

First Reflections

*on Bleeding for Jesus (DLT, 2021) by Andrew Graystone
Mark Meynell - October 2021*

lightly edited

It took me only a day to read this book and I'm reeling. It arrived while I was away and so have only just got to it. I knew it was going to be grim. But I simply wasn't prepared for quite *how* grim.

My emotions are a maelstrom: rage, shame, disappointment, confusion, despair. As I just said, I'm reeling. There is no place for a soundbite or platitude now, however well-intentioned. The story, as Andrew Graystone narrates what abuse survivors have shared, is one of pure horror. Nothing less. It is no surprise that several barely survived. It is horrendous that one in particular didn't.

So, to be honest, I don't really know what to do with all of this. I am floored. It feels like the sandcastle being corroded by incoming tides.

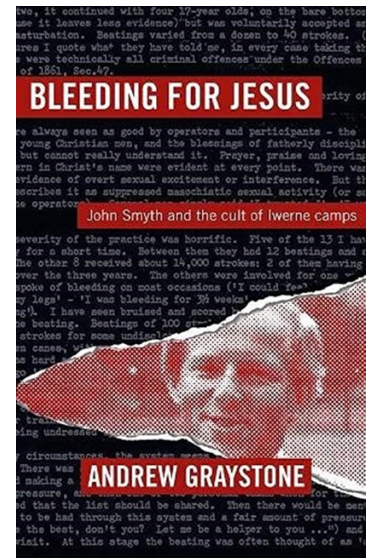
I. Too close to home

It is also a story that is horribly close to home, even though I'm a generation younger than the primary witnesses Graystone draws on. And I had never even heard of Smyth's name [until the news broke publicly in 2017](#). But many of the names mentioned in the book are friends, valued colleagues and mentors. Perhaps most significantly, I came to an adult faith in Christ through the ministry of Jonathan Fletcher in February 1989. And his older brother, David, is someone who mentored me in a loving (and low-key - of which more in a moment) way for 2 years. How can I not be thankful for that?

Yet, I was always aware of never being part of Jonathan's 'inner ring' and this was something I struggled with as a young believer. Was I not sound enough? Or cool enough? I now assume it's because I wasn't fun, athletic, or good looking enough. Thank goodness for that. In light of the recent exposure of what he did with (or, more accurately, to) several people, I'm hugely relieved.

For in Jonathan, there seems to have been a constant struggle to keep a malicious cruelty at bay (something, incidentally, I never sensed in David). This was concealed by his considerable charm and joviality, as well as sparks of ministry brilliance. But I am in no doubt about the wreckage he caused. I know this from individual friends. They include those directly and consistently abused, of course, as well as those treated abominably, like Robin his successor at Emmanuel. He would seem to go out of his way to undermine and belittle.

These folks are not exaggerating and there is far too much corroboration from additional sources. The [thirtyone:eight report from March 2021](#) and the [subsequent statement from the external members of the IAG](#) make that clear. And while there will be many who can testify to positive experiences of dealing with people like Jonathan, it is simply not good enough to try to offset them against those abused (as if that somehow cancels them out). Coupled with the myth of homogeneity (whereby we assume that the way a leader interacts with us must be the same as his engagement with everyone else), it is no wonder that people are reluctant to speak up. They fear either that they don't matter (being outnumbered by the leader's acolytes) or that they won't be believed (because of others' naivety about how manipulative and canny abusers can be). By all accounts, what I have said about Jonathan could easily be applied to John Smyth, who appears to have provide some kind of perverse template for Jonathan, despite being only a couple of years younger. Although, who knows who influenced whom more?



So this is a story that needed to be told and it is not hard to understand Andrew Graystone's determination. It's clear that for him, it is no mere journalistic scoop; there is a degree of righteous anger behind it, and who can blame him? I felt it too. I can't imagine the agony of the individuals (named or pseudonymous) mentioned in the book who have lived with this for so many years.

As I have said elsewhere, however, this comes close to home for other reasons too. I never went to Iwerne camps as a kid, but I did go from the New Year's student conference in 1990 (at which Jonathan was the main speaker, if memory serves) and helped out at Easter and in the Summer until 1996, first on the volunteer support team and then as a dorm leader. We got married in April 1997 and I was ordained in Sheffield in June 1997, and so life moved on. But some of my most cherished and important friendships are with people I met during those years and they continue to this day. For so many reasons, I cannot be anything but grateful for many of the faith and ministry foundations laid in those years. For sure there were many things I struggled with about Iwerne culture. Perhaps primarily because I'm a non-sporty muso who prefers art to kicking things, and also because I didn't grow up in an evangelical hot house culture. Those who knew me then know that I never sat easily within it. But I am still grateful. How can I not be?

Yet the contention of the book is that Iwerne camps were, and are, a cult. That is a shock, to say the least. But one I must take seriously. It must generate some genuine soul-searching because it is not a critique that Graystone flings out lightly. I can see exactly how he comes to his conclusions. As he concedes, it's notoriously hard to pin down definitions for cults, but they do share some hallmarks: a process of conversion, conditioning and coercion, for example (pp200-202). There is little doubt that these were essential elements to Smyth and Fletcher's grooming. Were they of Iwerne as a whole? I really don't think so. But then, will a member of a cult ever accept that they are a member of a cult? Of course not! To them it's normal. So you see the dilemma, I hope! Again, I'll come back to this. But as a long-standing friend from Iwerne said to me this week, I feel as if "I've been played all these years." I pushed back at that. But having now finished the book, I'm less confident.

The thing is, there will be some who want to reject this book in its entirety as exploitative and distorting, theologically or politically motivated, fear-mongering and gospel-damaging. On the other side, there will be those who find in its pages justification for every brickbat and assault on Iwerne camps (which, let's face it, is a very easy target for a host of reasons). The former regard attacks from 'insiders' as disloyalty and from 'outsiders' as persecution. The latter regard defences from 'insiders' as cultic evidence and from 'outsiders' as uncaring credulity. Well, I simply don't fall into either group, which I realise is going to please absolutely nobody (always a painful place to find oneself, even without a painful topic to analyse). There is far too much in this book that is important and desperately needed. But because of its serious flaws, my biggest concern is that those who need to wrestle with it the most will not even begin.

So (he writes very nervously), this is an attempt to chart a path between both extremes.

II. John Smyth's Abuses

The Horror

Graystone's focus is on John Smyth. He was unequivocally a sadist in the technical sense, taking perverse pleasure from naked beatings of young men all masked by the claim to concern for their spiritual welfare. These beatings were to be administered as a form of sin-purging post-confession and most were too impressionable or insecure to resist, let alone, question it. It was part of a process of sanctification, administered by 'a spiritual father' who out of the goodness of his heart wanted his son to feel the 'rod of discipline'. (p61)

In common with many abusers, it escalated. In the thorough report Mark Ruston wrote in 1982 (quoted in full pp68-72), several boys received literally thousands of cane or shoe strokes over a year or two. One described being unable to stop the bleeding for three and half weeks. It's horrific.

Once this came to light, the shock is that he was encouraged to leave the country, urged by people I know and respect greatly. A catastrophic error. Because in Zimbabwe, Smyth would set up Zambesi camps where the abuses were worse, if anything. Furthermore, they lacked the spiritual justification of sanctification now. Instead it was just for the discipline of rowdy teenagers.

Soon there were worrying rumours of casual nudity on Smyth's camps. Younger boys—those in Forms 1 and 2 (ages 11 and 12) were not permitted to wear underwear at all. At shower times, Smyth would stand naked, close to or sometimes inside the shower area, handling the boys soap or shampoo. He led the boys in prayers whilst he was naked. Alongside the persistent nakedness, reports were beginning to merge about a peculiar penchant for beating boys at camps with a table tennis bat. Unlike the beatings in Winchester there was no pretence that this was a spiritual exercise. This time the premise was that TTB (as Smyth called the beatings) was something between a punishment and a game. (p95)

What?! It beggars belief. This was never a feature of Iwerne! A Smyth speciality, evidently. A few pages later, Graystone quotes a letter Smyth wrote to parents of kids at the camp in which he explains the need to “whack them with a table tennis bat when necessary.” (p115) It was one of many dysfunctions and causes for concern in Zambesi Camps. Tellingly, Graystone makes the comment that “he was lacking the senior leaders that were such an important part of the Iwerne scheme.” (p94) The work was much more vulnerable to the exploitation of one man's perversity.

The combined effect of his abuses on individuals was devastating. The book describes two driven to attempt suicide. Who knows if others were too? It would hardly be surprising. And then there was the tragedy of Guide Nyachuru's death at only 14. The account is confusing because the events surrounding it are confusing. I don't suppose we'll ever know what happened. But there are too many unanswered questions. It was a catalyst for more change. The Smyths moved to South Africa.

The Hypocrisy

One aspect of the story new to me was the public profile Smyth enjoyed. I knew that he was a high-profile QC (ie senior barrister) but being a little bit too young at the time, I hadn't quite realised how high-profile. He was a crusader for Christian morals in a liberalising society, a stalwart ally of Mary Whitehouse in her prosecutions of Gay News in 1977 and then the National Theatre's production of Howard Brenton's play *Romans in Britain* (which depicted homosexual rape on stage) in 1981.

Then in South Africa he had a media presence and was drawn on for comment whenever some aspect of morality was up for debate. He was a reliable talking head to defend a traditional Christian position.

But all the time, he was indulging in the most horrific abuses, only of men (and often good looking men), when they and he were naked, after which he would kiss and hold them. At the very least, we have a case here of severe compartmentalisation.

There is a narrative commonly touted by the LGBT lobby that those most virulently opposed to the liberalising of sexual norms are often those who themselves are 'in the closet' and living in destructive denial. This seemed to be the case with Ted Haggard, president of National Association of Evangelicals in the USA, who had to resign in 2006 after a gay relationship he'd been in came to light. He had been a vociferous opponent of same-sex marriage. It's hard to see why John Smyth and Jonathan Fletcher are that different. The inconsistency stinks. An implication of the book seems to be that the same could be said for nearly all opposition from Iwerne products.

The Cover-Up

As with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, there were two scandals. The first involved the abuses; the second involved the concealment of those abuses. Despite their different theologies and purposes, the motivations for the latter (however well-intentioned) were the same. And in the end meant that there would be devastation on another continent, rather than stopping a wicked practice once and for all.

Graystone understandably, therefore, invests great efforts in trying to trace who knew what when, and this forms the primary basis of his censure (hence his roll-call in the appendix). It wasn't just the Iwerne camp leadership (by then long under the leadership of David Fletcher who had taken over from 'Bash'). It is telling that John Thorn, headmaster of the school attended by the majority of Smyth's original targets (Winchester), appears equally keen to keep things low-key. One of the things that makes it more complex is that so did several families.

The following month, some of the fathers of Smyth's victims, all prominent members of the Establishment, visited John Thorn, the headmaster of Winchester College. The men told Thorn that they didn't want stories about their boys getting into the public domain so they had no desire to take the matter to the police. They found a mutual interest in playing down what they knew. Thorn was shocked at what he heard, but also desperate to protect the reputation of the school. He contacted Smyth who, with a typical display of *chutzpah*, invited him for Sunday lunch. Together, Thorn, [the fathers of Simon] Doggart and [Andy] Morse drew up an undertaking for Smyth to sign, saying that he would never visit the college again. Thorn promised the parents that the statement would be held by the college and passed onto his successors. On 11 October 1982, Thorn accompanied two of the author parents to a painfully awkward meeting at Orchard House [Smyth's home in Winchester].

... The next day Thorn wrote to Graham's father. He described Smyth as 'a sick man and a pathetic figure.; He tried to be reassuring. 'We have I feel certain rendered him pretty well harmless, and he has been more or less expelled from the evangelical community.' What he did not say was that although Smyth had given a 'gentleman's agreement' not to beat boys, he had refused to sign the injunction. (pp81-82)

Grim indeed is the irony that the various efforts to protect the good name and reputation of both 'the Work' at Iwerne and the school eventually resulted in precisely the opposite outcome. Iwerne camps have now had to close completely, merged with the other Titus Trust camps (which despite appearances, is more than just window-dressing). I'll come back to that. Admittedly it took decades, but it did all emerge. As I say, I can't imagine what such a long delay did to those with so much pain buried.

The sense of heaviness and darkness over this whole saga is overwhelming at times. A ministry that sought to bring light and hope and purpose was itself exploited and abused by individuals who had nefarious ends (if unconsciously so). The bigger question though is whether or not these bad apples manifest deeper, more disturbing realities. Graystone argues that they certainly do.

Apologists for the Iwerne movement like to suggest that John Smyth was just a 'bad apple' – a singular example of a corrupt leader in an otherwise good work. But as survivor Lee Furney says, bad apples grow on diseased trees. Without doubt it was the culture of Iwerne that facilitated the abuse of John Smyth, and also of Jonathan Fletcher. It is not only the individuals who were abusive, but the culture itself. Good people failed to stop Smyth, and ultimately prevented him from facing earthly justice. That failure was a result of the toxic mix of personality and power that the Iwerne/Titus network wielded, and continues to wield within the contemporary church. The powerful theology and culture of the movement has been leveraged in

contemporary debates on gender, sexuality and abuse. It is in this culture that predatory pastors such as Smyth are formed, and groom their victims. (p200)

There is rather a lot going on in that paragraph. It binds together undeniable narratives of abuse and the culture in which it emerged and even prospered, with wider theological debates and controversies currently raging in the Anglican Church. It certainly makes clear that for many people, including the book's author, there is a direct connection between conservative theologies, traditional ethical positions, and catastrophic abuse. But then, you'd expect nothing less in the teaching characteristic of a cult.

This is where I begin to feel uneasy for a very different reason. Because isn't it also the case that a perfectly good barrel of apples get ruined by the introduction of some bad apples?

But my fear in articulating it is that some might take these reasons as tantamount to rejecting the claims of the survivors. Far from it. I have no doubt whatsoever that what they suffer(ed) is despicable and unconscionable. And I am clear that these agonies ARE symptomatic of cultural issues of substance. These must be faced, both within the Iwerne network and wider evangelical sphere (something I've been blogging about for many months now).

The problem is that *Bleeding for Jesus* overreaches. My biggest concern is that because of the book's flaws, its main concern will be (and, in fact, already has been in some quarters) dismissed. That would be disastrous and merely compound the agonies.

III. Concerns that undermine this book's case

- ◆ **Editing?** A relatively insignificant point, but it is a little off-putting in a serious book when a whole paragraph gets repeated, or when individuals get reintroduced when they reappear in the narrative (unnecessary when there is a good index). Having lived in Uganda for four years, it was odd suddenly to find that the Ugandan Vice-President got involved with the Smyth debacle (p93) - but of course, this was a weird typo and it should have been Zimbabwe.
- ◆ **Inaccurate?** more of a concern is the fact that there are some claims that are incorrect, in that it repeats assertions which have been disproved. Here is [James Stileman's statement about the matter](#), Here too is the [Scripture Union statement to correct their March 2021 summary](#). Of course, onlookers like me glaze over at the various refutations of timings and who knew what - but since the book's claims revolve around a conspiracy to conceal, it is striking that Stileman insists on documentary evidence confirming this was not the case. Graystone comes across in the book as one determined to go public with a story that others desperately concealed from him, that's untrue. Stileman even quotes Graystone's letter to the Iwerne Trust on 8th Jan 2015, "James Stileman has provided me with a comprehensive briefing together with sight of the relevant documents."

I don't have the kind of forensic mind (nor the time) that can plough through differing accounts of timelines and meetings that detective work demands. Some have been doing that online, both for and against the general case of the book. However, it is surely unsettling when some basic details are inaccurately reported.

- ◆ **Corroboration?** any investigation as serious and upsetting as this one is bound to be complex and involved. It is no surprise that various reports into the Smyth and/or Fletcher etc aftermath have taken (or are still taking) months and months. It is clear that Graystone has been involved in this story for several years, initially as a professional PR consultant and subsequently as someone who has felt great compassion for the victims and their families. That perseverance is commendable and inspiring. I don't doubt his commitment to them. I just fear a degree of partiality, because there are some victims' perspectives he seems less anxious to

engage with. I have known and deeply valued Alasdair Paine for nearly 35 years, but until his statement about the book went online, I had no idea at all that he had been a victim. More to the point, he was actually a key link in the chain for Smyth being first exposed, being one of, and perhaps *the*, first person to alert Mark Ruston (pp65-66). So it is astonishing to find his story told in the book without his permission or having been consulted for his perspective on the crucial events (but his testimony is quoted frequently, presumably taken from some anonymous source). It hardly seems consistent in a book like this, in which the need for protecting a survivor's anonymity ought to be paramount. For example, Graystone (rightly) shows great sensitivity to Smyth's children, his son PJ especially. Could the same not have been offered to all the other survivors?

- ◆ **Innuendos and slants?** From time to time, it seemed as if the purpose was to place a thought in the reader's mind without making a specific charge. It is a classic tabloid tactic, of course. So when speaking of the Archbishop of Canterbury, we read:

Archbishop Justin may or may not have been a victim of abuse himself as a child or a young adult. What is certain is that his formative years were spent in cultures where bullying and abuse were prevalent. (p157)

What is that saying exactly? Nothing. He has never claimed to have been abused. But it plants a lingering thought. Then the second sentence there is extraordinary. It is certain because it could be said of practically anybody of that generation (whether they went to boarding schools or not)! But the sentence seems to serve merely to tar Justin Welby with the same brush as Smyth and Fletcher. Or take the pseudonymous author of the 1970 book *The Returns of Love* which "was widely speculated to have been written by John Stott". (p17) We are told that it was not in fact by him but by 'one of his young colleagues', a strange statement because from what I have gathered, there are only about two or three people still alive who actually know who it was. So it's interesting the book can be so categorical. But it seems that the purpose in mentioning it is to infer Stott's homosexuality, in much the same way he does with Bash's in the appendix. I understand why this conclusion occurs to people but could there be a bigger agenda here with the book?

At other times, this became more or less transparent, as with this sentence. I agree that the hypocrisy of the man is rank and I, for one, am deeply uncomfortable about cases like those that Smyth & Whitehouse pursued. But it is easy to see who to root for here:

I realised that Smyth was commuting up to London every Monday and exercising his considerable legal powers to crush a typewritten free-sheet that was emboldening the newly emerging gay community. Then he was going home to Winchester, where he was beating young naked men until they bled. And he was doing both in the name of Jesus. (pp2-3)

It's a truly appalling story. But the rhetoric put me on my guard immediately.

It was notable that apart from John Stott, several of the actors like Bash and David Fletcher are described as 'not particularly bright' or 'particularly intelligent'. The exceptions are Jonathan Fletcher and John Smyth. Well, of course. But then, when describing Bash's sexuality, he wants to have his cake and eat it. On the one hand, 'it doesn't mean that his relationships were necessarily inappropriate in terms of sexual exploitation' (again there's a lot going on in that sentence), on the other hand "Nash was clearly drawn to boys" and "Nash's sexuality was clearly gay, but there was never any question that it could be expressed", despite John Stott's categorical denial of the fact. (pp230-231) A hermeneutic of suspicion at work, methinks. I never knew Bash. I've no idea if I would have warmed to him or not. Perhaps not. But the argument from silence conforms to today's presumptions about sexuality (which I suspect will already be passé in a decade or two) but it serves to tar the man with the same brush as Smyth (well, of course) and ratchet up the sense of the ministry's dangers.

- ◆ **Historical Contexts?** It was in the epigram to his stunning 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*, that L. P. Hartley put it so succinctly. “*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*” It has become something of a platitude since, of course, but it is an important observation. It strikes me that some of the obvious alienness of the Iwerne vision makes it easier to vilify according to recent *mores*. Please note, this is not to inhibit such criticism, as will become clear. Even so-called ‘products’ of the work can be circumspect and critical. We simply need to take care that the criticism doesn’t subsume more than intended.

There is no doubt that class prejudice and rigidity have been a cancer in the British psyche for generations. Inevitably, this is reflected in church culture. Are we more conscious of it, less bound to it, and more intolerant of it today? Perhaps. I hope so. Perhaps the development of multicultural Britain in parallel to the decline of British influence globally have both played a part. There’s clearly more to do. But this all serves to make the assumptions of previous generations all the more culpable. So when Bash’s vision to reach boys from the top public schools (in other words, the top strata of the higher strata) is laid out, we are shocked. Would such a vision be acceptably pioneered today? Undoubtedly not. Nearly a century ago, any opposition would have been derived not so much from the strategy but from the evangelicalism of its pioneers. See, for example, the horror expressed in the letters to *The Times* when Billy Graham first addressed University of Cambridge students in the 1950s.

As presented, the way the vision played out in the creation of camps for teenagers replete with a commandant, officers and a manual (known as ‘camp efficiency’) makes it all seem horrendous. Graystone does note that some of the practices, like Bash’s invitation for boys to stay with him ‘by later standards would be regarded as completely inappropriate. Even for the time, it shows a lack of sensitivity to the imbalance of power between a young disciple and a revered leader.’ (p232) That’s certainly true. Even a phrase like ‘imbalance of power’ in ministerial contexts is one I’ve only come to grapple with in recent years. And I personally believe it’s crucial and one we ignore at everybody’s peril. But who knows how it would have been perceived decades ago? Now again, it is clear that this kind of culture made it much easier for abuses to take place unchallenged. This absolutely must be faced, and it is to expose such a context that Andrew Graystone necessarily writes. The problem is that so much *else* in the dysfunctions of twentieth century British society is equally at fault. The ethos of the Boy Scouts movement was in direct parallel, and inevitably around the war years, the encouragement of boys especially to join cadet corps was integral to the country’s war effort. After all, the Iwerne culture was intentionally designed to mimic boarding school life (to create as little cultural dissonance as possible) so that boys could come under the sound of the gospel unimpeded. This is the historical context into which Iwerne fitted seamlessly. Which is precisely why its origins do not fit in today’s!

- ◆ **Historical Naivety?** The question that has exercised me more than anything (apart from the horror of the abuses themselves by Smyth and Fletcher) is how Smyth could have been packed off to Africa. I spent several years living in East Africa and my work ever since has sought to serve the global church in different places in an intentional posture of allowing indigenous leadership to determine what happens in their areas. If there is a role for cross-cultural workers from the west in the global church, it is surely *only* on such terms. So I could only agree with the Zimbabwe leaders who complained that “the problem is one we inherited from England.” (p121) It is a gruesome symbol of how much African churches have had to endure as a result of such an inheritance. What on earth could these leaders, to several of whom I owe a great deal, have been thinking? At best, I can only assume a kind of naivety which is no longer tenable but which forty years ago must presumably have been common. There is no doubt that David Fletcher and Mark Ruston regarded Smyth’s activities as evil and abusive in no uncertain terms; Ruston even identified as cultish. (p70) Could it be that they might have felt

that its exposure would have been sufficient to stop Smyth in his tracks? That not only did the boys' parents know all, but so did the Winchester headmaster and members of the Iwerne fraternity. Wouldn't the shame of such exposure hold him back? Could this not be a factor behind wanting to give people 'a second chance', out of Christian grace (see p87)?

I must confess that until I started attending the mandatory safeguarding training courses that are the norm in modern ministry, this is precisely what my instinctive thought would have been. "They won't do it again, knowing that we know what they know." Etc etc. That is painful naivety, though, isn't it? And for victims, the terrifying means of extending their risk. We know better now. We also know much better how systems work in generating a corporate blindness to bad practice and leadership.¹ The plan to shuffle Smyth off-stage proved catastrophic. There can be no concessions to serial abusers. It was the naivety in the first place which the likes of Smyth exploit. His brilliance was cruelly applied; he "was extraordinarily sly in his dealings with the boys." (p34) This is the nature of 'grooming', something else we are much wiser to now. He groomed the boys, the Iwerne network, his own family.

Part of the devious technique of sexual abusers like John Smyth is to create self-doubt in everyone around them. It should go without saying that the abuser's family are the most likely to be groomed in this way. Even after the Channel 4 reports, John Smyth continued to groom his wife to support him. His three surviving children came together with a fresh realisation that their father had manipulated them for decades, but he refused to answer their repeated requests to meet and talk about what had happened. He accused them of disloyalty and disrespect; of being bad children and bad Christians. True to form, he invoked God to justify his position... (p177)

I say this not to exonerate truly wrong, even catastrophic, decision-making. I can perhaps understand the thought processes around the original exposure and encouragement to emigrate. What is far harder to grasp is why efforts to stop Smyth were so weak after it emerged that he had not been shamed into desisting from his abuse in Zimbabwe. That is truly disturbing. I realise that everything is much murkier and harder to navigate in the midst of such traumas than we might hope, even knowing what we know today. But it is exacerbated when there are prevailing winds in a culture that mask an abuser's true destination. This is why examining a culture is so fundamental to preventing such horrors recurring.

Two quick points before moving on to the issue of culture.

- ◆ On 'Bash' himself. Bash was an easy target. It's not hard to cast aspersions from his nickname (his real name was Eric Nash), especially because of the Smyth and Fletcher perversions (a cheap shot, if ever there was one). Yes he was eccentric, if not plain weird. He had significant, and for our times, deeply concerning blindspots. Yet there is absolutely no evidence or suggestion that he was anything but appropriate in his dealings with boys. But there is just enough to weave a portrait of the leader that every cult needs. I couldn't help but think of the way the media portrayed Christopher Jefferies, the former Clifton housemaster who was the landlord of Joanna Yeates, the tragic murder victim in 2010. It's a matter of guilt by weirdness. Now, this does NOT mean Bash was flawless. Nor was his vision... There are questions to be raised about his leadership style which verged on the authoritarian, for example. But that doesn't seem to be the book's focus.
- ◆ Theological reductionism? It has become a trope to suggest that belief in substitutionary atonement necessarily leads to abusive leadership styles, and ultimately the kinds of abuse

¹ I write about this in *A Wilderness of Mirrors* (2015, Zondervan), noting the work of Philip Zimbardo in *The Lucifer Effect*: he was the lead in a project that became infamous, *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, but he found himself forced to revisit the subject years later after the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. (*Wilderness*, p52f)

we're dealing with here. I have no doubt that there are connections. In fact, church history shows that every doctrine can be exploited for unhelpful, harmful and dangerous practice; and it's certain that all heresies can be. But to suggest that this is inevitable the result of evangelical thought. There is an odd point made on p221 about John Stott taking a "more inclusive approach" to the atonement in the Lausanne covenant of 1974, than Bash presumably. It's true that there were fundamentalist streaks to Bash's theology, and Stott made great efforts to differentiate evangelicalism from fundamentalism through much of his writing (this is one reason he was given such a wide platform in the USA). They really are not the same thing. Nevertheless, it's hard to think of a more robust, thorough and scholarly defence of substitutionary atonement than Stott's 1986 magnum opus *The Cross of Christ*. It is facile and intellectually lazy to suggest that abuse must result from such a belief, thereby justifying any doubts about sustaining that belief. Surely, a far more constructive approach is to look at all beliefs of whatever churchmanship and simply ask how broken, damaged and sinful hearts can distort and twist them for their own ends. Abuse is hardly the preserve of English public schoolboys, or men, or repressed homosexuals, or anyone else.

So at last we come to my first attempt at some of the cultural problems that need to be faced. I don't doubt that I have glaring blindspots, made all the more glaring by this attempt, because I'm a fellow traveller in many ways.

IV. Concerns about the Culture

The perennial problem of class

An inherent problem in a ministry working within a culture is that it will never challenge that culture's blindspots. How could it be expected to? This is not to suggest complacency. Prophets have always been required to challenge the status quo. But not everybody is a prophet, much to the prophets' chagrin. One of the reasons I suspect that Iwerne is so controversial is that it has worked with the grain of what many identify as an engine of the British class system, private schools. It functioned like boarding schools to reach them.

A less toxic analogy might be a ministry working exclusively with artists and musicians, or those in the highest levels of sport, a group that makes the most of a shared interest and culture for Christ. As someone with two left feet, I know that I would be lost in the world of professional sport and wouldn't cut much ice at all. People are most comfortable with people who are most like them. That's simply a fact. Trying to remove as much cultural baggage as possible is a basic tenet of mission. Now there are a *lot* of questions raised *by that*, of course, not least the knotty problems of that missiological bane, the 'homogenous unit principle'. Indeed a notorious manifestation of the principle (which says you need groups of the same types of people to reach others who are the same) was the growth of Tutsi churches and Hutu churches in the 1980s. It was one factor in the horrors of the 1994 genocide being perpetrated by church-goers of various stripes. The church is emphatically not meant to be homogenous. Unity that overcomes and embraces differences is precisely what should subvert the world's categories (Eph 2:11-20 etc etc).

But a central missiological conundrum has ever been, "how can you expect someone to be sanctified before they're justified?" I went to boarding schools from 8-18. I was arrogant and entitled. I was a snob. I just know it. Humanly speaking, I'm not sure I would have listened much to someone *not* like me. I've learned better now. I've been humbled, necessarily. In all kind of ways. It's one of the reasons I loved working in East Africa where people didn't know what Iwerne was, hadn't heard of my school, and couldn't tell much from my accent. I was just an English *muzungu* (white man) - something that has its own baggage, to be sure. But that baggage could be subverted by being teachable and serving.

I think that if Iwerne had a fatal flaw it was the narrow exclusivity of its vision. It inspired the creation of several other camps working with private school children, all under the Scripture Union banner, but the Iwerne camps were always focused on “the top 30 schools”. In other words, with an elite within the elite. If you didn't attend one of those, then you would be encouraged to go to one of the others. Despite all the pragmatic justifications for those, it's not hard to see how this might foster rather than challenge a sense of superiority. My understanding is that there were discussions in the past, as the ministry evolved, to shift the criteria for attendance to groupings of schools by geography rather than status. At a stroke, that would have subverted some of the snobbery - and indeed that is what has happened in the last couple of years since the closure of Iwerne camps. My understanding is that previously designated 'Iwerne schools' have been shared out amongst the other camps by geographical proximity. There will still be detractors, naturally. But this is part of a much wider debate about private education generally, not a million miles from how to justify working in boarding school chaplaincy, say.

What is not always acknowledged is that the people who came to Christ through this work did not remain as culturally monochrome as commonly assumed, even if they came from such similar backgrounds. I have no statistics but there is no way that everybody coming through these camps ended up in ordained ministry, still less could they all have ended up 'at Iwerne churches'. Nor did they remain within a narrow band of evangelicalism or upper-middle class culture. What some certainly felt, however, especially in the earlyish decades, was that by moving outside these spheres they had gone beyond the pale. There was a cohesiveness to the culture that made it harder to follow different paths. In some ways, I think this is where Jonathan Fletcher's type of influence has been more widely felt (quite aside from the gruesome punishment culture he perpetuated). Failure to conform to his views of what was strategic or appropriate could provoke scorn and ridicule (something I received from him in small measure). When the 31:8 report reported a culture of fear within areas of evangelicalism, it is important to understand that this is precisely the kind of behaviour which generated it.

The Iwerne I experienced for those few years in the 1990s was a far cry from the martial system of the 1930s, largely because boarding schools had evolved to be institutions far removed from their Dickensian caricatures. I was struck at the time when starting out as a leader how much emphasis was placed on *not* following the practices of cults. I had no idea of the background to this, but we were regularly reminded that cults control people through manipulation and sinister practices (such as food or sleep deprivation, love bombing, forms of relational coercion etc). We were in no uncertain terms taught to avoid such things. The mentoring of individuals in dorm groups (and certainly in recent decades the practice of sleeping in the same dorms was stopped) was meant to be with the lightest of touch. A brief conversation here, a chat in public and outside there. Never in a closed room, definitely not alone in a car etc. Like any way of organising ministry it can seem contrived and forced. But I still value the friendships I have now with the leaders that started like this. It is why I was so surprised by Nicky Gumbel's widely quoted tweets about Jonathan Fletcher, in which he expressed gratitude for the 3 hours a week Jonathan spent with him in Cambridge. By the time I was a leader, that was way overboard.

The point here is that the work did evolve. I would say it became increasingly hard for abuses to occur. Of course, I could be very wrong. Where I think concerns about wider evangelicalism remain, which perhaps have been problems with the Iwerne work from the start, are as follows.

Too driven by worldly influence?

The fatal flaw of the work mentioned above (seeking to reach the elite of the elite) reflects a bigger problem, signs of which I think we can detect in ministries like Ravi Zacharias International Ministries as well as the Christian Right as a whole in the USA. This is the idea that the key to mission is worldly power and influence. Bash's vision recognised the way of the world in the 1930s and beyond: the sons of privilege at these schools will lead their worlds come what may. So how

much better if they do that as Christian believers? Fair enough. But how hard it is to pursue that ministry without endorsing or believing in the social and philosophical foundations of the *status quo*. Thus when a ministry's reputation amongst the powerful becomes threatened, it becomes almost impossible to conceive of ministry after that reputation is broken. That is why it needs protecting, perhaps at all costs.

Which is where the trouble starts. It's easy to identify that in retrospect, of course.

Too wedded to pragmatism over character?

This influence is essentially derived because of a missiological pragmatism: in other words, using whatever works to reach *these* people in *this* particular culture. Those who are good at that, whether effective youth workers, or brilliant public speakers, or successful church planters, are heralded as the models to follow. There is not much room here for the socially awkward, or the broken, or the incompetent. Even if they are godly and humble people with a love for others. Pragmatism trumps character every time. This is in part what explains the longevity and influence of some big names on either side of the Atlantic. But, again, as many of us have been saying for a while, this is tragic. The result is a community that resembles the world into which it is embedded and not one that reflects the beauty and character of Christ.

A corollary of this pragmatism is the way it marginalises a true Christian spirituality, the deep dependence on God in our brokenness and fallenness, and above all, helplessness. The pragmatist seeks a workable technique which gets round the need for humility, for facing doubts, for letting God be God. None of us would ever say explicitly that this is what we're doing, of course. We still have our prayer meetings with their shopping lists and intercession needs, we sing his praises and work for his glory. But the temptation to "assist God" in other people's discipleship journeys is great. It was something that came home forcibly to me when writing my book on depression a few years ago.² I realised how much of our discipling and mentoring of others can actually enfeeble their agency as adults, all the more so when dealing with mental illness. It is one thing to give advice, it's another to do it in such a way that the person feels they have no choice but to follow your lead. It is coercive or manipulative somehow. So while Graystone clearly oversteps in calling Iwerne a cult (and by including the word in the book's subtitle thus guaranteeing media interest), it is because of a tendency to "coercive control" that aspects of its culture should be described as *cultic*.³ The most horrific of Smyth's abuses was perpetrated on 'Tony', who was subjected to a beating lasting **a full twelve hours**. The justification for this was almost as hideous. Smyth decided that Tony "needed an experience to 'crush his spirit' once and for all." (p60)

The point is that a line was crossed, but it was crossed *long* before beating was deemed the answer. It was crossed when Smyth took upon himself the responsibility for somebody else's discipleship. We are usurping the unique role of Holy Spirit in convicting and sanctifying. And that is a cultural problem that is far too prevalent in evangelicalism. It is seen in less brutal form in the practice of one vicar who never allowed his curates to beat him at squash (because that wouldn't be good for them, apparently) or insisting on junior staff or apprentices always having to do particularly menial tasks (because that would be good for them). It is itself a form of anthropocentric pragmatism that betrays a secularism every bit as worldly as its atheist counterpart. For it has no use for God. The reality is that God does indeed tend to break people's pride and self-sufficiency as he matures them - that has been a constant in Christian spirituality since the early Church. But only God knows how and when to do it. We do not.

Too presumptuous about the right to leadership?

² When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend (IVP 2018)

³ This post on Surviving Church is helpful for clarifying terms and is my source for using the terms 'coercive control': <http://survivingchurch.org/2021/09/30/is-the-iwerne-movement-a-cult/>

It's not hard to see why someone coming through this kind of ministry would expect to become a leader. That's what boarding schools produce, and so naturally, it's what Iwerne produces. But one of the things I learned (often the hard way) from working cross-culturally is that one of the great enemies of godly ministry and mission is presumption. We presume to know best, to understand best, even (somewhat oxymoronically) to serve best. This is where privilege so often manifests, in the entitlement that presumes certain churches (usually in London) led by certain people from certain backgrounds should obviously be the people to lead national and even international movements. It may be that they are, but just as likely they are not. It was this thinking that provoked me to write the satirical piece [I Am A Leader](#), recently.

So where are we?! There is so much in Andrew Graystone's book that horrifies. It is a story that must be told and we must learn from it. We must be alert to the deviousness and manipulations of those who abuse. We must identify aspects of a culture that foster rather impede such people, and we must work hard to be different. At the same time, it's hard to deny that God was at work in the midst of this, somehow, mysteriously, perplexingly. I can testify to that in my own life. I have very many positive things that came out of my involvement. I'm just not sure the book allows for this complexity. I don't see an acknowledgment (unless I've missed it) of a mixed legacy from Iwerne's work in the book, just a toxic one. Many of us have been gripped by Mike Cospers's 2021 podcast series *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, which analyses the ministry of Mark Driscoll in Seattle and the devastation it brought. It's not identical to the Smyth/Fletcher and Iwerne story, but there are certainly uncomfortable parallels. But Cospers doesn't make Graystone's mistake of analysing it solely as a sociological disaster zone. He opens the series with testimonies of those who came to faith and found purpose through Mars Hill, because that is the reality. It happened. He simply recognises that the presence of good fruit from a ministry is the result of divine grace. It can never be taken as a divine endorsement of everything that ministry represents.

My fear is that the solution hinted at the book is more than the closing down of a ministry but a radical shift away from evangelical theology and ethics, even when it has a heritage and legacy extending far further back than the Reformation. Andrew Graystone was absolutely right to tell this story. I'm just not sure I always agree with what that story means. I suspect I'm only scratching the surface and that many others will join the conversation. I am also acutely conscious of my thinking shifting all the time in this fog! So what is written here is just a snapshot of thinking at this time. Next week will be a different story.

Mark Meynell

October 2021

Various Links

- ◆ [31:8 report](#) on Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Wimbledon; [IAG additional statement](#)
- ◆ [statement by St Andrew the Great Cambridge wardens](#); [by Alasdair Paine](#); from [Bishop of Ely](#)
- ◆ [James Stileman's statement about his involvement](#) and the [Scripture Union statement correcting their previous summary from March 2021](#).
- ◆ Various posts on [Surviving Church](#)
- ◆ [My posts over the last year on the state of UK evangelicalism](#).
- ◆ Mike Cospers's podcast series [The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill](#)