

Canon Professor John Robert Atherton

Professor Chris Baker writes:

Canon Professor John Atherton, who died on 24 June, aged 77, of heart failure, was a highly influential public theologian and priest who enjoyed an eminent and productive career in both Academy and the Church, and whose work became synonymous for many with the rise of Anglican Social Thought in the latter half of the 20th century. He was a prolific writer and thinker with deep cultural roots in his beloved Lancashire and intellectual roots in the Christian realism tradition of William Temple and Ronald Preston. In many ways he transcended the latter, but never forsook the former.

His academic trajectory began with a doctoral thesis on Tawney, an interest that began when he studied economics at the LSE. This work cemented his long-held ambition to bring practical and public theology into critical and nuanced conversation with economics and finance for the sake of the common good. He shared much of his predecessor, Ronald Preston's disdain for the simplistic condemnation of the market and economics by many public theologians, without a proper engagement for what he called the 'paradox of the market' (increased inequality, but also staggering growth in well-being and life opportunity for millions of the global poor).

Predictably perhaps, his early interest in Tawney led him to engage public theology with the Christian Socialist tradition, including *The Scandal of Poverty: Priorities for the Emerging Church* (1983), *Social Christianity: A Reader* (1994) and *Faith in the Nation: Christian Vision for Britain* (1988). Then, controversially for some in the establishment, he embraced aspects of Thatcherite neo-liberal market reform in his book *Christianity and the Market: Christian Social Thought for Our Times* (1992). Although he never forsook his passion for justice and the plight of the poor, he was willing, long before it became fashionable, to engage with the energy, drive and entrepreneurship of the Market as a solution to many intractable global problems. His later work moved increasingly across faith traditions and engaged with what he saw as the fundamental issue that could save our planet - namely how to combine religious and secular ethics and imaginaries, with economics, to create both human and non-human flourishing and well-being. *Public Theology for Changing Times* (2000), *Marginalisation* (2003), *Transfiguring Capitalism: an enquiry into religion and global change* (2008), *Through the Eye of a Needle: theological conversations over political economy* (edited with Hannah Skinner) (2007), *The Practices of Happiness: Political economy, religion and well-being* (edited with Elaine Graham and Ian Steedman) (2010), *Christianity and the New Social Order* (written with Chris Baker and John Reader) (2011) and finally *Challenging Religious Studies – The Wealth, Wellbeing and Inequalities of Nations* (2014) all address these themes.

His work reached across Europe and North America as well as UK audiences. In addition to giving the Ferguson Lecture in 2003 at the University of Manchester and the Baillie Lecture in 2004 at the University of Edinburgh, he was Visiting Professor at the University of Uppsala, where he was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate. More recently he was the William Scheide Fellow in Theology at the Centre for Theological

Inquiry in Princeton, USA. During his thirty years in Manchester he was an Honorary Lecturer in Christian Social Ethics at the University before being conferred as a Visiting Research Professor in Economics and Religion at the University of Chester.

His career and service to the Church of England was equally prolific and encompassing. He trained for the ministry at the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield (perhaps an unlikely choice for someone so proud of his Primitive Wesleyan roots). He then served curacies in Aberdeen and Bury (the former town being where he met his wife to be Olive Anne - affectionately known as Vannie) before engaging in parish ministry in the Gorbals and Hulme. His love of Lancashire was only nearly surpassed by his love of Scotland. He then became Director of the William Temple Foundation in 1974 where he worked alongside David Jenkins, and helped establish it as a renowned research and theological hub in its new home at the Manchester Business School. After ten years, he took up the post of Canon Theologian at Manchester Cathedral, a role he carried out with great verve and aplomb for twenty years until his retirement in 2004. He continued to serve as a non-stipendary priest in his local parish church, St Katharine's at Blackrod.

John's academic output found a perfect platform at the Foundation and the Cathedral and without doubt, during that period from the mid eighties to the mid nineties he would have been regarded as probably the leading public theologian of his generation. During this golden period, he was senior consultant and contributor to the Faith and the City enquiry, served on the National Board for Social Responsibility and the National Industrial and Economic Affairs Committee of the Church of England as well as chairing the Manchester Diocesan Board for Social Responsibility for many years. He was also instrumental in establishing Church Action on Poverty, a campaigning charity that flourishes to this day. He worked as editor of *Crucible* (the National Journal for Public Theology and Christian Ethics) right to the end, and served as Company Secretary for the William Temple Foundation for over 30 years, a commitment he carried out with great love and dedication.

But for all this great work and powerful service to both Church and Academy it is his personal qualities for which he'll be most missed. His warmth, wit and intense commitment which he brought to all his roles, touched the lives of literally thousands; students, parishioners, fellow academic staff, clergy and indeed anyone who met him. He was instantly recognisable and always unforgettable. He often spoke his mind, and didn't always suffer fools gladly (the 'Athertonisms' are the stuff of legend). But he never ceased to be grounded, compassionate and open-hearted. His restless mind and spirit continued to the end. Following his recovery from a major heart attack last year he threw himself into his latest project, exploring case studies of religious involvement and influence in key moments of economic history, a project begun in conversation with, and the encouragement of, Professor Angus Deaton, the Princeton economist who was the 2015 Nobel Prize Winner in Economics. We know that some of these were completed, and so we hope will be available for posthumous publication.

His innate modesty and lack of truck with certain elements of the establishment probably denied him the full spectrum of recognition to which he was entitled. But this never seemed to perturb him. He was ultimately happiest amongst those he loved - his family and friends (of which there are so many). A product of his time he moved with effortless ease and almost insatiable appetite into new intellectual terrain - new spaces that others will now have to colonise. He journeyed in his mind and spirit, but always remained rooted in his heart.

John leaves behind two children, Lesley and John, and three grandchildren, Alice, Morigan and Cormac.