

SHIP OF FOOLS: ALL ABOARD THE CYBER ARK

Discovering a Christian website which lampoons fundamentalists

(The Times, 2004.)

Last Sunday night, the Revd David Jenkins gave the strangest sermon of his life from the pulpit of an elegant Romanesque church. The congregation, who had come from all over the world to hear him, sat attentively in their pews. At the end of the service, some knelt in silent prayer; other raised their arms with a cry of ‘Hallelujah!’ before filing down to the crypt for an informal discussion. It was in many respects like any other Christian service – except that the church existed only in cyberspace.

The Church of Fools – a serious religious exercise, despite its name – claims to be the world’s first virtual house of prayer. On-line churches, where hymns or sermons can be downloaded, have existed for several years, but not as spaces where you can walk around and admire the architecture, whisper to your neighbour or participate in group worship. Launched as a three-month experiment (it ends on 8th August), www.churchoffools.com attracts 5,000 visitors a day.

Not all these visitors are pious. ‘The major problem we’ve had is people coming in just to disrupt it or shout “F---” in church,’ says the website’s organiser, Simon Jenkins (no relation to the former editor of The Times). ‘So we have about 30 church wardens armed with this – ’ he points to a button on his computer screen marked ‘Smite’ – ‘ready to log trouble-makers out.’

The church is an offshoot of Ship of Fools, a hilarious, eccentric and thought-provoking website which Jenkins and his co-editor Stephen Goddard started six years ago. Subtitled ‘the magazine of Christian unrest’, it lampoons the excesses of bigots and fundamentalists, as well as discussing

serious issues. Among its regular features are a Biblical Curse Generator, Signs and Blunders (embarrassing double-entendres spotted on church hoardings), and Gadgets for God (a round-up of tacky religious artefacts).

The gadgets are Simon Jenkins's personal favourite. 'I particularly like the Talking Tombstone. You approach it and it says, "Hi, I was Jane Smith, I died on 20th June 1975..." The other one that is great is the Last Supper Pillow, which has got the Leonardo da Vinci painting embroidered on it, and when you lower your head it activates a microchip which plays "Hey Jude" –as in "Hey Judas".'

Another popular feature is the Mystery Worshipper, for which contributors travel incognito to churches 'reporting on the comfort of the pews, the warmth of the welcome, the length of the sermon...The only clue that they have been there at all is the Mystery Worshipper calling card, dropped discreetly into the collection plate.'

This wackiness masks a serious intent. The site takes its name from Sebastian Brant's fifteenth-century satire, in which Wisdom condemns the follies of the age; its object, says Jenkins, 'is to question what we believe in the light of the modern world. Christianity has gone wrong at a lot of times in its history, with the violence of the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition, and the cloying, sentimental spirituality you get in some places; but that doesn't mean that you can't go back to the life of Jesus and make an honest attempt to follow Him. We want to generate a conversation about what the Christian faith is now.'

Jenkins's own background is evangelical Baptist. Though he earns his living as a copywriter and website designer (Ship of Fools relies on donations and advertising revenue to stay afloat), he studied theology at the London Bible College in the late Seventies. There he met Stephen Goddard, and the two launched Ship of Fools in its first incarnation, as a small-circulation

student magazine. It failed to catch on, and closed after ten issues; but fifteen years later, with the rise of the Internet, Jenkins and Goddard saw their opportunity to revive it in another format. At present the website has between 80,000 and 100,000 visitors (or 'Shipmates') a month, 60 per cent of them from the USA.

The response from the Christian Establishment has been generally tolerant. ('It challenges everybody,' says a spokesman for the Church of England, 'and it's a good laugh.') 'We're not satirical like Private Eye,' says Simon Jenkins: 'we'd like to comment on news stories, but we don't have the resources – so the Churches don't really see us as a threat. We've been denounced in e-mails, but not publicly: no one's tried to exorcise us yet.'

There are nevertheless elements of the website which some might consider blasphemous. Take the recent caption competition for a picture of Jesus beside a lighthouse, which at least one entrant considered phallic ('And I thought the Paschal candle was obvious' was her suggestion). Does the Ship recognise any boundaries? 'We often have hideous pictures featuring Jesus,' admits Simon Jenkins, 'but we wouldn't show Jesus on the Cross, because we wouldn't want to make fun of His suffering. For the same reason, when we did the Ark, we decided we'd avoid characters to do with the Passion.'

The Ark, which Jenkins describes as 'Big Brother meet the Bible', was arguably the website's most inspired creation. At the height of reality-TV mania, twelve Biblical characters were set afloat in this virtual vessel for 40 days and 40 nights, to be voted off one by one – walking the plank to the strains of the Navy Hymn – until the last survivor put ashore on Mount Ararat to claim his £666 prize. The hysterically funny archive tour includes Jezebel disporting herself on a sunlounger and Job tending the bar while John the Baptist (the competition's eventual winner) plays honky-tonk piano.

It was from the Ark, whose characters' dialogue was supplied live by a cast of Shipmates from across the world, that the idea of the virtual church sprang. The main similarity lies in the cartoonish figures which visitors can choose to represent themselves – something which at first glance makes the experiment hard to take seriously. 'We really didn't know whether it would work,' Simon Jenkins admits. 'But I was testing it out with the management team, and someone whispered to my character, "We should pray." So we did, and it was weird: you felt as if you really were praying, even though you were at a computer keying the words in.

'People have said, "I thought this would be really spurious, but I was very surprised to find that it felt like a proper church." Even my mother – who's got rheumatoid arthritis, and finds it hard to get to her own church – has got hooked on it.'

Though the church is non-denominational, the worry must be that Ship of Fools has inadvertently created something that will be copied by the Bible-thumpers it has always ridiculed. 'I'd be sorry if there was a Pentecostalist version,' says Jenkins, 'because it would just perpetuate those old, irrelevant boundaries – but I think it will happen. We're in an Eden-like state at the moment.'

Inevitably, there have been technical hitches. When I visited, the crypt was emptied three times while the server was rebooted, and during the church's first service the minister vanished into thin air. 'He got accidentally logged out,' explains Jenkins apologetically. 'Fortunately the Bishop of London, who was giving the sermon, was able to take charge instead.'

Now what would the Mystery Worshipper have made of that?