

# Singing the Lord's Song to Changing Tunes: Shifting Priorities in the Religious Column

Daniel Decotterd (*Angers, France*) and  
Jean-Pierre van Noppen (*Brussels, Belgium*)

The religious column as found in British local newspapers constitutes a complex cultural and linguistic artifact which it may be interesting to study for more reasons than one: linguistically speaking, it partakes of the interface between language and religion found in cultures where scripture-reading is, or used to be, part of daily practice in families and/or schools. Sociologically speaking, it is today caught in the strained relationship between religion and the media, and may have to struggle for its survival in a cultural environment which has come to call its relevance into question. In this sense, it can today be studied as an illustration (though not as an epitome) of the way in which a text genre may be viewed as the locus where shifts in a community's values and worldviews may be observed.

Opting for a case-example approach, we propose to focus on the religious column in the *Isle of Thanet Gazette*, a local weekly with a print run of 15,500 copies published in a small but densely populated area in South East England (Cf. Decotterd 1987, 1989, 1991, 2006) and seek to investigate how it was inscribed in, and related to, its home community at one particular stage in its recent history (2004–2005), marked by an almost simultaneous change in editor- and authorship. We suggest the shift was more than accidental, and not untypical of changing, often contradictory influences acting upon the genre.

The content, style and structure of a genre can be meaningfully correlated with extra-textual conditions like processes of production and interpretation or social and institutional structures, which clearly belong to the realm of discourse (Cf. Bakhtin 1986, Fairclough 1989:26), but which, though text-related, cannot always be retrieved or inferred from the text itself. An account of verbal devices *sensu stricto* would reduce the scope of the study to a level where the data are undoubtedly characteristic and relevant; but would not allow one to

define, or *a fortiori* to interpret or explain, a type of discourse, or in our case the transition from one type of discourse to another in terms of, say, its editorial motivation or of its expected impact on a given target audience. Hence, our study will extend its scope beyond the linguistic characteristics of the text itself to cast light on aspects of the total discourse situation like the purposes pursued, the relationships between author, editor and audience, or the ideological norms prevailing within a culture at a given time of its history to show how the eventual product may be conditioned (rather than *determined*, as Bakhtin would have it) by a discourse community's values, expectations and beliefs.

### The Religious Column as Religious Language

It would be an overstatement to say that religion consists simply and exclusively in talk and writing; but it must be granted that (in our culture at least) religious practice is, in many respects, a linguistic enterprise, and that language is a vital tool in any attempt to understand it: the central statements of the Christian belief system are recorded in a canon of writings, and reading, reciting, studying, commenting on or referring to these authoritative texts is part and parcel of religious behaviour. The other activities in Christian life and worship, such as praying, hymn-singing, meditating, preaching, praising, blessing, forgiving, communicating and excommunicating, confessing one's belief, theologising and many other religious practices are, first and foremost, forms of linguistic behaviour (Van Buren 1972:2), which may fairly be described as different sorts of speech acts.

If language is important to religion, the converse is true as well: within the English language as a whole, religion holds a place which is far from peripheral, as Biblical and liturgical images, collocations, idioms and turns of phrase have quite naturally found their way into everyday language as well as into literary forms of expression. It is generally recognized that the King James Bible holds a place in English language and culture comparable to that of Shakespeare—an influence which is still traceable in its vocabulary, imagery and literature (Frye 1981)—, and a similar claim could be made for many English hymns (van Noppen 2005). Yet, for all its influence on language and culture, the Christian idiom itself seems to be slowly disappearing from the British scene and media. An obvious explanation resides in

the progressive secularization of the intellectual climate in the “post-renaissance, post-Darwinian, post-Freudian” age (Vidler 1966:254) as well as in the increasingly “multi-cultural and multi-faith nature of British society,” though this much-flaunted phrase deserves careful qualification (Hoggart 1995). One must, indeed, be wary of all too hasty ready-made explanations: while an increasingly secular atmosphere may be one of the factors explaining the established churches’ gradual decline from a triumphant dominant status to a low-key postulant position and the progressive defection of the faithful, the concurrent growth of ethnic and evangelical denominations (and a number of less orthodox cults) is not infrequently explained as the response to a widespread need, in times of insecurity, for firmer guidance and more unflinching certitude than mainstream religion has generally provided; and either movement could manifest itself at the linguistic level through a different status and impact—decreasing or increasing—accorded to the language of faith, tradition, and scripture.

### The Religious Column and the Media

The aim of this paper, however, is not to settle issues in the sociology of British religion: the question that we seek to address here is whether in this changing climate, the religious column manages to maintain itself, and if so, by which means. For it must be conceded that the genre has come under heavy fire from the secularist camp, and has thus become symbolic of the strained relationship between religion and the media. Madeleine Bunting (1996), the *Guardian*’s Religious Affairs Editor, attributes the media’s bias against religion to a fundamental clash between the nature, values and motives of religion on the one hand and the modern media on the other, a syndrome strengthened by the loss of deference towards institutions and authority, and the ingrained hostility of the secular media elite. While the Church may itself be partly responsible for some of these attitudes—it has not always lived up to the standards of sanctity, morality and grace that it proclaims and advocates, and has often couched its message in a language largely irrelevant to the lives of people today—, the tension also seems to oppose two incompatible idioms: the message of the Church is steeped in a complex and subtle language of faith, revelation, spirituality, continuity and unity, while the media, where the features of tabloid writing start invading even the more upmarket publications (Knott

1997, Van den Eynden 1998), offer a simplified message focusing on the ephemeral, the controversial and the spectacular to pander to the tastes of their readership and thus maintain sales numbers (Dulles 1994). Caught in the crossfire between conflicting interests, the religious column is bound to be torn between its perceived mission on the one hand and editorial demands on the other. The secularists wonder why papers “should be so anxious to accommodate the demands of religious interests,” why they “shamelessly foist the religious obsessions of their editors on to the readership” and print “homilies instead of editorials on religious holidays and regular columns devoted to superstitious maunderings in their Saturday editions.” The National Secular Society claims that sales of the upmarket papers are slumping because “Bible-bashing ain’t what their readers want.” Nor is Christianity their only target: “on some days the *Guardian* can seem like the newsletter of the Muslim Council of Britain.” While some papers make a point of “wearing their faith on their sleeve for all to see, or more precisely on their front page,” others yield to the secular pressure or try to strike a balance between opposing demands:

The *Independent* has quietly dropped its Saturday religious column, and while the *Guardian* was considering giving its “Face to Faith” column the heave-ho, it rapidly changed its mind when a delegation headed by the Bishop of Durham arrived at its offices and demanded that the propaganda stay. Contributors have now been told that the column will be retained, will be more prominently placed under the letters column but will be 100 words shorter. The paper also reassures the religious blackmailers that there will still be “loads of religious coverage” on top (*Newspaper Evangelising*, 2005).

By the same token, the BBC religious programmes have tried to adapt as well. The Radio 4 *Thought for the Day* has opened its air time to representatives of different religions and denominations, and even to the occasional atheist (a choice which attracted a fair amount of criticism); and a programme like the popular BBC TV *Songs of Praise* has given up its former Sunday worship style to make room for more thematic community-, entertainment-, event- and people-centred broadcasts in which the Christian message is often mediated through personal interviews; possibly a movement illustrative of a desire to detach the programme from a church-institutional image and show the relevance of faith (rather than *religion*) to the lives of individuals, including those outside the Church who have something to offer (music, art, comfort) to their fellow humans. If religious broad-

casts on television are reportedly more popular than *Match of the Day* (Hoggart 1995), that may owe much to the way those programmes are presented: straightforward religious services on radio draw smaller, albeit loyal, audiences.

But back to the printed media. In the *Isle of Thanet Gazette*, the departure of one editor, Mike Pearce, and the arrival of a new, younger one, Rebecca Smith, has been marked by a simultaneous change in the religious column. The column survived—other instances of the genre were not so lucky<sup>1</sup>—, but underwent a noticeable mutation. Before September 2004 the *Thought of the Week* was a syndicated column supplied by David Jebson, a 78-year-old retired RAF radar mechanic, now a Christian communicator with the Chester City Mission. After this date the weekly column was entrusted to the Rev. Brian Sharp, the vicar of St John's Church in Margate, who defines himself as a “liberal” with a “forward-looking” message markedly different from that of the conservatively-minded Jebson.

### The Texts: Style

Like the other journalists of the *Isle of Thanet Gazette*, both the Reverend Jebson and the Reverend Sharp have to capture and sustain their readers' attention and express themselves succinctly in an editorial space squeezed out and to some extent shaped by advertising (Morin 1969). As any piece glaringly out of character would most likely rule itself out, the authors must adopt and conform to the overall pattern of the *Gazette*. It is therefore important to be aware of “styles,” i.e. the characteristic ways in which authors construct their texts and use words to fulfil the various functions with which each invests his language (Jakobson 1960): the expressive function to convey the author's religious feelings and convictions; the phatic function, which especially in a publication like the *Gazette* puts the text to the service of keeping lines of communication open with and within the local community; the conative function, which seeks to guide the readership's thought towards a Christian perspective on reality; and the poetic function, which resorts to rhyme, rhythm and imagery to

---

1. In the Netherlands, the religious correspondent for *Elsevier* and the *Algemeen Dagblad* used to be Rex Brico, who wrote philosophical meditations seeking “not to be missionary, but to make people sensitive to what transcends them.” With the arrival of a new editorial team in March 2004, he was replaced by a lawyer, a journalist and a politician.

attract, amuse and convince. We shall use two characteristic texts as our guide here.

*The Web* (D. Jebson, 06/09/04).

Webs remind us of spiders. There are 34,000 known kinds of spiders, from the speck to the spectacular tarantula! Most spiders possess an intricate spinneret system which transfers a liquid protein in the abdomen into a strong, stretchy, sticky, silken thread. If scientists could copy this process, a climber could carry a lightweight rope a mile long. He could also climb a mountain at over 100 mph if his strength was proportionate to a spider's! Another amazing thing about a spider is the advanced chemistry of its venom. This is designed not to kill its prey but only to paralyse it. This means that the creature stays fresh until the spider needs to eat it.

Although most spiders are harmless, in fiction they are often used to represent that which is sinister and satanic. The spider depends on the invisibility of its web to catch prey, whilst it hides near the edge ready to pounce. Satan is delighted when people think he doesn't exist because they can't see him. But he is in control of a global web and many visit his sites! Our Internet is usually used for good purposes but Satan's web is dedicated entirely to evil.

Just as we can see spiders' victims trapped in webs, so sadly we see Satan's victims trapped in a tangled web of evils from drink and drug addiction to trivialised sex without love. Experts say we are always only 1 meter away from a spider! But Satan is much closer! He whispers seductive temptations into our hearts then laughs when we yield. So how can we escape Satan's web? Scripture says "Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Jesus came to "destroy the works of the Devil" (1John 3:8). He'll not ignore your cry for help.

Reverend Jebson's column starts out from a phenomenon familiar to most of his readers, a spider and his web, and like a pedagogue leads his pupils from observation to reflection. The tone of voice adopted at the beginning of the article is didactic. But the representative tenor soon gives way to an evocative metaphor with multiple resonances: on the one hand, the variety of species and the stunning chemistry of the spider suggest the grandeur of the Creator, a point driven home by the evaluatives ("spectacular," "amazing," "advanced"), the exclamatives and the virtual projection of the spider's characteristics into the realm of human faculties. But on the other hand, the spider and his web (assimilated, in passing, to the world wide web) are turned into symbols

of Satan and his temptations to forcefully stress the ubiquity and insidious nature of evil, to which humanity is constantly exposed. The image translates the complex idea into a simple concrete image. Jebson occasionally resorts to alliteration (“from the speck to the spectacular tarantula”), a poetic device borrowed from the idiom of the tabloid genre. Having thus sought to convince his readers of the reality and proximity of evil, the Rev. Jebson subsequently urges them to ask for God’s help and trust Him. The whole article thus becomes a graphic incentive to return to the Bible, its guidelines and the promises issued by a divine authority.

The Rev. Brian Sharp strikes a very different note from Jebson’s both in form and content. Using a strategy that might shock readers, the Margate vicar proclaims the presence of God in locations like pubs and amusement arcades—places devoted to worldly pleasures and the cult of Mammon, which a conservatively-minded clergyman would be more likely to shun than indulge in. Pedagogical in his own way, the vicar takes his reader on a guided tour of these temples of temptation, trying to show that there is more to the palace of entertainment than meets the eye, and that the grace of God is not to be relegated to a narrow “Sunday slot set aside for God-bothering:”

*God is here even in the amusement arcades* (B. Sharp, 10/08/04).

It’s been a funny old week. Life’s like that sometimes isn’t it? I find myself this week in an amusement arcade! It’s been a while since I stepped into a place like this, I’m almost assaulted by the flashing lights and loud music. The place is populated by serried ranks of gloriously gilded gambling machines interspersed with a strange mixture of apparatus on which to play. Bucket seats, steering wheels and huge screens—Jenson Button wannabes trying their hand on simulated racetracks. Young girl disco dancers doing their darnedest to keep up with a list of ever accelerating, on screen, instructions on footwork (much to the entertainment of their male counterparts). It’s good to see they still have the cranes for cuddly toys (aren’t they frustrating? Why are they so “limp wristed”? Hasn’t the house got enough of an edge?).

Although all these pieces of equipment are interesting, they all play second fiddle to the main players In this Palace of Pleasure. The money makers. The machines that range from cascades of pennies to jackpots of a significant number of pounds, they have a voracious appetite, gobbling up coins as fast as the player can feed them in. No hint of indigestion and an endless capacity to keep the coins of a countless company of passionate players. No, wait! An avalanche

of cash spewed out to the glee of young and old alike. The décor is as loud as the music. This is a place in your face with glitz. I guess you either love it or hate it.

Those who are here really love it. Though to look at their faces one cannot be sure. There are those who concentrate so hard on feeding the machine that they seem oblivious to the flow of cash. So where is God in all this? You may well ask. Not immediately obvious but He's here, He's here in the welcome handshake of the arcade manager; He's here in the smiles and laughter of the youngsters; He's here in the innocent glee of the little ones on a Postman Pat ride. He's here in the people, after all we are made In His image. God Bless you all.

Here, the tone of voice is comradely, chummy even ("funny old week"), interspersed with suggestive collocations ("voracious appetite," "cascades of pennies," "cash spewed out"), touches of slang and trendy expressions ("wannabes"). This attempt to imitate and integrate the idiom of a significant sector of the younger public may supposedly fulfil two functions: on the one hand, the vicar may seek, like a chameleon, to keep a low profile by adapting to the colour of his environment, thus to deliver his message while going relatively unnoticed and escaping rejection; on the other, it may at the same time be a manner of suggesting proximity to his target audience, something also tentatively achieved by the question tags ("isn't it?", "aren't they?"), forms of address which seek to garner approval and thus foster a sense of solidarity. Yet the solidarity is not complete, as the clergyman suggests that his presence in this profane universe is something unusual: "I find myself," "It's been a while," "I'm almost assaulted." The careful hedge allows him to suggest that (like the church in the world) he is "in" the environment but not "of" it. He can thus afford to choose the best of both worlds, notwithstanding his own guess that "you either love it or hate it." Alliteration, rhyme and rhythm ("gloriously gilded gambling machines," "disco dancers doing their darndest") suggest a boisterous scene from which God is absent; but squalid as the environment may be, there are some touches of humanity left, small sparks of mercy and grace which may act as pointers towards a profounder, more satisfying dimension of existence, to be reached with a little effort along the narrow, more arduous road: "Finding Jesus is always better after a little effort" (03/25/05), "Being good is not good enough" (05/06/05), "There's more to Lent than Easter eggs" (02/18/05).



We are here faced with two communicative tenors: on one side, the fulgurance seen in Moses descending from Mount Sinai with the Tables of the Law, and on the other, the outreaching openness observed in Jesus when he dined with the tax collectors and sinners. We would like to argue, however, that we are here dealing with more than a difference in style. Norman Fairclough points out (albeit on the basis of a somewhat underdocumented scenario, 1989: 50–52) that a newspaper article, even a short one, may become the locus where wielders of power constrain content and wording to favour those interpretations of events (or in this case, worldviews) which protect, support or reinforce class or corporate interests. The maintenance of the column in the *Thanet Gazette* coupled with a change in authorship suggests that while the readership (and hence the editor) would not want the column to disappear, a change was felt to be welcome, perhaps in response to a shift in the socio-theological climate, “a slow drift towards agnosticism, syncretism and religious indifference” (Martin 1967, Davie 1995), which has been manifesting itself since the nineteen sixties and has (like most religious issues) elicited very different responses over the decades. The slowness of the shift may be explainable in sociological or demographic terms: modern ideas take considerable time to permeate to local communities where anachronistic attitudes may linger long after the ideology which supported them has lost its cash value.

### The Texts: A Content Analysis

In critical text analysis, one may perform “with-the-text” as well as “against-the-text” readings (Janks 1997), and we feel both approaches are worth attempting: it is only fair to the author to read a text in good faith (i.e. from the author’s and the original readers’ perspectives, if these can be retrieved or documented) before one starts criticising it from one’s own, analytically motivated vantage point. In one way, the analysis of a two-year collection of religious columns is an artificial exercise, as it gives a more comprehensive view of each author’s theology than the actual reader of the *Gazette* is likely to enjoy. A question raised one day may receive an answer days, weeks or months later, and thus the picture that eventually emerges may be more coherent (or, on the contrary more contradictory) than that constructed at a passing glance by a presumably benevolent, uncritical reader. The problem is a

recognized corollary of recourse to larger bodies of written documents (Armstrong 2005); in our study, which seeks to document a displacement of emphasis, the comprehensive view may be more welcome than the fragmented, piecemeal one, but it should not without further ado be equated to the average reader's perception of the texts.

#### a. Rev. D. Jebson

David Jebson's columns are based on a traditional Christian anthropology in which humanity is viewed as inherently "powerless to overcome inbred sin" (06/02/04), a state marked by attraction to the "world," which is full of temptations (06/16/04), of carnal pleasures which burden sinners with guilt ("from drink and drug addiction to trivialised sex without love," 06/09/04), and of earthly possessions which foster greed rather than contentment, while "only a loving relationship with God can satisfy our deepest longings" (06/11/04) for "true love is found only in God" (02/13/04) and "only Jesus Christ can give eternal peace different to anything the world can provide" (06/18/04). Sinners must then "turn away from everything they know is wrong" or, in more mythological terms, "resist the devil" (01/23/04) and "turn to their heavenly Father and feed upon His Word," which is communicated through scripture and personal revelation ("we know that conscience is God's voice within telling us we are wrong," 06/02/04) which demand discipline and obedience to follow Him "in the paths of righteousness" which "open up the way to heaven" (06/04/04). Admittedly, "No discipline seems pleasant" (07/16/04), but "patience and restraint will deliver their own rewards" (07/09/04) and "godliness with contentment is great gain" (06/11/04). If sinners fail, they must "turn to Christ for help and forgiveness," (07/02/04, 06/09/04), for Christ "opens the doors to paradise" for believers (02/06/04). Unbelievers will be judged (05/21/04), and with the assurance of the self-righteous, Jebson triumphantly declares that while "sceptics may snigger [...] believers will have [the] last laugh" (07/30/99).

This appeal to a radical change of life, a scenario of renewal (05/28/04, 07/02/04) leading from awareness of sin to repentance and acceptance of redemption in Christ (01/23/04, 01/30/04) and hence to salvation, justification and eventual sanctification partakes of the standard Christian belief system. God is here represented as the transcendent, intelligent Creator and Architect of the universe,

the Planner of human life and existence (including pain and suffering, 07/04/04), and the Source of moral judgment (07/02/04). The Christian's choice of life is here represented in terms of a stark two-valued contrast between truth and error, good and evil, Christ and Satan ("True and false religion," 01/30/04; "Those who are not on the side of Christ are on the side of Satan"), and thus between an otherworldly divine ideal and "this world," which is disparaged as the source of illusions and temptations (06/11/04, 06/18/04). The Bible is—understandably—honoured as the Word of God (03/26/04), but given a literalist interpretation which undermines its credibility (in spite of Jebson's unsupported claim that the stories in Genesis are confirmed by "modern research"); it is used as a repository from which quotes can be culled almost at random and pasted together to illustrate or support a point (06/25/04); and near-sightedly credited with a monopoly on social progress (abolition of the slave trade, improvement of workers' conditions), on education, decent behaviour and family values, including "respect for parents, people, and property" (07/23/04): "No nation can be great that ignores the sacred book. [...] If the home faith community crumbles, the state is doomed. [...] Educational culture cannot take the place of Christ in the home" (04/16/04).

If Rev. Jebson's theology is traditional, so is his language, which seems to be addressed mainly to insiders, i.e. people who have received a Christian / biblical education and are conversant with its vocabulary, logic and mythological imagery ("Christ has paid for our sins," "Jesus has conquered death," "Satan is close to us," "take the risen Lord into your heart"). Outside the Christian community where this sociolect has its natural habitat, the language is susceptible to require careful qualification if it is to be fully or correctly understood, though the actual understanding of religious discourse by the public at large has been little investigated (Loukes 1971, Ader 1975, van Noppen 1978, 1980, 2006), and such qualification as it would take demands more subtlety than fits into the simplified, two-valued idiom of the tabloid format or, for that matter, into the 300-word limit of the *Gazette's* "Thought for the Week."

Indeed, the critic substituting himself for an uninformed audience could point out a few potential problem areas. Thus for example, at the hands of a superficial reader, the forgiveness of sins could all too easily be construed as an incentive to live a lawless life and get away with it since "the price for our sins has been paid" (01/23/04), while in the Christian perspective divine grace calls for sincere acceptance of

Christ, genuine contrition, and the profound desire to sin no more. By the same token, divine providence could be understood as an inescapable determinism which evacuates human responsibility and freedom of choice (“many painful experiences in our lives are not our fault, but part of God’s plan to make us better people,” 06/04/04). Taking conscience for granted as a ready-made God-given faculty to distinguish between good and evil not only ignores the responsibility of parents and the role of education and experience, but also leaves Christian moral standards (as conveyed through, say, the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ Hillside Sermon) undefined in practice and therefore open to stereotyped interpretations, including the widespread assimilation of Christian ethics with middle-class values and morality: “[the fact that] human beings by nature tend to love evil rather than good is clearly demonstrated by the fact that children tend to be naughty rather than good” and by the fact that “newspapers with sordid stories sell more copies than others” (07/02/04).

Jebson’s observations may illustrate what has been deplored as the declining moral climate in Britain, “the coarseness of its appetites and its unbridled and antisocial attempts to satisfy them” (Dalrymple 2005); but as evidence for the state of human nature, their value is limited at best. By the same token, the “evidence” adduced for the existence of God (02/06/04, 02/27/04, 04/30/04, 05/07/04) and the literal inerrancy of the Bible (03/26/04, 05/21/04) illustrates a religious perspective on reality (from birdsong to the complexity of the genetic code), but fails to offer valid support to any ontological argument. At a time when science enjoys more prestige, confidence and even “sanctity” than religion (Ehrenreich 1991), Jebson’s unscientific argumentation is susceptible to fatally undermine his credibility. Moreover, Jebson’s claims to the Bible’s or Christianity’s monopoly on good and social progress are irritatingly short-sighted: decency is not a Christian prerogative, and many churches have been remarkably reluctant to approve, let alone advocate democracy and labour movements. And finally, his disparagement of the “world” is dangerously one-sided: while love of futile worldly pleasures may admittedly tempt one away from higher spiritual aspirations, the world is also the place that the Creator chose to “visit” (02/06/04), where He became incarnate and where Christians are called upon to live and act: activity in the world rather than withdrawal from it has, in Protestantism at least, been viewed as the answer to a divine calling (van Noppen 2000).

## b. Rev. Brian Sharp

The Rev. Brian Sharp, in stark contrast to Jebson, seeks engagement in rather than detachment from the world. God is involved in every aspect of human life, and can be met even in “strange places”: He is as present in the pub and the amusement arcade as He is in church (10/22/04), and manifests Himself in the “smiles, laughter and glee” of people, “who are all made in His image” (10/08/04) and must “search out the living Jesus in their own lives,” but also in the glory and beauty of creation (08/05/05). This is an altogether different anthropology from Jebson's, with little if any suggestion that the divine image in humans may have been broken or tarnished by sin. The whole notion of sin is remarkably absent from Sharp's columns. Misbehaviour like “bad manners” is attributed to the “lack of values and discipline,” for which society or the government are to blame, not individual conscience (02/11/05, 03/18/05, 05/20/05). This displacement of responsibility may be comfortably reassuring, but calls for little questioning of one's own codes of behaviour or education.

Sharp's stories also resort to a different geography, which projects the image of an immanent God, close to people and their everyday reality. The very structure of Sharp's columns reflects this: his starting point is often a small aspect of everyday reality—looking for a parking spot, a misbehaved teenager, junk mail on his doormat or an evening at the pub—which allows him, often *in fine*, to “share a view and slip in a bit of God” (02/04/05) and thus provide “a small lifeline to faith” (04/08/05). God appears at least once in every column in the final greeting “God bless you all,” but otherwise tends to recede into the background and act like a “benign big brother” (10/08/04) who “is active in the world and wants us to enjoy it” (07/22/05). He does appear as a “judge” once: not one who condemns, but one who “knows not only our deeds, but also our intentions” and “proclaims that mercy is of a higher order than justice” (07/01/05). This is good news indeed: the aim of faith is “not to make [people] miserable” but, writes Sharp, to help them “enjoy life” in all its fullness, “have fun” (02/04/05) and “not to worry” (08/19/05)—the latter advice somewhat shortsightedly torn out of its gospel context (Matth. 6:27, Luke 12:25) where concern for worldly issues like food or raiment is made subordinate to seeking the Kingdom. Of course, the gospel is “Good News:” we should “count our blessings” (06/17/05) and be thankful for them (03/04/05, 04/01/05). Indeed, Sharp's Christianity contains a lot more

joy, beauty and grace than Jebson's, and this might have constituted a highly positive point of departure had the substance of the Good News, its liberating message, been driven home more explicitly and convincingly. One must however regret Sharp's semantic vagueness, which may foster more misunderstanding than insight.

Sharp writes that "we have certain basic needs, and a relationship with our creator is part of it, even if we do not realise it," and "perhaps God is calling you," (01/28/05), but wonders whether people "put much endurance and effort into developing [their] relationship with God" (01/21/05). The observation that "like lawns, lives deserve care and attention" should encourage people to "take control of the life God gave us," for "faith gives purpose" (06/03/05). In practical terms, this boils down to "putting our talents to good use" and "making life better for someone" or even "getting off one's derriere," "trying something new" (09/30/05) and "enjoying it" (04/01/05). In these short excerpts, the critic will note that "perhaps God is calling you" is pastorally non-committal; that "certain basic needs" will more likely conjure up physical than spiritual aspirations (Jebson's phrase "deepest longings" seems a better choice here); that "take control of one's life" may be misinterpreted as "chucking God out of it," and that "putting one's talents to good use" may be understood as devoting them to one's own advantage or gratification, since "enjoyment" is the attitude towards life that Sharp encourages. And even if the audience understands that the "good" use here means putting one's gifts, time and money to the service of the less fortunate ("helping someone," "being active for others" (05/06/05, 05/27/05), the "Christian imperative" (07/08/05) cannot be boiled down to an ethics of social commitment. This reduction, to be honest, is not what Sharp advocates: it is what might be read into his words by readers not conversant with the underlying postulates—presumably, a major portion of his potential readership. By the same token, when Sharp writes that we must "practise the Christianity we proclaim" (06/24/05), the substance of the faith is left undefined, but the practice involves "making a Christian voice heard." The message to be conveyed by that voice, again, covers a very wide scope of potential reference, ranging from "making the world a better place" (04/29/05) to family values like discipline, duty and respect. Here, at last, Jesus is called in as an example of humility and obedience (03/18/05, 05/20/05).

### c. Jebson vs. Sharp

It is interesting to see that questions of discipline appear in both authors. According to Jebson, children from homes where the Bible is read “will grow up to revere God and therefore respect parents, people and property” (07/23/04); Sharp also acknowledges that there is “restraint and respect” with God and feels that “our Christian faith requires love of responsibility for one another” (02/11/05); but translates this into a demand for the parents’ right to discipline their children (03/18/05), positing that “he who spares the rod will spoil the child” (Proverbs 13:24) and leaving little room for the more gracious attitude to “never take the harsher way when love will do the deed” (Wesley 1780). This is surprising in an author whose columns otherwise tend to place a stronger emphasis on grace in one’s judgments and attitudes: after the London bombings and the tube shooting, he insists that while anger is understandable, “Christians have the choice to turn the other cheek” as an alternative to the desire for revenge (07/15/05), and may display grace in their own judgments: “we cannot expect [the police] to never make a mistake. We all of us do that” (07/29/05).

The difference persists in other columns where the two pastors write on the same theme: in the Valentine’s Day issue, Jebson reminds his readers that “True love is found only in God;” Sharp sees Valentine’s Day as a call to behave in a particular way towards God, who loves us. When Jebson receives junk mail, he denounces greed and love of money; Sharp reminds us that the retail market tries to rule our lives, but that God’s love is free and unconditional. Jebson strenuously seeks to prove God’s existence and the literal accuracy of the Bible by observing creation; Sharp, instead, seeks not to understand and explain, but to enjoy and celebrate existence, and thus to thank and glorify God, who does not need mankind to “defend” Him, even after the tsunami (12/31/04).

The texts of Jebson and Sharp appear in the same column in the same paper, albeit at different times, and belong to the same communicative genre, albeit with a different text structure. Yet they convey very different messages, as their authors view the realities they discuss (both divine and human) from opposing angles. Of course, “there are many ways of looking at a single phenomenon, and the final picture presented by an analysis can vary widely according to differences of perspective and emphasis. [...] An emphasis cannot be regarded as either right or wrong, but it can be challenged on the

grounds of being misleading” (Gilbert 1976:87). Obviously, neither of our pastors seeks to “mislead,” nor do they represent extreme positions. But their respective emphasis diverges to the point of projecting very different images of God and faith, and hence of human existence and behaviour.

Jebson’s approach is more evangelical-fundamentalist in the sense of strict adherence to scriptural inerrancy and belief in human sinfulness. While he does not go to the extremes of “hellfire and brimstone” preaching (i.e. threatening people with divine retribution), he does represent a transcendent God of authority and judgment, who demands obedience and discipline. Sharp’s columns speak not of evil, sin and judgment but of an immanent God of grace, close to people’s everyday lives, in which he recognizes all kinds of small “pointers” to God’s presence, grace and love. The God of his columns is ethically easy-going: He does not burden people with guilt, He demands neither repentance nor conversion, but reads the good intentions hidden in people’s hearts and encourages virtuous habits like patience and restraint. This, undoubtedly, is a language that will go down well with the present-day readership; but critics might well object that this brand of “easy-believism” is no longer genuine Christianity.

### The Editor’s Perspective

As pointed out, the *Isle of Thanet Gazette*’s shift from Jebson’s syndicated column to Sharp’s weekly musings was a decision taken when editor Mike Pearce retired and was replaced by Rebecca Smith<sup>2</sup>. The new editor qualifies her predecessor as a “traditionalist” in both his political and religious convictions, while she herself has “no strong political convictions and is not religious” (*Interview*, 12/12/05). She supposes that this exerts some influence on the way she edits the newspaper, but is aware that some degree of impartiality is part of her duties: she does not “buy into any cultural ideology” because a local newspaper is “for everyone who lives in the community,” a community characterized by great sociological diversity, “from Kingsgate to Newington,” from

---

2. It is not totally clear whether she wields full editorial authority, as in the interview she refers to her “boss,” who takes certain decisions, notably, with regard to content and layout. The question whether recourse to a local pastor rather than to a syndicated column made a substantial difference in terms of cost, and whether this factor intervened in the decision was not raised.



millionaires to workless and drug addicts, “all within three miles of each other.” In this multifaceted environment, the *Gazette* provides mainly local news (“who has died, who has got married, or whatever is happening at the Council or in your local school”) for a loyal readership perceived as mainly middle-class, middle-aged and female. Smith does not believe there has to be an editorial philosophy behind the religious column, but acknowledges that at the local level “religion is important and the Church is doing a lot of good work;” she “presumes people are happy to have [the column] in there,” so “we should not let it slip from our pages.” Actually, the future might see “more religion coming into the newspaper than less” because the *Gazette* might choose to reflect the development of new (Muslim or Greek Orthodox) communities in Thanet; but the community section might be redesigned to bring the message closer to current affairs or the life of individuals, in accordance with what seems to be Smith’s main premiss: that a community paper must, first and foremost, make contact with local people’s lives. The religious column may provide “something to get you through the day,” but must also “bring something beyond religion,” a local touch that might be conveniently summarized in the phrase “proximity principle”: “We meet our readers every day, I sit with them in the traffic jams on the way to work, and those are my readers, those are my people, these are the people I write for.” Translated into editorial policy, this option seems to have guided the choice of a local vicar for the new *Thought for the Week*. Rebecca Smith confirms: “Getting Brian in was because he was local. It is about people. I did have one letter complaining asking where [Jebson] had gone, and I explained it was a change because of being local. But I don’t think we had a strong reaction and newspaper sales have not plummeted.” This last clause is the only hint that the potential impact on sales figures may have been in the back of the editor’s mind as well.

### Rev. Sharp’s Perspective

If this local touch is what the *Gazette* expected, Brian Sharp has lived up to the challenge. His columns reflect his proximity to people’s lives and daily experience, smuggled into the text by means of “impressionistic” strokes, strengthened by phaticisms (“isn’t it...,” “don’t you...”) and popular turns of phrase. An additional advantage of having a local author is the possibility of immediate feedback: if Brian Sharp is actually

in close touch with the locals, the column may act as an invitation to subsequent interaction, and some of the vagueness found in his texts may be relieved if necessary: “I have been pleasantly surprised by the comments people [have voiced] to me. [...] I would much rather have a discussion with somebody than their being apathetic about the whole thing. [...] I have had only one letter asking me why I had said something, which I was very happy to be able to reply of course” (*Interview*, 12/09/05).

There seems to be, then, some degree of confluence between the paper’s proximity policy and Brian Sharp’s theology. An immanentist view which locates the divine within people and events will project an image of God more convivial and accessible to people than, say, a remote, impersonal Judge, Architect or Watchmaker: “When you are speaking to people you have to speak to them at the level at which they are. [...] I hope I am dealing with the things the man in the street faces as well; practically, I deal with local issues. [...] I tried to show the man in the street who never comes to church the glory of God is in other places as well—even in the amusement arcades—that was the point.”

In this respect, Decotterd’s interview with Rev. Sharp is revealing, inasmuch as the pastor tries to make his aims, motives and choices explicit and comments on his own perception of the readership’s response. His avowed aim is “to bring people to the love of God through Jesus Christ,” but if his other declarations and the collection of texts are anything to go by, his first concern is “to be heard and read at all,” and subsequently to “trick” his readership into absorbing a pinch, however slight or diluted, of Christianity “without realising it”:

The function of [the column] as I can see is to lay some form of Christian message which has been hopefully buried in something sweet, which will encourage people to taste it and then pick it up without realising it. [If I can] just make them think, then I have achieved something, [...] stimulating something in their minds. [...] I have planted something having to do with God and if it does prompt them to think about God then amen. I hope my faith comes through, I always try to make sure that it does (*Interview*, 12/09/05).

This oblique approach is a far cry from Jebson’s straightforward, hard-sell evangelizing. Sharp points out that the 300-word limit forces him to compress rather than develop, often at the expense of his Christian premises (“So where is God in all this, you may well ask,”

10/08/04). But much of his allotted space is wasted on phatic attempts at connecting with his audience ("Anyway, I digress," 05/25/05), while the gospels themselves contain ample evidence that daily-life realities can be turned into parables of the Kingdom in very few words. Sharp motivates his choice by the observation that even though "there is a great submerged faith in society, something intrinsic to [people] which they will not necessarily recognize," people must understand "you are not going to push [your message] down their throat." So "the first thing you have to do is actually to grasp somebody and then you mould and you bend what you have to say without changing the message." [...] "All you can do is hook a piece of interest" and "slip in a bit of God" [...] "As long as they read it, as long as people are making comments, then I have achieved something." The column may help people cross the first threshold towards faith, with the implicit understanding that more substantial food is to follow: in the interview, Sharp declares that his theology is more about "coming to know Christ" than about "to serve, to go out to find the poor and that sort of thing," but even so, there is as much, if not more, talk of social involvement and responsibility in his columns than there is actual God- and Christ-talk.

### **The Theological-Communicative Context**

The present-day preachers, writers of religious columns and even Bible translators seem to be caught between the rock and the hard place: on the one hand, they must be faithful to the original message and run the risk of speaking a language no longer understood by, or no longer relevant or interesting to, a present-day audience; at the risk, also, of not attracting or worse, losing part of their potential public. On the other hand, communicative commonsense demands that they should speak a language congruent with their time's idiom, beliefs and inclinations, at the risk of diluting, reducing or even betraying the original message, without the certitude however that the audience will stay in, or come back to, the fold of "believers" and/or "belongers" (Davie 1995), supposing that this is one of the column's aims. Sharp says it is not, but does tell his readers to "take someone with you to church on Sunday. You know it makes sense" (09/30/05).

Of course the Church must be aware of, and respond to, people's needs and questions in a changing world; but it cannot without further ado adapt the substance of its message to accommodate its target

audience. Paraphrasing William Temple's dietary metaphor (Cf. Proudman 1999), the question "What (spiritual) food does Jones need today?" cannot be rephrased as "What will Jones swallow?" A fast-food outlet may decide to remove pickles from its burgers if the consumers no longer care for them; but the Church cannot decide to suppress, say, the seventh commandment ("Thou shalt not commit adultery") to make its message more palatable to its public. But the question "How can the food be made *accessible* to Jones?" is of a different order: while the substance of the Word is supposed to be eternal and unchanging, its linguistic representation may vary to bring the message closer to those who need it most (Matthew 9:12). The question of "how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land" (Psalm 137:4) has been an issue in practical theology for a very long time, and is vaster than can be dealt with in this paper. One could document a chorus of voices from pew, pulpit and press (full references in van Noppen 1980: 2–38) deploring that the language of religion has lost its cash value and that its presumably outdated conceptual categories have played a role in estranging large swaths of the churchgoing public, "those who have rejected the Church because they have used their critical judgment and feel they can no longer adhere to the statements of another age" (Birchmeier 2005). While the response on one side has been to maintain or "reinvent" those words (Volle 1977: 318, Tillich 1963:94–5), in the opposite camp the tendency has been to displace the emphasis: "Let's start not from a heavenly being, whose very existence many would doubt. Let's start from what actually is most real to people in everyday life—and find God there" (Robinson 1963b). In his controversial paperback *Honest to God* (1963a), Bishop Robinson sought to play down a transcendent image of God which he felt had become irrelevant to a hypothetical "Modern Man" and thus an obstacle to honest faith. He sought to relocate God "in" humanity and the world to make Him more accessible, albeit at the risk of raising a new idol: "If Jones starts worshipping the God within Jones, he cannot but end up worshipping Jones" (Packer 1963:13).

The Rev. Sharp seems to have joined this well-staffed bandwagon of immanentism ("God is here in the people"). Of course, there is nothing basically wrong with the proximity principle in itself: the very idea of incarnation is a divine initiative to meet humanity on its own turf. But any theography takes a dangerous turn when its account becomes "partial" in the two senses of the word, i.e. "incomplete" and "biased." To reduce, finally, is to falsify, and this is what happens

when one angle of approach ignores, eclipses or excludes others. In this respect, both Jebson and Sharp lay themselves open to the charge of partiality, as the former emphasizes transcendence, authority, guilt and judgment at the expense of grace and unity; and the latter stresses proximity, love, grace and "enjoyment" at the expense of a self-questioning attitude which might lead sinners to repentance, conversion and liberation.

It is not the linguist's role to question the authors' motives and even less to issue a value judgment about who might be "right" or "wrong." What emerges from our various descriptions, however, is the inference that the *Isle of Thanet Gazette's* shift from one type of religious column to another is the resultant of many constraints: the demands of a medium conditioned by editorial policy (the paper's image, role and impact); the editors' own convictions and preferences; readers' expectations and responses (which may affect sales); an ideological climate in which talk of religion is no longer universally accepted, and which induces clergymen to adopt a high or a low profile according to their perception of their mission (to convert people, to "trick" or attract them, or not to scare them away, to "plant a seed" to "stimulate thought" or "get them through the day"); a theological debate between transcendent and immanent representations of God; and finally, the conventions of a genre with its own limits like the 300-word format, but also its own semi-tabloid style, which may take religious discourse out of its representative institutional idiom into the realm of poetic communication. The author torn between these influences and demands will have to decide whether to stick to the enduring "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3) in its original formulation and outdated imagery, or whether to "conform to the world" (Romans 12:2) and give the public "food according to their desire" (Psalm 78:18, ASV).

If a pastor feels that to be heard and accepted he must keep a low profile, if the gospel must be slipped or smuggled in rather than confidently proclaimed, if it must be watered down and sugar-coated to suit the public's sensitivities and expectations, if rhetoric and style become all-important, that is, if the medium comes to prevail over the message and the good news of "God's love through Jesus Christ" is narrowed down to "a bit of Christian reflection in the society in which we live," then the Church is, indeed, at risk of becoming the instrument of its own increasingly marginal status.

Fortunately, the repertoire of English theography offers more variation, and hence more choice than our binary contrast between two authors belonging to different schools suggests. But having viewed the merits and drawbacks of each paradigm, it seems reasonable to demand that regardless of the tune to which the Lord's song is played, "the trumpet [should not give] an uncertain sound" (1 Cor 14:8).

## References

- Ader, A. : "Zur Wortschatz des Credo bei Jugendlichen," *Linguistica Biblica* 35 (1975), 80–83.
- Armstrong, K.: "Unholy Strictures," *The Guardian Weekly*, August 19–25, 2005, 13.
- Bakhtin, M.M.: *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, edited by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.
- Birchmeier, H.: "Jeter le bébé avec l'eau du bain?" <http://www.questiondieu.com>, June 25, 2005 (transl. JPN).
- Bowden, J. (ed.): *Thirty Years of Honesty: "Honest to God" Then and Now*. London: SCM Press, 1993.
- Bunting, M.: *The Media and Religion*. Paper presented at Gresham College, London, on 11 November 1996. <http://gospel-culture.org.uk/bunting.htm>.
- Dalrymple, T.: *Our Culture, What's Left of It*. Chicago: Dee, 2005.
- Davie, G.: *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Decotterd, D.: *L'île communicante: thèmes et structures de la communication locale en Grande Bretagne*. PhD. Diss., University of Pais III, 1987.
- Decotterd, D.: "Lire la gazette locale," *Bulletin de la Société de Stylistique Anglaise* 11 (1989), 105–124;
- Decotterd, D.: "Cliché et créativité dans la gazette locale britannique," *Bulletin de la Société de Stylistique Anglaise* 12 (1991), 92–102.
- Decotterd, D.: "Transcendance et immanence: la chronique religieuse locale britannique en contexte," in *Aspects linguistiques du texte religieux*. Brest: ERLA/Université de Bretagne Occidentale, 2006 (forthcoming).

- Dulles, A., S.J.: "Religion and the News Media: A Theologian Reflects," *America* 171, no. 9 (October 1994), 6–9.
- Ehrenreich, B.: "Science, Lies and Ultimate Truth," in *TIME*, May 20, 1991.
- Fairclough, N.: *Language and Power*. London: Longman, 1989.
- Frye, N.: *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Gilbert, A.D.: *Religion and Society in Industrial England. Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740–1914*. London: Longman, 1976.
- Hoggart, R.: review of Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), TLS, March 24, 1995.
- Jakobson, R.: "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in Sebeok, T.A. (ed.) *Style In Language*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960, 350–377.
- Janks, H.: "Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Tool," in *Discourse Studies: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 18 (3) (1997), 329–342.
- Knott, I.: "The Function and Implications of Metaphor in British 'Quality' and 'Popular' Dailies," in M. Maufort & J.-P. van Noppen (eds.): *Voices of Power*. Liège: L3/BAAHE, 1997, 97–104.
- Loukes, H.: *Teenage Religion*. London: SCM Press, 1971.
- Martin, D.: *A Sociology of English Religion*. London: Heinemann, 1967.
- Morin, V.: *L'écriture de presse*. Paris/The Hague: Mouton & C°, 1969.
- Newspaper Evangelising Recedes Slightly*. Editorial, The National Secular Society:  
<http://www.secularism.org.uk/newsline9thseptember2005.html>.
- Packer, J. I.: *Keep Yourselves from Idols*. London: Church Book Room Press, 1963.
- Proudman, C.: "Church reinvents itself for mass consumption," in *Anglican Journal* 125/3 (March 1999), 11.
- Robinson, J.A.T.: *Honest to God*. London: SCM Press, 1963a.
- Robinson, J.A.T.: "Why I Wrote It," *The Sunday Mirror*, April 7, 1963b.
- "Thought for the Week," *The Isle of Thanet Gazette*, Margate, Kent, 2004–2005.
- Tillich, P.: *The Eternal Now*. London: SCM Press, 1963.
- Van Buren, P.: *The Edges of Language. An Essay in the Logic of Religion*. London: SCM Press, 1972.

- Van den Eynden-Morpeth, N.: "Wh- vs. th- relativisation as a stylistic diagnostic: Reporting on a real-time study of language change," in *Leuvense Bijdragen* 87 (1998) 1–2, 47–57.
- van Noppen, J.-P.: "Sondages et sens religieux," in *Foi et Langage* (Paris) II (1978) n° 4, 287–291.
- van Noppen, J.-P.: *Spatial Theography*. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1980.
- van Noppen, J.-P.: "Beruf, Calling and the Methodist Work Ethic," in: I. Heidelberger-Leonard & M. Tabah (Hg.): *Wahlverwandtschaften in Sprache, Malerei, Literatur, Geschichte. Festschrift für Monique Boussart*. Stuttgart: Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz / Akademischer Verlag (*Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik*, 388) 2000, 69–78.
- van Noppen, J.-P.: "Hymns as Literature, Language and Discourse: Wesleyan Hymns as a Case Example," in *The Hymn, a Journal of Congregational Song* 56/3 (Summer 2005), 22–30.
- van Noppen, J.-P.: "Variegated Context Worlds: Texte et Triangulation," in *Aspects linguistiques du texte religieux*. Brest: ERLA/Université de Bretagne Occidentale, 2006 (forthcoming).
- Vidler, A.R.: "Religion and the National Church," in *Soundings*. Cambridge U.P. 1966, 254.
- Volle, F.: "Ces mots qui ne passent plus la rampe," in *Foi et Langage* I (1977) n° 4, 316–318.
- Wesley, J.: *A Collection of Hymns* (1780), Hymn 468: *For Parents*.