

'IMAGINE THERE'S NO HEAVEN': JOHN LENNON, ATHEISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Since the advent of global communication there have been a number of events which have metaphorically 'stopped the world'. Unexpected, sudden, shocking, perhaps outrageous, they have had the effect, not only of preoccupying news editors and opinion formers for months and even years thereafter, but of momentarily disorientating all of us as onlookers, of giving us a sense that the world has shifted a little on its axis and will never be quite the same again.

Whether of natural or human causation, these are the events which, according to the cliché, we never forget where we were when we first heard of them. In recent times we would include 9/11 and the Boxing Day tsunami; in the slightly more distant past, the death of Princess Diana; and in the experience of those of more mature years, the death of Elvis Presley, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Prague and, most famously of all, the assassination of President John F Kennedy. And into this category, I suggest, would also come the shooting of John Lennon, 30 years ago this coming December.

Lennon's death impacted upon us, not simply because it was so 'out of the blue', so senseless, so brazen, but because it removed in an instant a person who had seemed, both in his heyday with the Beatles and subsequently as an activist, peace campaigner and independent musician, to personify the hopes which many entertained in the 1960s and early 1970s of an end to costly and futile conflicts like Vietnam, and the possibility of a new social order. With his mass following, powerful charisma, directness of speech and ability to play the media at their own game, Lennon, wittingly or otherwise, embodied the dreams and aspirations of a significant proportion of his generation for a global order less hidebound by tradition, convention

and institutionalism, and more open to one predicated upon equality, brother- and sister-hood and peace – themes to which he constantly resorted in his early post-Beatle songs. Admittedly, his withdrawal from public life for most of the five years immediately prior to his death considerably diminished his significance as a catalyst for change, though even then it was remarkable how, in the days immediately following his murder, the call to ‘give peace a chance’, his trademark slogan in the late 1960s and early 1970s, became the uniting theme of the hundreds of vigils held in his honour across the world.

It would be hard to deny that, as has been the case with many artists who have suffered premature death – Mozart, Schubert, Rupert Brooke, James Dean, Buddy Holly, Munroe, Hendrix – such a ‘career move’ (as someone once rather unkindly termed it) has enhanced rather than weakened Lennon’s reputation. Early death not only focuses the light more brightly on works of brilliance already created, it banishes the risk of such works being overshadowed by output of lesser quality in later life: it ensures a form of artistic immortality. Yet I suggest that Lennon’s renown rests less on the timing and manner of his passing than, say, that of a James Dean or Janis Joplin: for one thing, he had proved himself, in his all-too-brief career, to be a writer, composer, performer and communicator of true genius, inventiveness and imagination; and, for another, his death came at just the moment that he was embarking upon a period of renewed creativity, one which looked likely to spawn material of similar, if not higher quality than much of his existing work.

This somewhat fulsome assessment of Lennon’s work allows me to segue into the first of three points I want to make by way of an introduction to the main focus of this paper, the lyric of his 1971 song ‘Imagine’. First, I am keen not to indulge in hagiography here. In one sense I am not qualified to offer any assessment of Lennon

beyond what I have gleaned from his music, from the various recorded interviews he left, from media reports of his doings and from the copious literature (of varying quality and reliability) that his life has generated. I never met him, nor anybody who was remotely close to him, and I can offer no profound or previously unheard insights into his character. By all accounts he could be rude to the point of offensive, cruel, self-absorbed, arrogant and quick to put down lesser mortals; there was a palpable degree of inconsistency between the values he espoused in public and his own lifestyle and behaviour (recording himself singing 'imagine no possessions' in his 26-room mansion, for example, or - as Cynthia Lennon puts it in her biography of her ex-husband - 'telling the world to "live as one" yet [not being able to] pick up the phone, make peace with me and arrange to see his own son'); and more than a few of the people who entered his life appear subsequently to have left it in a seriously damaged and distressed state. And while such traits are not uncommon in some whom we would now call 'A list celebrities', and explanations for Lennon's complex and mood-driven personality could very plausibly be constructed by reference to his traumatic and in some respects quite wretched childhood, these are not the hallmarks of one on the high road to canonisation.

Yet the impact that Lennon has had on Western culture over the past fifty years is as great, if not greater, than any other figure of his generation, including those who have enjoyed considerably more years in which to make it. It is not for me to comment on the quality of his music, poetry, prose, performance skills or artwork, nor is this the place for a analysis of the hitherto unprecedented global phenomenon known as 'Beatlemania'; but Lennon's contribution to the shaping of post-War Western culture, his role as co-provider of the 'soundtrack' to the lives of the entire baby-boomer generation worldwide, and his reputation as a tireless advocate of the

logic of peace over the futility of war, speaks for itself. Perhaps just one point to bear this out: despite the fact that for most of his adult life Lennon chose not to live in his native city, and hardly set foot in it at all in the fifteen years prior to his death, the main airport in Liverpool is now named for him, and uses as its strapline a line from his iconic song, 'above us only sky' (though, given the propensity of a certain British airline regularly to mislay passengers' luggage, more than one wag has suggested this should be changed to 'imagine no possessions'). [*Radio 4, Brown/Bono, ODT*]

Second, in seeking to offer a theological reflection on one of Lennon's songs, I in no sense want to imply that he himself would have approved of such a project. Clearly, Lennon was fascinated at various stages in his life by religion – Zen Buddhism, Krishna Consciousness, Christianity, the occult – and even travelled significant distances and devoted significant periods of his time to pursuing what might be described as a religious quest; and, as a 'peacemaker', a 'speaker of truth to power', and a promoter of brother- and sisterhood, he might even be described, with suitable qualification, as an exemplar of certain aspects of the Christian ethic. But I think it is clear that in no sense could Lennon meaningfully be described as a Christian, and, heeding Lesslie Newbigin's famous verdict on Rahner's suggestion that those who reject the Christian gospel but *de facto* follow it in their 'basic orientation' could be given the title 'Anonymous Christian' – that it is 'tantamount to conferring an *aegrotat* degree *in absentia* upon a non-matriculant who does not even believe in tertiary education' – I have no wish to impose such a label upon John Lennon.

That having been said, there was a curious phase in his life when he did embrace evangelical Christianity, and even announced to close friends that he had become a born-again Christian. As far as I know this incident is described in only one account of Lennon's life – *The Gospel According to the Beatles*, a book which draws upon

the most reliable first-hand sources and whose author, Steve Turner, is among the most respected and best-connected rock journalists in the English-speaking world – and occurred when Lennon, following regular exposure to American television evangelists such as Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker and Oral Roberts, wrote to Roberts in 1972 expressing what he called his fear of facing up to ‘the problems of life’. Acknowledging regret for his comment that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, and quoting the line ‘money can’t buy me love’, Lennon asked Roberts to explain what Christianity could do for him, to tell him whether it was ‘phoney’, and to say whether ‘He’ (presumably God) can love him. ‘I want out of hell’, Lennon wrote. Though Roberts replied at some length to Lennon – a substantial part of his letter is reproduced by Turner – it was apparently not until five years later that Lennon made his ‘conversion’ announcement, following the screening of Franco Zeffirelli’s ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, starring Robert Powell, on American television on Palm Sunday, 3 April 1977, which he found very moving. According to Turner, a week later, on Easter Day, Lennon took Yoko and their son Sean to a local church service, and in the following months was regularly to be heard ‘praising the Lord’, writing songs with titles like ‘Talking with Jesus’ and ‘Amen’ (the latter a musical rendition of the Lord’s Prayer), calling the prayer line of Pat Robertson’s ‘700 Club’, and even trying to convert non-believers. Fearing, as Turner puts it, that her control over her husband’s life was in danger of ebbing away, Yoko worked hard to draw Lennon away from his new-found faith, and within two months Lennon had written a song called, ‘You Saved My Soul’, addressed not to God in gratitude for salvation from his ‘hell’, but to Yoko for rescuing the writer *from* God, from what he called ‘that suicide’. Three years later Lennon endorsed the view that serving God or the devil were not the only choices facing humankind, writing, as a riposte to Dylan’s song, ‘Gotta Serve

Somebody', penned during *that* artist's born-again phase, a song affirming that the only person you have to serve is yourself, that no one else can 'save' you.

In a sense this was a return to a stance Lennon had held immediately before his dalliance with Christianity, a number of his early post-Beatle songs clearly testifying to a deep and sincerely-held atheism. While in the late 1960s he could be heard speaking of God as 'a power that we're all capable of tapping' and affirming his belief in the afterlife on the basis of revelations received during meditation, drug-taking and dieting, the clear message of his first solo album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, issued in December 1970, is that religion (like sex and TV) is just a drug, that Hare Krishna was 'pie in the sky' and that God is 'a concept by which we measure our pain'. In the song in which this latter line appears, entitled simply 'God', Lennon lists fifteen things in which he has lost faith, nine of which are to do with religion and spirituality – the Bible and Jesus, but also Buddha, magic, I Ching, tarot, mantra, the Bhagavad Gita and yoga. His affirmation that all he now believed in was himself and Yoko, the only 'reality', frankly leaves little to argue about in terms of the writer's world-view at that time. [*play YouTube of 'God'*]

There is, however, a little more to say about Lennon and Christianity. Both Steve Turner and Lennon's most recent biographer, Philip Norman, make the point that informing the structure of the song 'God' might well have been Lennon's recollection of the creeds he was expected to recite in church every Sunday morning during his youth, that he effectively turned the affirmation, 'we believe in one God', upside down. If this is so, and it seems a reasonable assumption, it would simply be a more egregious example of the extent to which his orthodox Anglican upbringing permeated his thinking – and his art – throughout his life. Sent by his guardian and aunt, Mimi Smith, to the local Anglican Sunday School, Lennon would have been

regularly exposed, not only to the church's creeds, but to bible stories, sermons and, importantly, hymns and anthems (he sang in the church choir from the age of 8 to 14). Despite being a less than model church-goer, Lennon was actually confirmed, apparently at his own request, at the age of 15, and an awareness of the love-hate relationship he had with the church and its teaching can throw fresh and sometimes fascinating light on his later work.

The 'love' side comes through in his fascination with the figure of Jesus, for example. In the infamous 1966 interview with Maureen Cleave in which he spoke of the Beatles being 'more popular than Jesus now', it was not Jesus himself whom Lennon disparaged but his 'thick and ordinary disciples' who twisted his teaching. The following year, when the Beatles were consulted about the 'heroes' each wanted depicted on the *Sgt Pepper* cover, Lennon chose Jesus as one of his (even though the decision was eventually taken not to include him on the grounds that it was too controversial). At the height of the Beatles' popularity and influence, when disabled people were being presented to Lennon and the others in the expectation that something of their aura would rub off onto them, Lennon wondered whether there were parallels between his experience of having divinity thrust upon him by over-zealous followers, and that of Jesus himself. Lennon's tendency to imagine himself to be 'Christ' surfaced a number of times – particularly when under the influence of drugs, but most famously in the lyric of 'The Ballad of John and Yoko'. And in 1980, when asked why he believed that the Beatles would never re-form, he replied:

Do we have to divide the fish and the loaves for the multitudes again? Do we have to get crucified *again*? Do we have to do the walking on water again because a whole pile of dummies didn't see it the first time or didn't believe it when they saw it? That's what they're asking. 'Get off the cross. I didn't

understand it the first time. Can you do it again?' No way. You can't do things twice.

The other side of Lennon's relationship with organized religion came through perhaps most obviously in his parodies of hymns, in his sometimes overtly blasphemous cartoons, and in his mockery of the church and its clergy, particularly their tendency, as he saw it, to be mealy-mouthed or to water down what they really believed in order to be seen to be 'relevant' (the parody of the late-night religious TV programme 'Epilogue' in his second book, *A Spaniard in the Works*, is a good example of this). But not all of his parodies were cutting, as in the case of the account he gave in 1961 of the origin of the Beatles' name – 'it came in a vision: a man appeared on a flaming pie and said unto them, "from this day on you are Beatles with an A"'. On the *Let It Be* album he introduces the title song (by Paul) with a reference to the Charles Wesley hymn, 'Hark the Herald-Angels Sing', and when composing a track for the *Help!* album even recalled a religious poem his aunt Mimi had displayed in the house in which he grew up:

However black the clouds may be
 In time they'll pass away
 Have faith and trust and you will see
 God's light make bright your day.

If Lennon never really reconciled his orthodox Anglican roots, the deep scepticism they engendered in him, his occasional messianic pretensions, and his quest for meaning and fulfilment, it is perhaps salutary to reflect on a comment he made just a few months before his death:

People got the image that I was anti-Christ or anti-religion. I'm not at all. I'm a most religious fellow. I'm religious in the sense of [admitting there is] more to it than meets the eye. I'm certainly not an atheist. There is more that we still

could know. I think this magic is just a way of saying science we don't know yet or we haven't explored yet. That's not anti-religious at all.

So with respect to the song on which I shall shortly focus, while it is *possible* that its composer might in some indirect or implicit way have drawn upon half-remembered biblical references and images from far-off Sunday School days, I want categorically to avoid the suggestion that it might contain a deliberate or conscious religious message.

And this leads me to the third caveat I want to enter before engaging more directly with my subject, namely that, in seeking to reflect on one of Lennon's best-known songs, I am emphatically not claiming to have uncovered some hitherto hidden or double meaning in its lyric. Beatles songs were particularly subject to speculation as to their supposed 'real meaning', not least when they were thought to be concealing positive messages about the recreational use of drugs, though the composers themselves derided such 'research' and even parodied it in songs like 'Glass Onion' ('here's another clue for you all, the walrus was Paul'). (Apparently Lennon claimed to have written the most nonsensical verse of 'I am the Walrus' especially for the benefit of a teacher at his former primary school who he learned had set his class the task of analysing Beatles lyrics!) Attempts to discover the supposed hidden meanings in Beatle and other popular songs even led, in the mid-1970s, to the phenomenon of 'back-masking', to tracks being played backwards and the garbled sounds analysed for references to Satan, demon-possession and the underworld. What struck me about this at the time was not simply how 'forced' it all was – the listener needed to have the words they were about to hear spelled out before they heard the track as they would never make them out themselves; how predictable some of it seemed – did it take a genius to work out that a track such as 'Kiss, Kiss,

Kiss' by Yoko might, upon being heard backwards, convey the number of the Beast in the Book of Revelation? – but why it was thought that musicians would go to the trouble of including such esoteric messages in their songs, and why it was only ever music by artists who were already suspected of having occult leanings which was deemed to contain them. So in examining Lennon's lyric I will suggest no deeper meaning than appears on the surface.

But why spend time reflecting upon this song – other than as a way of paying tribute to what would have been its composer's 70th birthday?

Basically I want to argue that, for all that this song has been hailed as an atheistic anthem, its lyrics are not as far from reflecting orthodox Christian truths as might be thought. They even parallel, I want to suggest, visions of 'the world to come' in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and in the creeds of the church, which have important implications for the praxis of public theology. But in what sense?

The core imperative in the song is simply to imagine a better world – one without countries, and thus one in which there is nothing to fight or die for; one without hunger, greed, private possessions, or anything that might come between us as a human family or community; and, importantly, one without religion. [*play YouTube of Imagine*] On one level, as Philip Norman says in his recent biography of Lennon, it's all rather hackneyed and unalluring, 'a vista of purgatorial blandness... which would probably have sent John himself mad with boredom in five minutes.' Lennon may have set out to write something 'avowedly "spiritual"' in response to Harrison's 'My Sweet Lord' and McCartney's 'Let It Be', Norman notes, but lyrically this was hardly up to his usual standard, with poor rhymes, little evidence of his characteristic inventiveness, and a falsetto 'bridge' ('You-oo') far too 'poppy – too Beatly – for such

elevated subject matter'. *Rolling Stone* magazine described the song as 'undistinguished' and 'methodical', other critics as dull or pretentious, yet Lennon considered it to be as good as anything he had written with the Beatles, and it is evident from its truly global popularity, not to mention the numerous accolades it has received, that its vision has touched literally billions of people in the forty years since its composition.

In an interview with journalist David Sheff in 1980, Lennon claimed that the message of the song was not new but an iteration of that found in his previous material. "Give Peace a Chance" – we're not being unreasonable', he said. 'Just saying, "give it a chance". With "Imagine" we're asking, "can you imagine a world without countries or religions?" It's the same message over and over. And it's positive.' Tracks like 'Mother', 'Working Class Hero' and 'God' had also contained this message, Lennon said, but in too 'real' a form: "Imagine" was exactly the same message but sugar-coated', and that was why it became the big hit. I want to propose that in the song's call to 'imagine' a qualitatively better world than the one we actually confront, we might observe similarities with the call articulated by prophets such as Isaiah and Micah to visualize a time when there shall be no more weeping or cries of distress, when none shall fail to live out their full days, when all shall enjoy the work of their own hands, and when all shall sit under their own vines and fig trees. The parallels with the world Lennon envisages are not *too* strained, I suggest: Micah still speaks of individual nations, but they no longer wage war against each other and no one dies or kills in the cause of 'national interest': true brother- and sister-hood exists across old boundaries, which are increasingly seen to be artificial; as swords are beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, so peace prevails, even to the extent that wolf and lion no longer devour weaker prey or cause harm or destruction; and as

each person enjoys a stake in society, building houses and inhabiting them themselves, planting vineyards and eating their fruit, sitting securely under the shade of their own vines and trees, so greed, hunger and selfishness are no longer abroad and the world is 'shared'. Lennon's vision is very 'this-worldly', which is why it is often taken to be the antithesis of a 'religious' or specifically 'Christian' hope – but is the vision of Isaiah any less 'this worldly', set as it is specifically within the context of the creation of a 'new heavens and a new earth'?

I think the 'this-worldliness' of Scripture's vision of the future needs emphasising, not least as the influence of teaching which sees our ultimate destiny to be in 'worlds beyond' grows at an ever rapid pace. In Scripture, the denouement of history, as chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation makes clear, consists not in humanity being transported to 'where God is', but with 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God'. The home of God is 'among mortals', verse 3 affirms, and as if to underline this goes on to say that God 'will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them'. And then, in words which echo some of the Old Testament prophecy to which we have just alluded, 'he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

The context here again is a new heavens and a new earth: what God is doing in the Revelation account is not creating another totally new world to take the place of the one we now have, but making this one radically different. As Jürgen Moltmann has noted, 'Revelation does not say "Behold I create a new thing", but, "Behold, I make all things new.' The heaven/earth dualism which featured in the early chapters of John's vision is dissolved at the end in a new creation: now the tabernacle of God is with men and women on earth. 'Heaven on earth is the fulfilment of God's purposes',

as Christopher Rowland puts it, 'God is no longer apparently far off but immediate and manifest – very much part of that world of perfection and evident in it as God was in Paradise'. Indeed, as the African theologian Teresa Okure points out, the final two chapters of Revelation 'recapture' that original creation: since Adam's sin brought about the 'cursing' of the first creation (Genesis 3:17), so 'the final defeat of Satan, through whom this curse came about necessitates the redemption of creation itself; hence the rationale for the creation of the new heaven and the new earth.'

The sense that our future destiny lies in the here and now permeates not just the vision of John of Patmos, with its echoes of the Hebrew prophetic scriptures, but the whole of the Christian testament. It is *this* cosmos which God loved so much as to choose to identify with it by becoming incarnate within its history (John 3:16). It is *this* creation which St Paul depicts in Romans chapter 8 as 'waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God', and which 'will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God'; and it is on *this* earth that Christ prays for the kingdom to come and God's will to be done, as in heaven (Matthew 6:10). Christ's teaching about the kingdom – which we are told is already among or within us (Luke 17:21), and which is portrayed in the Gospels both as a present possession and a future inheritance – really makes no sense unless it is understood as being not just the 'end' but the ultimate completion of history.

The story of how the Christian church largely abandoned this hope of a new order being established here on earth is complex and much disputed, but two key points can be made. First, the expectation that the millennium, the thousand-year rule of Christ predicted in Revelation, would be realized on earth was assumed by many in the early church, certainly in so far as we can judge from the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus (and some more marginal figures such as

Prisca and Maximilla who anticipated the appearance of the new Jerusalem in mid-second century Phrygia). And, second, the reinterpretation of this literal, earthly millennium into an essentially 'spiritual' entity occurred in the wake of the transformation of the Christian community from a persecuted minority sect on the margins of society to custodian of the 'civil religion' of the empire. As the church became more comfortably situated within the existing order, we might be tempted to say, so the attraction of looking and hoping for a 'better one' began to recede. Thus in the writings of Origen in the third century and, particularly, Augustine in the fifth, we see the 1000-year reign of Christ understood as being already in process, having been inaugurated at his first appearance, and the references to the 'thrones' and 'judgment' in Revelation 20:4 detached from the context of the last judgment and depicted as 'the seats of the authorities by whom the Church is now governed'. As Richard Kyle has written, the millennium becomes for Augustine 'a spiritual outworking of the church's preeminent mission', namely the saving of souls. 'Next on God's schedule was not Christ's return to set up an earthly paradise. Rather, the church would accomplish its mission, Christ would return, and then the judgment.' Or as Bernard McGinn puts it even more starkly, though a shade controversially, Augustine 'immanentized eschatology by moving the meaning of history within the soul – the world ages and their goal are the model for the true meaning of history, the moral development of the believer.'

Belief, then, in a coming perfect age on earth became gradually sidelined, and by the middle of the fifth century references to a literal millennium in the writings of Irenaeus and others became suppressed and millenarianism declared a heresy. History was no longer moving toward a realization of the kingdom or new Jerusalem, it was thought, but had reached its climax with the Incarnation; and although there was still

a coming judgement and a final rest for the people of God – what Augustine defined as an eternal Sabbath or seventh age – it was now understood as outside or beyond history. History was no longer ‘in process’ but was more to be understood as a period of waiting during which the principal task for the church must be to rescue souls for the spiritualized existence that will follow the final passing of all things. As John Henry Newman once eloquently put it, ‘When once Christ had come... nothing remained but to gather in his saints... The light and life of men had appeared and had suffered and had risen again; nothing more was left to do... When [Christ] says that he will come soon, “soon” is not a word of time but of natural order.’

According to this schema, then, if there is any meaning to history it is now the moral development of the soul. The struggle between good and evil has been removed from the stage of history and ‘spiritualized’: it now takes place within the individual soul. The kerygma of the church must therefore centre on individual repentance and salvation, on pleading with souls to flee from the wrath to come and equipping them so to do. Salvation is largely worked out in the private, unseen, spiritual sphere, and its meaning found in inner transformation, not outer. All of which leads to the city of God being conceived, as Gershom Scholem has put it, as ‘a community of the mysteriously redeemed within an unredeemed world.’ At the core of this gospel is a profound scepticism that the world can be made a better place. It is cursed by the Fall, and although we are to do what we can to ameliorate the conditions under which we all live, the notion that the gospel might encourage us to struggle towards building the kingdom here on earth is seen as profoundly misguided. The world is ultimately to be escaped from, not transformed.

I want to suggest that Scripture knows little of this dualism and that, however paradoxical this might appear, its understanding of history, and of human

responsibility within it, is much nearer to what we would all-too-readily call the 'atheist' vision of a song like 'Imagine' than the thoroughly 'spiritualized' gospel popular in some influential sections of the contemporary church. And though this would be utterly rejected by Lennon and many others inspired by his song, the strongest argument in support of this assertion is the raising of Jesus from the dead, which, as St Paul tells us in I Corinthians 15:20f, is the first fruits of those who have died. Whatever actually happened during the first 'Easter' – and without there having been, as Tom Wright puts it, 'an event that actually occurred (in some sense) in time and space' Christianity makes no sense, either as a phenomenon or a praxis – the resurrection speaks of the irruption into history of 'the kingdom', of the future momentarily into the present. If, as Wright says, we understand the resurrection as 'only (what we call) a "spiritual event", either involving Jesus being alive now in some heavenly realm, or simply involving a new sense of faith and hope in our minds and hearts, the only events that will follow are various forms of private spirituality.' But in fact, as Wright argues, for Paul the resurrection of Jesus 'is neither an isolated and out-of-character divine "miracle", nor simply the promise of eternal life beyond the grave' but a challenge – because sin and death have now been defeated - to concretize now the radical themes of peace and justice that are at the heart of 'the kingdom', to participate in a new way of living by allowing Christ's peace and justice to replace our violence and selfish desires.

So Lennon as the inspirer of serious public theology? His song, which he once described as 'anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, anti-capitalistic', an evocation of the biblical vision of the 'new Jerusalem'? Well, I don't believe the similarities are too strained. In terms of the hope to see no more countries, what does Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek

mean in terms of the importance of national identities in the fellowship that Christ came to create? In terms of the reference to 'no possessions', is not the central characteristic of the supper which Jesus instituted to symbolize our unity the 'sharing' of the elements as interdependent members of the one body? Is what the song refers to as 'the brotherhood of man' so far from the depiction in Scripture of history culminating in a 'city', a metaphorical 'new Jerusalem', a community of saints? And – perhaps most paradoxical of all – is not the song's challenge to us to imagine no religion precisely of a piece with the statement of John of Patmos in Revelation 21:22 that he saw no temple in the new city, 'for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb'. Lennon later qualified the baldness of this lyric by saying he meant to convey the idea of 'no denominations of religion', of imagining a world 'not without religion but without this my-God-is bigger-than-your-God thing'; it's also possible, given the context of that reference, that he was thinking primarily of religion as a cause of war and bloodshed; but even taking that line at face value, is it so far removed from the implication that that verse in Revelation appears to be making that religious practices are only necessary, only 'make sense', in the (temporary) absence of that which they symbolize or foreshadow? In the new Jerusalem, John of Patmos appears to be saying, there is no need of a demarcated space where worship is to be offered, for God and Christ pervade the whole community. Similarly, there is no need of symbolic activities such as the Eucharist, Mass or Lord's Supper when the reality which they symbolize, true fellowship and one-ness in Christ, are finally and corporeally experienced. Might it not be said that if Christianity stands for anything it is its own abolition, the eventual realization of all that, at present, it can only represent, prefigure and anticipate in the most partial and inadequate way?

Where I would most obviously want to part company with Lennon is over the whole imperative of the song as he articulates it, in his call to 'imagine' a better world. 'Imagine' for Lennon, we need to be clear, did not mean simply 'picture in your head', 'conceive of' or even 'daydream about', but something more akin to 'wish for' or 'exert mental energy toward creating'. Lennon acknowledged two influences for that song: first, a book of poems by Yoko entitled *Grapefruit* published in 1964, which contained lines such as 'imagine one thousand suns in the sky at the same time', 'imagine your body spreading rapidly all over the world like a thin tissue' and 'imagine the clouds dripping. Dig a hole in your garden to put them in'; and so influential were these pieces, he claimed, that he should have given their author a co-writer credit for his song. But a second source of inspiration was what Lennon described as 'a little kind of prayer book' given to him by a friend, which was 'in the Christian idiom, but you can apply it anywhere.' It spoke, Lennon said, of 'the concept of positive prayer', and advised that to receive anything from God, we must first imagine it for ourselves. Lennon, as Steve Turner has put it, believed in imagination as a form of magic, something he himself spelt out in an advertisement he and Yoko placed in the *New York Times* in May 1979:

More and more we are starting to wish and pray. The things that we have tried to achieve in the past by flashing a "V" sign, we try now through wishing. We are not doing this because it is simpler. Wishing is more effective than waving flags. It works. It's like magic. Magic is simple. Magic is real. The secret of it is to know that it is simple, and not kill it with an elaborate ritual which is a sign of insecurity... Magic is logical. Try it sometime.

It is in the light of statements like this that we might understand the central message of John and Yoko's 1969 song and poster campaign 'War Is Over! If You Want It',

and their creation four years later of what they called the 'conceptual country' NUTOPIA, which had no land, no boundaries, no passports, no laws, 'only people'. But it is a million miles from the challenge laid down in the gospels to live out and anticipate the reign of God here and now, knowing that while we cannot bring it to fulfilment ourselves – it is, after all, the reign of *God* – our calling, as Matthew 6:33 puts it, is to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness', God's justice. It is also fundamentally unrelated to what Walter Brueggemann famously called the 'Prophetic Imagination', with its challenge to develop 'a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us' and to 'live in fervent anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give.'

Both St John and St Paul reiterate what I believe to be the thrust of the Gospels that human agency has a part to play in the creation of the new age. While there is clearly no other foundation stone than Christ himself (I Corinthians 3:11) Paul also speaks of himself (in the verse before) as a skilled master builder, commissioned by God, to contribute to the work of foundation-laying. While the new city speaks of perfection, as Chris Rowland, one of our foremost commentators on the Bible and apocalyptic points out, 'it is perfection rooted at least in part in human endeavour: on its twelve foundations are the names of the twelve apostles. Those vacillating faint-hearts of the gospels turn out to be foundations of the new Jerusalem.' Thus the construction of the new Jerusalem, the eschatological community, is an activity started here and now: it is not, as Rowland puts it, 'all left to some eschatological miracle; human agents infused with the Spirit of the new age may contribute to that future reign of God here and now in the midst of the debris of the old order.'

In encouraging his hearers to take a critical stance toward present injustices and inequities we might want to see parallels between Lennon and the Old Testament prophets, but I hesitate to push that very far. As I have been at pains to emphasise, I do not want to conscript Lennon into the church or turn him into any sort of advocate for the gospel. But I *do* want to offer the reflection that the conception, prevalent in many parts of the church, of the biblical vision of the 'new Jerusalem' as something disengaged from or outside the historical process, which would underpin an uncritical dismissal of Lennon's lyric as irredeemably atheistic, represents a break from the original message of Scripture and has severely weakened the church's impact in the world. Might not a fresh understanding of the kingdom of justice, peace and fellowship as the 'goal' (or *telos*) of history rather than its end give fresh impetus to the church to work towards those very goals, within the context of a comprehension of the historical continuity between the present and the future. The relatively new discipline, 'public theology', is of course precisely about discerning how the Christian faith can witness to this conviction, can seek to further projects committed to promoting justice, peace and genuine community in our world – but in so doing is it not really only reminding the church of its original calling? In many parts of the church a commitment to social justice *is* alive and well and growing, but is this not time for the *whole* church to refocus its energies, to recapture the dynamism of the message originally entrusted to it by its risen Lord?

Like millions of other admirers of John Lennon, I have stood at the spot in New York's Central Park, just across from the hotel where he was shot nearly 30 years ago, staring at the mosaic circle bearing the single word 'Imagine'. I have no idea what he himself would have made of the idea of a shrine to his memory, nor of the way the world is now – as far from being without international conflict, from

conquering greed and hunger, from knowing true brother- and sister-hood as it has ever been. It is interesting to reflect that at the time it first appeared, Lennon's song was taken by many political radicals as a hymn of encouragement at a time of defeat and exhaustion. In no sense do I wish to claim it as a source of inspiration to the church, God forbid, but in its evocation of a better world, and encouragement to us to begin to shape it, it is not, it seems to me, entirely without its challenge to people of faith.