

The Revd Professor John Atherton: 1939–2016

A Tribute by Malcolm Brown

John Atherton was a leading figure in Anglican social theology; particularly the study of Christian ethics in relation to economics. He made major contributions to the Industrial Mission movement in its most creative phases, and was profoundly committed to the life of the diocese of Manchester, its cathedral and its work in social responsibility, community work and engagement with the city.

Atherton trained for the priesthood at Mirfield and spent his early ministry in Glasgow and Aberdeen. As Rector of St. George's Hulme in the late 1960s, he was also industrial missionary with the GMIM team. In 1974, he joined David Jenkins at the William Temple Foundation soon after its move into Manchester Business School, later succeeding David as Director, before following Ronald Preston as Canon Theologian at the cathedral, a post he held with distinction for twenty years. Up to his death he continued to serve the Foundation as Company Secretary, being very much its heart as it went through various Directors and Chairs.

His contribution to the national life of the Church of England included distinguished spells on the Board for Social Responsibility and its Industrial and Economic Affairs sub-committee. He was a key adviser to

the group whose work led to the seminal report, *Faith in the City*, in 1985. That role took him into conversations at Downing Street between theologians and some of Margaret Thatcher's closest advisers.

Atherton's doctoral thesis was on R H Tawney (author of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* [1926]) whose work remained close to his heart all his life. Preston, his supervisor, had known both Tawney and Temple.


John, in turn, supervised a number of post-graduates who examined Preston and Temple in the light of later thinkers like MacIntyre with whom John had engaged rigorously. These continuities, within an evolving theological understanding, typified John's keen sense of how a tradition develops. His own researches took him well beyond Tawney, Temple or Preston and engaged with some of the most recent international interdisciplinary studies. Through this long intellectual journey, it sometimes felt as if none of his books was complete without a section on how his own mind was changing through rigorous interrogation of the evidence. One consequence was that he made respectful friendships with unlikely bedfellows – thoughtfulness and integrity mattered to him far more than party or ideology.

His own intellectual pilgrimage, however, followed no single trajectory. Clearly identifying himself as a socialist in the late 1970s, he came to appreciate the positive arguments for market economics.

However, by 2008, his engagement with sociology, psychology and other disciplines had led him to challenge the way economists constructed central themes like scarcity. Whilst many of

his books (*Faith in the Nation*, *Social Christianity: A Reader*, or *Public Theology for Changing Times*) gave his readers an intellectual framework to engage theologically with issues of the day, or brought together the thinking of others as a tool for reflection, *Christianity and the Market* (1992) and *Transfiguring Capitalism* (2008) offered radical new directions for theology in interdisciplinary dialogue.

He was a superb teacher – provided the student could hold his or her own in argument. His robust style would be accompanied by the twinkle in the eye, the pat on the arm and the idiosyncratic observation. It was a source of immense gratification to John, and to all his friends, that his long teaching career at Manchester University led to honorary posts at Princeton, Uppsala and a research Chair at Chester.

John died just as the outcome of the EU referendum was emerging. In a time when good theology and new interdisciplinary enquiry are needed more than ever, he will be sadly, deeply, missed. May he rest in peace and rise in glory. 



The Revd Dr Malcolm Brown is Director of Mission and Public Affairs for the Church of England, a former Executive Secretary of the William Temple Foundation and a Canon of Manchester Cathedral.