From England

THE CHURCH AND THE PRISON

by Tim Gorringe

The Christian community is to be found in the midst of the civil community. Though they are not the same they share the same centre and, although only a minority of the civil community is part of the Church, every Christian is a member of the civil community. The centre which they share is the rule of God, acknowledged in one case, unacknowledged in the other. The civil community is a secular community, embracing possibly many faith communities and, in contemporary Britain at least, a great many who are either agnostic or atheist. This does not mean that it has no theological significance. Isaiah believed Cyrus, King of Persia, was an instrument of God's will. Protestant thought has suggested, very differently from Augustine, that the civil community, or the state, may be regarded as a correspondence and analogue of God's kingdom. The civil community will sometimes be apostate. It will always leave much to be desired. However, when the affairs of the civil community are conducted in good faith, its concern will be the promotion of everything that furthers fullness of life, of shalom. Its understanding of fullness of life will differ greatly from that of the Christian community but there will be analogies. By the same token the Church is not concerned simply with 'spiritual' issues, with the next world. It is, as we have argued all along, concerned with the realization of shalom here and now. Politics is part of its brief. As part of its prophetic function it bears witness to what it believes to be God's will, as this is discerned from Scripture and in the light of tradition, and calls for the realization of that will in the civil community. In a pluralist society it is one voice among many seeking to make itself heard. It may be a voice which is small to vanishing but, unless it is heard in some way or other, the Church is untrue to its vocation. It is part of the civil community, and it addresses the civil community. That community, I have already insisted, includes those in prison. The prisoner forfeits his or her freedom, but does not cease to be a member of society. To some extent, as we have seen, society made him or her what they are.

The community and the prison

The mandate to visit prisons has always been honoured by some Christians. One of the problems with the growth of the prison as the main way of dealing with offenders was that the task of prison visiting quickly became professionalized. In the old unreformed prisons which Howard and Fielding documented, all sorts of people went in and out all the time. Gambling and prostitution were rife and there was a revolving door between crime inside and out. This meant that at the same time Christians exercising their mandate were also free to come and go. As the prison system grew this became far more difficult and responsibility was increasingly devolved to chaplains who did the job on behalf of the community at large. There are two problems with this move.

First, there is a problem arising from the institutional position of the chaplain. The word 'chaplain' comes from the Latin *capella*, cloak. The chaplain was originally the cloak-bearer to a lord or high official; then he became a priestly assistant to a bishop; finally to guilds or institutions. By the sixteenth century chaplains were attached to armies and it was a natural extension of this to attach them to prisons, hospitals and other institutions.

The origin of the term 'chaplain', then, carries with it the implication that the chaplain is there to serve the establishment. In the armed forces the chaplains are officers. The worker-priest movement, which was influential in the 1950s, was suspicious of industrial chaplaincy because chaplains were seen as a tool of management. In prisons the chaplain was at one time second only to the governor. All chaplaincy suffers from the ambiguity that endorsement by 'the powers that be' confers. At the heart of the gospel is crucifixion by the powers. Is it possible for the Church to be employed by them? Does it not represent a necessary constraint on Christian freedom? In the prison the chaplain might assist in institutionalizing the prisoners instead of performing his or her primary function of being a minister of the gospel. Even in the nineteenth century, it has been alleged, chaplains sometimes served a merely ornamental purpose, sitting with the governor on adjudications to provide some dignity and solemnity to what was taking place. Their sermons were tailored to suit bureaucratic interests. Religious teachings would not be allowed to stimulate sentiments that might subvert order and discipline. The church service might become just another perfunctory task the chaplain had to perform. A report on prison chaplaincy in Britain in 1919 noted that 'both chaplain and criminals were hardhearted,

and no-one, especially the chaplain, refrained from displaying boredom at the whole business . . . the outstanding features of the services were the cold mechanical method with which they ran themselves out and the obvious boredom of everybody concerned'.

A different kind of difficulty comes to the fore as society becomes more secularized after the 1960s. Up to the end of the previous decade, when conscription was still in force, recruits were asked on joining, 'Religion?' The answer 'Don't know' meant that 'C of E' was written against their name. Despite some evidence that people continue to believe even when they do not belong it is clear that the currents of secularism run deep. Many people are avowedly secular and find clergy either irrelevant or offensive. The rise of counselling as a form of treatment means that after disasters or tragic events secular counsellors, rather than clergy, are now wheeled in. Chaplaincy rested on an acceptance of a shared Christian culture. It assumed that the great majority of people would want the offices of a minister for the rites of passage. This is increasingly not the case. The recognition of our multicultural society has led to the appointment of chaplains for other faith communities, but the deeper question is whether it is right for the state to pay ministers of any religion to provide services which the majority, when they have the freedom, has no interest in seeking. This is not to deny that chaplains often do a very important job, and especially in prison. Perhaps it is here above all that the difference between what the counsellor and what the priest or minister has to offer is felt. But we can put the question more sharply in another way: the job of the Christian (and not just ordained Christians or chaplains) is to preach the gospel. It is not a question of offering specifically spiritual help or advice to people, but of meeting them with the judgement and the claim of Jesus Christ. Could we expect the state to pay for that to be done?

The second problem with chaplains is that they do a job which properly belongs to the Christian community as a whole. At the Lincoln Conference on the theme of 'Respect in Prison' held in 1991, the Canadian prison chaplain Pierre Allard had this to say:

> *'After 19 years as a prison chaplain (15 of these spent in a maximum security prison) my deepest conviction is that the community of crime must be impacted, not by individual chaplains, volunteers or other staff, but by the community of faith if truly the Good News is to become incarnate. In terms of the debate about penalty, the walls of the prison should once again become*

permeable so that prisoners should be encouraged to become involved in the activities of the community and the community can take part in many of the activities of the prison.'

My main purpose in this paper is to endorse and underline this statement, and to consider its implications for the task of the Church. In order not to be misunderstood let me reiterate my conviction that many chaplains do a splendid job, and do it in the exercise of a particular charisma which many other members of the Christian community may lack. Acknowledging the variety of gifts in the community is vital for the health of the Church. At the same time I think Allard is right for two reasons. First, because only a real recognition of the permeability of prison walls will enable society as a whole to accept that the prison is part of the wider community. Second, because the Church cannot in principle delegate its priestly, prophetic and diaconal functions to a few specialists. The chaplain is in jail on behalf of the Christian community, as its representative. This is good, but what is better is that the gifts of the body be available to that part of the community in prison as they are available to those outside. Every member of a Christian community will at once think of diverse gifts which all sorts of members of their community can make available to those in prison. Why should prisoners be denied that richness? It is bad for the Church and bad for those in prison. I begin, then, from the assumption that the Church, and not just 'the chaplain', belongs in prison. In this context the first task of the prison chaplain is to be an educator of the faith community, to help the faith community overcome the fear and distrust which the civil community has in general for those in prison.

Prisons, as we saw, are classic scapegoating places, where the sins of society at large are blamed on a small group who are driven out and then forgotten about. The civil community not in jail is often fearful, suspicious and driven by moral panics and badly informed judgements about that part of it which is. Chaplains are members of three communities: of the faith community, the civil community and the prison community. Their task must be to mediate between these three. They are storytellers of the truth about jails. This is at once a huge task and a liberation. It is a huge task because, on Allard's experience, it takes five years to educate just one faith community about prisons, and think how many churches of all denominations there are around our jails. But it is a liberation because it means that the whole burden of bearing witness to the love of God to those in prison does not fall on either the chaplain or the chaplaincy team. We are speaking of the Christian

community, of which the chaplain is a representative and to which he or she is a witness. It is this community which is the true minister to those in prison. Henceforth I shall talk about the minister of the gospel in prison. I do not just mean the chaplain, though he or she is also that, but every member of the Christian community who becomes involved in prison ministry. I understand that, in the British context at least, this person is likely to be a chaplain for some time to come. I believe, however, that this is *faute de mieux*, and that we should look forward to the time when the whole community can offer ministry, in the wider context of making prison walls permeable.

The minister of the gospel preaches the gospel, the good news of the kingdom. To speak thus is to invite misunderstanding, for the word 'preach' is one of the most negative in the language. 'Stop preaching at me' is a common reproach. Preaching the gospel does not mean going into cells, Bible in hand, and talking to people about Jesus. There are a number of reasons for this but it is principally to do with the respect for the person at the heart of the gospel. The gospel is always gracious invitation. It is gracious: not something rammed down people's throats, or used to bang them on the head with. And it is an invitation: something people need to respond to at their own pace and in their own way. Much of what passes for evangelism is the opposite of gracious and there is quite enough ungracious activity in prison without Christians adding to it. On the other hand, the invitation is there to be made. Preaching the gospel of the kingdom, by which I mean, sharing the reasons we find the Christian faith centrally important and compelling, is no infringement of anyone's 'autonomy', providing it is done graciously, with modesty, tact, humour and respect.

The minister of the gospel (that is, any Christian) faces the paradox that people are punished by being deprived of their freedom, but freedom is at the heart of the gospel. The minister of the gospel stands for freedom. 'For freedom Christ has set us free,' says Paul (Gal 5.1). 'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free' (Rom 8.2). If you continue in my word, says Jesus in John, 'you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8.32). What does the gospel of freedom mean for the unfree? It cannot be a pure spiritualization: don't worry about being locked up, you're free in spirit. The prisoner can then say: 'That's all very well for you. You can walk out of this place when you want to.' But Paul, who was a prisoner, did mean a freedom which transcended prison bars, the kind of freedom that Gandhi and Mandela exemplified in their spells

in prison. This freedom arises from what we call in today's jargon, centredness. We are centred when we have meaning and purpose in our lives, freedom to have relationships which are purposeful and loving. It is that freedom which the minister of the gospel is there to help people to find. How?

The medieval theologians spoke of the priest as *alter Christus*, another Christ, which the Reformation then applied to every Christian. Where this is important in prison is that the representative of the community has to be one person at least in whom love and hope can be encountered. Near the beginning of the twentieth century a prison chaplain wrote: 'Preaching a religion of brotherly love to convicts while you are treating them upon a basis of hatred is a discouraging performance.' A little later two prison reformers observed:

> *'All Christian services and all Christian teaching in prison strike one with a sense of futility because the whole atmosphere of the prison life is a denial of Christianity. The forgiveness and love of God etc., are meaningless terms to a man who has never known forgiveness and love from men and is in prison because men refused to give them to him.'*

Sir David Ramsbotham, when Chief Inspector of Prisons, noted: 'Some staff exhibit a cynicism for positive programmes with prisoners, oppose the need to change long-established work patterns, and continually challenge the legitimate authority of the Prison Service.' In this context, what does encountering the love of Christ mean concretely in the dayto- day situation in prison? I will try and sketch it in four ways, under the headings of courtesy, judgement, hope and power.

In the Middle Ages courtesy was a virtue which was highly prized. In this century we have been concerned with stripping off veneers and getting down to the reality behind appearances. We appreciate straightfrom- the-shoulder, no-nonsense talking and acting. Courtesy is a thing of the past, as we know to our cost from behaviour on the roads. But in society as a whole, and especially in jail, courtesy is a vital and practical expression of respect for the other. The prison governor Andrew Coyle says rightly that within the walls of the prison the veneer of politeness which covers most human relationships is stripped away to be replaced by a naked clarity which goes right to the heart of how each of us feels about our fellow human beings. The normal rules of society do not apply and behaviour which would be unthinkable in everyday life somehow becomes acceptable. But as Lord

Woolf noted in his report on prison disturbances in Britain, it is obvious that if prisoners are treated like animals — sworn at, degraded and psychologically toyed with week after week — they in turn lose respect, not only for their tormentors but for society at large. The minister of the gospel is one person who is called on to show courtesy even to the most wretched and unlovable creature. In doing that he or she really acts as *alter Christus* and breaks the mould of objectifying, hard-man, cynical behaviour. Where there is a chaplain, this will have to be someone who does not and cannot conform to prison service culture insofar as this embodies disrespect.

Another way of putting this would be to say that the minister of the gospel extends to prisoners the fellowship of what Jesus constituted as a society of 'friends' (Jn. 15.15). Friendship combines affection with respect. It is not blind to a person's faults but always looks to their good sides and cherishes that of value in them. It lacks the intensity of erotic relationships, and is not based on the simple given of family. For these reasons it is easier for friends to give 'space', to allow people to be moody, introverted or even downright disagreeable, in the confident expectation that these moods will pass, that it will be possible to say 'sorry' and simply get on with things. Friendship is a rare commodity but, as the Quakers rightly realized, it ought to be a constitutive virtue of the body called Church. In an address to prison chaplains Rowan Williams insisted that one of the key jobs of the minister of the gospel is to remind people that they cannot be defined by one act, say, theft, rape or murder, that people are complex and have different selves in different contexts. The friend sees these contexts, tries to see the person as a whole, indeed tries to see the person not 'the criminal' (Williams, 1994).

Second, the minister of the gospel is under orders not to judge: 'Judge not that ye be not judged,' says Jesus. Coyle notes several times the danger that prison staff come to regard themselves as better human beings than the prisoners in their charge and that this is reflected in the way they treat them. A Calvinist liturgy of the late sixteenth century, written for the return of an offender to the community, ran:

> *'We in the sin of this our brother accuse and condemn our own sins, in his fall we all lament and consider our sinful nature, also we shall join repentance, tears, and prayers with him and his, knowing that no flesh can be justified before God's presence, if judgement proceed without mercy . . . We all here present join our*

sins with your sin; we all repute and esteem your fall to be our own; we accuse ourselves no less than you; and now finally we join our prayers with yours, that we may obtain mercy, and that by the means of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Today the Iona Community liturgy likewise involves two moments of confession and absolution in which minister and congregation say in turn, 'Before God, with the people of God, I confess to my brokenness: to the ways I wound my life, the lives of others, and the life of the world', and are absolved by each other. What would it mean if this practice of confession were used in jail? It is a practical acknowledgement of the truth that we are all sinners.

In prison, as part of the judicial process, where a person is judged and perhaps condemned on the part of society, the minister of the gospel, as God's representative, does not judge, cannot throw the first or the last stone. Sir David Ramsbotham talks of the attitude of those who work in prison. Think of the attitude with which Christ encounters people in the gospel. The minister of the gospel encounters people, not as the scum of society, rightfully locked up, but as God sees them, as children called to repentance and amendment of life just as everybody else is. In doing so they enable people to attend to what it is they are really called to be, to the nature of desire, the reality of their vulnerability.

Third, hope, real hope for a different kind of future, is often in short supply in prison. The minister of the gospel has good hope for all. What it means to hope, says Karl Barth,

'Is to count upon it quite unconditionally that Jesus Christ has risen for each and every one; that his word as the Word of reconciliation is spoken for them personally; that the same Holy Spirit who has been incomprehensibly strong enough to enlighten his or her own dark heart will perhaps find a little less trouble with them one day.' (Barth, 1962, p. 918)

It is with that hope that the minister of the gospel encounters all those he or she comes across, and I shall return to this in the next section.

Fourth, at the heart of the gospel is a perception about power. Paul understood this perfectly. God's power is made perfect in weakness, he says. Power, of course, is all around us, part of the fabric of life, in families, in couples, in the workplace. But prisons, especially, involve the exercise of power. The young men who form such a large part of the prison

population value power in the form of physical strength and daring. More important is all the psychological manipulation, the jockeying for power within prisons, the establishment of pecking orders, picking on prisoners who have committed particularly unpleasant offences, sex offenders and the like. Then there is the power exercised by prison officers, which can sometimes go drastically wrong, or the use of prisoner power by officers. This is part of the daily reality of prison life.

The minister of the gospel has something to contribute here. Like any Christian he or she has to speak truth to power. Like any Christian he or she has to be on the side of the weakest, the prisoner who gets bullied by everyone.

Michael Ignatieff described the nineteenth-century prison chaplain as the 'technician of guilt'. A whole way of understanding Christianity was to rack up feelings of guilt, and then come in to meet them with the offer of forgiveness. One experienced prison chaplain notes that the chaplaincy is the one department in the prison charged with challenging people about 'change of life'. Its task is to ask people to consider their lives. It is the unique function of the chaplaincy, he says, to call to repentance so that forgiveness can be conveyed to those who reach out in trust, so that change may take place. It is the chaplaincy privilege to proclaim the good news that the result of sin – death in all its forms – has been defeated.

My problem with this is twofold. It does not acknowledge the need for discernment, but seems to assume that everyone in prison is a malefactor, whereas they are not. Second, it does not sufficiently acknowledge that all of us are in the same boat. Those not in prison need to repent as much as those who are inside. The whole of society needs to repent, and it is part of the gospel to proclaim that. Of course people have to be challenged to change of life, but this applies to the good people in the suburbs under their Neighbourhood Watch signs quite as much as those in prison.

From the Christian perspective guilt is both necessary to our humanity and destructive of it. The ability to acknowledge that I have been wrong, that I have made mistakes, that I need to ask forgiveness, is a fundamental part of humanness, according to the gospel. In this, Christians differ markedly from those humanists for whom guilt is always a bad thing, to be conjured away by psychiatrists. Christians, by contrast, say that guilt without forgiveness is destructive. Here we can agree that prison ministry can offer a vital opportunity for acknowledging guilt, and for finding forgiveness. Howard

Zehr (1990) notes that as a society we lack the rituals which acknowledge that the debt has been paid and the guilt has been ended. The Sunday service in prison is somewhere where we can use our imagination about this and as it happens the Iona Community, again, has some rich liturgies of healing which enable just this.

Those who are whole have no need of a physician, only those who are sick need one. Every minister of the gospel knows, but prison officers and governors may not necessarily know, that the gospel is addressed not only to prisoners but also to prison officers and governors. Andrew Coyle observes that the most important set of relationships in any prison is that between the prisoner and the first-line prison officer. Somehow the minister of the gospel has to infect *that* relationship with grace and hope – difficult when it involves the slamming of metal doors and the turning of keys the entire time. A prison chaplain comments that his job is to bring life and hope to *each part* of the prison system and help it to work properly. The task is to find ways of structuring that into what is already a very full regime in a society where religion is regarded as an optional extra only of interest to the pious.

Exclusion, inclusion and shalom In Chapter 1, and as the epigraph of the book, I quoted Winston Churchill's famous remark that a society is to be judged by the way it treats its offenders. By that standard the societies of Britain and the United States, in the past three decades, have been tried and found wanting. The new retributivism amounts to the belief that nothing works but that society can find a safety valve for its frustrations by punishing offenders. Prisoners, in my experience, share the view that nothing works. They are as sceptical of rehabilitation as anyone. With some honourable exceptions Christians, still tediously preoccupied with sexual ethics, have had rather little to say to this situation, partly, I suspect, because they read the need to punish out of their Scriptures. In general Girard is right that the gospel abolished scapegoating and the Church reinvented it. An Augustinian understanding of original sin can also feed the belief that the best we can do is to punish and to deter. But from the Christian point of view the 'nothing works' dogma is impossible. It is unbelief, and therefore sin. It is theology without eschatology.

The claim of the gospel is that, both immediately and over the long term, love works. Immediately, ministry to those in prison has to continue, and only makes sense, on the understanding that those found there are not subhuman but share the same need for redemption as the rest of us, and can

indeed be redeemed. As Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking* illustrates so movingly, respect and acceptance 'work' even for those who have committed savage crimes. In the long term we come back to the need for hope in prison. Although our understanding of eschatology as a theology of hope is relatively recent, after the cultural collapse of the past three decades we find we have now to recover it. In this period hope has once again given way to 'realism', and there is a rejection of anything even vaguely utopian as it is assumed that utopias generally lead to terror, or at least to greater social control. But, as Moltmann argued, if hope is grounded in the resurrection, it is unable to put up with reality as it is (Moltmann, 1967). Hope is only utopian in believing in that which has no place *as yet*; it takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught, including that of the offender. The 'nothing works' dogma, masquerading as 'realism', is the opposite of resurrection hope. It is either resignation or despair. Because it believes that Christ is risen, hope insists on the possibilities of shalom, it insists that God rules and that God's rule has effects. How can we read the prophets, or the letter to the Romans, and forget that? That some utopian dreams ended in dystopia is not a reason for abandoning hope, but more a call to scrutinize what the grounds of hope are. The critique of Enlightenment, first articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer, precisely focused on the problem of vesting too much faith in the power of reason and forgot that reason without virtue was destructive (though critics from Goethe to Mary Shelley pointed this out at the time). 'Nothing works' pessimism both underestimates what has in fact been achieved, which is considerable, and trades on the nihilism of late capitalism, a negative apocalyptic which is content to see the world burn if profits can be made in the meantime. Shalom, as I have argued, has partial, very imperfect, but nevertheless worthwhile realizations in the provision of universal education and health care, in the provision of democratic freedoms and even, in places, in the care of offenders.

It is a fundamental characteristic of shalom that it is inclusive, not exclusive. Stanley Cohen rightly challenges us to face the difficulties involved in inclusion. It can fail to address issues of guilt and wrongdoing; it can lead to policies which inadvertently lead to the new forms of exclusion; and it can fail to address the real facts of human diversity (Cohen, 1985, p. 268). Liberal rhetoric always runs the risk of not facing real social difficulties, of being unimplementable. To avoid precisely such difficulties Reinhold Niebuhr opted for what he called 'Christian realism' but this in turn seemed only too often to sprinkle holy water on the status quo. Against such false

realism we have to set the realism of hope. If such hope exists it is hope for the entire community and not just for a handful of brands plucked from the burning. This is the case because, as David Jenkins liked to say, it follows from our understanding of original sin that we can only be fully human if everyone is fully human. Some communitarian thinking takes too idealistic a view of earlier communities. If we begin from the New Testament, rather than from Tönnies and Durkheim, we will want to say that fashioning community is an unfinished task (a task only to be completed in the kingdom). If Girard is right, and Christ abolishes the scapegoat principle, this community cannot be exclusive. This is not to say that some people should not be locked up. On the contrary, there are certainly people from whom society needs protecting (advertising moguls and military hardliners come to mind). What is important to say is that if people are locked up they are nevertheless recognized and treated *as those who continue to belong to society*, as those produced by society, and therefore as those *to whom society also continues to recognize a debt*. This necessarily entails ruling out the death penalty, which is the ultimate form of scapegoat penalty, the ultimate form of exclusion, and which breeds a violent and exclusionary culture within any society which practises it.

Penal policy in both Britain and the United States for more than twenty years has been committed to exclusion: to 'banging up' more and more prisoners, so that we have had to return to the prison ships of the early nineteenth century, and also to the private jails which John Howard warned were always a disaster in dealing with prisoners. Those responsible for 'justice' (that is, scapegoating the poor) in Britain, Home Secretaries, to a man play to the gallery of the tabloid press, exploiting moral panics and depicting certain individuals or groups (in Britain currently paedophiles) as uniquely vicious. Of course I have no brief for paedophilia. I do, however, want to escape the stench of scapegoating about these political pronouncements, and to see some recognition of the fact that we are all responsible for the community we live in, which includes, unfortunately, child murderers and paedophiles, just as it includes dictators immune from prosecution who are responsible for the torture of thousands, or World Bank officials who urge dumping toxic waste in developing countries. We are all members one of another: that is the bottom line of penal policy, and it precludes scapegoating. The question we are up against in framing criminal justice policy is not 'containing' or 'dealing with' crime. It is the question

of what humans are on the way to becoming and how we can work together to improve our chances of becoming better. In relation to criminal justice this means two things. First, it means that, while there will always be a need for some imprisonment (though not at present levels) prisons should exist in vigorous interaction with their surrounding communities. Second, that social conditions are not fate and that we can do things to improve social justice. The criminal justice system will only be morally defensible when a far greater degree of practical equality than exists at present has been established. In this respect Paul's famous pronouncement that 'in Christ' there can be no ethnic, gender or class boundaries is a description of the Church's task in an alienated society. It is not simply a description of the kingdom of God beyond this world. Church exists to witness to the reconciling work of the God of peace, overcoming alienation here and now, and therefore (since no man is an island) reconstituting society. Unlike the optimistic Christian socialists of the first part of the twentieth century we know that we cannot 'bring in' the kingdom, but on the other hand we look for the realization of small concrete utopias, situations of shalom which are much less unjust than what we currently have. This applies to criminal justice as to all other areas of life. Shalom, the peace and justice of God, is both the context and the goal of criminal justice. Without justice, asked Augustine, what are kingdoms but bands of robbers? Let me rephrase that: without shalom as our norm and goal what is justice but the rule of the strong, and what is the rule of the strong but violence? Micah asked for justice to run down like waters. The justice he had in mind was an inclusionary justice, based on peace and equity. It is the fundamental framework for the Church's understanding of crime.

The Reverend Canon Timothy Gorringe is the Professor of Theology at Exeter University.

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