

The Christ of the Barking Road

Greg Smith

Out of the mouth of babes

- Is Jesus stronger than Allah?
- I want to be a Hindu so I can put Mehndi paint on my hands.
- Are we Christians or are we English?
- Will Parmesh go to heaven?
- Aleisha's a Hindu, so do we have to get her a Christmas present?
- It's not fair... God should have made Jesus a girl.
- If Ahmed can't eat pork and Saffron's a vegetarian why do I have to eat my vegetables?
- That man doesn't need to be homeless... Can't he share our house?
- Is it really true that Auntie Myrtle's grandmother was a slave in Jamaica?

Such questions are day to day reality for many of the children and young people of East London. Children have a habit of going straight for the heart of the difficult theological questions. Perhaps our theology should be far more childlike and thus closer to the kingdom of God.

My kids as part of our committed Christian family regularly worship in a majority black church, and attend a primary school in which over 80% of children are Asian and about 60% are Muslim. I experience daily hopes and fears for their development. Will they as I hope come out of it all as strong but open minded Christians, secure in a personal faith and clear in their values, knowing what they believe but in respectful friendship with others? Or will they drift into a fog of unknowing rootlessness, picking and choosing the bits they like in a desire not to offend anyone, or worse still turn into narrow racist bigots willing to fight for the flag of St. George and the dominance of the English "Christian" supremacy. Whatever happens in future the present reality is that they at age six and eight are far more sophisticated in identity work, and appreciation of different religions, than many of us were at eighteen.

Personal Journey

I want to structure this chapter as a journey... a short journey no more than 4 kilometres from West to East (literally and metaphorically) along the Barking Road in Newham. Indeed this was a journey a group of us made on foot one summer evening a year ago during which we counted 44 places where religious activity evidently took place. In fact in the whole borough of Newham in our recently published directory of religious groups we document 294 organisations of which 181 are Christian congregations and around 20 are mosques* (see table at end). The Barking Road certainly has plenty to offer for the multi-faith tourist or pilgrim.

When I came to Newham to live and work in 1975 there was a real sense of it being a missionary journey. Arriving on the Barking road from a rural Methodist upbringing, via a university where I had found evangelical faith, and a year as a volunteer teacher in India where I encountered non-western cultures and religions for the first time, I felt a definite sense of calling to work for the church, the gospel and the community of the (in)famous East End for a year or two at least. Through various jobs over two decades in church, community work and academic research I found fellow travellers on the journey, the closest companions being a peer group of like-minded Christian incomers. On a shared journey, for many years in one new church fellowship, we have stayed together through stages of evangelical outreach, community work and political activism for and against the Labour Party. Twenty five years on, our paths have diverged though we are still together. One of our members has become an MP and government minister, another is completing training for Anglican ordination having moved from Brethren roots through depression to High Anglicanism, a third is training for the URC ministry while her husband is teaching English to refugees and Religious studies at a secondary school on the Barking Road. We have all made decisions to stay and bring up families in the area, with all the dilemmas in education that poses to middle class families, and to white Christians living as a minority among diverse ethnic and faith communities.

We have walked the Barking Road together and that journey has shaped our lives. It has shaped also our religious understandings, as for most of us the exclusive certainties of 1970's evangelicalism have broadened to include more Catholic, Celtic Christian and Orthodox understandings, and we have come to see Muslim, Sikhs and Hindus as neighbours, friends and community allies rather than just "benighted heathen ripe for conversion". **The church too has changed too over the last three decades, from a tiny dispirited remnant of white old ladies to a lively growing and noisy multitude. Our fellow travellers in both mainline and independent churches are the peoples of the Two thirds world; it is now African, Asian, Latin American, Pentecostal and Catholic, prosperous professional and poverty stricken, global and local and all mixed up.**

Religion on The Barking Road

We begin our journey down the Barking Road on the millennium line of 0 degrees with a fine view of Canary Wharf and the Dome. If the first represents a temple of Mammon the second celebrates a memory of Christendom culture with a Faith zone covering something from each major faith community in Britain today. We risk our lives navigating on foot the Canning Town flyover and roundabout where the A13 shoots off to sever the two halves of the local neighbourhood, and the huge new transport interchange heralds economic regeneration for the most deprived ward of the most deprived borough in England. The first religious buildings we encounter are two hostels for the homeless, a temporary one linked to Newham's ecumenical night-shelter project the second a Catholic hostel for seafarers, now used for otherwise homeless men. There is a Catholic parish church and the sites of a Methodist chapel (now a garage) and an Anglican church (now a Macdonalds). But there are also the signs on the shops, His Grace Photos, Amazing Grace Groceries, Signs and Wonders Hair Salon, Mount Zion General Store, Faith Electronics and

just round the corner Saraswati Newsagents, and the Old English Pawnbroking Company.

Next in the religious landscape is the Islamic Centre, formerly the local synagogue. On one side it is flanked by a bookies, on the other by the worship centre of Calvary Charismatic Baptist Church. Across the road is Mansfield Settlement, a multi-agency centre that used to specialise in the muscular Christianity of boxing clubs but is now known for its work on HIV/Aids and its links with the Gay Christian Movement. Back on the other side is Glory Bible Church and Green Pastures Christian ministry, occupying a huge complex which was once a Baptist chapel, then a draper's shop and warehouse until five years back it became a church again. The congregation is large, lively and mainly African, with the flags of fourteen nations flying in the auditorium. They are engaged in partnership with the Council in a multi-million pound project to establish a day nursery and training centre..

At the Abbey Arms, (a not very religious pub), there is a cluster of mainline church activity. The House of the Brown Brothers or Society of Saint Francis, the Anglican Parish Church, the huge barn of Memorial Baptist Church and the associated West Ham Central Mission. Together these groups form a network of Christian care and support for poor and vulnerable people, for refugees and asylum seekers, for people with mental health needs and learning difficulties. With volunteers from other churches they run Newham Organisation for Stopping Hunger (NOSH), a Sunday lunch club where people from all these groups dine cheaply in good company. The sign on the church wall proclaims that the building offers a base for at least four new Pentecostal congregations, though they come and go so quickly that you can never be sure if the information is up to date. A bit further on there is St. Andrews, a former parish church now housing a new independent evangelical congregation and its various ministries, and a former snooker hall housing the Foursquare Gospel Church.

The next section of the Barking Road contains the URC church, thriving and evangelical with a daughter congregation, English classes for refugees and fellowship groups in Spanish for Latin American refugees. Across the road is a Pentecostal storefront church, and along it a shop front mosque operating in an unmarked building. At the traffic lights we stand within a hundred metres of a Catholic Parish Church, and a newly renovated St Martins Church of England, which shares its premises with a large secular youth work agency. The shop front of Sree Narayan Guru Mission, (next door to Emmanuel Enterprises) is dwarfed by the obviously prosperous West Ham United Club Shop, and the nearby football stadium.

The last kilometre of the Barking Road takes us past two mosques, a Church Army Youth Centre which also hosts three Pentecostal congregations, and another Parish Church and Community Centre (home to two or three more congregations), a "Mecca" Bingo Hall and the book-shop of Holy Tabernacle Ministries. We then arrive at the Town Hall, where if it is Sunday a banner proclaims that the Redeemed Church of Christ, Royal Connection Parish meets here to worship. During the week of course this is where Newham Council meets in secular state, although with seven Councillors and the local MP as signed up members of the Christian Socialist Movement, with half a dozen Muslim councillors including the Mayor and Deputy

Leader, three Sikhs and a couple of Hindus the undercurrents of faith are never absent.

How then should we read the story of the Barking Road? Clearly it is about globalisation, the numerous international public phone call shops speak clearly about and to the connections back home, in Pakistan, Nigeria, Colombia, Croatia, and Mozambique. Clearly too it is about global and local politics and economics, of economic migrants and asylum seekers, fleeing poverty and oppression at home, ending up in a part of London that is paved not with gold but with litter and racism, overcrowded housing and low paid casual work. In all of this religion offers some hope of building identity and community, practical mutual help and spiritual resources. The churches and mosques in one sense operate in a religious supermarket, or rather a set of niche markets purveying hope and friendship, meaning and faith. But for disciples of a Jesus who drives out with a whip the traders from the house of prayer for all nations, the prosperity of this religious environment can only raise difficult questions.

People and Ministry on the Barking Road

A road is a place for people journeying and the Barking Road is no exception. As people move up and down the road, crossing from one side to the other the short journey links with each life journey, each pilgrim's progress. Some of the journeys are very local, some are stages in transcontinental travel, some have clearly set their sights upon their vision of the Celestial city, others are struggling with Giant Despair or foundering in the Slough of Despond, or simply going round in ever decreasing circles. It would not be fair to spell out the stories of individuals in their struggles and their dealings with God. So instead we will present the stories of a few of the ministries and try to discern the theologies that lie behind them.

The Night-Shelter was recently renamed Turnaround as it has taken on a wider remit including day centre and resettlement work and is concerned for turning round the situations of homelessness and despair for people in the street. It is ecumenical, seven churches providing shelter on a weekly rota basis, and volunteers from other churches and faith communities helping out as they are able. With so many people involved it includes a range of theologies from the evangelistic through the compassionate to the empowering and the prophetic. There may be a shared gospel understanding around Matthew 25 35, "I was a stranger and you invited me in" and an obedience to the fast of Isaiah 58;7 "Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter". However there are multiple readings within a common commitment, where some of the churches want to present Christ and his love to the homeless and others discern Christ in the persons of the guests.

NOSH, the Sunday Lunch club also operates ecumenically, out of compassionate concern. The sharing of food among pensioners, single parents, people with learning difficulties and African refugees can be seen as a foretaste of the Messianic banquet. One feels that the diners are just the sort of folk that Jesus walked and talked among. It's a shoestring operation, struggling against setbacks as every few months someone more desperate than the diners breaks into the deep freeze and steals the food for next Sunday. People get involved as they are able, some find meaning in

helping set the tables, making the tea or washing up. There is pastoral care from each other and from the Christians who hold it all together. There are attempts to address wider issues, like health promotion and plugging in to the Credit Union which operates from the Catholic Church down the road. His name is not often mentioned but somehow Jesus is there.

Just up the Road the URC does its work with refugees. There are English Classes and prayer meetings, bible studies and worship in Spanish as well as English. There are links with the local Churches Immigration Support Group. Over the years this organisation has helped those struggling with Home office rules or threatened with deportation. There is personal and prayer support, legal advice, letter writing campaigns and in some cases sanctuary in church buildings. Some cases are won, some are lost, some people just disappear. There's an understanding that Jesus was a refugee in Egypt, that the immigration rules are racist and unjust and that God cares about justice. For some at least Christ is known as a personal friend and Saviour. I often support them in their campaigns, and think Jesus would too.

One of my friends is an American evangelist. He was an alcoholic when he was converted, he's a man of great faith and prayer. He and his family served many years as a missionary in Pakistan. He has a calling and a burden to share the gospel with Pakistanis. He is at home in their culture and language and far from naïve about what it would mean for a Muslim to accept Christ. He is hoping to help start a new expression of church that would be culturally sensitive and relevant while at the same time maintaining integrity to the Word of God. He dare not represent the church, he doesn't talk about being a Christian, for that is a mere "caste" identity, he talks of being a follower of Jesus. And as he and his five year old son meet people in the streets and shops they lose no opportunity to talk to people about their faith in a forgiving and saving God. I sometimes wish I could be as up front as them.

I recently got to know the pastor of a large local church, formerly a medical doctor originally from Nigeria. He gave up medicine for the cure of souls and is one of the ministers at the Glory Bible Church. It is a large Pentecostal worship Centre, to which hundreds travel from all parts of London. Its mainly African with a Nigerian majority but people from an increasing number of nations are becoming members. As in many African churches there is a distinct emphasis on faith and on a living Jesus who can bring you health and success in this life as well as the next. The ministry is entrepreneurial, growing, and beginning to reach out into the community to meet local needs. They work with the Health Authority to put on Health Information Days, with Social Services to develop their day nursery and with the local regeneration partnership to develop employment training courses. I've been helping them with the community work, and am excited about the direction in which the church is developing, and its growing links with other local churches. Yet I do find the cultural and theological mix confusing and sometimes wonder if the prosperous Jesus that many Africans seem to worship is the same one I serve, and whether their Christ is not perhaps more North American than African.

The Muslims who worship on the Barking Road are also aware of Jesus. For them he is a prophet, but not the final prophet. They reject the idea that he might be divine, for Allah cannot be associated with anything created, God cannot have a son. There is huge distrust... a Muslim student who approached the mosques to gather

information for our religious directory had many layers to unpeel. First he had to assure them he was not from the Council, then he had to explain why he was doing some work for and with Christians. Next although he dressed as a Muslim and prayed alongside them in the mosque he had to explain his own allegiances and beliefs, which strand of Islam did he come from, what were his Islamic agendas? In some cases he had a language barrier to overcome, as an English speaker with some fluency in Punjabi he couldn't get far with Bangladeshis. Finally he discovered he was the wrong age, a twenty year old should have more respect when talking to his elders who ran the mosque. Not only are there many Jesus's in the market place, there are a bewildering range of Islams, and unforeseen complexities in the inter faith encounter.

One of the features of our so called post-modern times is that a plethora of fragmented cultures and identities coexist with an evident increase in connectivity. Through international travel and electronic communications a global network entangles the world. At the local level we can also talk of the network society. Traditional dense and closely bounded local communities have tended, especially in cities, to give way to looser associations built up of overlapping personal networks.

In this context an important question is whether the diverse local ministries on the Barking Road are in touch with each other. The answer in short is both Yes and No. Among Christians denominations provide linkages for some but there are few if any formal ecumenical structures. There are however umbrella bodies bringing together certain groups such as the Newham Christian Fellowships mainly for the white led charismatic and evangelical churches, and the Newham Community Renewal Programme which brings together churches for social action programmes such as the Turnaround Nightshelter, and the Immigration Support Group. There are also informal ecumenical collaborations on specific local projects such as the NOSH lunch club. On the other hand there are cleavages and wide gulfs between Christian Groups. Most of the black majority Pentecostal Churches on the Barking Road are fiercely independent if not sectarian, and not even well networked with similar groups, let alone with mainline Christianity. Traditional party divides such as Catholic / Protestant, Evangelical / Anglo Catholic are less significant than they once were but new schisms have appeared for example over the gay issue. Inter faith activity is not well developed, one exception being a relationship between a mosque and a Catholic parish in the context of broad based community organising. But the charismatic Baptist church next door to the mosque would want to have nothing to do with Islam. Indeed the very mention of the possibility of interfaith relationships is contentious enough to make some Christian churches break fellowship with others. .

One of the few ways in which networking and collaboration between religious groups can move forward is through the proactive networking ministry of a small number of Christian workers, of whom I am one. Together with friends and colleagues, using a variety of action research and community development techniques, we have over twenty years sought to extend and strengthen the networks for urban mission and ministry understood in its broadest and pluralist sense. Such efforts have not always met with success but there are at least some possible channels of communication available between the different faith communities, religious groups and secular agencies that are found along the Barking Road.

Messiahs on the Barking Road...

There'll be another one along in a minute

In our church we sometimes sing

*I looked up and I saw my Lord a coming
I looked up and I saw my Lord a coming down the Road.
Hallelujah He is coming
Hallelujah he is here*

It often moves me to tears and it leaves me with many questions and few responses. When I was a young Christian in India I read E. Stanley Jones "The Christ of the Indian Road" and understood for the first time that Jesus could come in many guises, and be at home in many cultures. Today as I walk the Barking Road Jesus walks alongside, but in many packages, if not incarnations. . Its a bit like the Number15 bus which travels along the Barking Road. You wait for a Messiah for ages then three come along at once!

However all this pluralist language is highly unsatisfactory. Is Christ divided? Is there one God or many in all this? Even if there are diverse interpretations and its hard to be as certain in our faith as some Christians and Muslims appear to be surely there is a core of truth a basic gospel story, a rock which doesn't roll. Can we not go back to the simple faith of the old Boys Brigade Hymn?

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows role
Fastened to the rock which cannot move
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love*

The usual route to firm foundations is to return to the original sources, to look at what the Scriptures say. There are many books, and many sermons that try to present easy and unique answers to these questions, using proof texts. They want to be a guide book or street map offering power and control over the urban environment. As urban theologians we have learned to be much more modest, and just to put our stories alongside Bible stories and get people to talk about it. So here we'll only talk about signposts; and all of us who walk or cycle in the city know that signposts are unreliable, for bored youngsters love the game of turning them round to point in the opposite direction. .

Gospel Signposts for the Barking Road

The five New Testament Roads that come to mind are all in Luke / Acts

1. The Jericho Road (Luke 10; 25-37)

This is a downhill road, ultimately a road to one of the oldest cities in the world. It is a dangerous road for bandits are waiting in ambush. It's a road where muggings are too frequent and the police, if there are any don't bother to do much about it. The church is there too, but the religious people are not much use because they have a habit of not noticing, of just passing by, or not wanting to get involved in the blood and the muck, of not wanting to risk their necks. But just as you give up hope and you think you are bleeding to death along comes help from an unlikely source. It's the outsider, the foreigner, the one who wouldn't be welcome in church even if he decided to come, that has some oil and wine, and a donkey and a voucher for bed and breakfast at the next travel lodge. In the end it's quite simple, about being neighbours and going and doing likewise. It's a road which leads us to caring in the city. In consequence as a family we get involved in neighbourly and pastoral concern for people in our street and church, and we give money and time in projects like NOSH and Turnaround. But in doing so we find we often receive as much as we give and often from those whom the world regards as merely a burden on society.

2. The Jerusalem Road (Luke 19 - 23)

This road after passing through the hostile territory of Samaria begins in Jericho and is therefore an uphill trek. It's a road where money and power keep coming into the picture. There is the rich and crooked Zaccheus who repents and starts to do something useful with his resources. There's the challenge to invest our talents and take responsibility for up to ten cities, as a reward! There is the pomp of a powerful king yet riding into the city on a donkey and weeping over it. It's a story of confronting the capitalists who pretend to be interested in religion. It is a road for debating the claims of God and Caesar and coming to realise that they are simply two sides of the same coin. It's a road where the poor widow's contribution is worth more than the credit card of the rich. Its a journey of discerning the signs of the times, where there is apocalyptic meaning. But its a road that leads to betrayal, denial and eventually to unjust punishment for sedition and blasphemy, even death on a cross. In short its the road of prophetic protest and political involvement in the powers of the city. So we walk this road in campaigns as varied as Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice, Church Action on Poverty and the London Cycling Campaign. And we join Community Forums and Regeneration Partnerships, we

stayed involved in the Labour Party until we could bear the Newness no longer, and remain in discussion and prayer support groups with Christians who are local Councillors and MPs.

3. The Emmaus Road (Luke 24, 13-35)

The third road is a more quiet road, a road of retreat from the city. It's a sabbath road, a time to talk over and reflect on dramatic events that have taken place in the city. It's a road where if we are fortunate we may sense someone coming alongside us and restoring our disappointed hopes. It's a journey where he will help us understand the meaning of the Bible story, where we can make the links between our story and his. It's a journey with a living companion, a companion being defined as one who shares bread. And in the breaking of the bread, and perhaps the drinking of wine, we see symbols and memories of what it's all about. Ultimately it is about worship and expounding the Word, the every week ritual of the church for two millennia now. And it is this reflection and resourcing that renews our tired feet and sends us back with Cleopas and his friend into the City to share the Good News of a risen Jesus. Recognising this need we stay in the local church even when despairing that it will ever reflect the Kingdom, we worship with nostalgic old hymns and some trivial new ditties, and retell the old old story to children in the Sunday school.

4. The Road to Africa (Acts 8 26-39)

The fourth road leads to the south through the wilderness and is an odd story. Philip goes out of his way and meets the Ethiopian Eunuch on his way back to Her Majesty's Treasury. He's already got most of the story in the book he's reading, and the missionary just gives him the clue that it is something to do with Jesus. There is a quick baptism and Philip leaves him to get on with it. He goes on his way rejoicing. The first African Christian, the first black theologian, the founder of the African church. When you get back on the Barking Road you realise that Africans have just been getting on with it and rejoicing in the faith ever since. It's a road where if we are white and in the mainline church we can do no more than come alongside, to give space for them to do their own worship and theology and perhaps to listen and learn the rhythms from another culture and context. If it's a road out of slavery for them and us so much the better. As white people in a mainly black church we encounter sensitive issues, seek cleansing for our racism, and try not to patronise. On balance it's a privilege to be in a multicultural church, share an image of Christ who is not an English gentleman, and sway to the beat of the gospel songs. The bring and share dinners are a delight, but it's sometimes a pain to let others do it their way, and in their time!

5. The Damascus Road (Acts 9 and 26; 12-24)

The Damascus road marks a radical change of direction, a Turnaround experience as persecution and hate turns to solidarity and love. It's an experience of blazing

lights and voices from heaven in which the Jesus Paul never knew in the flesh breaks into the bolted dungeons of his heart. It is a moment when he is commissioned for his life's work and from then on he is not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Though we all have our problems with Paul and people like him, and we may well agree with Festus that "your great learning is driving you insane", there must be a bit of Paul's experience within us if we are to play a role for Jesus and the rule of God in the urban world. Like Paul we need converting to Christ and a radical reversal in our lives (often three or more times every day). And though the Barking Road may not have the spiritual significance of the Damascus Road as Christians committed to urban mission we need the experience of "conversion to the city" while walking such streets. Paul went on to take the Gospel to all the nations. On the Barking Road we should be thankful that God has saved us some long journeys by bringing all the nations to us. The end result in our family life is to obey our vision, to stay with our calling and continue to live close to the Barking Road. At times we've been tempted to move to the country, or at least to a smaller city, closer to the hills and dales of the North which we love. It would be all too easy to say "we'll go for the sake of the children". Yet in the end ours is not a very radical conversion, there are so many advantages and joys of living and serving in the inner city it seems we can do what we want and stay within the purpose of God.

In the end...

In the end I have to admit I cannot answer all my children's questions. The longer I live in the diversity and ferment of the city the more hazy the answers seem to become. But the issues of justice and of cultural diversity, and the need for faith, hope and love will not go away. By setting the story of gospel journeys alongside the story of our own journeys one thing becomes clearer than ever. We walk not alone but with Jesus, and I want my kids and everyone else to walk with him too. For if there is a meaning and purpose of life in the city it must all come together in the Christ, or perhaps we have to say Christ(s), of the Barking Road.

Shall we then give up the quest for a single Christ? Is the conclusion that we are now in the territory of post-modern post-evangelicalism and have left the idea of a single grand narrative behind? After all Jesus walked and walks many different roads, told many different stories, and had many different disciples who got on with their mission in many diverse places in various ways. Perhaps we should see the risen Christ as a divine networker who through the various gifts and ministries and manifestations of the Holy Spirit stays in touch with, but in a relaxed self emptying way, out of control of all this kaleidoscopic mess. We in our human limitations will not be able to understand the totality until Kingdom come. If that is the case we may not after all have to give up on traditional, credal, orthodox and Biblical Christian faith. For on this road we are not far from the teaching of Colossians 1; 15-20, or from the supreme and pre-existent, creator Christ in whom all things hold together, and through whom at the last all things will be reconciled.

The Contribution of Faith Communities in one Borough

Recent data from a comprehensive survey of religious life in the London Borough of Newham shows *

- There were in 1998 at least 294 faith based organisations of which
- **181 were Christian congregations** of which the largest groups were

BY Denomination	
Pentecostal	72
Church of England	26
Independent	15
Evangelical	
Baptist	13
Roman Catholic	12
Methodist	7

- **20 were mosques**
- **5 were Hindu Temples or Mandirs**
- **4 were Sikh gurudwaras**
- **1 was a Jewish Synagogue**
- The average membership reported (by 166 of the groups) was 134 people.
- A majority of all Christian congregations are majority black and the majority of Pentecostal ones are black led and almost totally black in membership.
- 82 (40%) of these have started since 1980
- Between them these groups owned at least 104 buildings, employed at the equivalent of at least 350 full time staff
- These groups put on at least 437 different religious activities, (conducted in at least 25 different languages).
- They ran at least 183 “secular” community activities ranging from children’s and pensioners clubs, a night shelter for homeless people to employment training and advice and support for refugees.

* From Smith G. (1999) **Religious Organisations in Newham in 1998-99**, paper accompanying the 3rd Edition of Directory of Religious Groups in Newham, published by Aston Charities, Durning Hall, London E7 9AB.