that a Christian pedagogy involve a whole-life, holistic focus on the formation of praxis-in-community. The praxis in question would be the praxis of communal reflection on the foundational stories of the Christian faith.^[24]

It is this reflection on *narrative*, therefore, that offers the basis of the alternative pedagogical approach for an enquirer course that is now to be proposed:

A practice of reflection on the story and stories of Jesus.

I believe that this practice of communal reflection on the story and stories of Jesus would provide an excellent basis for an enquirer course. It is further suggested that such a course would satisfy the four criteria for a truly respectful pedagogy that have been identified and would therefore meet the challenge of Paulo Freire. In order to examine this claim (and to explore some necessary additional characteristics of such a course) I will now consider *how* such a course would fulfil the four criteria that have been proposed.

The Love Joy Peace course

So, how will the Love Joy Peace course attempt to fulfil the four criteria that have been identified?



To fulfil the first criteria is relatively simple. In order that the success of the course *not* be measured by assimilation, it has been designed to offer an explanation and an experience of the Christian faith *without intending to persuade*. The Love Joy Peace Course intentionally does not include an invitation to accept the propositions of the Christian faith. There is no moment of 'decision'; rather the course ends with a invitation to explore further, if participants so wish.

Meeting the second criteria, that attention to the needs of the learner is offered (so that the course may be received as 'gift' by all), has required careful attention to both the structure of the course and the content. Structurally, although the course material does have an intended order, there is no reason why participants could not experience the course in any order. There is no need for participants to attend the whole course in order to benefit from it; each session is able to be received as 'gift' in its own right.

Regarding the content of the course, the well-known spiritual practice of Ignatian Contemplation has been selected to offer a practice of communal reflection-on-narrative

This method of imaginative contemplation (or meditation) is widely known and used across a broad spectrum of Christian faith.^[25]

Ignatius wrote that his method of meditation involved 'seeing in imagination the physical place where that which I want to contemplate is taking place.'^[26] In the Love Joy Peace course, participants will be invited to *experience* what it might be like for a Christian to (for example) know themselves as loved by God, by entering imaginatively into a narrative element of the story of Jesus.

The aim is to offer an experience of Christian spirituality that will be positive for the participant *whether or not* they desired to learn more about the Christian faith or accept its claims for themselves. If sufficient attention is given to welcome, atmosphere, and respect across a group of participants, the second criteria for a truly respectful pedagogy would likely be fulfilled.

The third criteria for a respectful pedagogy requires sincere attention be given to the agency and particularity of individual participants in order that learning may truly be held in community. In this respect, I suggest the practice of reflection-on-narrative being described is helpful. This approach is intended to offer a significant element of self-authorship and agency to participants. No-one's particular imaginative response to a guided meditation will, of course, be any more correct than anyone else's.

Regarding the fourth criteria for a truly respectful pedagogy (that the teaching of closed doctrinal elements be minimised) we can see that some elements of doctrine will inevitably (and essentially) emerge. As has been observed above, doctrine must always be expected to be present in any enquirer course, and as such doctrine must be assumed to emerge even in a narrative-based course that attempts to demonstrate orthopraxy rather than teach orthodoxy.

However, there will of course be a need to make *explicit* some simple foundational elements of Christian doctrine if only to maintain the desired posture of 'gift' towards participants. As the Love Joy Peace course invites participants to have a degree of imaginative freedom, it is necessary to offer some simple boundaries to that freedom. If participants find themselves, for example, imagining something that makes them feel uncomfortable, upset or afraid it would be appropriate to remind them that this was not representative of the Christian understanding of God. This would clearly



represent an element of doctrine. Hence one doctrinal element that must be made explicit is that Jesus reveals the nature of God as perfectly loving and good.^[28]

The question of what other doctrinal elements *should* be included in a Christian enquirer course (that it may be recognisably Christian) must now be asked.

However, answering this question may seem optimistic given the history of debate and disagreement across the Christian church and the reality of differing positions on many doctrinal topics. There is a danger here that any claim to completeness would represent hubris. However, if complete agreement on the doctrinal elements that would be essential to Christian faith might be impossible across the whole of the church, it does not follow that there are not some core elements of the faith that would be agreed upon by most Christian denominations. It is such doctrinal elements as these that have been selected. Of course, even if such a selection would be agreeable to most denominations, it is not clear that it would be considered *sufficient* by any particular church or 'stream' of the Christian faith.

It is therefore arguable that a problematic sense of 'hiddenness' regarding doctrine may remain. However, the suggested focus on experience and praxis (rather than orthodoxy) is intended to mitigate against any sense of deceit. In the Love Joy Peace course participants are invited to *experience* what it is like to be a Christian and that they are *not* being given an exhaustive understanding of everything needed to be considered a full member of a particular Christian church.

So what are the doctrinal elements the course intends to introduce? They are as follows:

1. The nature of God (Incarnation). That the incarnate Jesus reveals the nature of God as perfectly loving will be explored using meditations that invites participants to imagine themselves meeting a loving God. This session will be titled 'God'.
2. Redemption. That Jesus invites people into redemption will be explored through a meditation which invites participants to imagine themselves receiving peace with their own stories, and through a reflection on the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4. This session will be titled 'Peace'.
3. Salvation (forgiveness). That Jesus invites people to receive and give forgiveness will be explored through an imaginative meditation on the story of the woman threatened with stoning in John 8. This session will be titled 'Forgiveness'.
4. Crucifixion. That Jesus reveals God as 'Emmanuel – God with us' in the midst of pain and suffering will be explored with an imaginative meditation on the Crucifixion. This session will be titled 'Silence'.
5. Resurrection. That Jesus offers eternal hope will be explored through an imaginative reflection on Luke 24, 'The Road to Emmaus' story. That Jesus invites Christians into a community of participation in this hope will be explored through reference to Holy Communion. This session will be titled 'Hope'.

We can be confident that the narrative elements of Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection are as close to universal elements of Christian belief as can reasonably be supposed, as indeed are the concepts of a loving God, the invitation into redemption through the receiving and giving of forgiveness, and the invitation into a community of hope.



Conclusion: From proclamation to participation

If it is possible that Christian enquirer courses, despite their great popularity and wide use, can be experienced as oppressive, it follows that it is important to consider if there is not another way. It is clear that not every church, church leader, or Christian will agree that it is important to address this issue. In a world of contested opinions and contrary beliefs, many will no doubt conclude that an attitude of apologetic persuasion is indeed what the Church needs to embody. There are, I believe, several good enquirer courses for those who are comfortable with that approach. For those, however, who would prefer a move away from *proclamation* towards *participation* the options perhaps are lacking. The Love Joy Peace course is offered to those who wish to invite others to 'taste and see' that Christian faith and spiritual practice can indeed be held open as a gift for all to explore.

References

- [1] Proverbs 27.14
- [2] W. Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), p.1.
- [3] M. Davies, *Enquirer's courses are attended mainly by churchgoers, statistics suggest* (London: g. J. Palmer & Sons, 2019) <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/18-october/news/uk/enquirers-courses-are-attended-mainly-by-churchgoers-statistics-suggest> [Accessed 01/05/23].
- [4] P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996) pp.53-55.
- [5] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pp. 52-53.
- [6] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 55.
- [7] In full, Freire's statements are as follows:
 1. The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
 2. The teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing.
 3. The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
 4. The teacher talks and the student listens – meekly.
 5. The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
 6. The teacher chooses and enforces this choice, and the students comply.
 7. The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
 8. The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.
 9. The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
 10. The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, whilst the pupils are mere objects.Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 54.
- [8] J. H. Westerhoff, 'Towards a definition of Christian Education', in J. H. Westerhoff Ed, *A Colloquy on Christian Education* (Pilgrim Press: 1972), p. 70.
- [9] Westerhoff, 'Towards a definition of Christian Education', p. 70.
- [10] Westerhoff, 'Towards a definition of Christian Education', p. 66.
- [11] J. W. Berryman, 'Playful Orthodoxy: reconnecting religion and creativity by education', *Sewanee Theological Review* v. 48, 2005, p. 437.
- [12] With this in mind, Berryman develops the idea of a sort-of 'creative spiral' of opening and closing of meaning, through the 'playful' exploration and conservation of meaning in community. See Berryman, *Playful Orthodoxy*, v. 48, 2005, p. 441.



[13] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, p. 1.

[14] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, pp. 19-22.

[15] Joshua 4.6-7, NRSV.

[16] These are: Exodus 12.26, Exodus 13.8, Exodus 13.14, Deuteronomy 6.20 and Joshua 4.21.

[17] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, p. 21.

[18] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, p. 33, pp. 87-90.

[19] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, p. 33

[20] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, p. 1.

[21] S. Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down* (1981)' in J. Berkman and M. Cartwright eds., *The Hauerwas Reader* (London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 175.

[22] Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down* (1981)', pp. 174-181.

[23] Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down* (1981)', pp. 197.

[24] Westerhoff, 'Towards a definition of Christian Education', p. 70.

[25] Thompson & Williams describe Ignatian Meditation as having become 'very widely used'. See R. Thompson & G. Williams, *Christian Spirituality: SCM Studyguide* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p. 82.

[26] S. I. Loyola & G. E. Ganss, ed, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991), p.1.

[27] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, pp. 19-22.

[28] Here it may be useful to refer to biblical texts such as 1 John 4.7-21 and even the traditionally evangelistic John 3.16.

[29] See, for example R. Rohr & M. Merrell, *The Divine Dance* (London: SPCK, 2016), pp. 30-31.





DELIVERER'S NOTES

Course structure and content.

The 5 sessions of the Love Joy Peace course are based around discussion, explanation, and meditation. Each session also features a participatory action.

The course is designed to be run in small groups of 4-8 people in order to facilitate discussion, but of course groups could be combined; a host organisation could offer sessions in plenary for the meditations and explanations, with facilitated 'breakout groups' for the discussion and action sections as appropriate.

Discussion.

Discussion sections either feature 'starter' questions relevant to the topic being considered, or an opportunity for participants to discuss (if willing) their experience of the imaginative meditations.

Explanation.

Explanation sections are designed to be either read from the script by the course deliverer, or offered in the form of video / audio content via the Love Joy Peace course website (www.lovejoypeacecourse.com). However at the time of writing only the script option is available.

Meditation.

Each session involves 2 guided meditations. Like the discussion sections, these can either be read out by the course deliverer or accessed via the website.

When offering the meditation elements, thought should be given to creating a suitable atmosphere of calm. A quiet room with comfortable seating would be beneficial. Quiet background music could be used if wished.

Action.

The following resources will be helpful for the action sections.

- Session 1: Small mirrors / participants mobile phones with cameras.
- Session 2: Pens and plain paper (A4) with either clipboards or a solid surface to write upon.
- Session 3: Heavy stones or rocks (that can be held in one hand).
- Session 4: Pens and paper (any size) with either clipboards or a solid surface to write upon.
- Session 5: Bread / Holy Communion / Larger meal.



Participation by deliverers / facilitators.

An important element of the course is that learning is designed to be held in *community*. Participants are intended to be offered *agency* and freedom in the learning process.

In practice this means it would be helpful if lead deliverers / group facilitators would participate in the meditations themselves, and (if appropriate) to share some of their own reflections and responses.

Freedom of response for participants.

This also means that, excepting the understanding that 'if it is not *good*, then it is not *God*' (as explained in the session 1 notes) participants should be offered complete freedom to respond to the guided meditations however wish; it is important the deliverer and facilitators do not suggest that there is one 'correct' way to respond.

It is also important that no-one be expected or pressured to share anything personal about their response or about their story that they would rather not share.

It might be helpful, therefore, to give some thought to how deliverers and facilitators can enable open sharing, without adding unhelpful pressure. In discussions, a short pause to give space for people to respond is helpful, but an overly long pause may add unwelcome pressure.

Session length.

Each session is intended to be run over a period of 1 hr - 1 hr 15 mins. If possible, it may be helpful to reassure participants that the sessions will end on time.



COURSE FEEDBACK / CONTACT INFORMATION

**Please do get in touch if you have feedback on Love Joy Peace,
or wish to talk about running the course:**

email:

lovejoypeacecourse@outlook.com

website:

www.lovejoypeacecourse.com

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Love Joy Peace was pioneered at
St Paul's Boundary Road in Nottingham.

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