

Obituary: THE REVD DR JOHN MARK DAVID HUGHES

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The Revd Dr Andrew Davison writes:

THE Revd Dr John Hughes, who was killed in a car accident on 29 June, aged 35, was a leading theologian of his generation. In the words of the Revd Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, "John possessed a dazzling quick sense of fun and a generous, penetrating intelligence. His work dances with intellectual agility, always saying something distinct and theologically profound." John's death has left the Church poorer both in heart and mind. He is survived by his parents, Hywel and Janet.

John was born on St Lucy's Day - he considered the secular calendar to be a poor stand-in for the liturgical calendar - and grew up near Exeter. He retained profound affection for Devon his life through, as also for Wales, his family home. He went to school in Dawlish, and obtained a first in theology at Jesus College, Cambridge, followed by an M.St. at Merton College, Oxford.

He worked on his Ph.D., back in Cambridge, at Emmanuel College, with Dr Catherine Pickstock. It was published as *The End of Work: Theological critiques of capitalism*, considered by Professor John Milbank to be "the best study we have on the topic of work, for seeing that work is itself sacramental and contemplative, and for getting the work-leisure relation right". During this time, he also trained for the ministry at Westcott House, and was ordained deacon in 2005, and priest a year later.

After his curacy, back in Exeter, John returned to Cambridge, to be the chaplain of Jesus College. Two years later, he was appointed as Dean and elected to a fellowship. He was a scintillating teacher, and his publications routinely appeared in the best academic journals, but chaplaincy always had first place among his duties. He did it in the spirit of all that he respected - even adored - in the parish system: he was at the heart of the college community and, in him, the Church could hardly have been more embedded and incarnate. Then, precisely in that commitment to being present, he was able to point to God as the origin and destiny of all life and of all being. (A metaphysician to his fingertips, he was unafraid of terms such as "being".) The fragile were comforted; the faith of lukewarm Christians was enkindled; those outside the Church entered it; vocations to the ministry flourished.

Because of that outlook, he despaired of nothing as much as he despaired of the Church of England, for its present ambivalence towards the parish as the bedrock for mission, and towards the liturgy as its backbone. He had committed himself to Christianity after discovering the Book of Common Prayer and the works of Richard Hooker. Yet, in truth, he rarely despaired for long, even at the Church of England, which he loved so profoundly, since he was always inclined to see things in view of the resurrection.

Both at Jesus College, and more widely, John lived for others, and yet it would be a mistake to suppose that living "for others" bore for him any chilly overtone of sacrifice or self-abnegation. For him, to live for others was first and foremost to live with others. He died on his way back from an ordination, on his way to a first mass: one of many ordinations and several first masses this Pentecost. He would travel any distance for a baptism, a confirmation, a marriage, or a funeral - or for a party, for that matter.

His least favourite work of theology was Nygren's *Eros and Agape*, with its proposal that the highest love is disinterested, and gives without receiving in return. He preferred the Thomist vision

of agape, or charity, as comprehending every other form of love. John's enthusiasm for women, for one thing, as a sort of mystical wonder, was not lost on anyone who knew him well.

It should be admitted that John was not good at being wrong, perhaps because - to be fair - it was an unusual experience for him. Friends remember a long, but friendly, disagreement about some scientific subject or other. Eventually the person he was putting right gently pointed out that he, unlike John, had a doctorate quite close to the topic in question. That said, John's strength of will was easily borne, given his profound gift for fun and friendship. He dispensed wine freely (always sparkling in the octave of Easter); he danced at the slightest provocation; he remained, in many ways, a child at heart, and got on famously with his godchildren; around him, people laughed.

John was one of the outstanding scholar-priests of his generation, as devout as he was learned. Untold numbers of people looked to John as part of the hope for the Church. Already, they recognised, a certain intellectual renaissance in Anglo-Catholicism was taking shape around him - and not just intellectual. John, for one thing, had recognised almost before anyone else the significance of the theological revival that was later to be called Radical Orthodoxy, and he was scarcely less important in that movement than its instigators. In the intellectual life, as much as anywhere else, he valued collegiality.

As an academic theologian, John's interest and ability spread both wide and deep. He taught doctrine, ethics, and metaphysics at Cambridge, but beyond the university his most significant influence was coming to be in "public" or "political" theology. David Ford, Regius Professor at Cambridge, singles this out: John was "becoming a leading voice in Christian social thought". He had contributed, for instance, to the forthcoming collection *Anglican Social Theology: Renewing the vision today*, edited by Malcolm Brown. Two publishers were courting him for a volume of his own on Anglican social thought: one for a highbrow monograph, and the other for a popular introduction.

The last word might go to Professor Ward: "What we have of his theological work will remain; it is what we don't have that we mourn for. That, and his elfin smile."