

Greenbelt Festival 2009: a review by John Wiltshire TSSF

Freshly back from the Greenbelt Festival 2009, we're struck once again by its unique mix of talks and discussions, music and performing arts, worship and welcome, campaigning and camping, a family-friendly but still cutting edge air, a small army of volunteers and - oh, yes - diverse, delicious and largely healthy food stalls. Did you know that Greenbelt is now in its 36th year?

For those who aren't familiar with it, although Greenbelt's basically Anglican (its main sponsors being the Church Times and CMS) it's firmly ecumenical, inter-faith and inclusive - Jeffrey John in the past, and this year Bp Gene Robinson, have been strongly affirmed by the Greenbelt crowds. Speakers and performers often comment on the welcome they receive, and say this is their favourite festival - and you're inclined to believe them. The political and campaigning side is very busy. This year the Palestine situation was a major theme, including at the mass Sunday morning service (these are the biggest eucharists most of us will ever attend, by the way), and a performance direct from the Edinburgh Festival of the play "Go to Gaza - drink the sea". Lastly, it's not even exclusively Christian even though that's its critical mass, and all of its contributors are sympathetic and positive to our tradition. This in turn means it's not just for insiders and makes it a good place for enquirers, especially younger ones, to explore its distinctive take on Christianity.

An annual trip to Cheltenham Racecourse at August Bank Holiday means a regular injection of stimulating ideas - not just from talks, but from alternative worship and new music too (a concert of John Taverner's music this year, attended by the composer; a full performance of Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue" in its 50th year; more folk and rock than anyone could get to in a weekend). So, here are a few tasters that might intrigue you enough to explore further - or they may simply get some of you asking yourselves why you're not Greenbelters.



“Indebting the Future”: John Bell

John Bell’s a prophetic voice from the Iona Community (where he’s *“employed as a vagrant”* according to the programme) and a firm Greenbelt favourite. He started from . the current economic crisis but noting our simultaneous over-dependence on exploitatively cheap goods from the third world, went on to question whether there’s any alternative to a fundamental change in our lifestyles. Bell’s account of listening to a British buyer in S.E. Asia lying to a poor producer that he couldn’t sell even for £3 jeans that he’d surely shift for five times that much, simply to force the producer’s minimal price down yet further, made us all squirm. John Bell would have us be more open about our own money and how we use it, and stop pretending that money itself is morally grubby when in reality it’s our own lifestyle choices that are often shabby and indirectly oppressive of others. Money itself is just neutral. This was strong stuff.

“Debunking Dawkins - how we can engage the new atheism”: Alister McGrath

Several talks and panel discussions this year concerned the atheism / belief polarity that’s so much a part of contemporary debate. Alister McGrath, himself an erstwhile biologist and atheist though now a theologian, urbanely countered the main claims of the “new atheists” and often in quite simple terms. Of their

characterisations of Christians as believing in a capricious and sadistic God (i.e. an extremist drawn from the various OT versions), he simply pointed out that none of us ever actually meet Christians who really entertain such images, while the number of practicing scientists who take the Christian God seriously must be a bit of an embarrassment to Dawkins.

It was a theme at Greenbelt this year that science and religion are just not locked philosophically in the battle some atheists so much want. Science can't answer questions like *"What is the point of it all?"*, and intelligent believers easily accept that new scientific insights tell us more about the laws of nature set in place by the original maker of things. It wasn't all solemn though. I loved the idea of a sceptical bus travelling distant parts of the universe proclaiming: *"There's probably no humanity, so just relax and get on with it!"*

"Sexuality and Spirituality - keeping them together": Bishop Gene Robinson

Some of the longest queues this year were for Gene Robinson's three talks, the first of which, "Keeping your cool in the eye of the storm", immediately evoked the pressures on the man at the centre of the Anglican Communion's disunity. This second talk was a profound reflection on the sacredness of our sexuality, and the failure of our commodity-based culture to approach sex seriously rather than voyeuristically. Robinson's ethical conservatism probably shouldn't have surprised us, but his full support for marriage (including for gay and lesbian people, of course) derives from his belief that the risk of vulnerability we always take in our sexual encounters merits the safest possible personal space. One questioner asked if he'd agree with the advice, *"Don't sleep with anyone you wouldn't share a bank account with"*. He did. Gene Robinson seemed far from the subversive of the popular press's imagination. Nonetheless, as we drove out of Cheltenham late on Monday night a poster from the local paper shouted *"Greenbelt attacked over gay bishop!"* Maybe the new ideas had stopped at the festival gates.



These talks and others can be obtained on CD or MP3 from <http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/shop/>

For general information about the Greenbelt Festival: <http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/>