

Baptism

Tony Windross

I've long treasured the story of a young mother who'd moved to a new area, and took her little girl to the local church for the first time. They were met at the door by the Welcomer (sic) who pointed to the girl and said 'if *that* makes a noise – take it out!' What happened next is anyone's guess, and the story itself may be apocryphal. But (like all true stories) that doesn't matter. It's got the ring of authenticity, and I've certainly come across a number of church Welcomers just like that. It's the sort of thing the Church (and by that, I mean the Church of England, as I've little experience of the others) often does very effectively – by making it clear to those outside the club, that that's precisely where they are.

The way into the club is (of course) by baptism, but like all exclusive organisations, membership isn't something dished out lightly. For a child to be allowed to join, the parents may need to clock up a certain number of attendances at church services, followed by some classes, followed by an interview to establish the nature and depth of their personal faith. If those hurdles are successfully surmounted, the baptism service itself involves making a series of declarations and promises, each of which is a theological mine-field. Only the truly committed are likely to get through – which is (of course) the whole point. It's something Basil Fawlty would have thoroughly approved of, as there is (in effect) a *No Riff Raff* sign outside each church. Or at least, outside the churches of true believers. Because it's those with the clearest (and fiercest) faith, who are the most insistent on doctrinal purity. And are the furthest from the old-fashioned idea (still enshrined in canon law) that baptism is available to anyone who lives in the parish – free of charge and no questions asked.

But the days have long gone when the normal thing was to 'get the baby done'. Partly because most people have long since lost interest in the Church; and partly because the Church has long

since lost interest in most people. In 1982, there were 260,000 baptisms. In 2002 there were 160,000. And in 2022, 80,000. Only 8% of babies are baptised now, compared to 75% a century ago.

But there's nothing remotely surprising about this, given the way the Church, instead of welcoming the chance to be part of people's lives by recognising and sharing their joy, now tends to see the involvement of those outside the club on such occasions as (at best) 'mission opportunities'. And because that means there's always an agenda for 'making disciples', the religious integrity of the whole thing is sullied.

The problem (and it *is* a real problem) is that because religion is a way of responding to the most serious things there are, it's important (to those who find it important), that people take it seriously. But because many (maybe most?) of those seeking baptism for their children have no apparent interest in religion, almost by definition that implies they *don't* find it important. And if they don't find religion (and the things it deals with) important, it's not at all obvious (to put it mildly) how they *can* take baptism seriously. So maybe the Church is right *not* to offer Baptism indiscriminately?

To anyone who wants the Church to be as open and as welcoming and as available to as many people as possible, this very much goes against the grain. So is there any way to square this particular circle? To refuse to baptise a child (or to place such obstacles in the way, that it amounts in practice to the same thing) is bound to seem like a rejection – which of course it is. And one that is guaranteed to cause pain and anger on the part of the rejected family – together with a determination never to have anything to do with the Church at any point in the future.

Any religion worth bothering with, needs to take every opportunity to affirm and to celebrate. And the birth of a baby is *so* amazing, that the Church should surely jump at the chance to be involved. Religion is what people turn to at significant moments, even those who normally have no time for it. And because there really *is* nothing more special or more precious than human life, the arrival of a baby needs celebrating with all the stops pulled out.

The baptismal liturgy, with its special (and strange) words and actions, taking place within the special building that is (in principle, anyway) at the heart of the community, and where (in principle, anyway) all the Big Events of human life are marked, gives the occasion a dignity and a gravitas – that cannot be remotely replicated by simply having a family party in a room at the back of a pub. A celebration like that *is* important, because families really matter. But without a liturgical ‘grounding’ of some sort, it means the occasion is a lot less momentous than it could be.

Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures, and all our rituals are ways of finding (or imposing) meaning and value on ordinary (but in every case, always unique) life-events. The baptism service is a means of giving thanks for the birth of the child, and the safe delivery of the mother. It can be seen as a way of holding the child before God in awe and wonder – together with deep gratitude. And because (as non-realists are well aware) this can all be done without having to believe in any kind of external deity – that may be a way out of the difficulty.

If the basis of one’s faith is a realist God (and all that follows, in terms of dogma and doctrine) then anyone with a different conception of God (or indeed, no conception at all) is very clearly not a member (or even a potential member) of your particular club. And until and unless s/he passes the tests for admission, there’s no reason to let them in (and indeed every reason, on grounds of doctrinal purity, to keep them out). But if one’s faith is far more open, far more plastic, far more flexible, with no rules around (or about) belief, then the idea of imposing some sort of restrictive entry test on others is both offensive and absurd. The only thing that matters, is that those looking to become

members (or simply very loose affiliates!) have a genuine willingness to take it seriously.

And out of all the many baptisms I’ve had the privilege of taking (the vast majority involving non-churchgoing families), there’s not been a single occasion when I had the sense that those involved were taking it flippantly. Whatever their religious inclinations or intentions, they were all deeply involved in the specialness (= holiness) of the occasion, with the baby at the centre of it lavished with the love and attention that is the right of every single human being.

Baptism needn’t (and, I would argue, shouldn’t) involve some sort of test of doctrinal orthodoxy. There’s something both depressing and unhealthy about the way so many clergy seem to relish their role of gatekeepers for Jesus, as if the gospel message needs bouncers in attendance to make sure it doesn’t get watered down or contaminated. But of course if their religious world view is based (as in many cases it certainly is) on a more or less literal reading of the bible, which translates into a confidence that feels able (and more than willing) to make clear pronouncements about the nature of God and all that follows from that, then they will be unable (and it really *is* unable, rather than simply unwilling) to carry out a baptism in good faith, if the adults involved don’t share the same kind of world view. Which means that such clergy may not be being wilfully awkward, so much as prisoners of their theology.

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein famously talked about how many philosophical problems are the result of people ‘being held captive by a picture’, with the result that they live in a kind of mental prison, a bit like the way a fly buzzes and buzzes around a fly-bottle, banging against the side. He saw it as his job to ‘show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle’, and whilst it’s a matter of debate among philosophers as to how far he succeeded, it’s worth thinking about whether the analogy can be applied to theology.

Because inevitably we’ve all got some sort of ‘theological picture’ that we live inside, some sort of mental construct that enables us to make sense of the world. But what if it actually functions as a prison? What if all we’re doing is buzzing and

buzzing around inside it, banging against its transparent side forever? The question needs raising – not least because it reminds us that ours isn't (and can never be) the only theological game in town. Which is an idea that will (surely?) come relatively easily to non-realists, who will (or should) be a great deal less dogmatic about their theology than any realist is likely to be.

A more relaxed theology is going to mean a more relaxed approach to Baptism. Not in a completely indiscriminate 'anything goes' kind of way, but in the sense that there doesn't need to be any kind of theological enquiry made of the parents. Simply a sense that they are approaching it in a seemly and serious manner. It's this idea of there being a variety of different but equally legitimate ways of thinking about Baptism, that is *so* threatening to *so* many in the Church, whose default theological position is the cause of *so* many pastoral problems, when they turn away those who don't measure up theologically.

Because we can't ever 'see' our own theological picture (as we're all the time living inside it) there's no way we can ever know if it's 'true', in terms of how closely it conforms to reality. So we need to give up on any claim to have found 'the truth' (in the sense of apprehending the nature of Ultimate Reality), and simply think of our personal theological picture as a story we tell ourselves about the way things are – whilst allowing for the distinct possibility that one day we might come across another story we find more persuasive.

Only those completely convinced about the veracity of their theological picture, will feel entitled (= obliged) to stand in judgement on the theological pictures of others. But because more and more of those in positions of authority in the Church *do* seem to have such supreme self-belief and self-confidence, a hardline approach to Baptism is fast becoming the norm. Fewer and fewer non-churchgoing people are interested in having their baby baptised, at precisely the same time that fewer and fewer clergy are prepared to carry out such baptisms. With the result being the precipitous decline in baptism numbers noted earlier. The Church is fast becoming a less and



Font in St Brendan's Church, County Offaly, Ireland

[Image: holymart.co.uk](http://holymart.co.uk)

less welcoming place to more and more people. A place where 'clear teaching' is prized above all else. A place where questions that have taxed the greatest minds across the ages, find an off-the-shelf answer.

The degree of openness and generosity with which an individual church responds to Baptism enquiries, is as good a guide as any to the degree of openness and generosity with which it's likely to respond to the Big Questions of theology. Open Baptism and Open Theology go hand in hand – and each is now an endangered species. The insidious Alpha courses (with their all-smiling, pre-packaged answers to effectively everything) are the theological equivalent of Japanese knotweed, springing up everywhere, and undermining the long-cherished idea of the Church being freely available to all. Now it's well on the way to being about as open to everyone as the Ritz – and costing an awful lot more.