

# Confessions of a book-pushing bearded ideologue

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Here are a few faded memories of my misspent youth in the shady backstreets of Reformatia.

In 1962 I go to the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth - the only place which would accept my 2 A-levels, the best of which was art. I wanted to know if there was a good reason not to commit suicide, unwittingly echoing Albert Camus. My first year studies in philosophy – Symbolic Logic, Behaviourist Psychology and Plato - did not help me.

However, in 1963 I was converted to Christ near the end of the academic year. Within weeks of conversion I was given a set of the Unionville (Ontario) Lectures by leading Dutch and Canadian academics (Van Riessen, Runner, Hart, Zylstra, etc) which had been sent to UCCF (then IVF) headquarters in London and given to Geraint Fielder, UCCF travelling Secretary for Wales who in turn handed them over to me. By the autumn term I had a proto-CSU (Christian Studies Unit) bookstall next to the UCCF bookstall at the CU every Saturday night - often outselling them, which gave me considerable satisfaction. I went through an intense spiritual crisis – I saw that Christ must be everything -all things were made by him, upheld by him and made for him or nothing. In short, any sort of natural /spiritual dualism was impossible as was the idea that there could be religious neutrality in any branch of knowledge. One of my fellow philosophy students was Elaine Storkey (then Lively) who had come up to college as a Christian already. Initially she seemed to prefer parties to reformational thought but I didn't give up on her!. One of our lecturers promised to cure us of religion by the end of the year. (The poor man suffered with the Dawkins' syndrome). I eventually got hold of a copy of Dooyeweerd's *New Critique of Theoretical Thought* during my final exams,

In 1965 Elaine and I were awarded Teaching Fellowships at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. We sailed off into an Atlantic storm on the Empress of Canada. Within a week of landing we were at a Unionville Conference north of Toronto. On top of that was the fact that Dr. Paul Schrottenboer lived in Hamilton who was engaged in the planning which led to the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. In addition we linked up with Adrian Guldemond a Dutch-Canadian philosophy student at McMaster who was much further ahead in reformational thought than we were, as he could read Dutch and there was little for us to read in English. Within weeks the battle was joined again as the head of the philosophy department was Dr. James Noxon whose patron saint was David Hume - the Scottish Enlightenment sceptic. He has assumed that these bright young graduate students from Britain were into linguistic philosophy ( Ayer, Moore, Ryle, Wittgenstein, etc.) and visibly blanched after he had given us a wonderful tour of the area in his Mustang to find out that we were into Dooyeweerd...like Adrian with whom he had already been crossing swords for a couple of years. Elaine and I had an office next to Dr. Noxon's. Most times he went past Adrian would be with us doubtless conspiring to undermine everything the Enlightenment had achieved! The final showdown for me came when in my viva Noxon asked if I wished to delete an appendix in my thesis concerning the possibility of a Christian philosophy of mathematics. I was unable to back down and amazingly, the rest of the panel supported me.

In 1966 Elaine Storkey MA, returns to Britain to start a Ph.D at York University. I go as a special student in Apologetics and study under Cornelius Van Til and Robert Knudsen. I spend a lot of time with fellow students Jim Skillen, Bill Edgar and Jim Hurley.

By 1967 I completed my MA and return to home to Somerset – I live in a shed in the garden. (There was no room in the two-and-a-half-bed council house for six!). I start teaching geography at Ashton Park Comprehensive and produce the first (CSU) booklist on the school ditto-graph machine - about 30 titles printed in purple.

Elaine and I join the Graduates Fellowship Apologetics Group (with Oliver Barclay, Paul Helm, Donald Mackay, Stewart Sutherland, etc.). I present a paper on the possibility and necessity of Christian scholarship coupled with a critique of the claimed neutrality of "philosophical analysis" and of "scientific method" in the special sciences. I have badly upset some key players in the evangelical establishment. One of the above wrote me a cross letter demanding that I tell him "the definitive Christian approach" to cooking an egg, with the clear insinuation that all that I'd argued was stupid and wrongheaded. After that I was blacklisted for many years as somehow "unsound"!

Janice comes into my life. She hears about me from Janie Street, (now Gledhill, wife of the Bishop of Litchfield) who was Elaine's flatmate in York, while on a mission in St. Albans. Janice is doing a degree in Sculpture at the art college next to the school where I teach. She belongs to the Pentecostal Assemblies of God and reads almost nothing except the Bible. In her final year she has to write a thesis. She tracks me down to my book filled hut. After a bit we settle on "Art & Philosophy in the Twentieth Century" as the working title, and I assume the role as quasi-official supervisor. We were engaged before it was complete; I typed it myself with two fingers. We exchanged gifts. Janice started to really use her very sharp mind and I was renewed by the Spirit. So the Christian life was to do the works of the kingdom in the power of the Spirit. Without the Spirit the demands of the kingdom were crushing and overwhelming. Without the kingdom vision charismatics easily fall into weird subjectivism.

In 1968 Jan gets a first and is offered a scholarship at the Royal College of Art which she declines and does an Art Teachers Diploma at Bristol University. I get a phone call from Elaine. She had been teaching philosophy at Manchester College, Oxford - which has a Unitarian tradition. Elaine and Alan are moving to Stirling University - would I like her job? Yes please! And so it was. (I had applied for dozens of jobs that year with no success whatever).

While at Oxford I had met the president of OICCU (Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union), Chris Sugden (now the Director of the Oxford School of Mission Studies) and for a while most of the OICCU committee came along to a seminar I ran on reformational philosophy. However, panic sets in when various people gradually realised the academic and worldview implications were rather different from the dualistic pietism of conservative evangelicalism. So there was sadly a mass exodus.

However on the positive side there was a group of students at Oriel - including Douglas Holt, now canon theologian at Bristol Cathedral - who fed me lunch every Wednesday in exchange for philosophical dialogue. (Did Socrates get free lunches?) There were long conversations with Jim Houston whose rooms were opposite mine - he was planning Regent College in Vancouver. Not least, there were regular get together with a very 'fishy' Ph.D student from Birmingham called Arthur Jones - we talked philosophy of science as if our lives depended on it! There was also about then contact with Paul Marshall - encouraging him to go and do research in Canada so he could also study at the fledgling ICS with people like Bernie Zylstra.

At Manchester College the two resident junior tutors were Dave Pithers - leader of the Oxford Revolutionary Socialists - and myself, not a Unitarian but a Trinitarian. The students started becoming Marxists or Christians - so the College terminated both of our contracts "for administrative reasons" they said. Dave had certainly upset them - the Marxists had occupied high table one evening and read out a manifesto demanding that the college be handed over to the workers of Oxford! I had been much more low key but I was sacked too.

Back in Bristol Janice was seen by some as a sort of fearsome mega-intellectual on the education course at the university. She would ask the other students foundational questions about their disciplines. It's amazing what a short crash course in reformational philosophy was do for you!

1969 was crisis time. Janice and I were getting married soon after I became unemployed. (Janice's working class parents are suspicious of philosophers, let alone an unemployed one marrying their daughter!) Much prayer. In response the heavenly cavalry comes! An Air letter from Cal Seerveld at Trinity Christian College in Chicago offering a lectureship in philosophy

to me, a lectureship in sculpture and art history to Janice, as well as a fellowship at the Institute for Christian Art he was just setting up.

Three wonderful years of learning - in a little Dutch colony of heaven, a small chip off the Free University of Amsterdam! Fine committed philosophy students too like John Kok (now professor of philosophy at Dordt) and Justin Cooper (president of Redeemer College). Exciting times in America – the Vietnam War, counter culture, student demonstrations and much more. I also had contact with Jim Wallis who is at another college in Chicago.

What had been wonderful is terminated by the new college president who fires all the reformational people (about seventeen) on the faculty starting with the academic dean. We return to Britain in 1972.

In 1972 -6 I studied at Bristol University earning MA, PGCE and MEd. At Bristol University. CSU networking resumed. I am Involved with Bristol Christian Arts Group - Roger Hurding and Richard Winter, etc.

By 1976-9 we were at St. Werburgh's, Derby with Irving Hexham. Major CSU conferences - the biggest aping the current "Communist University of London" which brought together students and a wide array of neo-Marxist academics with seminars of worldviewish scope on everything -from sex and fashion to the usual socio-economic topics for ten days. So our was ten days long too - not the usual Christian quickie. I sold £600 worth of books – a fact I remember. It was ably organised by Andrew Thompson. Sixty people came - if my memory serves all the usual suspects - names like Lyon, Storkey, Jones, Sampson, Bebbington, etc. After three good conferences we ran up against some limits. We were trying to embrace all the disciplines and our clientele ranged from first year undergraduates to post-doctoral. Think of a great two dimensional grid - it makes far too many distinctive square for a little amateur organisation to cope with. On top of that there was the huge geographical spread that we currently have for the Leeds Colloquium. I also started a Ph.D with Nottingham University and taught in their extra -mural department.

In 1979-82 we moved to Bristol to train for Anglican ministry at Trinity College. My placement was with the Anglican university chaplaincy - the Monica Wills Chapel which became the Fellowship of the King. I ran what became called RadSoc – the core people were undergraduates - Mark Roques, Pete Core, Nik Ansell, Steve Smith, etc., three of whom went on to study at the ICS. There were long discussions of Hegel, politics, the nature of reason, etc - all lubricated with my best elderberry port. There were also considerable conflicts with both Trinity staff and chaplains both liberal and evangelical.

1982-5 No one wanted us! Ended up after a year of unemployment as curate at St. Paul's (a dying liberal Anglo-Catholic), in British West Hartlepool, where the man in the monkey-suit became mayor recently. I ran seminars on European thinkers for Christian students at Durham; theological conflicts with the bishop - John Habgood; met with Geoff Hall – an unemployed electrician- I told him to go to Bristol and get educated! Chair of the Cleveland Council of Churches Unemployment Program – fifty employees and big budget from the Manpower Services Commission. Various projects set up for the unemployed - a yacht club, and the manufacture of cannon balls and ramrods for HMS Warrior which was being reconstructed in Hartlepool docks. (It's now next to the Victory and Mary Rose at Portsmouth.)

In 1985-2000, vicar of Widcombe, Bath - at last a church of our own!

There were lots of CSU conferences - speakers like Paul Marshall, Jim Skillen, Jon and Adrienne Chaplin, Brian Walsh, David Lawrence, Arthur Jones and even Mark and Ann Roques. Also visits from Roy Clouser, Tom Wright, Bob Knudsen and others.

Members included Jim Tickner, Richard Betts, Jonny Baker (works for CMS, big man on the emerging churches scene, Ian and Sonia Mainsone-Cotton (Greenbelt and Sanctuary, Mary Palmer and Rachel Laurence (poets), Paul Alkazraji (missionary in Albania) Richard and Mandy Coutts, Guy and Ruth Donegan-Cross etc.

I set up CSU bookstalls in the Houses of Parliament, Windsor Castle and at a Moscow Palace of Culture - we get everywhere.....it's called extreme-bookselling!

I taught courses in philosophy and theology for Bristol University Extra Mural Dept, a UCCF/ CSU art students' conference - sixty people for a long weekend. I was involved with the Hookses (Pembrokeshire) artists & writers weeks. I helped to run the Bristol Arts Centre Group - members included Nick Park (Wallis and Grommit).

I met up with Andrew Basden at Spring Harvest (around 1987) and talked philosophy - he has not yet recovered – I'm now in his RRIS (Religious Roots of Information Systems) group at Salford University.

I linked up with Lesslie Newbiggin - about the same time – and gave him some good books. I taught on the Bristol Christian Fellowship Bridgehead for Education programme (with Mark Roques, Steve Bishop, Arthur Jones. Ruth Deakin etc). Students included David Lawrence and David Smith (now teaching at Calvin College - a big man in language learning and education).

In 2000 I left Widcombe exhausted - moved to Outer Radstock which like Oxford can be the home of lost causes! We joined Bath City Church (BCC) - big independent charismatic fellowship - about 500 members and recuperated.

In 2006 I'm now involved with Geoff Hall's "Group" - artists and art students in the Bath-Bristol area, exhibitions, tutoring students with their theses.

There have been CSU bookstall at various conferences - Christian Schools' Trust, John Ray Institute, Interface. I'm a tutor to the MA in Missional Leadership based locally at BCC- sell books there and at the summer school (250 attendees) - a member of RRIS. The ongoing dialogue biblical/worldview with leaders of BCC - promises to be fruitful...watch this space.