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# Editorial

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## Added Value

EDWARD CARDALE

I write in early May, when a sense of gathering political crisis once again affects the UK. It may be the slow grind towards a Brexit crunch later this year. Or it may be a dawning awareness of the scale of damage to public life after eight years of austerity. The NHS and the provision of Social Care are often seen as the most urgent examples, though they are only part of the total challenge which ‘the body politic’ is now failing to address. But in this or any national malaise, who is to be believed?

Gordon Mursell gave the title *Losing our Absolute* to the twentieth century, in the final part of his magnificent history of English Spirituality. In the media and everyday conversation, the word ‘absolutely’ on its own has become a verbal tic, meaning merely ‘yes’ – as if the loss of a *real* absolute has led us to cling on to the fantasy that all sorts of things can be ‘absolutely true’, when of course they are not. ‘Losing our Absolute’ prefigures the further struggles of British Christianity to find an authentic voice, in a society in which all truth is relative. No single religion or system, let alone one church, (even an Established Church), can claim any absolute authority or ‘pole position’ in the witness to Truth.

But we can declare our values, and attempt to live by them. Such a declaration is what Justin Welby sets out to do, in his recent book *Reimagining Britain*. His diagnosis of the state of the nation deserves to be considered, along with his politically neutral prescriptions, and I shall offer a more formal review of the book in our next issue. I mention now his three values, around which much of the book is developed. These values, or headings for groups of several values, are community, courage, and stability. We can defer discussion of how and why he came to choose and identify them. I simply wish

to add another one which may have seemed too obvious to be named. It is Truth.

Truth, we may suggest, once seemed to be a secure Absolute Value. Now in a culture of anonymity, secrecy and spin doctors, let alone fake news or alternative facts, we are all inclined to see it in more relative ways. Too many sources of information jostle for our attention, making for inevitably disputed claims to truth.

There is much lip-service paid to *transparency* in public affairs. What then is the difference between transparency and truth? Transparency is the in-word which is often held up as an all-purpose and virtuous characteristic, for all kinds of corporate bodies, private and public. It is almost as if to be 'transparent' – letting others see more clearly, say, how an institution works, or how much people are paid – is the one ethical value that will turn wrong things into right. But transparency is not the same as truth-telling in its deepest sense. It is not the same as a commitment to seek 'whatever is true and of good report'. Transparency, like openness, is a means to an end. It is not the end itself. An open society is an essential condition, but it is not necessarily a just society. That is why truth and justice still matter.

The articles in this issue have a wider range than usual, rather than being aspects of a single unified theme. All of them show the relevance of a thoughtful Christian faith, whether in the need for truth and wisdom in our political processes (Foster-Gilbert and James), or in the urgent areas of health and social care where the understanding and relativity of 'Christian values' has evolved so rapidly (Pye and Swift). The implications for health chaplaincy, in a society in which Christianity has lost its absolute, are pursued further by Chris Swift.

In our democracy, however flawed or dysfunctional it may be, the effective and required pathway for reform is through parliament. Christian values are to be pursued, mainly though not entirely, through a democratic process entrusted to elected representatives. One of the possible exceptions in the UK is highlighted by Graham James's article in this issue, about bishops in the House of Lords. It is good to be reminded that not every part of a healthy political system must necessarily be 'democratically accountable'. An elected second chamber for the UK still in any case seems far off, and the obvious dangers of populism (or the abuse of democracy) hardly make it more attractive just at present.

If you want an example of the application of truth 'across the boundaries' in public life, read our Forum piece in this issue by Andrew

Grinnell. Here you will find a compelling personal reflection on the subject of poverty in Leeds. The added value of Truth is shinningly evident. It is a motivating ideal, despite all hurdles, for the encounters between members of the poverty commission.

Honouring Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life does not reduce the Christian faith to a sectarian creed. Christians are bound with all other truth-seekers to foster and cherish the expression of all truth. Here is an essential if now elusive quality of a healthy national life.

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## **References**

Mursell, G., 2001, *English Spirituality*, London: SPCK.

Welby, J., 2018, *Reimagining Britain*, London: Bloomsbury Continuum.