

Telling tales about Alpha

Posted: 22 Feb 2012 @ 00:00

Church Times

A new novel by Alex Preston follows a group of young ex-Oxbridge urbanites who are exploring Christianity through a church-run course. **Sarah Meyrick** talks to the author about his own experiences of doubt and faith

A COUPLE of years ago, Alex Preston was working full-time in the City of London. Like many Oxford graduates, he had drifted into a career as an analyst and trader, and had never really meant to stay so long. He lasted ten years, by which time he was global head of trading at the Carlyle Group's leveraged finance division. Then he did what he had always meant to do, and quit — just as the City went into meltdown — to reinvent himself as a writer.

His first novel, *This Bleeding City* (Faber & Faber, 2010), was about a young trader who sees his life collapse around him at the height of the credit crunch. It drew heavily on his own experience of City life, and was well received by the critics. He scooped prizes in the Spear's and Edinburgh Festival awards.

Now he has turned his attention to another aspect of London life which he knows first-hand. *The Revelations* is about four ex-Oxbridge friends who become caught up in a highly attractive religious movement. "The Course", led by a charismatic priest with global ambitions, is designed to appeal to glamorous, young, and wealthy City types, and hooks them in with fork suppers, slick talks, and the promise of answers to life's big questions.

We meet the four main characters just as they become Course leaders, which means that they are given the responsibility of turning seekers into converts, as they progress through the programme.

It soon emerges that, behind the façade, each of them is fighting personal demons. Abby and Marcus, husband and wife, are desperately unhappy. Abby, who works for the Course full-time, has suffered a series of miscarriages, and is insecure in their marriage; Marcus, meanwhile, drinks heavily, and increasingly finds himself questioning whether his faith is real.

The beautiful and self-destructive Lee cannot stop herself sleeping with every available man — apart from the only one who loves her — and taking photographs of her conquests. And unattractive Mouse (who chose his nickname because he loves *The Wind in the Willows*) is desperate to be part of the in-crowd, just as he was at university — and even more desperate in his love for Lee.

THE novel charts the passage of the Course. The programme includes a retreat (when everything is carefully orchestrated so that people begin speaking in tongues) at a creepy Oxfordshire mansion, owned by the Earl, who is helping to finance the Course through murky financial practices. By the end of the novel, everything has unravelled, rather horribly.

The Course, of course, is a thinly disguised version of Alpha. It is a world that Alex Preston and many of his friends encountered when they arrived in London from university, desperately seeking . . . well, something. Alpha — and all that goes with it — seemed terribly attractive.

“It’s about how my generation were all in our early 20s, looking for some form of faith, some way of believing,” he says. “It felt as if there was a strong sense of latency that needed explaining.

“It started at Oxford, and continued in London. Everywhere I went, I kept encountering the Alpha course. It was directed at young people, and seemed a sensible way of exploring belief. And before I did it, I really thought it was what I was looking for.”

Reality proved different, however. He found the experience highly seductive, but the version of Christianity which was served up with the polenta deeply unpalatable. Some of this is about what he regards as an over-literalistic interpretation of the Bible, and also to do with attitudes to sexuality.

The Course was full of beautiful young people (“big-teethed men with flushed cheeks and girls in pink pashminas and blonde hair with surging hormones and tons of money”, he has said elsewhere). “Because telling people not to have sex is a surefire way of getting them to do it, the sexual tension was palpable. And the way it’s presented that Alpha can heal homosexuality — I think that’s positively medieval.

“In the book, they are all struggling with the hypocrisy of the whole thing. They want to live good lives, yet it’s a struggle not to fall into an antinomian way of living, where everything is OK as long as you say sorry on Sunday.”

PRESTON is stung by a recent article in the *Evening Standard* which suggested that he is an atheist. It is more that he found the Christianity presented by Alpha too simplistic. “[Alpha] felt to me, when I saw it advertised, that it was exactly what we were waiting for — a way of getting young people into church in a thoughtful way. I still think there is a need for that. But Alpha doesn’t offer a belief that is long-lasting or profound. It is picking up on a phase in life.”

He is much more attracted to the Christianity held out by writers such as the former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, and the writer Karen Armstrong, which allows for more doubt. “They are much less prescriptive. They offer a convincing argument against Dawkins and Hitchens, who have for a while dominated the debate. It’s a matter of fundamentalism versus some form of personal faith. There seems to me to be a need to climb the mountain in your own way.”

HE STRUGGLES with his faith, and yet carries on. “My faith is beset by doubts,” he says. “It’s an extraordinary struggle. But I think having doubts is one of the forming things. The notion of the comfort of faith is a slightly ironic idea. It’s a constant battle against the rationalist voice that this is a myth made up. I am at the very outset of a journey that is tortuous sometimes.”

Preston first encountered church as a choirboy in Worthing, although his parents are not believers. His good singing voice was picked up at primary school, and the school pointed him towards the local church. “I spent more time in church than many people of faith, through singing,” he says.

“I got into the pattern of going every Sunday, and spending time there. I think spending time being quiet, having the chance to step out of yourself, is very important. At 12 or 13, when your voice is about to break, you are aware of the transience of it all. [Faith] crept up on me. I found myself a strong believer in my early teens, and I always had a sense of something there, even when I was trying to be a trendy atheist in my 20s.”

He loved the whole package. “It gave shape to my childhood. When I look back, my childhood was all about singing and cricket. But it wasn’t just the music. Some of the priests I met were truly remarkable. They recommended books, became friends. I was taken seriously in an adult community, and they helped me to think about the things I was interested in.”

He had been baptised as a child, and, when he was 13, he decided to be confirmed, despite his parents’ unbelief. “Looking back, given the strength of their atheism — my father’s in particular — they were very laissez-faire about that. When I asked to be confirmed, there was no fight against it.”

He found support from his grandfather, a professor at Princeton. “In my family, he’s someone everyone looks up to, and he is very much a believer. He’s always said that the ‘lukewarm’ faith St John the Divine refers to is just right for him. He is someone who had faith, and could reconcile it with an enquiring rational mind.”

PRESTON takes his own children to church “not nearly often enough” — once a month or so. “My son loves the drama, the ritual, and especially when there isn’t Sunday school, and he can sit through the whole thing. So, yes, I will bring them up as Christians, but I hope in a responsible way, just as my father never let his own viewpoint dominate.”

Part of this is about the importance of providing the opportunity for reflection. “[Church] takes you outside yourself — it enables people to step aside from the solipsism that defines our culture. I had a long chat with [the psychologist] Oliver James in researching this book. It’s been proved conclusively that some form of belief and spiritual practice is psychologically better for you. Without question, that’s the case. People are going to suffer without it.”

He worries that the next generation is growing up in a world that doesn’t know how to relate to the divine. He quotes the novelist Julian Barnes, who wrote in his book about the fear of death, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*, “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him.”

“It’s about answering those things of deeper meaning, the revelation of pattern, those moments of transcendence when you are reading poetry, or you’re at a mountain top, that incredible latency.

“The challenge is about finding out what is possible, and how you can have faith and live in the modern world, how do to it without taking a ‘pick and mix’ approach of the bits you like. But we wouldn’t allow our medical services to run on tenth-century lines. Faith has to step forward, the way life steps forward.”

ONE reviewer described *The Revelations* as satire, but this was never the intention. Preston maintains that it is an attempt to think seriously about the search for meaning. He is fascinated by the number of Evangelical Christians in the City (he wrote a long piece for the Independent on Sunday last Easter about this).

“The number and variety of Evangelical movements was really interesting,” he says. “Some were heading in the right direction, though some were bonkers. You’re on dodgy territory when you use the word ‘cult’, but there were certain elements, like the unthinking leap into faith, that happen when you are taken away from your normal life. And the idea that people change overnight — my understanding is that change is a long process.”

None the less, he acknowledges the extraordinary success of the Alpha movement, and that many churches are thriving because of it. In contrast, he recently attended a service in Shropshire where he, his son, and his 65-year-old stepfather were the three youngest members of the congregation.

Some of his friends have stuck with the faith they found through Alpha, but a number are now “virulently anti”, he says. One particular friend of his is still very much part of the church. She is still reading the novel, and he is awaiting her response nervously.

His next book moves between the worlds of the Renaissance Italian painter Filippino Lippi, and 1930s fascism. “It’s all about faith and religion again,” he says. “It explores how people believe, and the role of art in belief. It’s about those moments of transcendence.”

***The Revelations* by Alex Preston (Faber & Faber, £12.99 (CT Bookshop £11.70); 978-0-57127-758-2).**

On course

MARCUS had started coming to the Course because of Abby. She had made it clear that it was the only way she’d stay with him, and he attended at first in the same way that he’d gone to piano lessons as a child: resolved to perform everything asked of him as badly as possibly in the hope of being swiftly excluded. Only slowly did he realise that the church might offer a means of negotiating the fear that shot its bright splinters across his mind whenever he thought of death. In the quiet ritual, the music, and, above all, the promise of an existence beyond the grave, Marcus had found peace.

It was something to do with the high windows. He could only see sky through the windows, nothing of the grubby world outside. It enhanced the sacred feel of the place, the sense of safety. His father hadn’t believed in God, or rather he gave the impression of a man whose diary was too busy to consider something so putative, so far in the future, as an afterlife. Marcus didn’t want to die with that kind of uncertainty. And since his own death existed in a kind of eternal present for him, he needed to make sure that he was always prepared; the time he spent in church was a totem he held up against the fear. He would live on afterwards; unlike his father, whose cold, blue skin as he was heaved into the ambulance spoke of nothing but rotting and decay.

At university Marcus had attended chapel almost shamefully, happy to use Abby’s involvement in the college choir as an excuse to spend winter nights in the quivering candlelight of evensong. Still, back then, he wouldn’t have considered himself a believer. But things filter through. And slowly patterns revealed themselves until, on the first Course Retreat he had attended, he found himself more or less converted. Or, if not entirely converted, then at least able to hold in his mind at the same time the sane, rational view that belief in God was akin to belief in magic, an atavism that had no place in the bright, scientific now, and a quiet recognition that, somehow, irrationally, God was there. And the friends from his old life seemed to drop away as the Course increasingly filled his spare time with prayer weekends and charity days, and the problems and questions that his cynical rational mind raised were silenced by the sheer business of it all.

This extract from *The Revelations* is reprinted with permission.