

**THE OTHONA COMMUNITY:  
“A STRANGE PHENOMENON”**

by

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# INTRODUCTION

There are some areas in life which cannot be described in words, but which can only be experienced ... To rediscover that one still has within, certain qualities which can satisfy ... is to find a critically important clue towards the acquisition of wholeness.<sup>1</sup>

A cult, a nudist camp, oddballs, a “sort of primitive social-religious retreat”:<sup>2</sup> these are among the less favourable things which Othona has been called. A “world of compassion”,<sup>3</sup> an “open and inclusive community”<sup>4</sup>, a place where no-one is sidelined, are among the more positive ways of depicting it. These attempts at naming make it clear, how difficult it is to describe or to assess “a strange phenomenon”<sup>5</sup> like Othona, to use the founder's own words.

Though it is complicated when one attempts to put it into words, this thesis undertakes the attempt to describe and show something that is better experienced than read or written about. The Othona Community, located in a very remote corner of Essex, is a Christian centre of dialogue and uninhibited exchange of ideas. People experience something there that they do not normally experience. Discovering this Community and becoming involved in it is the springboard for the thesis. My intention is to describe the praxis of this present-day Christian Community in action, in order to understand this “strange phenomenon” and to find out what keeps it going.

This is an academic attempt at putting into words what has been lived and experienced

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1 Norman Motley, Much Ado About Something (Dr Janet Marshall, 1985), pp. 124-125.

2 Essex Weekly News, 7 Sept., 1962 from Joseph Billio's Column.

3 David Birdseye. Birdseye Views (Private Publication, undated), p. 1.

4 Othona Community, Mission Statement 2014.

5 Norman Motley, Letters to a Community 1970-1980 (The Othona Community, 1986), p. 41.

for seven decades now. How can we understand the continued phenomenon of the Othona Community and its *Lebenswelten*,<sup>6</sup> the world created by its life, in the twenty-first century? What is its special charism and genius which has ensured its continuation?

Othona has always been part of my adult life. When I first visited it in 1979, I dug a trench (along with several international youngsters) between two old buildings to provide running water. I took cold showers in the mornings (hot water was only available in the kitchen), peeled potatoes on the grass, lived mostly outside and was fascinated by a life so simple, yet with all needs fulfilled. This fascination has lasted. Decades later, I still want to know what it is that draws people into the Community, year in, year out. What happens there? What do people undergo there?

These and more questions will be considered while also theologising about a place which I have always experienced as accepting people wholly over the last thirty-five years.

An encounter with Dr John Vincent, theologian and founder of the Ashram Community in Sheffield and Director for many years of the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield, encouraged me to become an “observant participator and participant observer”<sup>7</sup> at the same time, in order to find out what this “strange phenomenon” of Othona is about.

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6 The concept of *Lebenswelten* is discussed in 1.8 and 2.5. The literal translation is 'Life of the worlds' which means concerning the Community: the world which is created by and through the Community's life.

7 <http://openarchive.cbs.dk/bitstream/handle/10398/7038/wp%202007-2.pdf?sequence=1>.

The Othona Community came into existence in 1946 out of the need of a former Royal Air Force chaplain, Norman Motley, to establish a venue after World War II, where former enemies could come together to learn and practise reconciliation between each other and their differing histories, experiences, denominations, attitudes and more. Cherishing differences and diversity through reconciliation became the motto. Motley believed that God had called the Community into being and whatever was happening there was work towards the *Kingdom of God*. He found the appropriate premises for his vision along with an old neglected chapel, St. Peter-on-the-Wall, which is nowadays considered Essex's first cathedral.<sup>8</sup> The moment Motley entered it, he felt 'at home'.

Unusual places and projects require exceptional methods. I knew from the start that this endeavour would have to be different from any of my previous academic work. There was little academic literature I could draw on. However, there were many statements and articles in the Othona Quarterly from many decades, and personal communications that I could fall back on. Nonetheless, I would have to start a data collection as well in order to find ways of describing the phenomenon of 'Othona' as a phenomenography,<sup>9</sup> as a way of showing how members perceive and describe the Community (to be discussed in Chapters Two and Five).

It would not be possible to exclude myself this time, for the researcher and the

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8 Cf. H. Malcolm Carter, The Fort of Othona and the Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex (Hunstanton, Norfolk: Witley Press, 1987), p. 7. *Burnham Adviser*, April 27, 1907: "The First Essex Cathedral". See also John Gunstone, The "Oldest Cathedral" in England (Essex Countryside, no date).

9 See Ference Marton, 'Phenomenography – Describing Conceptions of the World around us', Instructional Science 10 (1981), 177-200.

researched were inextricably combined. I had to find ways and means to include my being part of the research. The methods offered in *qualitative research* (see 2.7 & 2.8) seemed ideal for that purpose. It includes *auto-ethnography* where the researcher becomes part of the project. Having been a member of the Othona Community for over three decades I have a prolonged acquaintance with the Community and its members. However, this thesis needs to be read bearing in mind my position as a German, intellectual, Protestant theologian who is part of that Community and at the same time assessing it. I do not claim this thesis to be complete: that is not possible, for a living Community reinvents itself incessantly. To offer a viable interpretation, one has to keep in mind that it is an ongoing process “to know more about narrative environments that make possible and even encourage creative explorations of self, identity, community, and reality.”<sup>10</sup>

This thesis will investigate the example of the Othona Community and by describing its *Lebenswelten* discern what living in Community can mean, in the twenty-first century. Can Othona be seen as a “church on the margins”, as an alternative to the established churches, as something the established churches can learn from, as a “new” church or “Fresh Expression”<sup>11</sup> that meets the needs of modern men and women? Is Othona an experience in 'contemporary discipleship'? These and more questions have to be mooted in order to approach the phenomenon.

In the early days of the research I intended to compare Othona with other Christian communities in Great Britain. Soon I realised that Othona itself demanded my full

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10 Susan E. Chase, 'Narrative Inquiry — Still a Field in the Making', in: Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln (eds), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), p. 76.

11 <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential/whatare> (19.7.2016).

attention, for it had never been investigated in depth. There is an element of comparison, however, as Othona has two centres, one in Essex, the other one in Dorset. The original one in Essex is the focus of this thesis. The sister Community in Dorset walks a different path and emphasises different aspects. I will, of course, refer to Othona West Dorset (previously known as Othona, Burton-Bradstock), but my main focus will be the original Othona near Bradwell-on-Sea, in Essex, that has a pertinent relation to the adjacent Chapel, which is of utmost importance to the members of Othona.

Therefore the first chapter is about my initial encounter with Othona. It deals much with the researcher: my academic background and influential professors, my fascination with the Community, the location and place of the Community, the challenges, the questions of theory and praxis and historical catenation.

In order to portray the Community as fully and authentically as possible, “thick description”<sup>12</sup> is inevitable. Many details have to be specified, the context explained, structures and meanings elaborated, and interpretations considered to explain the life and qualities which make up the culture of this Community. What do people do? What do people say? How do people perceive the phenomenon of Othona?

Chapter Two is a methodological one, stating the aims, objectives and methods used for my particular purpose. To describe a multifaceted phenomenon such as Othona, different layers of perception have to be identified in a multi-dimensional approach, so the methods are somewhat special, even idiosyncratic.

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12 Clifford Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 5-6.

Chapter Three includes a history of the little Chapel, St Peter-on-the-Wall, in the Essex marshes, and shows the balance between an ancient monument and a living community today. The Othona Community at Bradwell-on-Sea and the Chapel are not to be separated. They belong together. Without the Chapel, the Community would not be there. It is the reason why the Community started in this particularly remote place. This chapter puts particular emphasis on pilgrimages, for they demonstrate the extraordinariness of the place.

Chapter Four tells the history of the Othona Community, starting with old army Nissen huts at the very beginning in 1946 to building a highly ecological solar building in 2012. Part A of this chapter is also about the founder of the Community, the post-war situation and theological influences at that time. It explains the purpose of the Othona Community and the historical background when it came into existence. International links are considered, the German connection in particular. Part B of Chapter Four investigates the development of the Community, into its everyday life, into rules and regulations, structure and development, annual cycles and activities. This chapter looks at the Community from many angles to give an adequate impression of what goes on there, with Part C investigating Othona's vision and values.

Chapter Five contains extracts from fifteen in-depth interviews with members who were present in the summers of 2011 and 2012. The last interview is an 'Interview with myself' in which the researcher's alter ego questions her about her motivation to write a thesis about the Othona Community.



Chapter Six assesses and analyses the results of the data collection. What did I find? And what does it tell us about the Community? It is a discernment of the nature and charism of a communal, religious phenomenon. It also addresses the question how far it is possible to assess Othona theologically.

As a German, I have been very ambivalent towards the term *Heimat* (superficially translated as “home”, see 2.11). The reasons for that are clarified in Chapter Seven, which seeks to discern Othona's implicit theology by looking at the evidence. The significance of *Heimat* and a Theology of Encounter are discussed as ways of understanding the “strange phenomenon” of Othona.

The final chapter answers the Research Question and discerns what goes on at the Community. It is an attempt to make theological sense of the Othona phenomenon.

Whatever the outcome of the research, it will remain difficult to be dogmatic about a Community which lives by its extraordinariness. The famous phenomenographer, Ference Marton, states: “Wittgenstein’s world view that what really matters is that of which we cannot speak ... what we cannot speak of ..., we can still show, we can point out, we can live.”<sup>13</sup> That is what my thesis attempts with regard to that strange phenomenon: Othona.

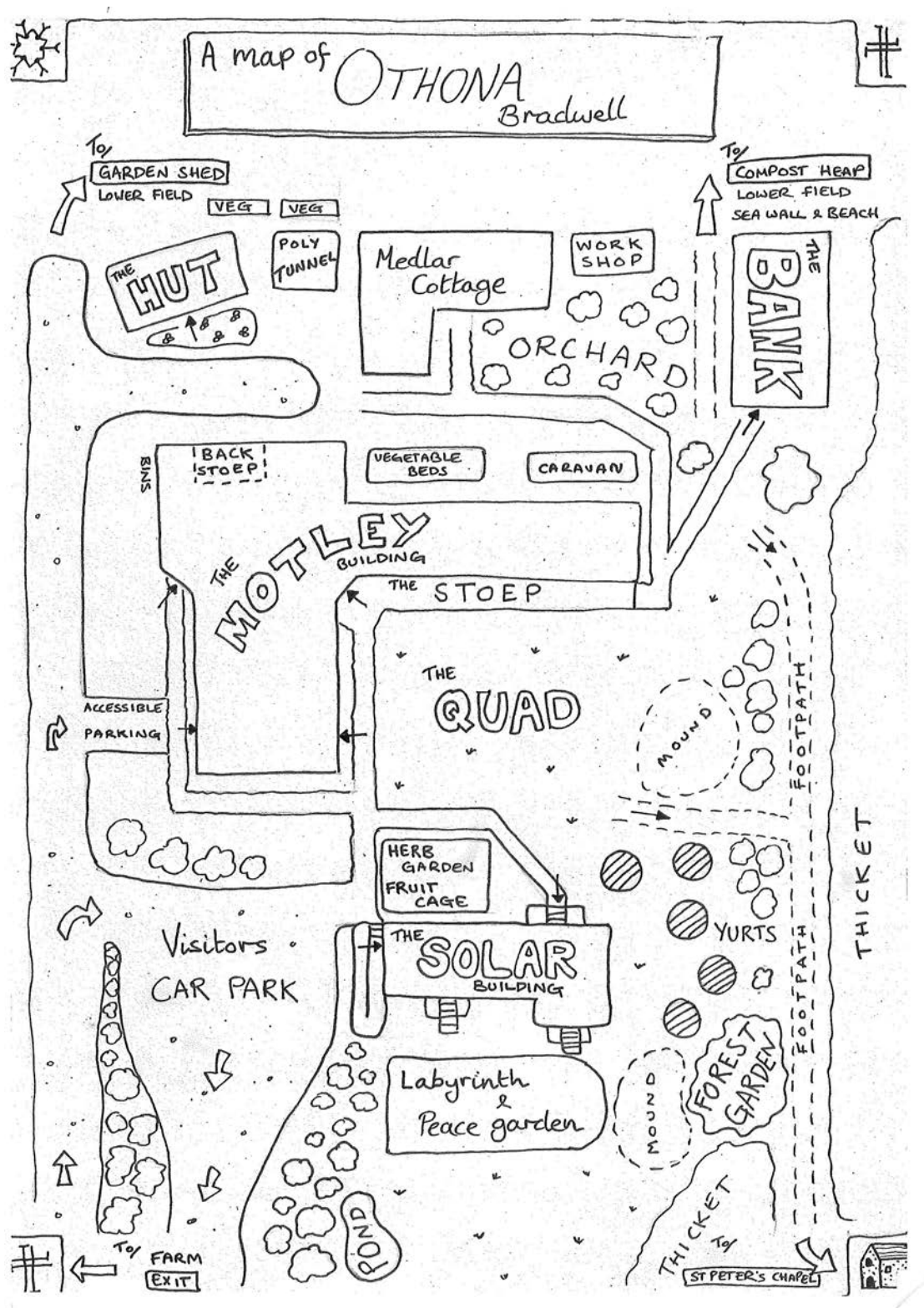
As an 'alternative introduction' and a way into the experience of Othona, I offer a typical 'A Day in the Life'. It can be read as a diary in note form. The grammatical

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13 [http://www.ida.liu.se/divisions/hcs/seminars/cogsciseminars/Papers/marton\\_phenomenography.PDF](http://www.ida.liu.se/divisions/hcs/seminars/cogsciseminars/Papers/marton_phenomenography.PDF), p. 187 (9.10.2009) – website outdated – modified version in Bibliography.

rules and the adopted style adjust linguistically to a day at the Community.

Fig. 1: Map of Othona



Source: Mark Russ, 2014

# AN ALTERNATIVE INTRODUCTION

## A Day at Othona — A Place to Be

Come with me for a day to Othona and see for yourself what kind of place it is.

The bells in the morning are ringing to wake people out of their sleep. Bells structure the day. There are bells for everything. There is always a warning or 'get ready' bell to prepare yourself for the next event. In case you have not been woken up by the two morning bells, there is always a child with a hand-bell going through the corridors of the buildings and across the fields making sure you have not gone back to sleep...

Upon entering the Solar Building (see Fig. 1) after having slept the night in a yurt (a big nomadic tent — see Fig. 2), I discover an elderly couple in the Quiet Room who have locked themselves out of their room. The Warden is incapable of finding his keys. They do not know what to do. Fortunately, the window of the room is slightly open, and I find a child to crawl through it and open the door from the inside. Sighs of relief!

**Fig. 2: Yurts (Chapel in the Background)**



Breakfast is lovely: porridge, apples, plums and figs from the orchard. Suddenly the fire alarm! Burning toast has set it off ... Grace is said. Then the announcements for the day. The duty list is read: Again. I am put on cleaning the toilets for the umpteenth time ... Somebody wants to make sure they really get cleaned!

The kitchen is starting to get busy: washing up, preparing vegetables, making sure lunch is on its way: it's a meal-centred Community.

Bells. Since it is raining, wellies on, a raincoat, prepare yourself for the muddy path to the Chapel. The first of two services every day, taken by whoever feels able to do it. A slow stream of people is moving. There it is, awaiting those who come twice daily through flower fields, no matter the weather, a crowd of nearly a hundred or sometimes only three. The Chapel is in desperate need of a new roof, for two hundred tiles fell off during a great storm in October 2013.

We are sitting patiently on the pews in a circle waiting for the last person to arrive. "Waiting for Rae" comes into my mind, a poem dedicated to Rae, in her nineties, a lovely lady who always seems to get lost somehow on her way to Chapel. The service is short. The wooden door stays open. Visitors join us. As well as swallows.

The rain has stopped. The tide is coming in. If I want to go swimming before the rehearsal of the musical, I will have to hurry! The sea is amazing, cold but calm. I will have to skip morning tea, otherwise I won't be on time for the rehearsal.

Lunch at one o'clock. Very busy dining hall, much noise, clattering of plates, people in queues. An opulent meal with produce from the garden and poly tunnel. More announcements, new arrivals, somebody offering yoga lessons at two o'clock. Would love to go but when do I look at my music and practise the words for my role? Constant banter and talk. The spuds and vegetables for tonight's dinner have to be prepared now. Where are the people put on 'vegetable preparation'? Ten more people for supper tonight, unexpected visitors from a neighbouring village or Quakers from Chelmsford. People spread out on the Squad, the area in front of the dining hall, read, chat, sleep on the grass. The sound-scape reduces.

At four o'clock, bells announce tea and broken biscuits. Rehearsal half past four, goes on until six. Supper at seven. Washing up takes long, but gives you the opportunity to talk to new arrivals. As soon as it is done, the bells calling for the evening service are heard. The 'time' for an event is not determined by the clock, but depends on the people being ready for it. This time torches are needed, for it is usually dark when we come back. If we are lucky the moon is bright enough to guide us. In the evenings candles are lit in the Chapel, and the shadows projected on the walls transform the atmosphere into something numinous.

When we come back, people gather to share a cup of cocoa or wine, a game of Scrabble, or they simply sit around tables talking. The badgers outside can be seen searching for food. Walking back to my yurt, I see an amazing sky, so clear with stars bright and sparkling. What a day! And what a place to be!

# CHAPTER ONE

## DISCOVERING OTHONA

### 1.1 Introduction and Context

The history, the past, and the present of the Othona Community are indelibly intertwined with the Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall in Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex. In order to define the research project and describe its aims, I need to take such historical 'elements' into account (see Chapters 3 and 4).

After coming to the Othona Community for more than three decades, it has long been my wish to reflect upon it theologically. I left university at a point when I saw no connection between theory and practice. At that time I was not able to express what I found years later written by G. West: “We reject as irrelevant an academic type of theology that is divorced from action.”<sup>14</sup>

When confronting my much admired theology professor with the issue of theory and practice, his standard answer was: A signpost does not walk the way it shows (it does not follow the path into which direction it points — *Ein Wegweiser geht nie seinen eigenen Weg*).<sup>15</sup> In other words: What he taught — and he was quite inspiring in his field of *Sozialgeschichte des Alten Testaments* (tr. Social History of the Old Testament) — had no impact whatsoever on what he did or lived. There was no praxis involved.

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14 Christopher Rowland (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), p. 155.

15 Translations are by the researcher unless otherwise stated.

His answer did not satisfy me at that time, especially as I had also been a student of Dorothee Sölle (still Germany's most-read theologian) who claimed in her *orthopraxie* that you could not think what you did not do. She wanted to combine a spiritual life with a political praxis, the 'right' praxis, the '*ortho*'-praxis and that meant, life according to justice.<sup>16</sup> I wanted and needed a combination of theory and practice; a *vita mixta* of action and contemplation as found in the Franciscan and Ignatian traditions. Luckily, Othona came my way.

## 1.2 Christian Movement for Peace

As a young student of Protestant theology, American literature and Pedagogy there was only one viable way to proceed, to travel and to get to know people, countries and languages without having 'to pay through the nose': to work in the country itself. A good way to combine all of that was to participate in international work camps, for they were even funded sometimes. I worked for the International Voluntary Service, lived on a kibbutz in Israel for half a year, studied at the University of Haifa, and joined a camp counsellor service. However, the Christian Movement for Peace, a non-profit organisation, seemed to be the most appropriate organisation for me, offering interesting camps all over Europe and the world.

The Christian Movement for Peace came into being after the First World War (in 1923) in Germany and France<sup>17</sup>. The organisation strove towards peace and

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16 Cf. Bärbel Wartenberg-Potter, 'Dorothees Beitrag zur feministischen Theologie und zur Erneuerung der Kirche'. <http://nordelbien.de/nordelbien/norabisz.bischoefe.potter.kontakt.bischoefe.htm> (5.4. 2011).

17 [http://www.yap-cfd.de/ueberuns/yap-cfd\\_info.htm](http://www.yap-cfd.de/ueberuns/yap-cfd_info.htm) (03.08.2010).

reconciliation, wanting to reduce prejudices and promote tolerance, particularly among nations which had formerly been at war.

The father of that organisation was an Alsatian, Etienne Bach, an officer in the occupation army of the Ruhr area. On Good Friday 1923 he was about to take the Eucharist with the mayor of Datteln, Germany. The tension between the two must have been notable. Both drank from the same chalice and ate from the same loaf. Bach noted later *Die Herzen waren verändert* (tr. the hearts had changed).<sup>18</sup> After that crucial experience, they both tried to alleviate the lives of those who were living in occupied lands while challenging the preconceptions each side had of the other.

Christians from the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain and Switzerland joined in the idea of reconciliation and founded in 1924 the “Knights of the Order of the Cross” (*Kreuzritterorden*), which later became the *Christlicher Friedensdienst* (tr. Christian Movement for Peace). During World War II it was a Swiss, Gertrud Kurz, who extended the area of work for that organisation by looking after war refugees. In 1994 the Christian Movement for Peace changed its name and became the YAP (*Youth for Action and Peace*), omitting the word ‘Christian’ to become more inclusive. Now they call themselves VAP (*Volunteers for Action and Peace*).

The work camps they have provided over the years and still provide today, enable young people to learn from each other by living and working together. The VAPs support local activities throughout the world on peace, justice, social action, community development and environmental issues. A group of VAPs still come to

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18 [http://www.yap-cfd.de/ueberuns/yap-cfd\\_info.htm](http://www.yap-cfd.de/ueberuns/yap-cfd_info.htm) (03.08.2010).



Othona every year .

I tended to choose work camps relating to children, knowing that I wanted to teach. Hence, I worked in a cooperative just after the Portuguese Revolution, looking after disabled children. In a Belgium Summer Camp for physically and mentally challenged children, I was taught the most common swear words in French used among them. I spent a summer as a camp counsellor in the vicinity of New York, and could not believe how strictly it was run and how easily those children discarded food. One summer my working group stayed at Rotherham Hospital to support parents with their multi-challenged children.

### **1.3 My First Encounter with Othona**

In the summer of 1979 I came to Othona for the first time. The work we were expected to do was quite different to what I was used to: preparing the ground for pipes to ensure working toilets and showers. My first impression of the Community was that of simplicity: simple lifestyle, simple accommodation, simple food, simple clothing. The generator produced electricity only between 18:00 and 22:00. We had lanterns instead of electric lights. Everything was shared: chores, food, stories, laughter and sometimes wine.

I remember people endlessly drinking tea on the grass, peeling potatoes together, and the tremendous impact of very unusual services in the Chapel. Beyond these, there was a feeling of 'painlessness', of being 'whole', of living off an energy that was not mine alone. It was swift and easy, with a light-heartedness that reminded me of Mozart's music.

I did not know at that time that places could tell stories, that history could become alive, that sensations long gone could be conveyed and transmitted through a piece of land and that there was a correlation between history, place and Community.

#### **1.4 The Power of Place**

I was reminded of all that a few years later when visiting Bergen-Belsen for the first time, the *Vernichtungslager* (tr. extermination camp) located in the Lüneburg Heath in Northern Germany. It was an early summer day. A light breeze was going through the meadows and the wild flowers. I walked around the fields which are now part of a museum area, not paying any attention to the museum or the information you could get at the entrance. I wanted to sense the open fields which had once been an extermination camp, on a sunny day.

But — without being able to name it at that time — something was terribly wrong there. I felt disturbed — as one presumably does when visiting places of tragedy and abhorrence. It was a sensation, not a knowledge of that place. It was as if the earth which had witnessed all the atrocities there still exuded something that affected me. I *knew about* the place, of course. I knew that Anne Frank had died there of exhaustion and illness. I had watched a film in which the British made some Germans watch the opening of that *Vernichtungslager*. All I could see as a spectator were the faces of those Germans who mirrored the unfathomable horror that was yawning before them. However, on that particular visit, it was not history speaking but the memory of that piece of land, communicating that it still beheld and held all those repercussions and recollections. My feelings are well-summarised years later in the following passage:

... the social theorist E.V. Walker writes that place has no feelings apart from human experience there, but a place is a location of experience. It evokes and

organises memories, images, feelings, sentiments, meanings, and the work of the imagination. The feelings of a place are indeed the mental projections of individuals, but they come from collective experience and do not happen anywhere else. They belong to the place.<sup>19</sup>

There at Bergen-Belsen I felt quite the opposite of what I had when visiting Othona for the first time. The projections of individuals and groups determine the ambience of a place. While dwelling on positive collective experiences at Othona, I have never felt so negative about a place before or since as I did at Bergen-Belsen.

These experiences have made me become more aware about the power of place, and so in this research I look at the various historical strands that have shaped the coming into being of the Othona Community. Different experiences from various walks of life have contributed to coin Othona. For that reason the radius of influences on Norman Motley has to be considered when approaching the phenomenon of Othona.

I took to Othona — this place and this Community — and returned to it year after year. I did all my examination preparations there. I introduced my daughter (later my son) to it and lived there with her during my sabbatical year. I met the founder of Othona very briefly in that first year before he died in 1980. What has not ceased to amaze me ever since, is the idea of integrating Germans as early as 1946 into a ‘study camp’ in Great Britain, the idea of ‘reconciliation’ immediately after World War II.

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19 John Inge. *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 83. Interestingly enough, Inge writes in a footnote about the possibility of the redemption of places. He states that it has been inherent in Christian tradition to redeem places where unfathomable evil has taken place. This, however, I find unimaginable in places of concentration or extermination camps as long as there are *Zeitzeugen* (survivor witnesses) around. It might possibly take more than one generation to redeem these sort of places.

## 1.5 Historical Background

When Dick Howard, the provost of Coventry Cathedral, declared on Christmas Day in 1940 in a radio broadcast from the cathedral ruins that after the war he wanted to “work with those who had been enemies, to build a kinder, more Christ-like world”<sup>20</sup>, there was much uproar and rebuke, particularly, when he said “Father, forgive!” — instead of “Father, forgive *them!*” (alluding to the Germans) — words that are now engraved into the ruins of the old cathedral.<sup>21</sup> He evoked a storm of protest. ‘To work with the enemy’ — what an affront in the middle of the war! Howard's commitment not to take revenge but to forgive and seek reconciliation with those responsible could not possibly have been a popular attitude among the British, as an interview with Alan Hartley in *The Guardian* shows.<sup>22</sup> When asked what the people of Coventry had felt after the destruction of the Cathedral, he replied:

Anger ... Anger that somebody would fight a war to include women and children indiscriminately. We accepted that attacks on factories making war equipment were legitimate, but this type of mass bombing was inhumane and ruthless, and it set the pattern for total war.<sup>23</sup>

So, retaliation came quite easily, and within a short period of time “Coventry recovered its spirit and within a few months, factory production was back to normal”.<sup>24</sup>

Reconciliation instead of retaliation was supported by Norman Motley, the founder of the Othona Community. Motley had been to Coventry in the early 1940s. It is hard to say if his inspiration for the cross of nails (Othona’s emblem) stems from Coventry or if it was completely independent (as his daughter claims). The emblem was

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20 <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/about-us/our-reconciliation-ministry.php> (31.1.2011).

21 Information from Janet Marshall (Motley’s daughter) in a private phone call (27.1.2011).

22 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/2010/sep/07remembering-theblitz-co...> (1.2.2011).

23 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/2010/sep/07remembering-theblitz-co...> (1.2.2011), p. 2.

24 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/2010/sep/07remembering-theblitz-co...> (1.2.2011), p. 2.

manufactured as an

ugly sign of four nails ... as a reminder of the central fact of Christ's revelation of the nature of God — new life — ... healing and revealing ... those who have the Nails are actively concerned ... with the relation of faith to life — the incarnation of the Gospel.<sup>25</sup>

The *Nails Movement* (see also 4.3) that Motley initiated during the war hoped to work for peace and reconciliation in the post-war world.

This was a concept so very much against the mainstream at that time that one cannot help but wonder where it came from and how it came into existence: a concept so completely different to what one would expect, considering time, circumstances, and context.

Janet Marshall, Motley's daughter, writes that her father was also influenced by the former Bishop of Chichester, George Bell.<sup>26</sup> Bell was a promoter of the Ecumenical Movement between the wars. After 1933 he became an ally of the so-called *Bekennende Kirche* (tr. BK - Confessing Church) in Germany. It was that movement within the German church that opposed the *Deutsche Christen* (tr. DC – German Christians) Movement, those clergymen and followers who uncritically accepted the Nazi ideology. Bell was friends with Dietrich Bonhoeffer; he rejected area bombing and retaliatory attacks and asked 'unpopular' questions such as: "How can the War Cabinet fail to see that this progressive devastation of cities is threatening the roots of civilization?"<sup>27</sup>

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25 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 15.

26 Appendix I: Email Andrew Chandler on Motley and Bell.

27 George K. A. Bell, *The Church and Humanity (1939-1946)* (London: Longmans, 1946), p. 140.

## 1.6 “Wholly Other”

When the founder of the Othona Community discovered the Chapel of St. Peter-on-the-Wall, he felt immediately 'at home'. He labelled the experience as numinous: “... there are times when one knows with a certitude deeper than purely rational processes and knowledge”<sup>28</sup> was how he commented on the sensation he had upon entering the Chapel. Norman Motley had detected a place where he belonged and thus decided to establish the Othona Community right next to it, possibly sensing already that “Community and places each build up the identity of the other.”<sup>29</sup>

The Othona Community is the result of the strong vision of a man who served as a RAF chaplain during World War II. As chaplain he instigated what he named ‘answer-back-meetings’ which were in response to the compulsory Chaplain talks at which questions were not permitted. Now, men and women, regardless of their creed, denomination, persuasion and rank met during the week to discuss existential questions, for example, the issue of theodicy, war and peace, and the lack of unity within Christianity.

Motley had felt something in the Chapel that Rudolf Otto had termed in his book *Das Heilige*<sup>30</sup> as “wholly other” (*ganz andere*),<sup>31</sup> decades earlier. For Manfred Josuttis, professor of practical theology in Göttingen, it is the “reality of all realities”:

Heilig meint ... die Wirklichkeit aller Wirklichkeiten, die unabhängig von der Einstellung und von der Wahrnehmung der Menschen eine Realität ist.<sup>32</sup>  
(tr. Holy means ... the reality of all realities, which independently of the attitude and perception of people, is a reality).

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28 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 13.

29 Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. xi.

30 Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige* (Breslau: Trewendt & Granier, 1917).

31 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (Orlando: Hartcourt, 1987), p. 9.

32 <http://www.ejb.de/index.php?id=356> (“Das Heilige ist nicht organisierbar”) p. 3 (27.2.2010).

The classic historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, takes up the word and defines the “wholly other”, something completely and utterly different from physical realities, as “sacred”.<sup>33</sup> “The sacred is ... the opposite of the profane.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to say that “sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations.”<sup>35</sup> Considering the time when the Othona Community came into being, one can well speak of post-war reality as the profane existential situation as the counterpoint to the sacred existential situation Motley perceived at Othona.

### 1.7 Post-War Situation

Bell, Howard, and Motley were examples of preaching and living a wholly different perspective. They were promoters of the Ecumenical Movement<sup>36</sup> (and ‘ecumenical’ meant ‘peaceful’ to them at that time) and supporters of the Confessing Church in Germany and therefore of the German resistance. They differentiated between the Nazi regime and German people. To preach ‘reconciliation’ at a time when Paul Celan’s death fugue *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland* (tr. Death is a master from Germany) became a metaphor of the holocaust, seems almost naïve from today’s point of view — or at least “wholly different”, if not “wholly other”.

‘Being in Christ’ made these clergymen look differently at their existential situation. Therefore, Motley’s attempt at building a community right after the war with people who had just been ‘enemies’ can be regarded as “wholly other”, as participating in a different existential reality to what was going on elsewhere.

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33 Eliade, *The Sacred*, p. 10.

34 Eliade, *The Sacred*, p. 10.

35 Eliade, *The Sacred*, p. 14.

36 Cf. Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 48.

He did not care about the origins of the people who joined the Community. He lived and practised “to be clothed in Christ” (Gal. 3:27), disregarding the provenance of the people in camp. “People are what they are and are received as such.”<sup>37</sup> He included and integrated un-repatriated German prisoners-of-war, Russians, and Armenians, people from all walks of life regardless of their social strata, income or aptitude.

This is all the more amazing, for it did not represent a common attitude at that time.

One can justly apply the term ‘wholly other’ to the Othona Community as well. To reach it is a journey in itself. It is a place where all the status symbols of modern life do not count or matter. People go there to be away from things that weigh in everyday life. They start a journey on more than one level when they set out to make their way to Othona. As Norman Motley said: they “want food in more than purely physical terms.”<sup>38</sup> Othona enables people to go on their spiritual journey. This journey, however, is far from being mythical or theoretical. It is downward and practical towards wholeness.

### **1.8 Constituent Elements of the Community**

So, how can our research help to understand Othona? What are the constituent elements shaping the Othona Community, and how can we find out what they mean to Othonites (members of the Community)? In trying to find this out I start with my untied perception of the dynamics of the Community.

My experience, perception, and observations have led me into thinking that the

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37 Motley, Much Ado, p. 25.

38 Motley, Much Ado, p. 49.



following components help in understanding the Community:

Journey — Home  
Belonging — Identity  
Volunteering — Discipleship  
Place — Transition

In order to find this place where I feel well taken care of, which I consider *Heimat* (tr. Home/see Chapter 7)), we have to go on a journey. It is from one country to another, sometimes even from one continent to another; for some Othona is only a stone's throw away. The journey does not stop after having arrived at Othona. It can become an inward, spiritual journey (see 1.7). Some come only in the summer, others visit as often as possible. We discover and learn about ourselves by belonging to a group of people, by becoming part of a Community. Though this Community is different every time we come, it shapes our identities. This identity entails 'discipleship' by volunteering each other, by serving each other, by being there for each other, by discovering that 'discipleship' is part of the common good of this Community. The Community can be an 'in-between-place' where people can go who sense that their lives are about to change, for people in transition, for people on the brink of something new where they are empowered for the next step. Othona can also simply be “a place to be”, a combination of Community, Chapel, and natural environment.

Other components may emerge as the research progresses. In order to investigate the Community's history and its present, its practices and spirituality, its theology and mission, and even its future, those components need to be clarified. This will be done by listening to Othonites, as I investigate what other members of the Community consider to be components crucial to the life of the Community.

## 1.9 The Research Question

In exploring Othona and its significance, I discovered a strange phenomenon with a charisma that is hard to put into words. As a phenomenon, it cried out for investigation and articulation. I developed my fundamental Research Question in this way — as one academic attempt of putting into words what has been lived and experienced for seven decades now:

How can we understand the continued phenomenon of the Othona Community in the twenty-first century?

This will involve consideration of its *Lebenswelten* by whom I refer to the worlds we experience, perceive and associate with and which we take for granted, without asking about their coming about or reference to other worldly connections and relations.

But how was I to investigate this human phenomenon that was both familiar and strange to me? How to put into words a strangeness that resists articulation? This is the task undertaken in Chapter Two.

# CHAPTER TWO

## RESEARCHING A STRANGE PHENOMENON

### “What the hell is going on here?”

#### 2.1 Introduction

How can I capture this strange phenomenon called Othona? What *is* the phenomenon? What sort of community is it: to what needs does it respond and offer support? For what does it provide fulfilment?

How can I grasp a strange phenomenon in which there is hardly any *Schriftkultur* (tr. culture of the written word) apart from Othona's journal *The Full Circle*? Its main features contain a culture of encounter, relationships, and narrative. There are many facets to be taken into account when wanting to depict something with so many layers, such as history, politics, personal involvement, spiritual engagement, material, social, religious, legal and narrative issues.

How possible is it to portray a phenomenon that is extraordinary, special, and unusual? In order to investigate a multi-layered and multi-faceted phenomenon, we need to approach it from different angles and with respect to different dimensions.

To understand any human community requires knowledge of relevant documents, records, and writings with regard to

- Geographical and physical location
- History of the Community and its foundation

- Organisational culture: economic and political structure
- The ideas, ideology, vision, values, and language of self-description

But none of these, however necessary, can get to the heart of the matter, because each human community is unique and mysterious, particularly to outsiders. The existential truth of a community may only be discerned from within. This privileges an insider approach and observer participation, and requires in-depth conversations with members who are able to speak freely and openly of their experience and perceptions of the Community.

This indicates that fully to understand any human community, especially one with a distinctive ethos, requires a particular kind of research to supplement literary and documentary research:

- Ethnographic field research
- Qualitative research (including semi-structured and unstructured interviews)
- Auto-ethnography

In particular, *Phenomenography* and *Lebenswelten* proved useful tools to guide the research undertaken. These terms will be explained in 2.5.

## **2.2 Research Goals**

In order to approach the Research Question, “How can we understand the continued phenomenon of the Othona Community in the twenty-first century?”, requires three fundamental Research Goals that approach the phenomenon from both a documentary and a personal perspective leading to theological discernment:

1. To research documents, records, and writings to assist in understanding the context and background of the phenomenon of Othona

2. To research the human life of the Community, including its past and present history, its people, its thinking, its praxis — to assist understanding the phenomenon of Othona and its charism.

Finally, to understand Othona requires discernment of its theology, by drawing conclusions from the material gathered through the first two Research Goals. So, the third Research Goal is:

3. To uncover the implicit theology of Othona.

This research aims at description, analysis and understanding of Othona experiences, looking for distinctive characteristics, “to uncover all the understandings people have of a specific phenomena”<sup>39</sup> — in this case Othona. It has to be clear though from the very start that: “Such an aggregate of descriptions making up ‘the perceived world’ is logically bound to be ‘unvollendbar’, i.e. ‘incompletable’”<sup>40</sup>, because a Community is a living entity, always evolving, never finished.

How do I find academically recognisable ways of looking for methodologies, guidelines and procedures to approach something that has never before been in the centre of academic inquiry? The ground is unploughed concerning material about the Othona Community. There is not much footage apart from articles written in the Community's quarterly *The Full Circle*. I will not only have to start a process of data collection but will be telling Othona’s narrative as the research continues.

The following questions were developed to assist understanding the mysterious

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39 Ference Marton, 'Phenomenography: A research approach to investigating different understandings of reality', *Journal of Thought* 21(3): 28-49 (1986), p. 32.

40 Ference Marton, 'Phenomenography – Describing Conceptions of the World around us', *Instructional Science* 10 (1981), 177-200, p. 190.

phenomenon that is Othona:

- What is it that draws people to Othona and why do they keep coming back? (see Chapter Seven and Eight)
- What is the magic of the place? (see 3.2; 3.5; 5.4.2 & 7.4; 6.2.6; 7.5)
- Why do people mostly from a middle-class background put up with poor accommodation, crazy people, a day of travelling to reach it, daily chores in their spare time, a muddy place where much is improvised, people they do not get on with and would never befriend themselves with by choice, year after year ever since 1946 ? (see Chapter Seven and Eight)
- What needs are fulfilled there? (see, for instance, 7.11; 8.1; 8.2; 8.3; 8.4)
- What are people looking for and what do they receive? (5.4.2 & 7.4; 7.5)

Or to cite Clifford Geertz, one of the most famous fathers of interpretive ethnology:

“What the hell is going on here?”<sup>41</sup>

### **2.3 Finding Appropriate Modes**

Our Research Goals help us to discern the methods and methodology that are required to address our strange phenomenon. Historical and documentary research is necessary for Research Goal 1, when considering the historical aspects of Community and Chapel, but when dealing with the experiences of members (including myself), qualitative research such as ethnography and auto-ethnography is appropriate to delve into people's perception of the phenomenon for Research Goal 2. Research Goal 3 sums up the outcome of the first two goals and elicits an implicit theology.

That is why I want to describe extensively the natural *Lebenswelten* (cf. 2.5) of this Community, to see whether I can find abstractions and categories representing and

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41 In: Uwe Flick, Ernst v. Kardoff & Ines Steinke, Qualitative Forschung - Ein Handbuch (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2009), p. 391.

generating data, findings, and results that can contribute to the Research Question. So the process of data accumulation brings about the methods I want to apply. Methods and methodology are determined by the Research Question.<sup>42</sup>

## 2.4 Narrative Analysis

In order to take into account that Othona is a place linked to stories, history and narratives, it is necessary to do a *narrative analysis*, making the world of the Othona Community and its members (of whom I am one) visible. Narrative is “meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience.”<sup>43</sup> Narratives are seen not as a set of facts but as products constructed or fabricated by people in the context of particular social, historical, cultural, and religious locations. Most intended interview accounts are likely to be *storied*, i.e. told in a narrative form. This is important because “narrative knowledge is ... a legitimate, rigorous and valid form of knowledge, that informs us about the world in ways which are publicly significant.”<sup>44</sup> However, “Narratives do not speak for themselves or have unanalysed merit; they require interpretation when used as data in social research.”<sup>45</sup> So for further analysis, the extracts of intended interviews have to be selected and organised for closer inspection along with field notes, documents, and articles of *The Full Circle*.

As Othona has been working since 1946, it is worth looking at its stories: what is

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42 See e.g. Isadore Newman & Carolyn R. Benz, *Qualitative-Quantitative Research Methodology* (Carbondale/ Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998): “The research question dictates the selection of research methods.” P. 89 ff.

43 Susan E. Chase, 'Narrative Inquiry — Still a Field in the Making', in: Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds) (*Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2013.

44 John Swinton & Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 38.

45 Catherine Kohler Riesmann, 'Narrative Analysis', in: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.470.1392&rep=rep1&type=pdf> p. 2 (21.3.2016).

going on narratively in those environments? And this includes myself, as “Inquirers also become storytellers ... experimenting with personal narratives, first-person accounts, reflexive interrogations.”<sup>46</sup> Again, it is the imagination and interests of the storyteller that links events and endows them with meaning for others.

Narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was. The “truths” of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future.<sup>47</sup>

Narratives offer possibilities to re-imagine events, incidents, situations, stories, and experiences to form a collective identity and to find ways of resonance. This collective identity can possibly manifest itself in this process (see 1.8). This is where the researcher comes in as a conglomerate of storyteller, narrator, inquirer, interpreter, observer, and participator.

## **2.5 Phenomenography and *Lebenswelten***

I am using *phenomenography* to find out what is going on in this Community by mapping the phenomenon of Othona to understand the various kinds of ways in which people experience, perceive, describe and interpret the Othona Community. In this *phenomenography*, the methodological approach delineates the processes of collecting and analysing data. It shows the individual’s personal understanding of the phenomenon of Othona and portrays the relation between the individual and the phenomenon. The aim is to discover the different aspects relevant for defining the phenomenon:

It is to find and systematize forms of thought in terms of which people interpret aspects of reality — aspects which are socially significant

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46 Yvonna Lincoln & Susan A. Lynham & Egon G. Guba, 'Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited', in : Denzin & Lincoln, Qualitative Research (Los Angeles/London: Sage, 2011), p. 125.

47 Riesman, 'Narrative Analysis', p. 6.



and which are ... shared by the members of a particular kind of society.<sup>48</sup>

Disclosing aspects which members consider important is the step to be taken when categorising people's perceptions. The claim that the researcher has to be “neutral to the ideas of the participants” for she “is not studying his or her own awareness and reflection, but the awareness and reflection of the subjects or participants”<sup>49</sup> has to be subject to critical appraisal, for no research is neutral, value-free or objective<sup>50</sup> (cf. 2.7.1 Interpretive Paradigm). Furthermore, I intend to approach the phenomenon of Othona from an auto- ethnographic angle, because I am involved in this Community.

The most important proponent of phenomenography is Ference Marton, and no-one dealing with this subject matter does not draw upon him.

Phenomenography is a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of the world around them. ... [P]henomenography investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or think about various phenomena.<sup>51</sup>

By broaching the subject in qualitative ways, Marton already indicates the general direction: qualitative research.

Apart from mapping a phenomenography I want to look into endogenous structures, into the *Lebenswelten* of community to find out about its internal working and inner dynamics. By *Lebenswelten* I refer to the approach of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schütz and, later, Jürgen Habermas,<sup>52</sup> who defined that term as the world of people with a pre-

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48 Marton, 'Phenomenography', p. 180.

49 Cited in: [https://www.iied.edu.hk/apfslt/v9\\_issue2/ornek/ornek2.htm](https://www.iied.edu.hk/apfslt/v9_issue2/ornek/ornek2.htm) MaryKay Orgill, 2002 (12.8.2015).

50 Cf. Denzin e.g., “objectivity is a chimera”, Denzin & Lincoln, 'Introduction -The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research', in : Denzin & Lincoln, *Qualitative Research 4*, pp. 9, 11.

51 Marton, 'Phenomenography', *Journal of Thought*, pp. 28-49.

52 Werner Thole, *Grundriss Soziale Arbeit* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag, 2012), I.

scientific realization and implicitness as opposed to a scientific, academic related world view. Husserl saw *Lebenswelt* as

*die alles Seiende und alle Allheiten wie all ihre Zwecke und bezweckenden Menschen und Menschenleben*<sup>53</sup>.

(tr. all the beings and all-beings as well as all the purposes and people and people's lives)

enveloped in a world. For Alfred Schütz *Lebenswelt* was

*der fraglose Rahmen oder Horizont unserer Welt- und Selbstausslegung, der selbst ... nicht thematisiert wird ...[ist] Archetyp unserer Erfahrung der Wirklichkeit.*<sup>54</sup>

(tr. The unquestionable frame or horizon of our world - and self-interpretation, which is not an issue ...[is] an archetype of our experience of reality).

Habermas differentiates between three components of *Lebenswelt*: culture, order, personality.<sup>55</sup> Investigating these authors would exceed this thesis, suffice it to mention these three philosophers as the original proponents of *Lebenswelten*, using the word as a contrasting term to science without the conscientization<sup>56</sup> of reality. So let me outline briefly the way I am employing the term.

Whatever people experience in their everyday life is *Lebenswelt*. People with different cultural backgrounds can be part of several *Lebenswelten*. However, the *Lebenswelt* of everyday life is — to draw on Alfred Schütz again —

*die Wirklichkeitsregion, in die der Mensch eingreifen und die er verändern kann, indem er in ihr durch die Vermittlung seines Leibes wirkt*<sup>57</sup>.

(tr. the reality region which people can get hold of and which they can change through the medium of their bodies).

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53 Heiner Legewie, 1998 [http://www.ztg.tu-berlin.de/download/legewie/Dokumente/Vorlesung\\_3.pdf](http://www.ztg.tu-berlin.de/download/legewie/Dokumente/Vorlesung_3.pdf), p.2 (20.2.2015).

54 Cf. Legewie in: <http://www.ztg.tu-berlin.de/download/legewie/Dokumente/downloads.htm>.

55 Legewie, 1998 [http](http://www.ztg.tu-berlin.de/download/legewie/Dokumente/downloads.htm), p. 2.

56 According to [The Freire Institute](http://www.freire.org/component/easytagcloud/118module/conscientization/) “Conscientization” is the process of developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action. Cf.

<http://www.freire.org/component/easytagcloud/118module/conscientization/>.

57 Legewie, 1998, [http](http://www.ztg.tu-berlin.de/download/legewie/Dokumente/downloads.htm), p. 2.

which when shared can be thought of as a collective memory.<sup>58</sup> For a hands-on, practical Community such as Othona, the philosophical or sociological definitions of *Lebenswelt* are — except Schütz's last statement — of little use because *Lebenswelt* consists of whatever happens in Community when a group of people come together to interact with whomever they encounter. These encounters differ from week to week depending who is there and who creates the *Lebenswelten* accordingly.

When attempting to depict Othona's phenomenography and *Lebenswelten*, it is not possible to rely on standard methodologies, for they cannot grasp this unique genius of a multi-layered and multi-faceted reality, as the above example of excluding the researcher shows.

I will try however to negotiate between the chosen methodologies offered by academia and the given ones determined by the reality. I will see how far each helps to address the Research Question to understand the phenomenon of the Othona Community.

For Ference Marton phenomenography is to

look for the most essential and distinctive structural aspects of the relation between the individual and the phenomenon ... we end up with categories of description ... which are decontextualized and hence may prove useful in contexts other than the one being studied ... It is a goal of phenomenography to discover the structural framework within which various categories of understanding exist.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, phenomenographers have two research goals in mind: first, to “discover and classify previously unspecified ways in which people think about certain aspects of

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58 Cf. Legewie, 1998.

59 Marton, *Journal of Thought*, p. 34.

reality,<sup>60</sup> and secondly, to communicate these findings as categories. These *categories of understanding* are the results of research which are “relational, experiential, content-oriented, and qualitative.”<sup>61</sup> Hence, when presenting my findings, I will not be making statements about Othona as such, but about the way people perceive Othona and the way they express this. These perspectives on reality are presented as categories of understanding in 5.5 after the interviews.

## 2.6 Procedural Methods

In order to be able to supply methodological answers when delivering a phenomenography with its related *Lebenswelten*, three research-relevant fields emerge to address the Research Question of understanding the phenomenon of Othona.

- 1) How do I acquire the information about Othona and its people which is relevant for my thesis?
- 2) What methods and research tools for collecting the data will be needed?
- 3) What is my role in obtaining and assessing the information?

As there is hardly any written material available (except the Community quarterly *The Full Circle*), I have to start a process of data collection. Most of it will be insider knowledge, for whoever writes in the *Full Circle* or on *Facebook* is usually also a member of the Community. There are few newspaper articles or other footage created by people outside the Community.<sup>62</sup> This insider knowledge, however, is important data from a qualitative point of view.

On the other hand, being in the journalistic tradition of *nosing around*, of soaking up

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60 Marton, *Journal of Thought*, p. 35.

61 Marton, 'Phenomenography', 2008, p. 33.

62 E.g. BBC Essex report 2012; Essex Magazine, *Rural Retreat*, Oct 2001, pp. 16-19.

knowledge by having lived there for a long time, by working from inside, by listening in to conversations that take place wherever I go, or by having known members long enough to judge the validity of their statements as well as by my expert knowledge, I have an unavoidable pre-knowledge of this social group, so as to be able to identify available operational tools and patterns of interpretation. I have observed members of the Community at meals, at Chapel services, on the beach, on the Stoep,<sup>63</sup> and at games.

**Fig. 3 The Stoep**



So, even before talking to them I already know much about them, either through our long history together or through other people. Other pertinent information I need, I have to extract from members, preferably through interviews.

So data collection and the analysis of the results are the steps to be taken before the data can be evaluated, reviewed and mirrored. I want to compare different sources of data:

- a) my experiences/views/notes/field work/observations/casual talks/

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<sup>63</sup> The *Stoep* is a longish terraced porch in front of the window side of the main building, a place of encounter, chat, and smoking: the central informal meeting place of the Community (see Fig. 3).

emails/ phone calls/documents/chats/conversations/discussions/letters/  
services/ naturally occurring materials<sup>64</sup>

b) what other people say/ think /interviews/case studies/ Facebook /  
surveys/ The Full Circle / Trustees' Minutes/  
calendar of events/ websites/ editorials

c) written analytical sources/ sources from 'outside'

Apart from providing the Othona Community with a written document about its history, this work could also show the Community what we have been doing all these years, enabling us to look clearly at our achievements and where we are going. It might also provide us with a direction for the future by being able to voice what our particular charism is, which helped us survive over the past decades and could sustain us for the ones to come.

The findings will tell us about the world we have created and are creating. As “Collective stories become integral to social movements,”<sup>65</sup> perhaps, we will be able to discern in what ways we have been part of a social justice movement.

## 2.7 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a set of various interpretive tools to assist one to study an interpretive community. The focus of this qualitative research is on understanding how an observed group makes sense of the world and/or interprets phenomena as a way of bringing meaning to them. It seeks to describe the *Lebenswelten from within*.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative Research consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible.<sup>66</sup>

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64 Anssi Peräkylä & Johanna Ruusuvuori, 'Analyzing Talk and Text', in: Denzin & Lincoln, *Collecting and Interpreting*, p. 277.

65 Susan E. Chase, 'Narrative Inquiry', p. 71.

66 Denzin & Lincoln, 'Introduction', in : Denzin & Lincoln, *Qualitative Research 4*, p. 3.

Othona's world has been rather private so far, but with this research it is going to be subjected to disciplines that will make it more 'comprehensible' and 'visible'.

In qualitative research, the researcher is a key instrument of data collection. After all, no data are "untouched by the researcher's hands."<sup>67</sup> She "must develop thorough and comprehensive descriptions of the context"<sup>68</sup> as I intend to do with "thick description". To assist this, I intend to blend my own ethnographic observations with the reports and materials provided by members.

As Guba and other qualitative researchers believe, all research is interpretive<sup>69</sup>, and as there are different unique single truths show that there is no definite and no absolute truth. "The interpretive practice of making sense of one's findings is both artistic and political."<sup>70</sup> The interpretive practice, I would add, depends much on the researcher and her special interests, keeping in mind, however, that "using multiple sources of data underscores that any view is partial and that narrative environments are multiple and layered."<sup>71</sup>

Finally, I want to engage in conversation with the data I collect to see what can be drawn from the Othona experiences for Othona itself. Othona does not seem to have an *Überbau*, a theoretical structure or superstructure and theology. Praxis stands in the foreground without any explicit theoretical grounding. Every Community member would agree that Othona is about *people* and *inclusiveness*, but as Gilo puts it on

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67 Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 'Analyzing Talk and Text', p. 278.

68 [www.personal.psu.edu/users/w/x/wxh139/Quality.htm](http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/w/x/wxh139/Quality.htm) (13.09.2013), p. 4.

69 Denzin & Lincoln, 'Introduction', p. 13.

70 Denzin & Lincoln, 'Introduction', p. 15.

71 Chase, 'Narrative Inquiry', p. 75.

Facebook:

it struggles, as it rightly should, to understand what 'being Christian' means in the context of a community open to 'all faiths and none'.<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, in order to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them<sup>73</sup> the following questions emerge:

- What is Othona about?
- What happens there?
- What and who is it for?
- What do people 'get' there?
- What sustains it?

These questions have to be considered when analysing the interviews. Chapter Seven will provide the concluding answers and simultaneously evaluate Othona's implicit theology (Research Goal 3).

## **2.8 Justification of Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research uses methods which are adequate to the subject matter and the objectives connected to it. Qualitative researchers usually still have to define their views about objectivity, validity, and reliability.<sup>74</sup> However, quantitative researchers still often reproach qualitative research for a lack of these attributes.<sup>75</sup> It is exactly those criteria to which the latest proponents of qualitative research object. They do not see subjectivity as an interfering variable. Quite to the contrary, they want to use the particular phenomenon in question to understand the research process. They define new forms of validating their research process.

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72 Facebook, Othona Forum Document, Letter to Trustees from Gilo (24.09. 2011).

73 Cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 'Introduction', p. 4.

74 Cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 'Introduction', p. 4.

75 Cf. Denzin & Lincoln, Qualitative Research 4, p. 2, 'Resistance to qualitative studies'; Uwe Flick & Ernst v. Kardoff & Ines Steinke, Qualitative Forschung — Ein Handbuch (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2009), p. 3; and Philipp Mayring, Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse — Grundlagen und Techniken (10<sup>th</sup> ed., Weinheim/Basel: Beltz -Verlag, 2008), pp. 7f.



“Triangulation is an alternative to validation ... the display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously.”<sup>76</sup> Triangulation, though, does not seem to be enough for the case of Othona. Ninian Smart is helpful here, for he argues that various dimensions have to be considered when investigating religion.<sup>77</sup> Whilst not deploying Smart's categories, this kind of approach can be applied to Othona by considering multifarious levels of looking at the strange phenomenon, e.g. history, geography, structure, values, theology, and ecological validity,<sup>78</sup> a psychological term that refers to the extent to which any piece of research reflects real life, which is appropriate for Othona as well. Ecological validity helps qualitative research when attempting to portray *Lebenswelten* and depict them extensively. Reliability in qualitative research does not mean repetition and fastidiousness, but seeing each individual research process as both unique, but also being embedded in a special frame that has to be contextualised through rich description to assure accuracy and faithfulness to reality. Due to the uniqueness of the process it is not repeatable.

Denzin, however, wants to chart a “path of resistance”, to “create our own standards of quality, our own criteria.” He resists the view that

within the evidence-based community, there is the understanding that qualitative research does not count as research unless it is embedded in a randomized control trial (RCT)! Further ... there are no agreed-upon procedures, methods, or criteria for extracting information from qualitative studies. These interpretations must be resisted.<sup>79</sup>

The problem with the standards of quality in qualitative research is that there are no

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76 Denzin & Lincoln, *Qualitative Research* 4, p. 5.

77 Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

78 [http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/9781848721166/chapter7/Key\\_issues\\_Ecological-Validity.pdf](http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/9781848721166/chapter7/Key_issues_Ecological-Validity.pdf).

79 Norman K. Denzin, 'The Politics of Evidence', in Denzin & Lincoln, *Qualitative Research* 4, p. 645.

core criteria. They differ from researcher to researcher.

The publication of Tashakkori's and Teddlie's book *Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*<sup>80</sup> shows a willingness and a necessity to come up with a third methodological movement,<sup>81</sup> a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches when it comes to investigating social research questions.

Without wanting to discard mixed or quantitative methods from the start, my Research Question is linked throughout to methods that necessarily fall under the category of *qualitative research*: participant observation, field notes and observations, in-depth-interviews, open questions, triangulation, and auto-ethnography. Numeric information as part of quantitative research is not part of my research for it does not contribute to addressing the Research Question, therefore qualitative research is the most appropriate method. This is why the *third methodological movement* is not useful for my particular research.

Though I am walking on the path of qualitative research, it is a path with restrictions, because historical research, based on the evaluation of historical documents and pictures as well as archaeological data, has to be taken into account as well when going into Othona's and the Chapel's past. Going to the Essex Record Office in Chelmsford, to Lambeth Palace Library in London, or resorting to Othona's archives has shown me that documentary research is a *sine qua non* in making sure that my research is also partly based on generally available documents and not completely

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80 Abbas Tashakkori & Charles Teddlie (eds), Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Los Angeles/ London: Sage, 2010).

81 Tashakkori & Teddlie, Mixed Methods, p. ix.

dependent on the researcher and her gathered data.

However, terms such as validity and truth do play an important part when it comes to defending one's findings. They depend heavily on the researcher as well as on politics and on any scientific paradigm. My Research Question would produce different results to some extent when being executed by someone else, because each researcher brings or obtains ideographic knowledge. This approach assumes that people can only be understood by taking the whole person into consideration. "It presumes that meaningful knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences."<sup>82</sup> Therefore, it will be virtually impossible to repeat my research project, for the conditions would be different. Thus the angles from which I interpret my findings have to be described clearly. Judith Preissle<sup>83</sup> advocates "for control of standards to be as local as possible", realising how difficult it is to find unitary meanings of constructs. She tells of preparing students in qualitative methodologies "while urging them to think and do beyond these practices."<sup>84</sup> This statement shows how ephemeral all work with constructs is. Nonetheless, they have to be as authentic as possible.

### **2.8.1 An Interpretative Paradigm**

All research is contextual, subjective or governed by values.<sup>85</sup> According to Marton, a "researcher's theoretical orientation has implications for every decision made in the research process, including the choice of method."<sup>86</sup> So, a chapter on

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82 Swinton & Mowat, Practical Theology, p. 43.

83 Judith Preissle, 'Qualitative Futures — Where We Might Go From Where We've Been', in: Denzin & Lincoln, Qualitative Research, p. 693.

84 Preissle, 'Qualitative Futures', p. 696.

85 Cf. Denzin, Norman K. & Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds). Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Material (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011), p.13: "All research is interpretive".

86 See Denzin & Lincoln, The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, pp. 3-4.

methodology should include the assumptions and beliefs that underlie research work: the interpretive paradigm. It is the ontological and epistemological aspects that determine the researcher's basic *Unterbau* (tr. sub-structure), her way of reading reality: "how things really are and how things really work"<sup>87</sup> and how we know what we know.

Most qualitative research emerges from an interpretive or constructivist paradigm: "All reality is interpreted and formulated via an interpretive process within which the researcher is inevitably enmeshed."<sup>88</sup>

Initially, the most acceptable approach I thought I had found in Denzin's basic assumption that

the social world is an interpreted world, not a literal world, always under symbolic construction ... validity-as-reflexive-accounting (VARA) which places the researcher, the topic, and the sense-making process in interaction.<sup>89</sup>

This 'constructionist' view of reality, however, has to be set against geographical, historical, and biographical data, and Othona's policy statements, and the founder's view and intentions. Thus it is hard data (geography, history, documents) and soft data (interview perceptions) alongside the researcher's own perspective (auto-ethnographic, self-reflexive, self-critical) which have to be assessed when addressing the Research Question.

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87 Denzin & Lincoln, 'Entering the Field of Qualitative Research' in : Denzin & Lincoln, (eds) *Collecting and Interpreting*, p. 201.

88 Swinton & Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 37.

89 David L. Altheide & John M. Johnson, 'Reflections on Interpretive Adequacy in Qualitative Research', in: Denzin & Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, p. 585.

So the initial assumption of working with a constructivist paradigm has to be revised. Looking at the Community and the Chapel, it has to be seriously questioned whether everything is 'constructed'. We seem to encounter energies which do not leave a place (see 1.4), but carry on, which the next group build upon. Basil the Great can be quoted here for he writes about the essence-energy aspect when saying: “no-one has ever seen the essence of God, but we believe in the essence because we experience the energy.”<sup>90</sup> Whatever people feel and experience at the Chapel is 'received' not 'constructed'. The power of place cannot be 'constructed' but comes into being through centuries of experience of people with that place.

Othona acts something out that seems to be “under construction”, looking at it superficially. But something much greater spreads and sprawls when looking at the phenomenon at a deeper level. There is more to it than can be seen at first sight (see Chapter Seven and Eight). Therefore Denzin's assumption that everything is 'constructed' has to be challenged, as will be shown with the example of the Chapel and Othona later on.

It would not do my research project justice to use only one interpretive paradigm, for it is difficult to demarcate the boundaries. It draws on at least two further paradigms: participatory and feminist theory. It is not possible to incorporate a feminist ethic without including feminist ideas. Most feminist researchers want to connect their research to social transformation and change<sup>91</sup> in regard to oppressed groups and women. They “consciously use ... research to help participants understand and change

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90 Cited in: Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London: Mowbray, 1979), p. 27.

91 Cf. Silvia Schroer & Sophia Bietenhard, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

their situations.”<sup>92</sup> I would not want this to be restricted to women, but would want Community members, particularly those who cannot voice their own needs, to be significant beneficiaries. As a woman, I cannot and do not want to neglect a feminist approach. For me, the feminist interpretive paradigm overlaps with the constructivist and participatory paradigm.

... the participatory research relationship is collaborative, such that research is with, for, or even by the community. The researcher is simply one partner in the research process. The ideal is one of *empowerment* of communities. Researchers develop awareness of indigenous understandings and aspirations such that these are primary determinants of the research work and its potential outcomes.<sup>93</sup>

This passage encapsulates my approach towards the Community. My interviewees are to be seen as conversation partners in some kind of collaborative process. I am one person in the research process, though without me it would not be done, but without the participation of the others, I would not be able to develop such a broad understanding. As a result of this thesis “indigenous aspirations” have been taken on again (see 8.9: Report of AGM 2014/15).

The categories among the paradigms are not fixed, they “are fluid, indeed, what should be a category keeps altering, enlarging ... even as [we] write, the boundaries between the paradigms are shifting.”<sup>94</sup> In qualitative research the categories are primarily defined by the individual researcher as well as by her particular research project. However, “a goodly portion of social phenomena consists of the meaning-making activities of groups and individuals around those phenomena.”<sup>95</sup>

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92 Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Post-Modern* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 226.

93 [https://www.Lancaster.ac.uk/research\\_ethics/5-2outlook.html](https://www.Lancaster.ac.uk/research_ethics/5-2outlook.html) (2.2.2015).

94 Lincoln et al., 'Paradigmatic Controversies', pp. 100-116.

95 Lincoln et al., 'Paradigmatic Controversies', p. 116.

So, whenever I present my findings to my Community, be it individuals or groups, be it in a conversation or in a talk, I will reflect *with* them about the topics that emerge from the interviews; I will validate my data in a reciprocal process (See Chapter 6). When presenting my findings I will offer the group — as an integrated storyteller of the common story — an interpretation of how I see our interaction going on at Othona. I will put into words what I have noticed and experienced. When others resonate with my experience it will become theirs as well, by assenting, approving, and accepting the results. If they are not validated, I will encourage them to correct or to complement and add whatever they think is missing, sometimes by telling me their angle of the story. Thus, exchanging our different perceptions of realities is a form of validation and simultaneously an ontological and theological approach towards the phenomenon of *Othona* which I want to map in a *phenomenography*.

## **2.9 The Consequences and Ethics of 'Making Othona Scientific'**

Ethical questions demand a particular sensitivity. Being a participant observer grants access to sensitive information and insights that usually stay hidden. Therefore, documents and materials have to be used with care so that they do not get used or abused in a way that would mar the dignity, self-determination, and interest of a person.<sup>96</sup> Participation has to be voluntary, confidential, avoiding harm for the person. *Informed consent* is required with *Consent Forms*<sup>97</sup> signed by the interviewees. *Ethical Approval* for the field work was obtained from The University of Birmingham.<sup>98</sup> However, when asking for the *informed consent* at the beginning of a

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96 Cf. Flick & Kardoff & Steinke, *Qualitative Forschung*, p. 589.

97 Appendix II: Consent Form.

98 Appendix III: Application for Ethical Review. The study was granted conditional ethical approval on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012 and after some more information received full ethical approval on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

project, the researcher applying *qualitative research* does not necessarily know what information she may obtain and what she is going to do with it. But since research studies also always depend on the personality of the researcher and her methods, a certain amount of trust is inevitable.

For that purpose, I will discuss my findings with members of the Community whenever I can. I do not expect the research process to be linear but rather cyclical, for my findings have to be mirrored and compared with reactions and changes within my Community. They are not necessarily my interviewees, but by presenting and sharing my results I partly triangulate and therefore validate the outcome, when I am listening and incorporating their critique. I hope to invoke a sense of identification, a resonance others can share.

One issue which cannot be fully granted is that of anonymity. As it is, some persons might be recognised by their functions or degree of relationship (especially to the founder) or by certain attributes. Having known each other for so many years, we know each other well, and it can be that we recognise a statement since we have heard it before. Accordingly, one person withdrew her interview at an early stage. Initially, I anonymised the accounts and narratives of the interviewees. However, they provided information that made anonymity difficult particularly within the Community. So, at the suggestion of my supervisors I asked permission for their first names to be used. All the interviewees agreed either personally, through Facebook or via email. Some even mentioned that they were proud to be part of, and recognisable in, the 'project'.

As for ethics, I am rooted in the values of *feminist communitarianism*, a research that



is rooted in “a concept of care, of shared governance, of neighborliness, or of love, kindness, and the moral good”<sup>99</sup> and endorse “a radical, participatory ethic ... an ethic that calls for trusting, collaborative non-oppressive relationships between researcher and those studied, an ethic that makes the world a more just place.”<sup>100</sup>

## 2.10 Auto-Ethnography: Possibilities — Limitations

Having an emic perspective from within a certain group, in this case the Othona Community, grants me the status of a 'native'. Thus by having a *native's point of view* as an insider-storyteller, I as the researcher will have to be particularly careful. However, “researchers cannot be separated from their research,”<sup>101</sup> they are always partial and taking stands. Being part of my own inquiry indicates an insider status, an interpretive *a priori* or as Werner Meinefeld puts it, I have an *alltagsweltliches Vorwissen*<sup>102</sup> (tr. an everyday life pre-knowledge) of which I have to be conscious. “There is general agreement that a researcher’s world view affects the manner in which that person conducts his or her research.”<sup>103</sup> This world view will be elaborated in the social location of the researcher (2.10.1). Concerns about my being able to distance myself from the subject matter in order to stay critical and reflective is an issue that comes up when reflecting about the insider and outsider status (see 2.10.1); as a participant observer, I will try to do justice to both positions. Therefore, transparency, resonance and self-reflexivity remain important throughout the work.

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99 Mission Statement, in (for instance): Programme of Events 2015, p. 2.

100 Denzin & Lincoln, 'Locating the Field', p. 24.

101 Ronald J. Pelias, 'Writing Into Position', Denzin & Lincoln, *Qualitative Research 4*, p. 663.

102 Werner Meinefeld, 'Hypothesen und Vorwissen in der qualitativen Sozialforschung', p. 273.

103 Teddlie & Tashakkori, 'Mixed Methods Research', in : Denzin & Lincoln, *Qualitative Research 4* , p. 292.

*Auto-ethnography*, also called *Interpretive Autoethnography*,<sup>104</sup> places the self and others in the same social context.

As an auto ethnographer, I am both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed ... I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller.<sup>105</sup>

So, I am the “indigenous ethnographer, the native expert, whose authentic first-hand knowledge of the culture is sufficient to lend authority to the text”.<sup>106</sup> It should be mentioned at this point that I am a lay ethnographer who uses *auto-ethnography* both as a method and as a text, “as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context.”<sup>107</sup>

In wanting to depict Othona’s history and present reality, the person doing the research has to be included. All stories, interviews and information received go through the researcher’s hands. As she is biased and partial, she may possibly not be open for new perceptions, even though *openness* is one of the main issues in doing qualitative research.<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, she is the one with the expert knowledge, who knows how to extract information from her interviewees that other researchers might never obtain. The depth and openness toward someone you know are of a different quality than towards a stranger. The disadvantages of being an *insider* are quite obvious, too. Some people are more open on certain matters with a so-called 'objective' interviewer, someone they do not have to live with, who is most unlikely to

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104 Norman K. Denzin, 'Interpretive Autoethnography', in: Stacy H. Jones & Tony E. Adams & Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Handbook of Auto-ethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA.: Left Coast Press 2013), p. 123.

105 Carolyn Ellis, cited according to Denzin, in : *Handbook of Auto-Ethnography*, p. 123.

106 Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (ed), *Auto/Ethnography - Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford/ New York: Berg, 1997), p. 7.

107 Reed-Danahay, *Auto-Ethnography*, p. 9.

108 Werner Meinefeld, 'Hypothesen und Vorwissen', in: Flick et al., *Qualitative Forschung*, p. 267.

come back to the Community. This was a problem with one of my interviewees. This person did not respond to me after the interview for fear that I would write things this person did not want others to know. I assured this person that I would treat their information discreetly.

Listening requires the willingness to put the other's story at the center of one's attention, to resist defensive reactions, and to acknowledge the limits of one's ability to put oneself in another's shoes<sup>109</sup>

Therefore, apart from being emotionally mature and sensitive,<sup>110</sup> narrative interviewing should involve patience and creative and sensitive interaction with the interviewees.

### **2.10.1 Insider — Outsider**

The insider-outsider-problem permeates qualitative research, especially when it comes to the study of religion or religious phenomena.<sup>111</sup> In the course of this thesis, I shall touch upon the implications of these terms. Being an 'insider' implies that I have access to information, knowledge, experiences, practices, stories and lore that would take an 'outsider' a long time to accomplish, if at all. "Large groups of individuals often come to view themselves as being one "kin" — that is, to the external observer, "fictive kin".<sup>112</sup> Whether this applies to the Othona Community will be seen in the evaluation of the interviews (see 5.5.2; 6.3.2; 7.5). The fact, however, that I am so close to the Community, so involved, might prevent me from taking an etic perspective, one from the outside. "Does your membership of the community invalidate

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109 Chase, 'Narrative Inquiry', p. 70.

110 Chase, 'Narrative Inquiry', p. 61.

111 Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon (ed), The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion (London/New York: Cassell, 1999); Jeppe S. Jensen, 'Revisiting the Insider-Outsider Debate: Dismantling a Pseudo-problem in the Study of Religion' in: Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 23 (2011), pp. 29-47.

112 Jeppe S. Jensen, 'Revisiting' in: Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 23 (2011), p. 35.

your objectivity?”<sup>113</sup> asks George Chryssides, a renowned British theologian. “When using the etic approach, the *ethnographer* emphasizes what he or she considers important.”<sup>114</sup> By describing the constituents that make up Othona (see 1.8), I am doing exactly that. In ordering and structuring material and the interviews, my priorities can be seen and, therefore, “the scholar of religion paradoxically remains in control of knowledge and thereby dictates the rules for interpreting religious phenomena”<sup>115</sup> However, as the researcher, I do not wish to dictate but to suggest tentative concepts of grasping Othona's endogenous theology that are open for discussion and reflection by others. Otherwise, I become the 'outsider' who proposes something that is foreign (*non-Heimat*) and alien to Othonites. “The Other”<sup>116</sup> that the ethno-anthropological researcher normally deals with, is in my case not 'the other', for I am one of them.

Othona in order to be inclusive, does not work with terms such as 'insider' or 'outsider'. These terms are diametrically opposed to what Othona stands for (cf. Chapters 7 and 8). The researcher, influenced by a feminist ethic (see 2.8.1), wants her research to be participatory and collaborative, to be as experience-near to the interviewees as possible for I feel compelled to do justice to them in my writing. By choosing which detail to reveal and which aspects of their lives to capture, we as a team serve scholarship. “The ideal is one of *empowerment* of communities.”<sup>117</sup> For

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113 George Chryssides, 2012 in: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/podcast-george-chryssides-on-the-insider-outsider-problem/> (14.9.2016).

114 Conrad Kottak, *Mirror for Humanity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), p. 47.

115 James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates* (London: Continuum, 2006) p. 2015.

116 Karen McCarthy, 'Writing About “the Other”' in: Russell T. McCutcheon (ed), *The Insider/Outsider Problem*, pp. 350 ff.

117 [https://www.Lancaster.ac.uk/research\\_ethics/5-2outlook.html](https://www.Lancaster.ac.uk/research_ethics/5-2outlook.html). (2.2.2015).

those reasons I “consider the insider-outsider distinction a gradient and not a rift”<sup>118</sup> realising “we are all and always insiders and outsiders in varying degrees in different contexts.”<sup>119</sup> I suspect that my position as an insider might be beneficial to the research and may prove beneficial to others researching other Christian Intentional Communities.

### **2.10.2 Pinning Down Auto-Ethnography**

Holman Jones resists the above categorizations, and calls auto-ethnography a *blurred genre*<sup>120</sup> in which life, art, and changing the world all play a part. Auto-ethnography as well as qualitative research are still “a field in the making.”<sup>121</sup> There are many approaches: one of the latest ones, however, is to go beyond written and oral texts<sup>122</sup> and include visual images, art, theatre, music, films, paintings and photographs. I want to include photos of the Community and the Chapel to show the location of my ‘research field’. Photographs will help to paint the picture and add to its completeness.

I anticipate that I will discover more about auto-ethnography as I use it as a tool in my research.

The definition doing most justice to my thesis and to academic standards is that of Leon Anderson. He accredits analytic auto-ethnography with five features:

... the researcher (a) is a full member in a research group or setting; (b) uses analytic reflexivity; (c) has a visible narrative presence in the written text; (d) engages in dialogue with informants beyond

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118 Jensen, *Revisiting*, p. 42.

119 Paul Walker, 'Perspectives from Ethnography: Applications in Mission and Urban Theology' in: *The British Journal of Theological Education*, 14:2, 2004, 153–167, p. 160.

120 Norman K. Denzin, 'Interpretive Autoethnography', p. 124.

121 Chase, *Narrative Inquiry*, pp. 55 ff.

122 Chase, *Narrative Inquiry*, p. 66.

the self, (e) is committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.<sup>123</sup>

All five features apply to my way of approaching the research: (a) I am a full and long-term “member” of the Othona Community, being involved with it to the extent that I was for instance asked (without having an official office) to consult with the Trustees in choosing a new Warden; (b) I hope to demonstrate “analytic reflexivity” throughout the research. Reflexivity is especially important when it comes to questioning the sources of my own knowledge and my being involved as a learner in the research process. It plays a decisive role in my position as a 'participant-observer' and as an 'observer-participant' because it ensures firstly, my distance towards the project, as well as secondly, my being part of the research. Constant reflexivity helps to differentiate between both positions. Self-reflection on my being German should also be included in analytic reflexivity. This is most difficult for me as a modern cosmopolitan. Where is my interest a matter of human nature, of curiosity, of general interest? Where does it start to be of theological importance? And where am I bound by national, geographical, and /or historical issues? My interest in the notion of *Heimat* clearly reveals that I am German. I am a 'child of my times'. *Heimat* is of importance in current German culture, therefore German influences are clearly noticeable<sup>124</sup> (see 7.5). Othona is definitely a place that has shaped my experience. (c) My “narrative presence” is clearly visible, for I have in addition to a special style a special interest (*Heimat*) that I want to demonstrate as part of a human and therefore religious need; (d) I engage whenever possible in “dialogue” with my interviewees and other members of the Community, but as well as in literature of all kinds; (e) And

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123 Leon Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (2006), pp. 373-395.

124 ARD Themenwoche, October 2015, a governmental and governmentally financed TV channel dedicated a full week to *Heimat*. Compare also footnotes in 7.5.3 on *Heimat*.

last but not least, I want to improve understanding of the phenomenon of Othona as a social phenomenon in a way that other communities may profit from the research as well.

### **2.10.3 The Researcher's Social Location**

In trying to limit the scope “we not only bring the self to the field ... (we also) create the self in the field.”<sup>125</sup> Thus, before delving into the scope of the Othona Community, my social location has to be clarified for “writing ... is ... discovery of the subject ... and discovery of the self.”<sup>126</sup>

I am a central European, German, well-educated, middle-class Caucasian woman from working class parents who worked their way up the social ladder and became teachers. I was brought up with ‘education’ as one of the highest life principles. It has turned into lifelong learning.

I was formed by the German students' revolution in the late 1960s (a highly political, leftist movement), and my studies in the 1970s were heavily influenced by the philosophy and sociology of the Frankfurt School: Bloch, Adorno, Horkheimer and some American sociologists such as Goffman and others. My MA in theology was also on a sociologist: Max Weber and his theological influences. I read Protestant theology, a word-oriented, dialectical, and sceptical theology, with Dorothee Sölle as one of my most influential teachers. I come from an academic theological tradition in which the question whether politics have anything to do with theology and religion

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125 Reinharz, Shulamit, 'Who am I? The need for a variety of selves in the field', in: R. Hertz (ed), Reflexivity and Voice (pp. 3-20). (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), p. 3.

126 Lincoln & Lynham & Guba, 'Paradigmatic Controversies', p. 124.

has always been an issue. As a consequence of being Sölle's student, theology has always been 'political theology' for me as well as 'feminist', wanting "a more holistic methodology of interpretation, one that is critical, experimental, dialogical, contextual and liberating."<sup>127</sup> Before I learned anything about the Bible as a young person, my father informed me about Marxism and the Communist Manifesto and German history of the twentieth century. I learned that I had a Jewish great-grandfather.

With this background, social justice issues have always been on my personal agenda. As a young student those issues liaised with spiritual and religious involvements and developments, in particular Othona. When I came to it in the late 1970s and early 80s and told people that I was studying theology, I was frequently asked if I wanted to become a nun, for it was unheard of at that time in Great Britain (at least for the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church) for women to become ordained.

My wish for being grounded somewhere, for choosing *Wahlverwandschaften*<sup>128</sup> (tr. choosing your own relatives) is clearly inherent in a family history of divorces. If you do not have the family you have wished for, you can decide to select your family. As humans we have the wish to belong. This also relates to *Heimat*.

#### **2.10.4 The Position of the Researcher in the Thesis**

Having written my MA at the beginning of the 1980s, I was used to hiding myself as a researcher. To talk about yourself was considered *bad style* and *un-academic*. So

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127 Silvia Schroer & Sophia Bietenhard, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2003), p. 33.

128 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Die Wahlverwandschaften (4<sup>th</sup> ed. Hamburg: Fischer Bücherei, 1960).



most of my research had to be phrased in passive constructions to avoid the narrative “I”. The exclusion of the researcher’s self has been standard. However, writing a thesis of this kind in the twenty-first century is a very different experience. My former approach has fortunately taken a different turn within qualitative research. Since I am writing from an auto-ethnographic angle, the consideration and position of the researcher are demanded.

In qualitative research the researcher is often regarded as a research instrument. The researcher is as much a part of the inquiry as the intent of the study and the inquiry process. In fact, the researcher’s thinking lies at the heart of the inquiry ... that is - students’ own professional experiences, personal intellectual concerns, and assumptions about knowledge.<sup>129</sup>

Crucial for my approach as a participant observer is the epistemological question of *How do I know?* (see 2.2). However, ontological and axiological underpinnings constitute my research as well: *How do I see the world?* and *What are my values?* (see 2.7 and 2.6.) In other words, my role and place in the world and my ethics and norms connected to my position have to be taken into consideration as well.

A key part of the ethnographic ethic is how we account for ourselves. Good qualitative research ... shows the hand of the ethnographer.<sup>130</sup>

So when sharing my insights in relational dynamics I invite readers to accept my perspectives and perhaps identify with them. My writing becomes a location for their deliberation.

These processes allow me to integrate unspoken knowledge and *unpainted pictures* as well.

Good ethnographies ... reflect tacit knowledge, the largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often reflected in

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129 Maria Piantanida & Noreen B. Garman (eds), The Qualitative Dissertation: a Guide for Students and Faculty (London: Sage, 1999), p. 24.

130 David L. Altheide & John M. Johnson, 'Reflections on Interpretive Adequacy in Qualitative Research', in: Denzin & Lincoln, Qualitative Research, p. 591.

nods, silences, humour, and naughty manners.<sup>131</sup>

In order to do so, you have to know people well. On the other hand, it is important to stay open, and not let your world view over-influence the insights you might obtain. There is always a danger of seeing everything through your own individually-coloured glasses.

Do the perspective, politics, and ideology of the observer so powerfully influence what he or she notices and reflects on that it over-determines the conclusion drawn?<sup>132</sup>

This question will be revisited in the final chapter.

## **2.11 Existential Focus of the Researcher: *Heimat* and Belonging**

Some elaborations, however, are of special interest to me. Having lived in many places and travelled the world, *Heimat* is becoming a term of increasing importance. “Home” is only a very superficial translation of *Heimat*. Germans define *Heimat* not only geographically, but also emotionally. It is where you feel at home, where you are accepted by everyone, where everybody helps you, where you experience community, where you belong.<sup>133</sup>

Where people become cosmopolitans because globalisation tears them out of their microcosms, a new need for *Behaustsein* (tr. being with a house) develops. Where do I belong? My own idiosyncrasy as a German shows in my interest in *Heimat* and 'belonging'. As somebody who was born a decade after the end of World War II, my occupation with rootedness is generational. In this contextual nature of the researcher, a certain uniqueness develops which will be quite different to my mostly English,

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131 Altheide & Johnson, 'Reflections', p. 591.

132 Altheide & Johnson, 'Reflections', p. 591.

133 DER SPIEGEL 15, 2012, pp. 60 ff.

Irish, and French interviewees.

But then what makes me German? And about what sort of 'Germanness' am I talking ? I asked Janet Marshall, the founder's daughter, who has been 'exposed' to Germans from the very start of the Community, how she would define my 'Germanness'. She replied that I was not 'German' in Community but that she considered a very thorough intellectual rigorousness a very German trait. She saw that in me. Possibly a preconception or prejudice?

My country was different when I was born. I used to understand it as an absolute, as a constant entity but had to learn that countries are constructed concepts, invented. Two 'Germanys' became one in 1989. The German Democratic Republic does not exist any longer. Cultures are real, and history is real, but “All experience is local” and “All identity is experience.”<sup>134</sup> At the moment this united Germany is changing again. Dramatically. Chancellor Angela Merkel's magnanimous and courageous decision to open the German border to refugees is already changing the normal street scene. New questions arise. Will we be able to offer them *Heimat* ? Will we be able 'to make it'? *Wir werden es schaffen* (tr. We can do this), as Angela Merkel keeps saying like a mantra. Having experienced three different 'Germanys' in my lifetime, I am no longer sure what it means to be German. I recognise values, norms, habits and customs. At the same time I have come to realise that to be German means to be diverse, dynamic and distinct. I would prefer to accept Taiye Selasi's concept of being multi-local and multi-layered: “Replacing the language of nationality with the language of locality

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134 Taiye Selasi in: [http://www.ted.com/talks/taiye\\_selasi\\_don\\_t\\_ask\\_where\\_i\\_m\\_fromaskwhere\\_i\\_m\\_local](http://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_fromaskwhere_i_m_local), p. 2. (17.10.2015).

asks us to shift our focus to where real life occurs.”<sup>135</sup>

By realising that these two terms *Heimat* and *Belonging* are indispensable parts not only of my emotional biography but of others as well, I exemplify something that is of importance to others, too, even though their background is completely different. It is here, that I as the researcher experience something that can be verified and balanced and corrected with other people’s considerations and stories.

Othonites have a narrative identity — as Christians or non-believers they are “storied people”.<sup>136</sup> In order to find out if stories, narratives, memory, place, and *Heimat* are essential terms and “clues towards the acquisition of wholeness”,<sup>137</sup> interviews will be conducted. What is the experience of modern man and woman? Possibly not knowing where your *Heimat* is? The interviews will help us to address these questions.

## **2.12 Development of Interview Questions and Qualitative Interviews**

Quite obviously, no previously tested set of questions was available for this research study; they had to be developed.<sup>138</sup> Questions were worked out as a guideline that I would have in front of me when talking to my interviewees and taking notes (see 5.1).

There are a variety of qualitative interviews, partly standardized, partly open ones. They serve to collect data or deepen knowledge about the research field. I opted for a combination of narrative, biographical, and focussed interviews or conversations,<sup>139</sup>

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135 Selasi 'don t ask', p. 4. (17.10.2015).

136 Louise J. Lawrence, *The Word in Place* (London: Ashford Colour Press, 2009), p. 11.

137 Motley, *Much Ado*, pp. 24-25.

138 Appendix IV: List of Questions.

139 Swinton and Mowat claim that interviews are not conversations mainly due to power structures. They are right, however, I wanted these interviews to be as informal as possible and did not want

for this mixture seemed to be the one that could evoke and generate information valuable for this kind of research. Narration combined with openness and non-directivity (narrative) referring also to people's biography (biographical) in connection with our subject "Othona" (focussed) covered the areas I wanted to touch upon.<sup>140</sup>

I chose a form of semi-structured interviews with flexible boundaries. The boundaries of the interviews were fluid, to leave space and room for unexpected topics, keeping in mind that "Interviews ought not to be considered true representations of human experience, but rather representations of human sense making."<sup>141</sup> I wanted to conduct an interview very much like an everyday conversation at the dinner table at which I am asking questions, as naturally as possible, and as open as possible. Research in that case meant *communication* by creating space for the interviewee to delineate herself and at the same time refraining from leading questions, exposing my own stance, and being directive.

Thus, going from personal to general to theological questions would build up the difficulty of the questions and grant the interviewee's adjustment to what was going to be expected of them and what kind of enquiry to await.

These questions, the location at the far end of the Stoep, at the centre of the Community, and the general approach were designed to allow the individual time and

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to exclude my being asked back. Even though I am the expert in the technicalities of this process, and realise what can be done with information (cf. 4.8.), I wanted to leave the option open for 'conversing' if that helped the interviewees to structure and formulate their thoughts.

140 Christel Hopf, 'Qualitative Interviews', in: Flick & Kardoff & Steinke, *Qualitative Forschung*, pp. 349 ff.

141 Preissle, 'Qualitative Futures', p. 695.

scope to think about their perceptions of Othona. How the participants were selected and how they responded to the questions can be found in 5.2 and 5.3.

Following this discussion of methodology, and before the interviews, I now proceed to investigate Othona's location and history, drawing on my own experience and the limited historical records that exist. This is important methodologically because all these aspects have to be considered when approaching the phenomenon of Othona. Since the Community is intrinsically linked with the Chapel St Peter-ad-murum, the next chapter explores the Chapel (and with it the first Research Goal) and then Chapter Four will explore Othona as a Community.

## CHAPTER THREE

# ST PETER-ON-THE-WALL — THE PRESENT AND THE PAST

### A. The Present

#### 3.1 Introduction

The name of the Othona Community derives from the old Roman fort Othona. The Christian missionary St Cedd used the remains of that fort and built St Peter-on-the Wall, that unpretentious little Chapel, where the former gatehouse used to be.

**Fig. 4** Picture: St Peter-on-the-Wall, Bradwell-on-Sea



*Source:* Othona Picture Folder: St Peter-on-the Wall

Without this Chapel, the Community would not be where it is. As it inspired a feeling of homecoming in the founder of this Community, he decided to establish “a movement of the spirit” next to it. The Community is linked to the Chapel and cannot

be thought of without it. That is the reason why it is important to look at the different dimensions and functions (present, past, pilgrimages, evensongs) of the Chapel to realise its influence on the Community.

Chapter Three is divided into two parts: Part A deals with the Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall as a contemporary church in the Chelmsford Diocese which is regularly used for services and pilgrimages. Part B delves into the diversified history of this building including its rededication in the last century.

### **3.2 Walking towards the Chapel: The Present and the Past**

The journey to the Community is a pilgrimage in itself. Leaving busy Liverpool Street Station in London by train, changing at Wickford (where I experienced last summer that there was no driver for the train available, and a replacement had to be found while the passengers were waiting) in order to reach the nearest available station near the Dengie Marshes, which is Southminster. From there an infrequent bus service takes you to Bradwell-on-Sea. The bus stops outside the King's Head pub. You are either collected there by an Othona Community member or you walk past St Thomas' Church along an old Roman road, the East End Road, for 1.5 miles. You turn left after a caravan park at a pond to reach the Othona Community.

The alternative is that you keep on walking straight directly towards the remote, wind-swept spot where the Chapel stands. A gate and a turning stile prevent people from driving up to it. A board announces "In this place the word is revealed". A public footpath leads to the ancient church. It is an uneven path framed by fields of rape, wild flowers and bushes. By preserving key areas at field boundaries, wildlife is able to thrive in its natural surroundings. Thick hedgerows reduce the wind speed across



the fields and prevent the soil from erosion. As one walks towards the Chapel there is a little house, a vestry, to its left. A huge, massive, wooden door is one of the first features one notices about the church.

**Fig. 5    Wooden Door of St Peter's**



To the right — hidden behind trees and bushes — is the Bradwell Bird Observatory. It is a place where you meet the most obscure bird watchers sitting endlessly to catch a glimpse of a rare raptor such as a merlin, a hen harrier, a peregrine, a short-eared owl, a hobby or such like. There is a paper on the door listing which birds have been seen over the past years. Grapes and plums grow at the birdwatchers' hut. Some days you can experience a complete noiselessness. In front of you are extensive areas of shell banks and saltings. The area is called Bradwell Cockle Spit. It consists of thirty acres of shell bank with extensive salt marshes. The view of the wind park across the sea is new. The barges which have been sunk just offshore are to protect the salt marshes and the sea wall from erosion.

### **3.3    On the Road to the Othona Community**

If you prefer to go to the Othona Community first, you will have to turn left into the

East Hall Farm instead of walking straight ahead to the Chapel. There is only one old sign indicating that you are on the right path to the Othona Community. Othona's post-box is an open, wooden, lichen covered box on a pole.

East Hall Farm is owned by the Othona Community and went up for sale in 2012. It is operated under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) which strives to combine modern farming in harmony with the environment. The farm has 1800 acres of which 750 acres are below sea level. The area is protected from flooding by the sea walls and a dyke. One encounters a rich flora there including such exotic plants as yellow-horned poppy, slender birdsfoot trefoil, grass-leaved oracle and marram grass. Grassland meadows are grazed by cattle during the summer and provide a rich mix of flowers and plants. Conservation field boundaries are planted with grass and wildflower mixtures to encourage insects and nesting birds. As you approach the Community on a very bumpy track you see remains of military heritage. Pillboxes, overgrown and bricked up are all along the coastline and inland as well. There is parking space giving way to several buildings: the Othona Community.

#### **3.4 St Peter-on-the-Wall: Church in the Chelmsford Diocese**

There are 463 parishes in the Diocese of Chelmsford, which is part of the Church of England in Essex and East London. The diocese has three area bishops, of Barking, Bradwell, and Colchester. Bishop Stephen Cottrell of Chelmsford serviced the 2015 Dawn Easter Morning Communion at St Peter's at 6:00 a.m.

**Fig. 6 Paschal Fire on Easter Morning 2015**



He arrived late to kindle the Paschal Candle and Fire, having underestimated the distance between Chelmsford and Bradwell. The small crowd gathered was mainly from the Othona Community. Looking at the vision of the Chelmsford Diocese<sup>142</sup> one can spot several parallels with the Mission Statement of the Othona Community (cf. e.g. p. 4. 24). “We are members of an international movement which encourages human flourishing, works for justice and peace and displays signs of God’s activity in the world. And as such we are called to be beacons of hope and carriers of joy!”

St Peter-on-the-Wall is frequently visited by bishops, possibly because it is an ancient

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142 <http://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/policies/transforming-presence> (24.7.2015).

monument,<sup>143</sup> a holy site and a living church at the same time. St Peter's is, also, the Chapel for the Othona Community. The bishops all visit the Community afterwards, as did Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury in 2014, John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, Laurie Green, Bishop of Bradwell in 2010, and Peter Hill, Bishop of Barking in July 2015.

St Peter-on-the-Wall is the link between the Chelmsford Diocese and the Othona Community. The link goes as far as people thinking in the earlier days that the Chapel *belonged* to the Othona Community. Othona has permission to use it. Othona and Bradwell Parish look after it, however, it belongs to the Diocese of Chelmsford.

### 3.5 The Past as the Present

St Peter's is England's oldest cathedral, and everything you would not expect a cathedral to be. It stands on the edge of the land. It is surrounded by nature and water. It is built of stones which were once part of a Roman fort. It is simple, coarse, uncouth

**Fig. 7 St Peter-on-the Wall and Vestry**



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143 Cf. Essex County Council, [Othona Community Site, Archaeological Excavation](#) (Bradwell-on-Sea: Field Archaeology Unit, January 2010), p. 1, "The fort and the church are protected as a scheduled Monument (SM 24883)".

and rough. It was a monastery, a chapel-of-ease, a beacon, a lighthouse, a smuggler's hideaway for contraband, a barn and a billet.<sup>144</sup> With this history one can assume that the Chapel is grounded and earthed.

Yet, it emanates a sensual simplicity which seems to point to something beyond. It draws in people by their thousands and when you look into the visitors' book the most popular comments are 'overwhelming', 'overpowering', 'peaceful', 'awesome', 'tranquil', 'beautifully serene', 'an oasis of peace and more in a frantic world', 'exudes the centuries of worship and peace'. Even P.D. James' sceptical detective Dalgliesh cannot help being drawn into the Chapel's spell and wishes

that sitting there quietly, he could hear the sea, with a need that was almost a longing — that ceaseless rise and fall which, more than any other natural sound touched mind and heart with a sense of time's inexorable passing ...<sup>145</sup>

Ray Crowther alludes in his novel *The Nearest Far Away Place*<sup>146</sup> (with a picture of the Chapel on the cover) to the extraordinariness that the place emanates. St Peter-on-the-Wall, the remote Chapel in the Essex marshlands, touches something in people and pulls it to the surface. It has a transcendent, sacred and numinous quality.<sup>147</sup>

Apart from all the visitors and pilgrims that come year-in, year-out, on Wednesday mornings the Eucharist is celebrated followed by breakfast at the Othona Community. The Good Friday Walk of Witness starts by walking the Stations of the Cross, it

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144 Cf. Martin Wallace, *The Celtic Connection* (privately printed, 1995), p. 77.

145 P.D. James, *Original Sin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 324-25.

146 Ray Crowther, *The Nearest Far Away Place* (Eastbourne: Panglossian Books, 2005).

147 Appendix V: Inside St Peter's.

Unfortunately, there is no reference for the following narrative. It is part of Othona's lore: Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, who grew up in Brentwood, Essex, used to come to the Community in his youth. He is said to have been so bored during Chapel services that he kept on counting the window panes of a Chapel window. They amounted to 42 (six by seven) and inspired him to use the number in his book as the essential answer to the ultimate questions of life.

culminates in kindling the Paschal Fire on Easter Morning (see Fig. 6).

In 1964 the celebration of thirteen centuries of Christendom took place where St Cedd had landed. The Jubilee Light was symbolically taken from St Peter's to all the churches in Essex.

Churches centuries old, churches in new towns, churches which abound in history and architectural gems and the churches which still have to make history. They are all now linked with the lonely stone church on the wind-swept marshes of Bradwell.<sup>148</sup>

In other words, all the churches in Essex were then connected to the place where Christianity had set off.

### 3.6 Pilgrimages

The Annual Bradwell Pilgrimage takes place on the first Saturday of July. Hundreds of people or pilgrims walk the Chapel track from St Thomas, Bradwell-on-Sea to St Peter's Chapel.

Pilgrimages are particularly important for the history of the Chapel, they guarantee an account of the event in a newspaper. There are articles dating back to the time right after the rededication of the Chapel in 1920. *The Daily Chronicle* reports on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1925:

The clergy paused at a thatched shed, opened their suit cases, and put on the robes of the Church of England. Then they passed through a nail-studded door into the barn-like building, and therefore this primitive place was the first Essex cathedral — offered up praise, remembering with gratitude the builder, Bishop Cedd ...<sup>149</sup>

In 1930 the lecturer was Reverend Dr Cranage who believed that if further

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148 Maldon and Burnham Standard, April 2, 1964.

149 The Daily Chronicle, June 25, 1925

excavations were carried out another church might be discovered not far from the Chapel. He thought that St Peter's was one of the earliest known churches in England. An unknown source, a newspaper clipping in the Othona Archives, names the obscure parties which participated in the pilgrimage of 1937:

The Guild of our Lady of Ransom, the Knights of St Columba, the Children of Mary, Catholic Boy Scouts, the Grail with the Grail flag, and the Catholic Women's League.

1954 was the largest pilgrimage so far celebrating 1,300 years of St Cedd having landed on the coast near Bradwell. The preacher, the Bishop of Newcastle, Noel Hudson, hailed the exceptional date as follows:

So then we make our pilgrimage on this notable day and to this sacred and hallowed spot where those centuries ago the dawn of the Light of the eternal Gospel first broke in the preaching of Blessed Cedd of Northumbria.<sup>150</sup>

The *Essex Evening Standard*<sup>151</sup> reporting about the big event also mentioned the close by bombing and strafing range for air planes. They were grounded on that day for the celebrations, to prevent interruptions by the noise of engines.

Another renowned person gave a speech, George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, which the *Essex Chronicle* calls "modern Iona religious community."<sup>152</sup>

He stated something that can be called 'very modern' decades later:

If the Christian Church of this day is to succeed in its task, they must introduce three principles: They must identify themselves with the people whom they seek to convert; all Christian bodies must feel their inter-dependence on one another, and they must interlace their religion with the life of the world like the continuous pattern on a Celtic Cross.<sup>153</sup>

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150 *Essex Chronicle*, July 9, 1954.

151 Cf. *Essex Evening Standard*, July 9, 1954.

152 *Essex Chronicle*, July 9, 1954.

153 *Essex Chronicle*, July 9, 1954.

These thoughts concerning Celtic Spirituality would take half a century to become immensely popular. George MacLeod was much ahead of his time when speaking about the interconnectedness of everything and a global ethic.

### **3.6.1 Pilgrimage 2010**

The pilgrimage of 2010 drew in even more pilgrims than usual. The Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, proved to be a magnet. He told BBC Essex that the historic Christian site should be regarded as nationally important and that it should be known in the whole of England as a place of pilgrimage. He thought the history and the background were ‘fantastic’ and felt ashamed of never having been there before and not even knowing that it existed.<sup>154</sup>

When the large group of pilgrims finally arrived at St Peter's (having started in the village of Bradwell at St Thomas’ Church), they were given bottles of water to regain their strength after that strenuous and long walk on a hot summer’s day. People gathered on the grass around the Chapel and enjoyed their picnics. Elderly ones went into the Chapel to search for some shade. In two enormous tents there were music groups playing, stands from different denominations informing about their work, and local groups selling their produce. The atmosphere was joyful and pleasant but very exceptional, for this remote and lonely place is not used to so many visitors all at once. When I randomly asked why people had come, the answers were as follows: some wanted to give thanks and renew spiritual ideals; others wanted to see what a pilgrimage was like and if it was similar to Glastonbury; others had been coming for

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154 BBC Essex, 10 July, 2010.



years since they enjoyed the spiritual feeling. Some pilgrims grasped the opportunity for having a quiet day out and meeting up with Christian friends, others mentioned the sense of peace they were feeling there where heaven met earth, and compared Bradwell to Lindisfarne. The setting, the inexplicable essence of the place and the sea were named again and again.

John Sentamu gave his sermon with much verve and witticisms. Afterwards he visited the Othona Community with Laurie Green and had many hands to shake. It was an unusual sight for two bishops clad in their purple attire to be walking into the busy Community kitchen.

In the summer months of July and August the most inspiring and varied Evensongs are held, attended by parishioners and members of the Othona Community. Some of the most sought after ones were given by Martin Wallace who became Bishop of Selby. They dealt with Celtic Christianity and were published under *The Celtic Connection*, *Celtic Heroes of Faith* and *Practical Celtic Spirituality*<sup>155</sup>. The vicars in charge of the Chapel from 2005 until 2011 were Margaret and Laurence Whitford , a progressive couple open to new ideas:

Innovations this year included the Parish Animal Service which was attended by 40 people, 10 dogs, 2 horses and a gerbil!<sup>156</sup>

On the last Sunday in October a Eucharist is held in honour of St Cedd, its founder.

## **B. The History of St Peter-on-the-Wall**

### **3.7 Introduction**

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155 Published at Aquila Celtic Crafts, Bradwell-on-Sea.

156 <http://www.bradwellchapel.org> (09.06.2010).

The history of St Peter-on-the-Wall (also sometimes called ad-murum meaning 'on the wall', see 3.9) is scarcely documented, though it is considered “a cradle of Christianity in the British Isles.”<sup>157</sup> Material and documentation on the Chapel is very rare. For some centuries there is nothing at all. In 1920 Herbert Brown divides the chapel’s history into four periods :

- Roman Fort
- Saxon Monastery
- Benedictine Period
- Decay and Restoration<sup>158</sup>

A fifth should be added: Archaeological Excavations. The most recent and profound ones date from the 1990s, and following up those is the very last one — ordered by the Othona Community — from January 2010.<sup>159</sup> I shall follow the above format when writing about the Chapel and include an archaeological section.

### **3.8 Roman Fort**

The Chapel is mainly built from recycled Roman materials, from the Roman fort of Othona. It was built where the gatehouse of the fort had been, therefore St Peter-*on*-the Wall. Its strategic position alongside with eight other forts on the south-east corner of England served as a defence system to protect the country from marauding and invading seafarers.

What was feared was a full scale invasion by Roman naval and military might to regain possession of a former province. The Litus Saxonicum was Carausius’s answer to this threat ... Othona conforms to the general pattern of this fortified line.<sup>160</sup>

In the meantime historians have extended their point of view concerning the defence

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157 [http:// www.chelmsford.anglican.org/chelmsfor-file-st-peters-chapel.html](http://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/chelmsfor-file-st-peters-chapel.html) , (10.05.2010), p. 1.

158 Cf. Herbert Brown, *History of Bradwell-on-Sea* (Chelmsford: JH Clarke & Co, 1929), p. 1.

159 Cf. Essex County Council, *Othona Community Site*.

160 Elizabeth Bardwicke, *Bradwell on Sea and the Roman Empire* (undated paper found in the Othona Archives: written by E. Bardwicke in the 1970s, recalled by Jim Bye), p. 2.

system. Those forts were also important with regard to socio-economic issues, e.g. to distribute Britain's produce and other logistical matters.

The fort was built between 260 and 270 AD. The Saxon Shore Fort *Othona* is only mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum*. This is a document of the Late Roman Empire with the list of dignitaries and their field of responsibility. It dates from 425- 430 AD. In Book xxviii.13 it talks about "The commander of the *company of Brave Men* at OTHONA".

In this document, the first garrison unit 'at the disposal of the Right Honourable Count of the Saxon shore in Britain' is housed at a place named *Othona*, which has been identified with the Bradwell fort.<sup>161</sup>

Hence the following scenario might well have happened:

Around Othona a thriving community would have flourished. Generations of people grew up accustomed to the shouting of the centurions, and the clashing of weapons from the parade ground. In the army and naval workshops of the garrison, there were craft and skilled work for the more talented civilians. On feast days there were displays and those fierce, bloody sports so be-loved by the legions. There was the business of supplying the need of the garrison, with time, the stir and bustle of Othona became integrated with the life of Bradwell and the military regime dominated it.<sup>162</sup>

Even though the above described scenario is thought up, it is likely to have taken place for the report about the latest excavation (cp. 3.11) states "The majority of the archaeological evidence represents late 3<sup>rd</sup> to late 4<sup>th</sup> century extra-mural activity related to the Roman fort."<sup>163</sup> After Rome's legions had been called back in 410 AD, the fort was deserted and left exposed to the elements for some centuries.

### 3.8.1 St Cedd

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161 <http://www.roman-britain.org/places/othona.htm> (10.11.2010).

162 Bardwicke, *Bradwell on Sea and the Roman Empire*, p. 3.

163 Essex County Council, *Archaeological Excavation*, p. 1.

Where once martial cries were heard ... the chants of the monks took there [sic] place.<sup>164</sup>

St Cedd, missionary and monk, educated under Bishop Aidan at Lindisfarne Priory, proved successful in spreading Christianity in Middle Anglia; consequently he was sent to Essex to evangelise the East Saxons. He built several churches and founded monasteries, one of which was Ythancestir. The only available source about St. Cedd is Bede.<sup>165</sup> He writes:

He [St Cedd] built churches in several places and ordained priests and deacons to assist in teaching the Faith and baptizing the people, especially in the city which the Saxons call Ythancaestir and that called Tilaburg. The former place stands on the bank of the River Pant, the latter on the River Thames.<sup>166</sup>

A note of the translator adds that “Ythancaestir was probably Othona, a Roman military settlement in Essex”.<sup>167</sup> Whether this is true or not has never been satisfactorily clarified.<sup>168</sup> The river Pant was identified with the river Blackwater. The above mentioned monasteries were built after “soaking the place in prayer” to become “spiritual powerhouses.”<sup>169</sup>

St. Cedd is said to have prayed and fasted for forty days:

... he took no food but a morsel of bread, a hen’s egg and a little watered milk. He explained that it was the custom of those who had trained him in the rule of regular discipline to dedicate the site of any monastery or church to God with prayer and fasting.<sup>170</sup>

One may wonder whether St Cedd laid — with his praying in particular and ‘claiming the ground for Christ’ — the foundation stone of the latter “power-house” and the

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164 Bardwicke, Bradwell on Sea and the Roman Empire, p. 3.

165 Bede, A History of the English Church and People (Reading: Cox & Wyman, Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 178 ff.

166 Bede, A History of the English Church, p. 179.

167 Bede, A History of the English Church, p. 343.

168 Cf. Malcolm Carter, The Fort of Othona and the Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex (Hunstanton, Norfolk: Witley Press, 1987), p. 20.

169 Cf. Wallace, The Celtic Connection, p. 29.

170 Bede, A History of the English Church, p. 181.

magnetic exuberance which the Chapel exudes.

The assumption “that Bradwell may have been a double monastery for men and women who lived in separate buildings under the same head, and worshipped in separate parts of the same church”<sup>171</sup> is underpinned by the unusual length of an arch indicating a possible earlier double chancel arch. Like Iona and Lindisfarne, the simple monastery at Bradwell would have been simultaneously “a church, a community of both men and women, a hospital, a library, a school, an arts centre, a farm, a guest house and a mission base.”<sup>172</sup>

The Saxons tended to construct buildings with wattle and daub walls (the Othona Community is building in 2012 a Cobb house using a similar ancient technique), only monasteries and churches were built in stone, using hard mortar. St Peter-on-the-Wall is one of the remaining few left. Such buildings “are heavily influenced by the Roman basilican tradition, with a rounded chancel in the east and plain walls”.<sup>173</sup> Others see Byzantine features in the chapel<sup>174</sup> or compare its nave and sanctuary to Syrian churches.<sup>175</sup>

After St. Cedd’s death of plague in 664 “Essex was taken into the diocese of London and St. Peter’s became a minster, the chief church for the surrounding country.”<sup>176</sup>

### **3.9 Benedictine Period**

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171 Carter, *The Fort of Othona*, p. 13.

172 <http://www.bradwellchapel.org/sphistory.htm> (12.10.2010).

173 Carter, *The Fort of Othona*, p. 14.

174 Cf. Carter, *The Fort of Othona*, p. 13.

175 Cf. John Gunstone, *The “Oldest Cathedral” in England* (Essex Countryside, no date).

176 Carter, *The Fort of Othona*, p. 9.

The next reference to the Chapel comes from the *Domesday Book*. This is a great survey of England completed in 1086 and executed for William the Conqueror. He wanted to find out how much land and livestock landholders had and how much it was worth. The *Domesday Book* comprises *Little Domesday* which covers Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, and *Great Domesday* which covers the rest of England except London and Winchester.

In the time of Edward the Confessor the town Ithancester (Bede's Ythancaestir, possibly Othona) was known under the name of *Effecester*.<sup>177</sup> Ithancester was a manor, one part held by Turchill, the other one by Ingulf. Turchill's part had been granted to the Benedictine monastery in St Valery, situated on the estuary of the Somme in Normandy. Ingulf's part had been given to Hugh de Montfort.

There were 1 ½ hides of land and 20 acres, 2 serfs and 1 ploughland, pasture for 300 sheep and 1 fishery. The advowson of the Parish Church was included in Ingulfs [sic!] portion.<sup>178</sup>

When William the Conqueror sailed for the conquest of England, the abbot of the monastery, Bernard I, in St Valery was asked to pray for that mission. It was successful and the recompense was the gift of land in England at Walle and Dengie.

Thrice in "Charters of the Abbots of St. Valery" Walles is mentioned with Easthalle or East Hall, the manor which adjoins the Chapel Field and which was given at the same time ... It is evident that Walle or Walles was a vill (sic!) corresponding to the manor Ithancester, and that it included the foreshore, the site of the Chapel, and at least the manor of East Hall.<sup>179</sup>

It is evident that St Peter's ad murum (on the wall) is interchangeable with the Latin, French or Germanic expressions *de la val*, 'Wall' or similar expressions. It could also have been named after *vallum*, the rampart of that fort. The Chapel is from now on

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177 Cf. Herbert Brown, *St. Peter's*, 1920, p. 8 and *Burnham Advertiser*, History of St. Peter-on-the-Wall, Bradwell, April 27th, 1907.

178 Brown, *St Peter's*, p. 8.

179 Brown, *St Peter's*, p. 9.

also called ‘Church de la Val’, ‘Capella de la Walle’ and the like.

Herbert Brown states that the Benedictines owned the Chapel for 323 years.<sup>180</sup> In 1391 many possessions of the Benedictine monastery of St. Valerie-sur-Mer were sold in England. They were of no use to the monasteries, for the monks were adherents of the anti-pope Clement VII and therefore enemies of King Richard. A quittance was found for the Bishop of Winchester, William of Wykeham, for 7250 francs on the 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1391, four days later another one for 10340 francs.<sup>181</sup>

Edmund de Bouberg was the Abbot of St. Valery when this sale took place. The price named in the History of St. Valery as given by William of Wykeham is 6000, a sum considerably in excess of the 17,590 francs mentioned in the charters. Exchange was apparently in favour of the franc.<sup>182</sup>

There are no other records concerning the Chapel’s use until 1442.

A group of local clergy reported to the Bishop of London about the state of the Chapel. It had been slightly enlarged now having a chancel, a nave, and a small tower with two bells. They did not know by whom or when the Chapel was founded. There had been a fire and the rector was responsible for repairing the chancel and the parishioners for fixing the nave.<sup>183</sup>

In documents held at the Parliamentary Archives, in the so-called Bickerstaff’s Estate Petition we read that “a barn called St Peters (sic!) Chappell (sic!), with 10 acres of land adjoining, in Bradwell-juxta-Mare”<sup>184</sup> is leased for seven years at an annual rent of eight pounds to Godfrey Thacker of Grays’ Inn (Middlesex), squire. The lease dates

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180 Brown, *St Peter's*, p. 10.

181 Cf. Brown, *St Peter's*, p. 19.

182 Brown, *St Peter's*, p. 20.

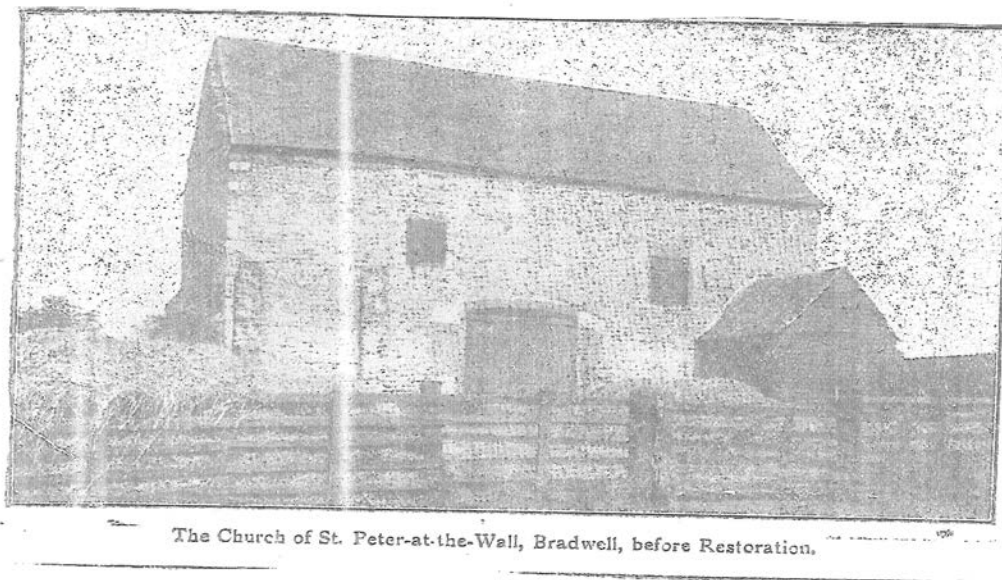
183 Cf. *Burnham Advertiser*, April 27th, 1907.

184 *Parliamentary Archives*, Bickerstaff’s Estate (Petition) HL/PO/ JO/10/6/2/1501 8 Feb 1700.

from 28 October 1686. The leaseholder is Sir Charles Bickerstaff of Seale (Kent), Knight. This is the latest available written record of the Chapel before it is restored in the twentieth century.

In late Tudor times the Chapel was used as a beacon, a lighthouse, a smuggler's hideout and particularly as a barn. The latter is probably the reason why the Chapel 'survived'. It was looked after since it was needed for cattle and hay. Herbert Brown mentions two maps in the British Museum. On the one of 1750 it is marked as a chapel, on the one of 1774 as a barn. It probably stayed a barn until its restoration as first photographs at the beginning of the twentieth century show (see Fig. 8)<sup>185</sup>. Even after that it was used as a billet and shelter during the First World War.

**Fig. 8** Picture: Postcard of St Peter before Restoration



*Source:* Picture folder at the Othona Community.

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185 Apologies for the poor quality of the picture. Due to age the reproduction of the original is very blurred also.



### 3.10 Restoration and Re-Dedication

St Peter-on-the Wall was rescued from oblivion by Christopher W. Parker, who transferred his land on which the building was situated to trustees. Unfortunately, there are no records how it got into his hands. Funds were raised to restore the Chapel. C.R. Peers of the Office of Works (Ancient Monuments Department) and the supervisor during the period of restoration advised:

that the church should remain without the slightest suspicion of 'restoration', far more impressive in its venerable simplicity than any furnishings could make it.<sup>186</sup>

Fortunately, this piece of advice was taken to heart. A huge oak door was put in place, windows were unblocked and the roof made weatherproof. The rededication took place on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1920 by the Bishop of Chelmsford. On the invitation to that event Amos 9:2 was cited :

In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old.<sup>187</sup>

There could not have been a more appropriate text responding to the history and state of the Chapel! What had been a barn for many centuries, became again a place of worship, though it was not exactly put back into the state it had once been. It was restored into a 'lighter' version without the apse and the porticos.

The Chapel experienced some more restorations during the last century. It was damaged by a landmine in the autumn of 1941, a report was issued on the work of restoration. The building was re-roofed, the windows re-glazed, the door and stonework repaired and cleaned. The architect in charge wanted to restore it

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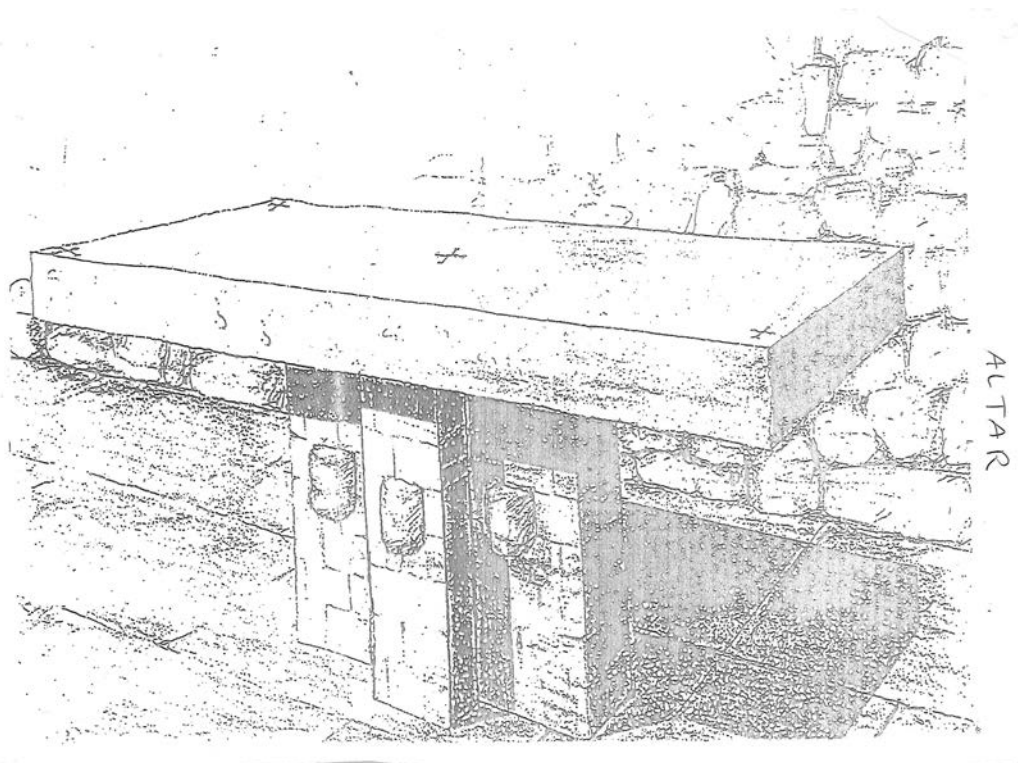
<sup>186</sup> Brown, *St Peter's*, p. 21.

<sup>187</sup> Othona Archives: Service sheet for Re-Dedication, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1920.

completely by reconstructing the apse and taking down the east wall, opening up the triple arcade and rebuilding the northern and southern porticos.

Fortunately, St. Peter's has been carefully and subtly looked after. It used to have a wooden altar. The collection of the Pilgrimage in 1984 was made towards a new stone altar. But that project petered out and Guy Shenstone created the present one which does not seem to fit into this old building. The new modern altar (see Fig. 9) was consecrated at the Bradwell pilgrimage of 1985 by the Bishop of Chelmsford and Brentwood. The supporting pillar incorporates three stones representing the three other communities involved in St.Cedd's mission: Lindisfarne, Lastingham, and Iona. St Cedd was trained at Lindisfarne by Aidan who came from Iona. St. Cedd built a monastery at Lastingham and died there.

**Fig. 9 Sketch of the Wooden Altar in St Peter's**



Source: Picture Folder of the Othona Community

So this is the recorded background and history of the Chapel before Norman Motley set foot onto the recently de-mined area in 1946 and into the Chapel itself, starting a new chapter in which the Chapel becomes indelibly linked with the Othona Community.

### **3.11 Archaeological Excavations**

Othona's intention of building a new Community house in the 1990s called archaeologists onto the site. The area to excavate was situated 160 metre north of the Roman fort known as 'Othona'. There had been excavations before (primarily in the past century) within the fort, but never before outside the fortification itself. In 1991 four trenches revealed Roman, Saxon and medieval traces. This was evidence enough to excavate the premises of the intended building (see Fig. 10).

The excavation in 1992-93 “revealed the presence of late Roman activity, dating from the mid-third to early fifth century AD.”<sup>188</sup> The area excavated (see Fig. 10) was not part of the extramural Roman settlement, “although the density of features suggest settlement nearby.”<sup>189</sup>

The excavations in 2010 — again ordered by the Community to construct the Solar Building — “enhanced the interpretation of the 1992-3 excavation”, though the original objective “to assess the relationship of site activity to the middle Saxon church and monastery could not be achieved due to the complete absence of Saxon

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188 Maria Medlycott, The Othona Community Site, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex. The Extra Mural Settlement. *Essex Archaeology and History* 25 (1994), pp. 60-71.

189 Medlycott, *Othona Community*, p. 26.

evidence on site.<sup>190</sup>

**Fig. 10 The Othona Community Archaeological Site**

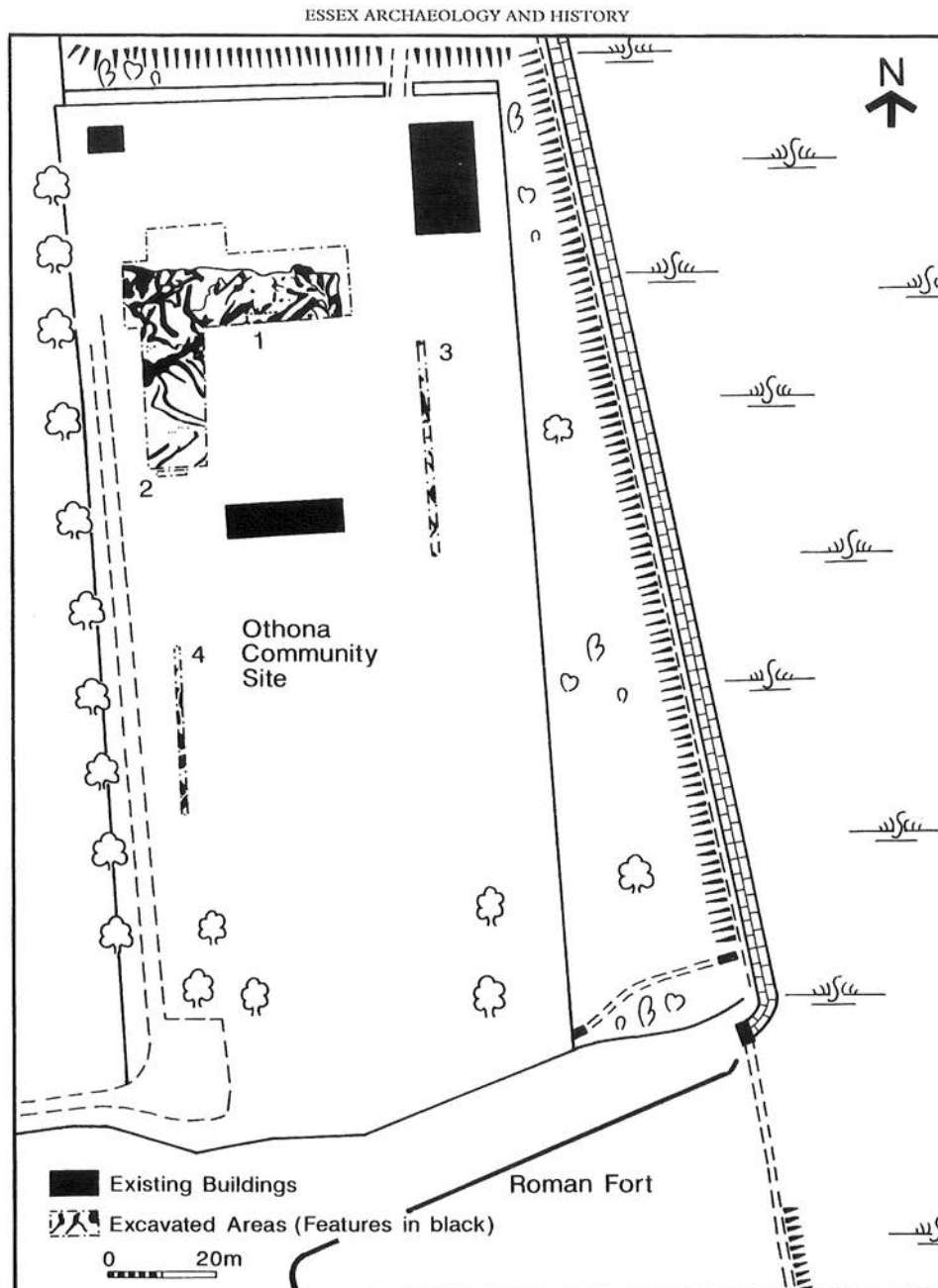


Fig. 2 Location of excavation and evaluation trenches.

Source: Maria Medlycott, The Othona Community Site, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex.  
The Extra Mural Settlement. *Essex Archaeology and History* 25 (1994), pp. 60-71.

190 Essex County Council, Field Archaeology Unit, January 2010: Othona Community Site. Archaeological Excavation (Report), p. 20.

### 3.12 Chapel and Community

The Chapel, located near salt marches and the Blackwater Estuary, is of utmost importance to the Community. Not only did it inspire Norman Motley to set up his Community near it, for he “had sought a place rich in Christian history, but free from the quarrels, trivialities and divisions which hinder so much of the life of the Church,”<sup>191</sup> it has also made sure that along with the natural environment the Community has been caught by “an energizing force ... drawing intimate connections to everything else in our lives”<sup>192</sup> through it. Our imaginations, possibly needs, have transformed this nondescript, inconspicuous Chapel into something special and inspiring as will be shown in Chapters Five to Eight.

The next chapter is about the origins, the historical background, and the build-up of the Community before we consider the perceptions people have of the strange phenomenon that is Othona.

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191 Janet Marshall & Sheila Maxey, 'Othona', in: John Vincent (ed), Christian Communities (Sheffield: Ashram Press, 2011), p. 90.

192 Cited in Belden C. Lane, Landscapes of the Sacred, p. 39.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## OTHONA AS COMMUNITY

### 4.1 Structure of Chapter Four

Chapter Four is divided into three parts which all have different thematic foci. Part A starts with a general look at post-war Christian communities before Othona's beginnings are broached. It puts Othona into a historical, political and religious context, it then focuses on the peculiarities of the Community. Part A brings Othona into alignment with movements and historical developments taking place after World War II. In order to understand a modern phenomenon, it is obligatory to know its history of origins. That part is working towards Research Goal 1 to explain the background and roots of the founder and the phenomenon. Then the physical changes the Community has undergone until today are considered. By taking a closer look at the organisation and structure in the course of history in Part B, the thesis turns to Research Goal 2 to delve into the human life of the Community, the requirements and preconditions, that aided the phenomenon to come into being and to develop. Part B reveals the structural changes that have taken place over the years, to be conscious of the changing of attitudes and perceptions going along with them. This is imperative since much of this shifting modification is implicit rather than outspoken. Part C attends to Othona's vision and values. It tries to discover how it has developed its special charism, moreover, what the bedrock for its praxis is. In wanting to discern Othona's theology, as Research Goal 3 aims, a close look has to be taken at Othona's inherent understanding to uncover the ground onto which the phenomenon is built. Part C will help to do so.

Whilst dealing with the phenomenon of Othona it is a prerequisite to look at all these dimensions to understand how people perceive the Community.

## **A. History and Development**

### **4.2 Christian Communities in the Twentieth Century**

Othona's self-definition is that of an “open and inclusive Christian Community.”<sup>193</sup> In order to understand the development from old army Nissen huts to the phenomenon of Othona, it is worth looking at concepts and realities of community.

As a result of the two world wars the twentieth century experienced the founding of many Intentional Christian Communities in Great Britain. There had been communities of Religious Orders before, but the aftermath of World War II required a clear stance on issues of war, economy, injustice, and spiritual matters. Most of those newly formed Christian communities<sup>194</sup> wanted to be an alternative to the experienced world. They were ecumenical and came into being to bring people of various backgrounds together to practise living together for a period of time. Definitions of Intentional Christian Communities are as diverse as the actual outcomes. They range from people studying the Bible together to living together and pooling one's income and holding goods in common. In Leafe Christian's book *Finding Community* a Christian community scholar writes:

When visiting a Christian community, it is not uncommon to be examined about your beliefs, so its members can determine if you are a Christian, or even, the 'right kind of Christian.'... Some Christian communities are so uninterested in ... other intentional communities that they decline being listed in the *Communities Directory* ... they identify far more strongly with

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193 See 4.23 Othona Vision.

194 Vincent, Christian Communities, pp. 10, 24.

the rightness of their beliefs and mission than with being an intentional community as such.<sup>195</sup>

I am quoting this passage in detail because this is not something that would happen at Othona. Othona is not mission-oriented in that sense, nor is anyone interested in someone having the 'right belief'. It is service-oriented in providing people with the opportunity of having a unique Community experience. Leafe Christian's statement that most Christian communities do not welcome people who are LGBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) is not confirmed at Othona.<sup>196</sup> Othona was one of the first Christian Communities to welcome people with different sexual orientations, thus demonstrating its open and inclusive nature.

The eleven Intentional Christian Communities who joined a conference in September 2010 at Othona have much in common:

All without exception are the result of a vision by their founders ... All to a variety of degrees share some form of common life ... All are in many ways fragile and vulnerable, in part because they are open to new expressions of ministry, to inclusivity and to openness ... because their work depends on a (comparatively) few committed and dedicated members ... The one thing that all are doing is challenging the norms of our society today.<sup>197</sup>

Whether Othona challenges social norms will be seen in the last Chapter.

These communities have no inclinations towards being escapist. They believe that whatever happens in community has repercussions within *worldly affairs*. They think whatever you learn in community must have an impact on the world 'outside'. They all want to make a difference for the sake of peace and justice in the world. Othona, in particular, wants to strengthen people and offer them a place to regenerate before they

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195 Christian, *Finding Community*, p. 67.

196 It may well be that she refers to communities in the USA. The experience in Great Britain is different, unless you deal with communities with a fundamentalist orientation.

197 Vincent, *Christian Communities*, pp. 23-24.



take up their position in the world again: “a place where people could come for personal discovery and renewal”.<sup>198</sup>

### 4.3 The Nails Movement

From the fellowship which developed through those Answer-Back-Meetings (see 1.6), the Nails Movement emerged. Norman Motley, the founder of the Othona Community, discerned that in the early 1940s:

Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Methodist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian and Baptist ... Unitarian and a host of other small sects were all out of communion with each other.<sup>199</sup>

Having just experienced the universal need of people to exchange and question, he felt desperate about the lack of a unifying spirit and real community in his church, for “The unity of the Spirit is the only security and guarantee of the bond of peace.”<sup>200</sup> At that time the vision came into being of establishing a place where those Answer-Back-Meetings could be taken up in a time of peace to revive the sense of belonging and solidarity.

**Fig. 11 The Nails**



A visible emblem was needed to demonstrate unity. Four rough nails were welded into

198 Marshall & Maxey, 'Othona', p. 84.

199 Motley, Much Ado, p. 4.

200 Motley, Much Ado, p. 46.

a cross (see Fig. 11). “These Nails ... were and are given to those who are committed to the centrality of Christ in the complexity of our existence.”<sup>201</sup> William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury at that time, and advocate and supporter of Norman Motley, called the Nails Movement “a real movement of the spirit”<sup>202</sup> and in response to being sent the Nails replied “I shall treasure my nails.” There is no copy in the Temple archives at Lambeth Palace Library of the long paper of about thirty pages sent to Temple on behalf of Motley. All we know is that Norman made a great impression on the Archbishop. However, there is a brief indication of the vision which might have been present. In a letter to William Temple dated 29<sup>th</sup> Sept 1943, Motley writes:

I saw Max Warren [who for a long time was General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society] the other day, and he feels that the Nails may have a profound significance with regard to the unification of European and non-European coloured Christians in the mission field – possession of the Nails as a symbol of the total implications of the Christ Faith, and of the world-wide nature of the Church, with the consequent impression of solidarity which that knowledge gives.<sup>203</sup>

These Nails are still given out to those who wish to show their bond with the Community. The wearers of the Nails, however, are becoming rare because people do not think it necessary any longer to visibly demonstrate their faith.

#### **4.4 Glastonbury — Lindisfarne**

Thus, the desire to establish a unifying centre (see 1.5), to which interested people could come after the war, was beginning to take shape. George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, suggested rebuilding Glastonbury.<sup>204</sup> In a letter to Norman Motley of 7th July 1947 he writes:

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201 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 5.

202 Lambeth Palace Library, *Temple Archives*: W. Temple 38. MS3997, Miscellany ff 28-98.

203 *Temple Archives*, p. 38.

204 Cf. *Temple Archives*, p. 10.

... we might find ourselves at Glastonbury before we die — at least I pray that that might be so — but that is between you and me and not for the public.<sup>205</sup>

However, Norman Motley sought for a place “to link the old and the new; the realities of the distant past with the realities of the present”<sup>206</sup>, for the Kingdom of God contained according to him things old and new. Lindisfarne was considered — and discarded as too remote. A place in Sussex did not prove to be adequate either. Even though George MacLeod had come as a speaker in the early years, his wish to be co-opted to the Othona Executive Committee was declined for he was not considered to be “a useful member of the Committee due to his limited knowledge of the Community and some apparent misunderstandings of its purpose.”<sup>207</sup> It was not possible to get to the bottom of the misunderstandings, for there is nobody around any more who knows of them. A tentative explanation might be that MacLeod wanted to rebuild Iona and make it available to men only at first. Motley, however, sought to include inner city people: men, women, families and therefore also children and offer them a time of renewal at the Community. MacLeod and Motley came from very different social strata (MacLeod from an upper-class clergy dynasty, while Motley had to work his way through college). Both had strong (possibly conflicting?) personalities, yet, whatever the reasons were not to co-opt Macleod into the Executive Committee, has to stay within the range of speculation.

#### **4.5 Othona's Inception**

The Anglo-Saxon Chapel of St Peter-on-the Wall had come to Motley's attention, located near salt marches and the Blackwater Estuary. He writes about his first visit to

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205 Othona Archives: Letter of George MacLeod to Norman Motley, 7.7.1947.

206 Motley, Much Ado, p. 10.

207 Othona Minutes, 1955, p. 3.

the Chapel:

The sense of thirteen centuries of prayer was almost overpowering.  
Numinous is ... what we felt ... At the moment I entered the building I  
knew we were home.<sup>208</sup>

He physically experienced what a decade before him a journalist from the *West Essex Gazette* had noted when looking at the plain chapel which had been a barn for centuries:

Yet, the aura of a wonderful nobility hangs over it, so that entering its simple little door one senses instantly a greatness and a grandeur, as though upon the threshold of a vast cathedral.<sup>209</sup>

Whereas the journalist focuses on aura and grandeur, Motley is overwhelmed by prayer and the numinous, surely a key to Othona. The overwhelming presence of this Chapel made him decide 'to pitch his tent' there. Permission from the Bishop of Chelmsford was attained to use it. Since the army was still controlling the area at that time — it had just been de-mined — the officer in command had to agree to the use of the old huts and the premises, which he did.

The first experimental summer 1946 was attended by people from the International Voluntary Service for Peace, by un-repatriated German prisoners of war, Russians and Armenians from France, Sisted parishioners and other groups.<sup>210</sup>

A leaflet had been sent out in 1946 in which Norman delineated his vision:

... the need is visualised for some place in the south of England where men and women of different backgrounds and vocation may come and live together for a few days each summer to find anew for themselves, for this country and for our age full as it is of both possibility and menace - the meaning of the good tidings of God. In this quest for renewal they must be able to work together with their hands; to think and talk together of the issues which confront us, and to do this

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208 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 13.

209 *West Essex Gazette*, Marshland Winter, 14.12.1935.

210 Motley, *Much Ado*, pp. 14-15.

in the atmosphere of a common daily act of worship, restored as worship must be to its natural and spontaneous place as part of the daily round of work, play and comradeship.<sup>211</sup>

This rather monastic way of describing a refuge for the summer represents Othona in a nutshell.

Life was simple and basic. The Community lived in huts and tents and fetched water from a standpipe two fields away (see Appendix XIII). An early member, John Hardy, remembers:

Water was always a problem in those days and had to be dragged from a tap near the chapel in a dustbin mounted on wheels. This ... had to be hauled along the sea wall and over the field at morning and evening chapel time. Before the service it was put under the tap and left to fill. If the service was too long it overflowed and if it was too short then several men had to hang about waiting. The deal which many tried to achieve, was when the time of devotion equalled the time of filling. The water was needed for drinking and washing up, with what was left being available to wash in. It was a Bishop who wrote on the wall: "In this place you either stink or swim."<sup>212</sup>

#### **4.6 Norman Motley**

Given the significance of Norman Motley as the founder of the Othona Community and the continuing influence on it, it is important to have a grasp of the man and his history. In the summer of 2016 his daughter Janet published a memoir of her father<sup>213</sup> in which she tells the story of his life along with various people's personal memories of him. This booklet is an enlightening addition to this thesis because her recollections complement my elaborations on a very personal level and in much greater detail.

Photographs of Norman and his wife, Violet, are provided at Fig. 12.

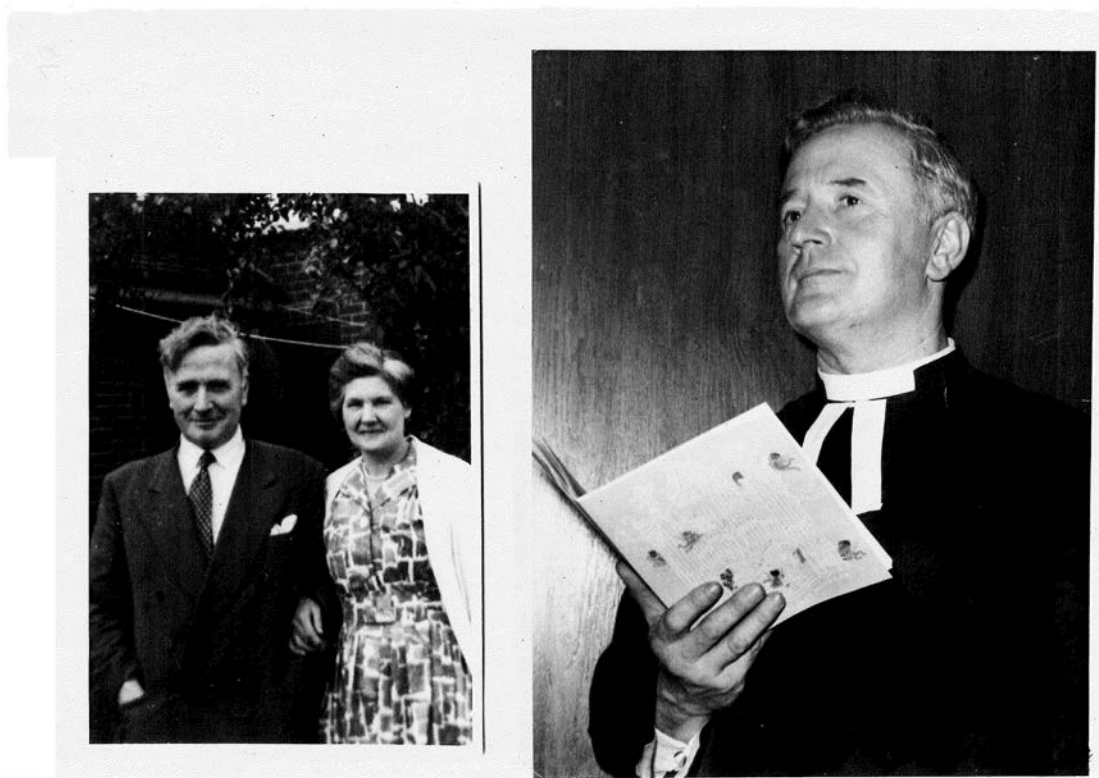
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211 Original Leaflet, *The Othona Community*, 1946.

212 Hardy, *Norman and Othona*, p. 6.

213 Janet Marshall, *Norman Motley – Portrait of a Man of Vision*, Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2016.

**Fig. 12 Photographs of Norman and Violet Motley**



*Source:* Private pictures from the 1960ies (Janet Marshall) Norman and Violet Motley

#### **4.6.1 Early Years**

Norman Motley was born in Forest Gate, London on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1913. He was the eldest of four children. Even before going to school, he knew he wanted to become a priest. His family was involved in their local church and were members of the choir. Norman left school at fourteen due to constraints in the Depression and started working in a local factory. Through hard work and ambitions he managed to matriculate at night school. At sixteen he was lecturing for the Workers' Educational Association on the life and work of Beethoven, using records and an old wind up gramophone to illustrate his talks. Norman had a deep love and knowledge of music.

According to his daughter he struggled hard to become accepted by the London College of Divinity at Highbury to study for the priesthood, because most ordinands

were from public schools and Oxbridge. Norman had to work his way through college always with the threat of having to leave because of lack of funds. To support himself he taught, and ran various parishes while still studying. This was wonderful experience, but exhausting for someone with a chronic rheumatic heart disease. He won several prizes including the Watts Ditchfield prize for Hebrew.

#### **4.6.2 A Working Life**

It was during this time that he met his future wife Violet Ashcroft, a nursing sister on a TB ward at Oldchurch Hospital, Romford. They have one daughter, Janet.

Motley became a deacon at St Paul's Cathedral in 1938 to work as a curate at Christ Church, Spitalfields in the heart of London's East End. From there he moved to St. Swithin's Parish Church, Gt. Chishill.

In 1941 he joined the RAF Bomber Command as a chaplain and was sent to a vast training Command Centre at Blackpool. It was there where he started *The Answer-Back-Meetings*. Out of those meetings and fellowship emerged the Nails Movement (see 4.3 and 1.5). As a chaplain Norman went on a convoy to South Africa and returned afterwards to England and Blackpool.

A tension between the Chaplain-in-Chief and Norman Motley comes out in his letter to Archbishop William Temple<sup>214</sup> from 30<sup>th</sup> October 1942:

I do appreciate your having seen Motley and given so much of your time. Motley, in his enthusiasm which I so much admire, is however apt to be discursive and then leave one in a complete fog, so at the

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214 Lambeth Palace Library. [Temple Archives](#).

moment I am not quite clear as to whether we have something here on which we can focus.

In a letter to Temple dated 1<sup>st</sup> February 1943, Motley complained about not being able to get through to the Chaplain-in-Chief. “Even the simplest 200 word type-written statements leave him baffled and blank.”<sup>215</sup>

At the instigation of Archbishop William Temple, Norman Motley became the Rector of All Saints, Stisted, Essex. He was then able to carry on working on the Nails Movement and to circularise the RAF with details of the nails, and facilitate his movements throughout the service. This was important to keep contact with existing RAF colleagues. At Stisted, he started searching for a place to set up an experimental community centre and in due course founded Othona.

On 19<sup>th</sup> September 1946, he became Rector of St Michael's, Little Ilford, Manor Park; in 1950 Chief Anglican Padre of Toc H and in 1952 in charge of St Thomas, Navestock, Essex; from 1957 until his death in 1980 he was rector at St. Michael's Cornhill with St. Peter le Poer and St. Benet Fink in the City of London. Norman Motley was governor of William Temple College in Manchester and Moorpark College for Adult Education in Surrey. He was chaplain of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, the Drapers' company, The Society of Apothecaries, Woolmens' Company and to the Lord Mayor of London in 1958-59, 1960-61, and 1971-72.

### **4.6.3 Socio-religious Background**

Norman Motley saw the Othona Community clearly as a result of a post-war

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215 [Temple Archives](#), p. 34.



movement. He was appointed to work on the report called *Towards the Conversion of England*, instigated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1943. The first paragraph summarised the basic task of the Church:

To evangelize is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through him, to accept Him as their Saviour, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church.<sup>216</sup>

Unfortunately, the Church was divided, and therefore did not provide — though hopes hung high — an element of change in a world devastated by the war. A globally united church was what Norman had in mind: “The divisions of the Church are sinful and hinder God's purpose ... Division is sin.”<sup>217</sup> He became a proponent of the Ecumenical Movement, which aspired toward the unity of all Christians, but worried whether the World Council of Churches had any real effect on ordinary people. He missed genuine fellowship between people, people caring for each other, willing to share each other's burdens. But though “The world needs a sense of the Christian faith, and that can best be transmitted through authentic community”,<sup>218</sup> it was not enough to restrict it to Community alone, but:

The Christian man or woman has a responsibility to make the political institutions of this country work. No reader of this letter will assume that the purpose of voting is to put in a party which makes its principle objective the raising of the standard of living for us alone.<sup>219</sup>

He was taking a clear stand on the left of the political spectrum, though he did not impose it on others (cf. 4.5.4 John Hardy's account). He considered people to be spiritual beings striving for fullness and completeness. He did not believe in “an other worldly religion” nor in the “gospel of humanism.”<sup>220</sup> He also rejected Reinhold

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216 Commission on Evangelism, *Towards the Conversion of England* (London: The Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly), 1945.

217 OTHONA, *The News Bulletin of the Community*, April 1950, privately printed, pp. 3, 6.

218 Letter from Norman Motley, April 1969.

219 Letter from Norman Motley, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1964, to Community members.

220 *News Bulletin*, April 1950, p. 5.

Niebuhr's<sup>221</sup> view

... that Jesus' teaching envisages a wholly transcendent and future Kingdom of God and that His perfectionist ethic has no immediate relevance to the practical problems of national and international life.<sup>222</sup>

When looking at some of the people who have inspired and influenced Norman Motley such as William Temple,<sup>223</sup> George Bell,<sup>224</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>225</sup> Toyohiko Kagawa,<sup>226</sup> or Dick Howard (see 1.5), it becomes obvious that they were not only supporters of the Ecumenical Movement in Britain but also social reformers and peace promoters, some even pacifists. They all aimed for “a living Christ operating visibly through groups of people who are really alive.”<sup>227</sup> Motley who attempted to reach the ordinary people of his day with his experiment Othona in order to answer questions in terms of action. They all wanted *faith* to be visible, to have creative consequence in the world. And they all hoped “that our respective Churches will become more vital instruments for God's purpose as the people in them truly understand the ultimate oneness of the world-wide-church.”<sup>228</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his brother Karl Friedrich in 1935 stating:<sup>229</sup>

Es gibt doch nun einmal Dinge, für die es sich lohnt, kompromisslos einzutreten. Und mir scheint, der Friede und die soziale Gerechtigkeit, oder eigentlich Christus sei so etwas.

(tr. At present there are still some things for which an uncompromising stand is worthwhile. And it seems to me that peace and social justice or Christ himself are such).

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221 Niebuhr was an influential American theologian to critique capitalism and advocate religious socialism. He was also the foremost proponent of Christian Realism.

222 News Bulletin, p. 5.

223 Cf. Motley, Much Ado, p. 8.

224 Cf. Motley, Much Ado, pp. 16-18.

225 Cf. News Bulletin, p. 5.

226 Cf. Motley, Much Ado, pp. 50-52.

227 News Bulletin, p. 9.

228 News Bulletin, p. 9.

229 Evangelische Jugend in Bayern, <http://www.ejb.de/index.php?id=1189> (27.1.2016).

Linking up uncompromisingly social justice issues and peace with a radical Christ testimony is something these theologians had in common, and which influenced their theologies, even though there are significant differences between them.

#### 4.6.4 Attitudes towards Norman Motley

People with a real presence, charisma, and vibrancy have harsh critics as well. Norman Motley, unsurprisingly, had a split audience, too.<sup>230</sup> Barbara Dyer, a pioneer from the very early beginning, writes about him:

That he was a remarkable man whose genius sustained and nourished the Community is more clearly seen in retrospect. A rod of benign discipline ... pervaded the scene. Everyone without exception went to the chapel services ... Everyone came to lectures, waste was angrily frowned upon.<sup>231</sup>

Even his daughter talks about a “benevolent dictator”<sup>232</sup> when referring to his style of leading the camp. And Brenda (5.3.7) remembers “very formal services: 8 o’clock on Sunday mornings, before breakfast, so that people sometimes fainted. There was no choice. They had to go.” Dave James, a long-term member, recalls that Norman could be quite stern. “If he found sugar at the bottom of an empty teacup, he used to stride up and down the dining room booming at the top of his voice. He said it was unchristian to waste food.”<sup>233</sup> Gunter Steffen, a German pastor who had been at Othona in 1959, remembers the expression “He gave him a Norman”, meaning he told someone off or gave him a tongue-lashing. On the other hand, he writes in his Bradwell memories<sup>234</sup> that the short encounters with Norman impressed him deeply and have accompanied him all his life. They motivated him to study theology. What

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230 Appendix VI: Email Janet Marshall about her father.

231 Ann Frogatt (ed), Bradwell Memories, published privately, p. 4.

232 Field notes, conversation summer 2012.

233 Essex Magazine, Oct 2001, 16-19, Rural Retreat, p. 18.

234 Gunter Steffen, Erinnerungen an Othona/Bradwell, published privately, January 2010.

he remembers particularly well was his *ökumenische Offenheit*<sup>235</sup> (tr. ecumenical openness). When Steffen came back in 1996, he felt the spirit of Norman to be still present.

Frances Drake — a member who died in 2011 — came to Othona in 1951 when she was eight years old. She called Norman “a godly man who had the ability to see through you and to see in you what you couldn’t see yourself.”<sup>236</sup> She recounts that Norman was very much ahead of his time in his ability to be inclusive and to talk to anyone, in respecting children and encouraging them at a time when ‘children were seen but not heard’. She said:

Norman is very high on the list of people who influenced my life, right after my parents; a firm, strict, fair, loving, kind man. There were always people at his door wanting to see him. We were valued as individuals ... I feel fortunate and privileged to be an Othona child.<sup>237</sup>

John Hardy, the “second in command” until 1980/81, memorises his “first real introduction to Norman. One day laying down the law about going to the pub and weekendening, and then the next breaking those same rules himself.”<sup>238</sup> In his unpublished memories, John writes

He believed the community should bear witness to Christ in the world and be a place where, to use his own words taken from St John ‘The spirit bloweth where it listeth’ ... it should be open to all, from whatever religious or political background or none. He was himself to the left politically ... yet refused to impose his views on others ... He also believed fervently that the Community be open to all classes in society and not just become the province of the middle classes ... he insisted on a degree of authority and structure. He also had a horror of the camp becoming over-materialistic and concerned too much with physical comfort and buildings ... He ... believed the Othona experience ... would lead to wholeness and healing.<sup>239</sup>

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235 Gunter Steffen, *Erinnerungen*, p. 3.

236 Field notes, summer 2010.

237 Field notes, summer 2010.

238 John Hardy, *Norman and Othona*, privately published, no year, p. 5.

239 Hardy, *Norman and Othona*, p. 16.

There are less favourable accounts from people who worked with him. They call him a tyrant, a control freak. The grocery lists had to go through his hands, portions were considered too big by him, he was very much concerned about food (as the generation was who had experienced the war). Allegedly he treated people from the parishes differently than the ones who came to speak. Clearly, Motley was a complex person. From the accounts offered about him, it becomes evident that he was a strict and authoritarian man who did not always practise what he preached. Saying one thing and doing another, or 'blowing his top' and apologising later was quite typical of him. He was not always consistent but had an anarchic streak, as he had shown in his Answer-Back Meetings in war time. He became particularly harsh and protective of the Community when he feared others wanted to restrict the openness or change the ethos of the Community. But his charisma prevailed over his darker side. His vision was so strong that he envisaged and built a “movement of the spirit”<sup>240</sup> of prophetic quality that has lasted all these years. As a deeply religious man “Norman was an inspired and inspiring man, charismatic and sometimes very wise”<sup>241</sup> who understood his work as labouring towards the Kingdom of God which comes “in small groups” so that “being with each other we have been with Him, and that, because we have been with Him, we are being made new.”<sup>242</sup> Seeing Christ in the other person was his motivation to work on an ecumenical basis long before the word had any significance in Europe. He deduced Othona’s legitimation from that point:

Our only reason for existence is that people find the indefinable but healing and re-generating factors which enable them to meet life

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240 Motley, Letters, p. 48.

241 Tony Jacques, Mentioning the Unmentionable: What can we say about the Bible (Burton Bradstock: Digby Jacques Publication, 2003).

242 Motley, Letters, p. 23.

more effectively on their return.<sup>243</sup>

This renewal and well-being

to build Jerusalem here ... will require all the resources of the inner life of the Spirit ... it comes ... to those who are open, indeed, vulnerable to Him - and to those who seek Him. ... This ... is the primary function of the Community.<sup>244</sup>

Norman's motto was reconciliation, and as a German I have had the privilege of being a beneficiary of this magnanimous attitude.

Years later, Diane Leafe Christian writes about what it takes to found a community. She has been the editor of *Communities* magazine since 1993. In *Creating a Life Together — Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* she states what Norman must have known as early as 1946:

Every community formed since the early 1990s that I know of, has been motivated by a spiritual impulse and/or by environmental and social justice concerns. Their founders learned to understand and use tools also used by mainstream culture — creating legal entities, buying property, borrowing money, paying interest — in order to create viable alternatives to mainstream culture.<sup>245</sup>

Even though Norman had helpers, it was his impetus, his initiative to establish a venue for what he had heard — “a new cry for togetherness and community within the Church.”<sup>246</sup>

#### **4.7 Othona at the Beginning**

By 1947 a piece of land had been acquired almost next to the Chapel. A camp with

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243 Motley, *Letters*, p. 22.

244 Motley, *Letters*, pp. 23-24.

245 Diane Leafe Christian, *Creating a Life Together – Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* (Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2003), p. 28.

246 Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989) p. 8.

Nissen huts and tents was set up and the Chapel restored. The Community met in the summer for ten weeks. The four elements of worship, work, study, and play structured the day. The programme for the summer Community for 1949 offered a wide variety

**Fig. 13 Othona Summer Programme 1949**

Source: Othona Archives

OTHONA,  
PROGRAMME FOR THE SUMMER COMMUNITY FOR  
1949.

Date.	Subject.	Speaker.
June 25th - July 2nd.	Work and Prayer.	Closed week.
July 2nd - July 9th.	The Gospel for the World.	Dr. Max Warren and Geoffrey Paul.
July 9th - July 16th.	Children and Youth in the Parish Community.	Various Speakers. Dr. Paul Levertoff and Prof. Nicholas Zernov will also be addressing groups.
July 16th - July 23rd.	Communism.	Geoffrey Drewett.
July 23rd - July 30th.	Drama and Propaganda in Community.	Oliver Wilkinson.
July 30th - August 6th.	The Incarnation and the Common Life.	Dr. Charles Raven.
August 6th - August 13th.	Psychology and Spiritual Values.	Dr. Maud Geddes.
August 13th - August 20th.	Worship and Life.	Rev. Cyril Bowles.
August 20th - August 27th.	Education and Personality.	Bert Shipley and others.
August 27th - Sept. 3rd.	Community and Work.	Norman Motley and others.
September 3rd - Sept. 10th.	Work and Prayer.	(Closed week).

The Bishop of Chelmsford will be present at various times in July and August.

The Bishop of St. Albans and the Bishop of Colchester also hope to be able to attend.

The Rev. Michael Scott will also attend and discuss his work for a period if his Cause permits him to be in Eng. and in July and August.

Note. (i) Owing to difficulties with rationing and transport we shall not be able to accommodate visitors for week-ends only except under special circumstances. Those who wish to come for part of a week or at week-ends only are requested to write personally to the Rev. Norman Motley, at Little Ilford Rectory, E.12.

(ii) Because of the rising living costs it has been necessary to increase the inclusive cost of the week's stay at Othona to £2. Of this 5/- should be sent with each application for each week. Visitors may stay up to two weeks if accommodation permits. This money will be returned if there are no vacancies. Otherwise it will be deducted from the account at the end of your stay.

Please fill in and send as soon as possible if you wish to attend.

Full name ..... Mr, Miss, etc.....

Address .....

I wish to come from Saturday ..... to Saturday .....

I enclose P.O. or cheque for ..... as my deposit and I understand that no deposits may be returned.

of courses such as 'Work and Prayer', 'Communism', 'Psychology and Spiritual Values', and 'Education and Personality' among others (see Fig. 13<sup>247</sup>). Due to rationing and transport people were encouraged to stay for a week and not just a weekend. The Bishops of Chelmsford, St Albans and Colchester were announced to visit.

Frances Drake, who came as a child, remembers bell tents with reinforced caps. When it was raining the caps came off and the tents collapsed.<sup>248</sup> Tilly lamps with paraffin were primed each afternoon for the huts and tents. There was a daily rather wearisome run for water from a tap near the Chapel (see Appendix 8). In the women's and men's dormitories were 30 to 40 beds. Food rationing lasted until 1952. Food was basic and filling: stews and pudding. Children were looked after by many people *in loco parentis*. You had to sit through lectures even if they were going over your head.<sup>249</sup>

This above passage encapsulates the simplicity and austerity with which the Community had to deal in the first years; conditions, one would nowadays call 'primitive'. Albeit much has changed over the decades, the spirit of the inceptive years is often still palpable.

Everybody was welcome, in particular “those who felt unwanted or excluded by the church, and those who were totally disinterested in anything the church had to offer.”<sup>250</sup> Norman Motley put great emphasis on the ecumenical movement, though to be a Christian was not a prerequisite at all to visit or to become an Othona member. It

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247 Apologies for the poor rendition, but the original is of inadequate quality.

248 Appendix VII: The Lower Field.

249 Field notes of talk with Frances Drake, summer 2010.

250 Motley, Much Ado, p. 21.



was and is open to people of all faiths and none.

In the first news bulletin of the Othona Community in April 1950 Norman Motley had complained :

Where are the marching songs of the Christian Church of our day? ...  
Some of these songs of past ages ... cannot answer the needs of our time.  
We must have new songs ...<sup>251</sup>

He obtained them a quarter of a century later with the help of Colin Hodgetts (a former warden and now Chair/see 4.17) who wrote the *Othona Psalms* for the Community in 1976.<sup>252/ 253</sup>

Motley wanted to strengthen international relations, foster Christian unity, and correlate faith and life to take positive action in the world.<sup>254</sup> His insight ‘to take people as they are’ has proved liberating and therapeutic. Motley wanted his movement to be “from life and not from ‘hot-house’ forcing.”<sup>255</sup>

Dave Forgan remembers his first visit in 1960 as a fifteen-year-old:

One of my enduring memories of that first stay ... was a sense of Othona as being a place of acceptance; even at that early age I recognised it as somewhere where everyone was valued with no questions asked. In a sense it was also a place of liberation from the norms of everyday life, a place where I could be myself ...<sup>256</sup>

“We shall remain a movement of the spirit”, Motley wrote years later in September 1977 realising that “It is not possible to limit or to organize the Kingdom of God or to

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251 Othona Archives, *The News Bulletin of the Othona Community*, April 1950, p. 8.

252 Colin Hodgetts, *The Othona Psalms*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Foxton: The Burlington Press, 1976).

253 This is how Archbishop Rowan Williams commented on these psalms :“I think this is an extraordinary achievement. It is very hard to bring off a real rewriting in real English ... but I think the percentage of direct hits is impressive.” Cf. <http://www.colinhodgetts.co.uk/music.html> (14.11.2009), p. 4.

254 Cf. Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 46.

255 Motley, Letter to Constance Marie in connection with Programme of 1949 (Othona Archives).

256 Ann Frogatt, *The Othona Community: Bradwell Memories 1946-2007*, p. 49.

shape the Holy Spirit.”<sup>257</sup>

#### **4.8 The Sister Community in Dorset**

The Community flourished and soon the need to be open all year round became clear. Bradwell had to be closed from autumn to spring due to its location and primitive amenities. Motley was hoping to base another centre in Dorset around the medieval chapel of St Katharine’s overlooking Chesil Beach. A bit further along the coast he finally found what he had been searching for: a community house and a chapel, formerly owned by the Christian Contemplative Community also called “The White Ladies”.

Their founder and leader, Adela Curtis, an early 'green', mystic and author of many books, had established a self supporting religious order there. She and her white nuns tried to be self sufficient in many ways, and, for instance, raised silkworms to weave their own garments. Her books were also read on the continent where she was considered a serious mystical writer, and some of her books underline her ‘green spirituality/mysticism’.<sup>258</sup> She died in 1960. Her order is nowadays considered a “British Utopian Experiment”.<sup>259</sup>

The house and premises in Dorset lacked basic amenities but were immediately considered to have the ‘right qualities’ for a sister community. Thus in 1965 the second centre was opened with a stone-built-house, a chapel attached, a walled garden with a small cottage called ‘Littleness’ and seven acres of beautifully wild grounds.

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257 Frogatt, *Bradwell Memories*, p. 48.

258 Adela Curtis, *How to be Happy on Nothing a Year* (1933), *Consider the Lilies* (1941), *Sex and Money* (1913) and *In Praise of Littleness* (1919).

259 <http://www.utopia-britannica.org.uk/pages/DORSET.htm> (14.11.2009).

#### 4.9 Motley's *Letters to a Community 1970-1980*

The decades have been shaped by different priorities and issues. Motley guided the centres with his *Letters to a Community*<sup>260</sup> between 1970 and 1980. Four times a year he wrote his thoughts about Community, faith, and theology, realising that “It sounds as if I am preaching.”<sup>261</sup> He did, in fact, expound his point of view again and again:

Human society ... was never more impoverished than it is to-day (p. 16) ... The Christian faith has something supremely important to say to this predicament. The quest for a practical answer is part of the reason for the existence of the Community (p. 7) ... 'real living is meeting' (p. 12) ... living in Christ is not necessarily spectacular (p. 23) ... The Kingdom of God ... comes to those who seek Him, both consciously and unconsciously. This ... is the primary function of the Community (p. 23).<sup>262</sup>

For Motley, the main task of Community was to provide a place of encounter for – and here he draws on Martin Buber – 'real living is meeting' (see Chapter 7).

In June 1976, he ponders over the staying powers of the Community. After thirty years he comes to the conclusion that five elements contribute to the healing power of the Community. Those are:

the feeling of wantedness ... the tyranny of time is kept to a minimum ... those who come feel they are at home ... what is of real value will communicate itself through the quality of living which is experienced ... the sense of freedom for those who want ... The entirely *spontaneous* unmasking process, which takes place within a few days of arrival, is not the least of the elements which count in this mystery, for mystery it is.<sup>263</sup>

Experiencing true Community through the Holy Spirit by being available and accepting was his preaching in a nutshell. Even for Norman Motley the Community remained a mystery. “Othona,” he stated,

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260 Norman Motley, *Letters to a Community 1970-1980*, The Othona Community, 1986.

261 Motley, *Letters*, p. 31.

262 Motley, *Letters*, pages in brackets.

263 Motley, *Letters*, p. 38.

is a strange phenomenon ... No-one can define precisely what happens ... the Divine Spirit ... does seem to express himself in a hundred and one new ways in the uninstitutional character of the Community.<sup>264</sup>

There have been many attempts in the *Full Circle* to describe what actually goes on in the Community. These ventures usually stop at a certain point and people say: “If you really want to know what goes on there, you have to go and see for yourself.” Motley ascribes the unusual powers there to the Holy Spirit. Chapter Eight will refer back to them (see 8.2 and 8.8).

In 1986 Motley's *Letters to a Community* were published: a compilation of his letters, written for the *Full Circle* in the 1970s.

Norman Motley died in 1980. He is buried at Navestock with the headstone on his grave reversed. Why that is the case, nobody really knows. 1985 saw the publication of *Much Ado about Something — A History of the Othona Community*.

#### **4.10 International Links**

After Motley's death in 1980 a link with Eastern Europe started. Young students especially from Poland at first received letters of invitation and financial support as prerequisites to visit the West in general and the Community in particular. The international links were and have been since strengthened by yearly groups from Volunteers for Action and Peace (see 1.1).

##### **4.10.1 German Connections**

Connections to Germany have been upheld ever since 1946. In search of visitors from Othona's early days, I came across two German pastors. Bishop Dr Hans

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264 Motley, *Letters*, p. 41.

Christian Knuth recalled the impact Othona had made on him when visiting in 1957 as a pupil. He learned about the camp via the YMCA. His love for England initiated by the Othona Community guided him to become the link between the Church of England and the *VELKD (Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchen Deutschlands)* (tr. Unified Protestant Lutheran Churches of Germany). Those connections, conferences and exchanges led eventually to the *Meissner Erklärung* on 18 March 1988 (tr. Declaration of Meissen) in which those two churches declared their intention of working with and supporting each other on a national basis.

A friend of Dr Knuth's, Gunter Steffen, was influenced by Norman Motley to such an extent that he decided to study theology. He became a Lutheran pastor and took groups of young people to Othona in the 1970s. In a recollection of his Bradwell memories<sup>265</sup> he states that during the Pilgrimage Weekend<sup>266</sup> in the early 1970s the Anglican Bishop leading the Eucharist invited him to help distribute the bread and wine. Steffen concludes that he was most likely asked because Norman had pressed the Bishop to do so, demonstrating once more his ecumenical openness.

Martin Riemer, a young IT-student in the 1970s and later a scientist and lecturer at the Hamburg Medical School (UKE) has continued that tradition of introducing young people of his parish into the Community. Since the early 1990s he has also organised Othona Meetings in Pinneberg, Northern Germany.

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265 Gunter Steffen, *Erinnerungen an Othona/Bradwell*, unpublished manuscript, 2010, p. 3.

266 Every year on the first Saturday of July an Ecumenical pilgrimage takes place with people from a wide range of churches in Essex. They walk from Bradwell Church St Thomas to the Chapel of St Peter-on-the Wall.

And last, but not least, another strong link to Germany is the researcher herself who has never found anything similar to Othona in her home country. She never considered Taizé for she always thought that having found Othona was enough.

It is at Othona where she met her supervisor, John Vincent, and regrets, sometimes, not having come across the Urban Theology Unit before.

#### **4.11 Physical Developments**

The Community has always tried to be as self-sufficient as possible. Therefore, in the 1970s there were cows, chicken and pigs which disappeared when the Warden in charge of them left.

In 1986 the area became a Site of Special Scientific Interest. This mark of distinction entailed Othona's wish to become even more environmentally friendly. Reed-beds as a septic system for disposing sewage were installed in 1993, and an old diesel generator was upgraded to continually produce one's own electricity.

The 1990s saw the replacement of the old Army huts.<sup>267</sup> Confronted with the choice to either close or rebuild as it was no longer possible to last in ex-army huts and old tents, Othona members fund-raised and generated a purpose-built, spacious new building. In 1993 there was no summer season at Bradwell for the first time since 1946 due to building work. The Community met for a month at a scout camp site at Debden, Essex. The new building was officially opened and dedicated to the glory of God by the Bishop of Bradwell on 17 September 1994. This new accommodation (see Fig. 14, L-shaped) enabled the Community to be open all year round but demanded

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<sup>267</sup> Appendix IX: Army Huts, 1992 (before the New Motley Building).

paid staff as well.

**Fig. 14 The New Motley Building 1994**



*Source:* Othona picture folder

#### **4.12 Othona in Action: Work, Worship, Study, Play**

While in the early days even the basic duties (such as fetching water from a well) took more time, new amenities have made life easier for Othonites in the twenty-first century. The day, however, is still structured according to Motley's Benedictine Rule.

##### **4.12.1 Work**

*Work* today is understood as performing your duty or chore. There is still a *duty list* read out in the morning allocating each one a job to assure the functioning of the Community. There used to be a *duty officer* who made sure that the jobs were properly

done but this job seems to have disappeared. So, if a chore is not done or not done well, the control has to come from within the group. Thus, cleaning jobs are on the list, as are vegetable preparation, work in the kitchen, laying the tables, picking apples, leading the 'Chapel' services, washing up and many more. Many jobs centre around the preparation of meals. If you are the cook (which I have often been) and you need volunteers for extra jobs, you always find helping hands.

Sometimes working parties are created if special jobs need to be done such as cleaning an area from shrubbery, painting or picking apples and plums. Having full or part time paid staff (on a pocket money basis for the volunteers) who are responsible for certain areas, has shifted some of the workload from many to a few. That is an aspect which is at times regretted by the older hands for it assured a good Community feeling to have a concrete project everybody was working on.

#### **4.12.2 Worship**

Worship is held twice daily at St Peter's and the preferred option is to have it taken by lay people from the Community. Anyone can do it. Any subject is welcome. There is a so-called *chaplain* every week in charge of the Chapel and the services who offers help and support if a newcomer does not know how to create a service. A small library of prayer books, Bibles in many languages, and theological explanations are available. People from Othona like hymns and prayers from many sources such as Celtic, Taizé, Iona and the like.

Every Thursday morning there is the option of taking the Eucharist with villagers from Bradwell held by the local vicar of the Church of England. In the summer there



is Evensong in St. Peter's along with people from the village and surrounding hamlets. Often they are very well attended, and space is normally rare.

Grace is said during meals. Members or visitors are approached by the Warden or the one in charge of the services, a special member on the welcoming helpers' team, or any member around. Sometimes, the grace is sung, sometimes made up on the spur of the moment. Promptly at 9 pm on Thursday nights, there is a special service called *Dedication* in which the sister Community (Othona West Dorset) and people connected to Othona are remembered and prayed for. The name of each person who has been part of the Community that particular week is called out and prayed for. You do realise at those services how many people have visited Othona during that week.

#### **4.12.3 Study**

In the summer mostly, the weeks are themed ranging from music, art, drama and health to theological, biological, ecological or astronomical subjects, a very broad and diverse spectrum of subjects on offer. The most sought after weeks (probably also, because they appeal to children and adults alike) are the music, art and drama weeks. Each week tends to end with a concert, an exhibition, some performance in which everyone having participated joins in and presents her exhibit or piece of art, music or drama. The summer of 2011, for instance, included the following courses: *Drama and Worship*, *Moving to a Different Drum* (on Autism/Asperger's Syndrome), *Clowning around*, *Making a joyful Noise* (Music Week), *Celtic Paths*, *From Building to Batik*, *Our changing Perception of the Divine Mystery* and others.

The so-called *Study Periods* have changed as well. Before the 1980s roughly, there

used to be a speaker who gave talks in the afternoons. It was obligatory to join in. Ideas were presented and then discussed in a big round. One met in the common room as it was then, later in the *Bank*, a rather dilapidated old building, a donation from a bank, but away from the hubbub of the kitchen. Very often those lectures centred around religion, theology, and politics.

Nowadays, these lectures still take place within certain frameworks such as *astronomy week* in which some theoretical background is given during talks in the afternoons, while the practical part of the matter is watched through enormous telescopes at night. In the mornings games and handicrafts for young and old take place. So there is often more than just an afternoon session or activity.

#### **4.12.4 Play**

Lately, there has been the effort to integrate *Play* into the offered weeks so that children are not separated from certain issues. This is, of course, not possible for all the weeks. *Moving to a different drum* had many distinguished speakers and was clearly not a subject for children. Therefore, the aspect of *Play* in rather theoretical weeks takes place on the grass before the main building. There is a volleyball net, a sand-pit for the little ones, a swing and a playground and altogether enough space to play to one's heart's content. The beach is very close and the timing of the Community centres much around the tide. There is the Warden's talk at the beginning of each week which advises visitors never go swimming on their own. But swimming and the high tide (and playing on the beach, tide fights or walking along the sea-wall) have always determined the time of the meals. Looking for cochlea and other shells and spending time on the beach can also be considered *Play*.

In the evenings quizzes and games can be offered. People play *Scrabble* or assemble around tables to talk and exchange ideas. There is usually a puzzle done by some. The huge dining hall has a small corner for toddlers, even though they enjoy having the enormous space to play in. Pens, crayons, paper, scissors, games galore are available whenever one wishes. There is always somebody playing a musical instrument they have brought, and there is also a piano in the dining hut. The term *Play* covers a broad spectrum.

So even though the four elements Motley started out with have changed over the decades, they do still exist and continue to shape the Othona timetable.

#### **4.13 Othona in the Twenty-First Century**

Wardens come and go. In the beginning Othona was run solely by volunteers. But times have changed. The new building is now also used for outside groups, schoolchildren and visitors. Paid staff work alongside volunteers.

Sustainable living and renewable technologies have become incorporated into Othona's agenda. The summer of 2009 saw the first wind turbine being erected at the Community. At the same time Othona was awarded £103,000 by the East England Development Agency's Cut your Carbon Competition.<sup>268</sup>

The so-called 'Men's Hut' (a dormitory and part of one of the last Army huts) is

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268 Cf. <http://www.carbonoffsetsdaily.com/uk-carbonmarketnews/community-receive-giant-g...p.3> (14.11.2009). See also Chris Hobbs, 'Sun shines on sustainable Living' in: *Oyster*, Summer 2009, Issue 24, p. 26.

replaced by a Cobb house (rammed earth and straw bail) “highly innovative and designed to be zero-carbon in operation, achieved through very high thermal mass and the use of glass to maximise passive solar gain.”<sup>269</sup>

As before, Essex County archaeologists are at work at the moment making sure the building site does not contain any valuable historical finds. From basic wooden huts to sophisticated architecture: Othona has adapted to the third millennium without ever losing its initial aim:

To rejoice in diversity, to experience community, to offer hospitality as disciples working on healing, renewal and reconciliation.<sup>270</sup>

The new millennium brings forth new questions posed in particular by younger members of the Community. In 2009, Dave Seckleman questioned the inclusiveness of Othona:

The most important and valuable aspects of Othona are all irrelevant to religion: associating with people ... sharing humour, wisdom, love, culture ... taking time away from modern technologies.<sup>271</sup>

He demands a “de-Christianising of Othona.” “Is there any need then to have Jesus as the spiritual figurehead of this organisation?”<sup>272</sup> he asks. Whether his thoughts on this issue agree with Othona's ethos will be seen in the last chapters.

Othona integrates aspects of an ecovillage or, to put it in a similar vein: It demonstrates environmental awareness by trying to live sustainably with a solar building made of natural materials such as straw bale and cob, by growing some of its own organic food in a poly tunnel, by producing its own energy with a wind turbine,

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269 <http://www.carbonoffsetsdaily.com/uk-carbonmarketnews/community-receive-giant-g...p.3>.

270 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 58.

271 *Full Circle*, Winter 2009, p. 17.

272 *Full Circle*, Winter 2009, p. 17.

making use of photovoltaic panels, using reed beds for sewage and waste water, encouraging serious recycling, composting and the awareness of using power sensibly. There is tree-planting every year to ensure an annual harvest of home-grown produce.

Having discussed Othona's history and development we now proceed to understand its organisational structure as a community.

## **B. The Organisation and Structure of the Othona Community**

### **4.14 Management Structures 1946 – 1993**

The structure of the Community has changed several times over the past decades. The Community started out from 1946 to about 1960 by having non-functional Trustees. The Trustees were simply a legal requirement for setting up a charity. At that time Trustees and Executive members were the same. The Executive was chaired by the founder of the Community, Norman Motley, a highly charismatic and authoritative person with a clear vision for the Community. From the 1960s onward until 1993, there were common Trustees and Executives and a House Committee for Bradwell as well as one for Othona, West Dorset.

After Norman Motley's death and also partly before, Wardens were in charge at both Centres. From 1946 until 1994 the Community had been mainly open in the summer and organised itself by making sure that there were people ('helpers' from the 1980s onward) in charge of certain areas such as transport (confirming people got to the station in Southminster and were picked up from there), cooking (the cook was the only person who did not have to pay for his stay), wardening (someone for the overall

responsibility and well-being of the camp), a chaplain (someone making sure the daily services were taken and looking after the Chapel), a person in charge of the distribution of beds and many more jobs, necessary to run the 'Camp' (as it used to be called) in the summer. The helpers responsible for those jobs changed from week to week, depending on who was going to be present, to ensure there was always a fresh team in charge to avoid exhaustion.

#### **4.15 The New Management Structure: 1993**

In 1993 “A New Management Structure for Othona”<sup>273</sup> was intended to take into account that the Community was changing by being open all year round. This required a Warden and residential staff living on site.

Reconstructing the Community in the 1990s and establishing a *New Management Structure* was a recovery plan “for our scattered Community to operate effectively and with a united purpose”.<sup>274</sup> A two-tier structure was proposed: The Trustee Body was backed by the House Executive and the Finance and General Purposes Committee with the help of a Trustee (a Link Trustee or Trustee Guardian) mediating between Trustees and House Executive. The purpose of the *Management Structure* was also to simplify the relationships between committees. Criticism was inherent when stating:

The Trustees will need to become a less executive body but a more decisive and clear-thinking one ... Legally they are Othona, holding its assets and safeguarding its aims.<sup>275</sup>

This *New Management Structure* required a mission statement to be issued by each centre:

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273 [A New Management Structure for Othona](#), unpublished paper, 17.3.1993.

274 [New Management Structure](#), p. 1.

275 [New Management Structure](#), p. 2.

It should not be long ... but spelling out of the main activities and purposes that centre is to pursue ... A centre's mission statement does not replace ... the aims of the Community as a whole ... It can be changed from year to year ... but only by agreement with Trustees ... It gives the basis on which the warden and House Executive operate and the Trustee Guardian exercises supervision.<sup>276</sup>

The *New Management Structure* supplies the Warden for the first time with a framework within which to operate, not to be seen as “a set of quantifiable 'performance indicators’”<sup>277</sup> but to grant her/him the responsibility and authority “for the whole life of the centre.”<sup>278</sup> The Warden is accountable to the Trustee body annually and to the Trustee Guardian.<sup>279</sup> The Structure contains a two page appendix called “Rule for a Warden”<sup>280</sup> making clear that it is neither perfect nor exhaustive and presumes a Core Community at the centre. It advises the Warden to exercise authority wisely, not to be afraid to voice unpopular decisions, and to

Speak the truth in love ... Take particular care that nobody is excluded from community solely because they lack money or the confidence to ask for help ... Both the old and the young can make distinctive contributions to our life together ... Open-hearted welcome is the keynote of Othona, not least for those who are bruised by life. But some people's needs are so acute that they need specialised support ... Learn to distinguish between those who can play a part in community life and those who will have to be referred elsewhere. Do what you can to make the community financially self-supporting, but do not let commercial success or efficiency become ends in themselves. Beware the tone of voice ... Do not take yourself too seriously.<sup>281</sup>

This quote shows for the first time what is expected of a Warden and provides general guidelines on how to execute their office. It demonstrates at the same time the range of abilities and demands that are hoped for and hints at the amount of authority behind each single advice. Behind the concept of setting up this new structure is the idea of a clearer framework, of giving people the proper authority for their work, of better

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276 *New Management Structure*, p. 3.

277 *New Management Structure*, p. 3.

278 *New Management Structure*, p. 4.

279 *New Management Structure*, p. 4.

280 *New Management Structure*, pp. 9-10.

281 *New Management Structure*, pp. 9-10.

communication and of avoiding “hidden power struggles.”<sup>282</sup>

That *New Management Structure* became the formal constitution for the Othona Community in 1994.

#### **4.16 From Management Structure 1993 to Trust Deed 2008 to Charitable Company 2012**

The New Management Structure of 1993 was replaced by *The Othona Community Trust Deed* on June 23, 2008. *The Othona Community Trust Deed*<sup>283</sup> declares that “the Trustees' decision shall be binding upon all members of the Community”,<sup>284</sup> thus making it very clear that the Trustees have ultimate responsibility. The *Trust Deed* defines the tasks of a Trustee and determines his/her range of liabilities and powers. A Treasurer and an Accountant are always needed as well as someone experienced in writing contracts and with a knowledge of legal issues. On the other hand the Trustees are required “to hold responsibility for the over-arching Othona vision and the two centres' faithfulness to that vision.”<sup>285</sup>

To sum this up, the Trustees are responsible for the managerial as well as the visionary side of the Othona Community. “The number of Trustees shall be at least eight and not more than fourteen”<sup>286</sup> for both centres. At the moment there are three Trustees for each centre plus the Warden who is also an ex officio member of the *Bradwell Centre Committee*. This means that Othona is not fulfilling the *Deed* these days. The *Trust Deed* states

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282 *New Management Structure*, p. 5.

283 From 23 June 2008, published for internal use only.

284 Othona Community, *Trust Deed*, 2008, p. 6.

285 The Othona Community, *Agreed Procedures*, 14 May, 2012, published for internal use, p. 1a vi.

286 *Trust Deed*, 2008, p. 2.



Every question shall be determined by the majority of votes of the Trustees present and voting on the question.<sup>287</sup>

The Trustees may appoint sub-committees and delegate to them whatever they consider necessary or urgent. They may make rules within the limits of the *Trust Deed* concerning qualifications of the Chair or Centre Committee members, the length of service of a member and any elections being required. Though it may look as if the Trustees have the ultimate power over a centre, their aim is to restrict themselves, in order for the centres to be self-regulating. Furthermore:

As little as possible should be “prescribed” by the Trustees. The Centres should be able, via their Centre Committees, to decide their own policies, strategies and financial operations.<sup>288</sup>

Even though

The daily affairs and development of the Community ... shall be under the general management and control of the Warden ... or person appointed by the Trustees ...<sup>289</sup>

it is within the power of the Trustees to make particular rules when it comes to

imposing qualifications or requirements to be met by the Chairs or members of the Centre Committees or any other committee including the length of term which may be served by them with or without a break.<sup>290</sup>

In addition to houses and grounds, Othona used to own a farm through which one drives in order to reach the premises. The *Trust Deed* spends a whole page on the management of Trust Property, on making investments and payments.

The Trustees may from time to time mortgage sell exchange let invest vary the investment of or otherwise dispose of or deal with the Trust Property or any part thereof in such manner as the Trustees after consultation with any appropriate Centre Committee shall from time to time determine.<sup>291</sup>

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287 *Trust Deed*, pp. 2, 7.6.

288 Othona Community, *Articles of Association for a Charitable Company limited by Guarantee*, draft, unpublished yet, pages unnumbered.

289 *Trust Deed*, 2008, p. 4.

290 *Trust Deed*, 2008, p. 4.

291 *Trust Deed*, 2008, p. 3.

The Trustees reserve their right to

alter, add to or revoke any of the provisions of this Deed other than the contents of Clause 2 (the objects of the Community) provided that no alteration shall be made which would cause the Community to cease to be charitable at law.<sup>292</sup>

The *Trust Deed* is followed by *The Agreed Procedures* from May 2012 (cf. 4.13.6).

Along with many other charities, it seemed sensible in the current legal system to become a *Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee* as a way of protecting trustees from personal liability. This is currently being pursued (and was completed in 2014). Recently, there have been differences and dissatisfaction particularly at the centre in Dorset. Now the main difference apart from having financial independence is that there are Trustees allocated to and responsible for each particular centre.

#### **4.17 The Chair of the Othona Community**

The Community has a Chair who also serves as a Trustee. The Chair can be re-elected as long as he/she serves as a Trustee. The election of the Chair for the year takes place at the AGM meeting in September every year. The Chair is approached by the Trustees and elected by them.

The present Chair, Colin Hodgetts, who is, amongst other things, a teacher, vicar, musician, has been involved with the Community at both centres since 1963. He served as a Warden at Bradwell from 1976-1978. He has a great deal of experience in working with charities<sup>293</sup> (e.g. Colin has set up among many other things a halfway house for alcoholic women in Stepney, and he is the co-founder of the London School

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292 *Trust Deed*, 2008, p. 6.

293 Cf. [www.colinhodgetts.co.uk](http://www.colinhodgetts.co.uk).

of Non-Violence) and is the author of *The Othona Psalms*.<sup>294</sup> He was therefore considered to have the expertise necessary to resolve the issue of the incomplete Trust status of the charity, a process Othona has been going through since a new structure (*The Agreed Procedures*) was set up in 2012. Colin concedes<sup>295</sup> that you have to have the time and financial independence to work as Chair. He meets with the Trustees at least three times a year and says that there is “much work going on behind the scenes”.<sup>296</sup>

#### **4.18 Management and Administrative Rules: “The Agreed Procedures” 2012**

*The Agreed Procedures*<sup>297</sup> which came out in May 2012, focus on six main fields:

- a) Trustees
- b) Centre Committee
- c) The Position of the Warden
- d) Annual General Meeting
- e) Membership
- f) Financial Procedures

The *Agreed Procedures* define the Trustees’ responsibilities and the terms of recruitment, arrange the membership and frequency of meetings as well as the length and areas of the service. The Trustees are “To hold ultimate responsibility for the Othona Community's compliance with the Charity Commission's requirements.”<sup>298</sup>

The *Centre Committees* are to care about the financial viability of the Centre which entails the annual programme, development strategy and financial policy.

It has also delegated authority for the implementation of statutory policies in relation to health and safety, fire regulations and the safe-guarding of children and vulnerable adults.<sup>299</sup>

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294 See fn. 249/250.

295 Telephone call, 31.1.2014.

296 Telephone call, 31.1.2014.

297 The Othona Community, *Agreed Procedures*, 14 May, 2012, published for internal use only.

298 *Agreed Procedures*, p. 1 (i), (vi).

299 *Agreed Procedures*, p. 2 (2a).

According to the *Procedures* the Warden is the leader and manager of the Centre responsible for the day-to-day management including the hiring and firing of the staff. Overall the Trustees have responsibility for the Community's assets and finances. The tasks of the Treasurer, the individual functions of the different Centres, particularly the implementation of their newly gained financial autonomy, are contained in the *Procedures*.

Regarding membership, it is now differentiated between full 'Members' who support Othona's mission and purpose, and 'Friends', people unsure yet whether to become members or not. Full members receive the Community's newsletter *The Full Circle*.

#### **4.19 The Bradwell Centre Committee**

The first BCC (Bradwell Centre Committee) Strategy Meeting took place in November 2013.<sup>300</sup> The chair of the BCC set the scene by unfolding the purpose of the meeting: sharing plans, reflecting ideas, setting objectives and planning action. As usual the session was opened with a prayer. The present Trustees gave their individual insights:

Bradwell should continue in the future as it has in the past few years with no fundamental changes to what we do or how we do it. There are areas in which we can do better and make improvements ... but nothing major or significant.<sup>301</sup>

Another stated that

... Othona at Bradwell should take positive action to bring in people of the many Christian denominations, and the many different world faiths who need a safe and spiritual place to meet and grow together in real community.  
... Othona at Bradwell will improve opportunities for disadvantaged people ...

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300 Minutes of Othona BCC Strategy Meeting, 17 November 2013, unpublished paper, for internal use only.

301 Minutes, 17 November 2013, p. 2 a.

to add on two or three well-designed en-suite rooms for all those unable to share fully in life at Othona because there are no such facilities at either Centre.<sup>302</sup>

The Warden said how difficult it was to consider dreams and hopes when most of the time there was so much work that they seemed to be just getting by. Financial viability was her objective as well as more time off and a better income without increasing rates.

We offer a unique place for visitors; we don't scream and shout about Christianity but we try to live it. We offer a safe non-judgemental, accepting space, open to people from all faiths and none to come and be together in community. I think we do it well and should not be doing anything fundamentally different.<sup>303</sup>

Another Trustee pointed out that she considered Othona's reality its most special feature.

Othona accepts people as we really are.  
Othona accepts everyday life as it really is – not hiding away the chores and practicalities of life.  
Othona allows everyone to search for God in our own way – not limited by creeds or doctrines.<sup>304</sup>

Living out Othona's mission to provide a place to build community is the main task of the Core Community and needs therefore to be heavily supported, was the statement of another Trustee.

Returning home renewed and refreshed is an experience many visitors experience at Othona. However, though many people search for a meaningful life, “It has to be said that our efforts to introduce more overtly religious topics are not successful,”<sup>305</sup> a life-long member stated. “We are a too-well kept secret ... our current membership is too small and too narrow.”<sup>306</sup> New efforts at marketing might be a way to put Othona on

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302 Minutes, p. 2.

303 Minutes, p. 3.

304 Minutes, p. 4.

305 Minutes, p. 5.

306 Minutes, p. 5.

the map.

The last speaker brought up the matter of communication and trust between BCC, Warden and Core. The Warden called Othona a 'miracle' and would like worship to “be placed at the centre of Othona life.”<sup>307</sup>

Reflecting on the emerging ideas, three issues came up: worship, staffing and marketing, and communication.<sup>308</sup> Tasks were split up to ensure that work was done in each of these domains. Both wardens are planning to leave in February 2016, so the question of successors is of utmost importance.

The Trustees delegate certain responsibilities to the Bradwell Centre Committee regarding “the operation, financial management, general management and future direction of Othona, Bradwell.”<sup>309</sup> This Committee is asked to report on a regular basis to the Trustees. The Centre Committee is allowed to have as many members as needed but four of them have to be Trustees of whom one is the Chair. One member is required to be “financially literate and sufficiently experienced to assist and guide Othona Bradwell in its financial matters.”<sup>310</sup>

The BCC along with the Warden is in charge of the strategic development of the Centre as well as financial planning and performance. That involves specific tasks such as setting, monitoring and managing an annual budget, developing the annual

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307 Minutes, p. 6.

308 Minutes, p. 7.

309 Bradwell Centre Committee, Terms of Reference, 9 May 2012, paper published for internal use only.

310 Terms of Reference, p. 1.

Community programme of events and activities and the development of the site and buildings.<sup>311</sup> An important issue for the BCC is how to improve opportunities for disadvantaged people, whether the disadvantage be physical, mental, financial or social.

#### **4.20 The Core Community**

Another matter of the Trustees' concern is the Core Community, “through whose hands Othona's vision becomes reality.”<sup>312</sup> So the welfare of the Core Community and the improvement of their living accommodation requires attention from the Bradwell Centre Committee. The Core Community are recruited from new or old members who live on site and do “hands-on-jobs”. They cook, clean, cater, garden, welcome, allocate beds, wash, meet and greet, do maintenance and office work. When someone is responsible for a specific area, he/she gets paid a modest salary. Others (depending on their contract) work on a pocket-money basis plus board and lodging. Among the latter one often finds people from different countries and continents, thus continuing Othona's early aim to remain internationally diverse. This is how the internet page invites people to come and join:

We live and work together to welcome people from all walks of life to the centre, offering hospitality, assistance and openness ... Our aim is to provide an accepting and safe environment for all who stay at Othona.<sup>313</sup>

The Core Community is line-managed by the Warden.

When I lived at both centres I experienced at that time (and it was early days opening the Community all year round) under-developed communication structures that led to

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311 Email from line manager Fran Jones from 9.02.2014.

312 Minutes of Othona BCC Strategy Meeting, 17 November 2013, cf. Alison Garnham (unnumbered).

313 [www.othona-bradwell.org.uk/working-Here](http://www.othona-bradwell.org.uk/working-Here), p. 1. (28.04.2015).

difficulties concerning child-raising, authority, openness and personal needs. In the meantime it has been realised how important it is to care for the carers. Staff now have proper housing, the Warden makes sure the Core has two days off per week, and acknowledgement of the work that is done to guarantee the running of the Community is currently at a very appreciative level.

#### **4.21 The Warden**

Even though the overall responsibility for the Community lies in the hands of the Trustees, it is the Warden who is accountable “for the whole life of the centre.”<sup>314</sup> The *New Management Structure*<sup>315</sup> from 1993 gives the Warden for the first time a consistent framework within which to operate. Nevertheless, it remains unspecific about how they are to fulfil their responsibility.

The Warden's job description from August 2011<sup>316</sup> divides the key responsibilities into

- six areas:
- 1) Core and volunteers
  - 2) Finances
  - 3) Centre Development
  - 4) Centre Management
  - 5) Programme
  - 6) Communication

Before those fields are expounded, however, some general remarks concerning the Warden's work are introduced:

As Warden you will lead the year round work of Othona Bradwell in accordance with the aims of the Othona Community as stated in the Mission statement. You will work alongside the resident core community ... to provide a welcoming and accepting atmosphere ... and ... uphold its spiritual vision. You are accountable to the Trustees ... This role combines strategic leadership

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314 The Othona Community, The New Management Structure, Photocopied edition for internal use, 17.3.1993, p. 4.

315 New Management Structure, 1993.

316 Warden Job Description, unpublished paper, for internal use only, photocopy from August 2011.



with managerial responsibilities.<sup>317</sup>

The Warden is to make sure the Centre runs effectively. For that the core members have to be instructed and guided. The aim is to ensure an atmosphere of welcome and acceptance. It is necessary to share the workload.

The finances have to be managed and kept within agreed budgets. The Warden is asked to use Othona's resources wisely. At the same time he/she is expected to increase the income, advertise the Centre, draw in new numbers, and

Develop — in concert with the Trustees and Bradwell Committee — new and existing ways of fulfilling the Centre's purpose.<sup>318</sup>

Furthermore, health and safety protections have to be ensured, children and vulnerable adults protected and site security measures taken.

With the advice and support of the Bradwell Committee, develop a programme of events which reflects the changing needs and interests of members of the community and new visitors.<sup>319</sup>

The paragraph on communication is the longest in the job description taking into account how important overall communication is in a community:

Communicate effectively with all internal Committees ...  
Represent Othona and develop good relationships with ... a wide range of people and organisations including the local parish and Diocese, neighbours, members of the community, first time enquirers and visiting groups.  
Report regularly ... through *Full Circle* and email and web networks.<sup>320</sup>

The Warden's line manager is the Chair of the Bradwell Centre Committee. The line manager's task is to “undertake regular supervision ... to review progress against objectives set in her annual appraisal”<sup>321</sup> along with the Chair of the Trustees.

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317 Warden Job Description, p. 1.

318 Warden Job Description, p. 1.

319 Warden Job Description, p. 2.

320 Warden Job Description, p. 2.

321 Email from Line Manager Fran Jones, 09.02.2014.

## **4.22 Decision Making and Responsibility**

So, who actually makes decisions when it comes to so-called “difficult visitors”? Who is in charge? Who takes responsibility? I asked the founder’s daughter, Janet Marshall, a medical doctor herself, about her experiences in the past decades. This is what she replied in an email:

Good question about difficult visitors. It is the warden’s decision because they are the ones who have to cope with any problem, but if they are unsure, the warden would ask her/his line manager who is a Trustee and if they are unsure, then the matter would go to the chair of Trustees. Obviously the warden, if they did not know the person, might ask around to get information from someone who did know what they were like or if they had caused difficulties in the past. I do remember when someone had been banned (it was a child protection issue) and they wanted to come back, the matter came to the whole Trustee body for a decision. In the past I have occasionally been asked for a medical opinion on risks. Having said all that, it has very rarely happened, but there is a formal procedure and line of authority.<sup>322</sup>

This is as concise as it gets in the Othona Community. But in practice, however, it is the wardens who decide and manage, backed up – if necessary – by the Trustees.

### **4.22.1 Rules and Regulations**

Even though there are rules which are expounded in the Warden’s talk at the beginning of each week or session, there are also exceptions. Martin Riemer, an honorary member, explained in an email that the only rule which does not change is that of the Warden deciding everything. If required, she has to justify herself in front of a committee or the Trustees. Martin himself only remembers there being short bans for cases of distributing or owning drugs, theft, paedophilia or, in former times,

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<sup>322</sup> Email from 12 Oct. 2012.

adultery.<sup>323</sup>

The consumption of spirits is not allowed on camp. We all know, however, that the flask of a much-loved writer does certainly not contain tea! If you want to enjoy a glass of wine in the evening you must have brought it with you, and you are asked not to have it in your room but share it. It is putting the person above the rules and making sure they will not drink publicly or offend anyone. So the limits and stretching of rules depend on the wardens, on the level of maturity of the person involved and the degree of damage he or she has done.

There are certainly examples of straining the rules. One of my interviewees was banned from the premises for a year and a half after having demolished Community property in a drunken state. A young man on probation was given the chance to work in the Community. Then money disappeared. When he was found guilty of having taken some a second time, he had to leave and ended up — for other offences — in prison. In the meantime he has offered to pay the money back. He has been invited back to the Community but has so far declined, though keeps in touch via Facebook. At another time, a young woman with a Zimmer frame had all her belongings and household transferred to Othona (although not pre-arranged with the Wardens). She ‘used’ Othona as a carport and varied her stories about where she had come from and what she wanted to do. The Zimmer frame was always brought out when she wanted to make a point. Otherwise, she did not seem to need it. She could not stay at Othona — and getting rid of her belongings is another story.

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323 Email from 15 Oct. 2012.

These examples demonstrate that rules, exceptions and boundaries are semi-permeable and dynamic at Othona. However, a safe place, a home must have boundaries.

Boundaries are necessary conditions for hospitality because they provide definition of the space being entered and give identity to both host and guest.<sup>324</sup>

The question of boundaries is difficult to pin down. Since it is the Warden taking decisions, it will depend on them how each individual case is assessed.

Even when somebody is thrown out, they are theoretically allowed to return to Othona's hospitality as my first case shows.

What do all these examples, rules, regulations and responsibility tell us about Othona's values, ethos and vision? Having considered the way the Othona Community is structured and organised, we now turn to a consideration of these vision and values that undergird the Community and its life and praxis.

### **C. Othona's Official Vision and Values**

Othona does not impose anything on people or, as interviewee Marilyn (see 5.3.11) expresses it, faith is “not shoved down your throat.” However, there are accepted standards and protocols, in practice: rules (cf. 4.22). Proverbially, it takes all sorts to make Community, and our differences and values are at times incompatible and divergent.

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324 Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, Beyond Homelessness, p. 52.

#### 4.23 Vision and Values

When asking generally about what the *Othona Vision* is, I received the following email from the Secretary to the Trustees

Having had a hunt through my papers and found the line you refer to in your email to Jan I have come to the conclusion that no 'Othona Vision' statement exists but the phrase was used ... in that document [Agreed Procedures] to describe our common view of Othona in the light of the various official and unofficial statements and discussions we have had over the process of change.<sup>325</sup>

The term is used (for instance, in the Warden's job description 4.21; in the minutes of the Othona BCC strategy meeting 4.20; in the Agreed Procedures 2012, 4.18), and all the members seem to understand it without it actually being anywhere defined. Sheila Maxey, former Chair of the Community, writes in a report from the Othona Trustees Meeting in November 2011 that

we were agreed that there was a common over-arching vision and purpose across the Community, but that it was quite properly expressed and lived out very differently through the two centres.<sup>326</sup>

This affirms the statement from above that it does not seem to be necessary to spell out the vision. However, a look into the history of the Community is helpful. The original leaflet from 1946 describes the founder's vision as follows:

... the need is visualised for some place in the south of England where men and women of different backgrounds and vocation may come and live together for a few days each summer to find anew for themselves, for this country and for our age full as it is of both possibility and menace – the meaning of the good tidings of God. In this quest for renewal they must be able to work together with their hands; to think and talk together of the issues which confront us, and to do this in the atmosphere of a common daily act of worship, restored as worship must be to its natural and spontaneous place as part of the daily round of work, play and comradeship.

Othona does not advocate a retreat from reality or an escape from the every day. It seeks the stimulus of a spirit that will drive men back into the world with a new understanding and will lead to the coming together of groups of people

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325 Email from Alison Tebbs, 11.03.2014.

326 Full Circle, Winter 2011, p. 11.

with a new vision: a positive purpose and will to service, firmly founded and rooted in Christ.

For Motley the “good tidings of God” are to be explored in a place of renewal. The “daily act of worship” administered in living and working together, “seeks the stimulus of a spirit” which is “firmly rooted in Christ.” When people leave the Community, they are provided with a new vision which is working towards the *Kingdom*.

#### **4.23.1 Vision and Crisis 2005**

Leafe Christian's view that a community without a common vision is vulnerable to crisis (see 7.3) is affirmed when thinking of the year 2005 for Othona. After the Warden's sudden departure, the Community was closed due to unclear 'Health and Safety Instructions'. The Executive was suspended, the Trustees took over but were losing control as well: “The main weaknesses seem to have been in the way that the Trustees and Executive have tried to manage the centre instead of governing it”.<sup>327</sup> The line of accountability became diffused. Othona had to be pulled back from the brink. Members collaborated and pooled resources. So-called 'Vision Meetings' took place that summer in which different groups discussed issues of authority, communication, and restructuring. Under debate was also a review of the vision or the creation of a new one. Here are some statements of members concerning a vision:

It should be with a vision of the future ...

The original vision is still very much alive and far from being exhausted ...

Establish and communicate a clear vision for what Othona is for and who it seeks to attract and serve, based on an open Christian ethos ...

The Othona Community is firmly rooted in Christianity. It is good and vital

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327 Feedback quotations from August 2005.

that Othona aims/visions being talked about on a regular basis to be a reminder of where our history lies, lest we forget.<sup>328</sup>

The feedback from August 2005 shows the necessity of some kind of vision. It also seems to be a memory of history. However, the details of the vision remain unspecified. Nobody seems to be explaining the vision itself. People resort to Motley's vision without actually stating it. Of twenty-nine feedbacks in August 2005 only two referred to Othona's Christian roots and that "the level of Christianity is good as it is."<sup>329</sup> The general findings dealt much more with Community 'issues' such as

- Communication has broken down between various parts of our Community (11x)
- We need to determine who manages the Warden / Core / volunteers (6x)
- There is plenty of enthusiasm to continue Bradwell (6x)
- We must not wear out our Warden / Core / volunteers (5x)
- We need more discussions on what to keep and what to renew (4x)

It is easier for members to speak about Community matters than about religious issues or theological visions. Visions take place in a sphere that might require theological language. Othona is too practical for that, so visionary language is not used. The last statement replaces *visions* with *aims*, but insists on talking about the *roots* in order to stay connected to the past which is clearly Christian considering the fact how it came into existence.

As far as Bradwell is concerned, after many discussions and work, a new Development Committee was set up, and, in 2006, a new Executive was elected to guarantee the smooth running of the Centre.

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328 Feedbacks concerning Vision Meetings. I received the information from Martin Riemer who collected and led the Vision meetings, but likes them to remain anonymous since they were not meant for publication.

329 Evaluation form: An attempt of what we can learn from our Vision Meetings, p. 1, email from Martin Riemer, 2.9.2015. The number in brackets shows the times the issue was mentioned.

Though Motley was very clear about his objective, his original vision has melted down to the Famous Four of the Othona Community: each day is to be determined by *Work, Worship, Study and Play* (see 4.12). Alison Tebbs also talks about “unofficial statements”. This is the point mentioned in 2.1: the lack of a *Schriftkultur*. Even though there are minutes of official meetings, much work goes on behind the scenes, as the Chair conceded (see 4.17), which is never put into writing but which is known to people having participated in those meetings and to which they can resort.

#### 4.24 Mission Statements

One of the ways of addressing Othona's vision is through the *Mission Statement* (which has been altered over the years) to be found in every edition of *The Full Circle* and other publications – in public documents in general. It expresses many unvoiced values which are inherent in the life at Othona. In 2007 it stated:

The Othona Community is an open Christian Community, whose purpose is to provide, mainly through its two centres in Essex and Dorset, a welcoming, accepting place with a pattern of work, worship, study and play where people of different beliefs, cultures, classes, abilities and ages can discover how to live together, learn from each other, explore together the relationship between faith and life with a view to a more positive action in the world, and encourage one another in caring for the world and its people.<sup>330</sup>

In the process of being a Registered Charity to becoming a *Company Limited by Guarantee*, this *Mission Statement* required alteration to be acceptable. So, the new *Othona Community Mission Statement* reads as follows:

Othona is an open and inclusive Community rooted in the Christian tradition and drawing on a wealth of other inspirations. We welcome people from all ages, abilities, backgrounds and beliefs to our two centres on the quiet coast of Essex and Dorset.

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330 In, for instance, *Full Circle*, Summer 2012, p. 2.



Through sharing in a daily rhythm of work, learning, worship and play, we seek personal renewal and glimpses of the sacred. In community we explore the relationship between faith and life and encourage one another in caring for the world and its people.<sup>331</sup>

Even though the Othona Four are kept, the statement has shifted. Othona does not call itself specifically “Christian” any more but is “rooted in the Christian tradition and drawing on ... other inspirations”.<sup>332</sup> All this takes into account that the Community is frequented by people from different faiths and denominations or none at all. But Othona being Othona juxtaposes both renditions of the Mission Statement at the same time. While the Full Circle of Spring 2016 speaks of an “open Christian Community”, the official Programme of Events for 2016 in Bradwell-on-Sea quotes Othona “as an open and inclusive Community”, demonstrating once again that it is not the written word that counts but how people act it out.

In order to comply with the Charity Commission requirements two amendments had to be made. The herein before mentioned Secretary to the Trustees adds:

I'm attaching the two bits we have sweated blood over and also meekly accepted as an amendment from the Charity Commission to enable us to go ahead with the new company getting charitable status.<sup>333</sup>

These two new objects are:

1. To advance the Christian faith for the public benefit in particular but not exclusively by the provision of retreats and other educative activities.
2. The promotion of religious harmony for the benefit of the public by promoting knowledge and mutual understanding and respect of the beliefs and practices of different religious faiths.<sup>334</sup>

The Secretary to the Trustees comments

While agreeing these as encompassing our work used for that purpose, we do

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331 In, for instance, The Othona Community: 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 2016 Programme of Events.

332 Cf. New Mission Statement: The Othona Community: 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 2016, p. 2.

333 Email from Tebbs, 11.03.2014.

334 Email from Tebbs, 11.03.2014.

not wish these to be the outward facing statements about Othona – the Mission Statement is used in public documents.

The '*Othona Vision*' is not stated in any specific way under that heading, but ... used ... in the procedures to describe our generally agreed ideas of what Othona is and what it does – officially described by the *Mission Statement*.<sup>335</sup>

Othona wants to embrace people of all faiths and none. And as the phrase “to advance the Christian faith for the public benefit” could be interpreted as aiming 'to convert' people to Christianity — though it does not need to be read into that phrase — made this statement unacceptable for many Trustees. They wanted a different wording for the public face of Othona to make it quite clear that their interpretation of advancing religious faith was to be welcoming and broad-minded about faith. Othona has always tried to find access to people who considered themselves to be on the fringe or even outside of Christianity.

Embracing the ideal of “religious harmony” was another crux. Though Othona's involvement in ecumenical matters from the very beginning can be seen as a sign of it, the musings and struggles are pertinent to Othona's ethos. This is how the Chair of the Bradwell Committee describes the situation:

We could not aspire to an aim to make a significant contribution to “religious harmony,” whilst at the same seeking to provide a peaceful and harmonious place for all, whether religious in their outlook or not. I think it was a matter of interpretation – what different trustees read into these words, what it meant to each of us, and whether the phrases specifically stated what we each believed was at the heart of Othona. So as we felt the need to use a form of wording acceptable to the official bodies that was closest to Othona's ethos, we were free to expand and explain as a Community, and further unpick these phrases as two centres each with a degree of autonomy.

So, part of the ongoing exploration of Othona's purpose in a changing world ...<sup>336</sup>

“Sweating blood” over these issues and not wishing them “to be the outward facing

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335 Email from Tebbs, 11.03.2014.

336 Email from Ruth Bull, 8.5.2016.

statements about Othona” shows how difficult it was for the Trustees to accept those two new objects as an amendment. On the other hand, Othona is willing to be in touch with the needs of today and therefore ready for changes and compromises.

Othona has the vision of the founder and the outworkings. Over the years, Othona has become a less-hierarchical,<sup>337</sup> and a more inclusive and participatory Community. What Brenda (see 5.3.7) remembers as people fainting in Chapel because they had no choice but to attend the Sunday morning service without eating breakfast, is now history. The 1970s saw a *passion patrol* which made sure unmarried men and women did not mix secretly — a practice which would nowadays be seen as bordering on the ridiculous — or a kind of religious police.

For Othona to stay sane and viable, it is necessary to have a well-balanced selection of people. To be able to experience a transformative spirit, there has to be an equilibrium between needy and giving people. This can be a very fine balance.

Community life is filled with difficulties. But numerous problems of the present are solvable if we concentrate on available energy, on that which is working, which helps people to discover their potential (see 4.23.1: crisis in 2005). New perspectives are necessary, and each generation has to find them anew. Quite often a change of perspective is required in order to elicit innovative ideas. Othona is strong enough to overcome its undemocratic structures. Committee members and Trustees do not have

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337 There is no religious leader any more, however, “Almost uniquely amongst membership charities, Othona has no vote for Trustees. Our community is entirely in your hands”, writes Kate Mulkern on Aug. 5<sup>th</sup> 2011 on Facebook when restructuring the Community is at hand. When it came to finding a new Warden in Sept. 2014, the Trustees asked several people having been attached to the Community in years for advice, deliberation and help when choosing the new Warden. I would interpret this as a sign of breaking down hierarchy.

to be appointed any longer. It is definitely time for democratic elections. Othona serves as an example when it comes to inter-national and inter-generational living together. Daring to employ inter-structural democratic measures could be a paradigm for a new generation and a new millennium. Even Othona has to arrive in the twenty-first century eventually, as much as it might hurt.

But now it is time to listen to what members have to say about this “strange phenomenon”.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE

#### 5.1 Introduction

Having portrayed the Othona Community in history and practice through documentary research and therewith fulfilling Research Goal One, I now want to understand the perspectives of current members of the Community.

In order to investigate Othona's history and present practice now through the eyes of Othonites, its mission and charism, I conducted in-depth interviews with selected Community members. I wanted to discover how and in what way Othona is perceived by its members. In this chapter Research Goal Two is tackled, namely to research the human life of the Community, its people and their thinking. These interviews are the heart of the research. Although they cannot reflect the attitudes of all the members, they are a sample of people present during two summers that, in my experience, represent opinions and views which are common and typical of members, as will be seen when comparing the results with other sources from the Community (such as the *Full Circle* or material published for internal and organisational matters). I also reflect upon my role in the Community, as a member, a participant observer and as a German doing this study, and make some conclusions about its limitations and possibilities.

The following interview summaries are presented with the aim of addressing the Research Question of understanding this phenomenon of Othona and its *Lebenswelten*. I have shortened the interviews and summarised what I considered

insightful, representative, meaningful and ideographic, that is, being unique, non-replicable and connected to one specific person. If I had not shortened them, much unnecessary repetition would have occurred. To minimize my influence on the summaries I have included direct extracts of what people actually said so that others may listen to the words they used rather than my attempts to summarise them.

It is important when rendering the interview extracts not to analyse in-depth or engage too critically about them at once. I want to let the interviews speak for themselves before I interpret.

As an observant participator of the Othona Community, I am in the unique position to investigate with insider knowledge. So when talking recently to members and ‘nosing around’, I have made it a habit to jot down pieces of conversation, immediately recording anything that particularly struck me. When I was fascinated by a phrase or thought during a conversation I wrote it down at once. During the summers of 2011 and 2012, I selected various people who were present, to ask them about what they considered essential to the life of the Othona Community. The aspects I wanted to cover are outlined in Chapter 2. These sort of conversations have not stopped with the interviews. I kept researching opinion, making notes, explaining circumstances, as I continued to participate and observe.

When informing myself about qualitative interviews<sup>338</sup> I decided to use a combination

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338 See i.e.: [http://www.univie.ac.at/igl.geschichte/kaller-dietrich/WS%2006-07/MEXEX\\_06/061102Durchf%FCrung%20von%20Interviews.pdf](http://www.univie.ac.at/igl.geschichte/kaller-dietrich/WS%2006-07/MEXEX_06/061102Durchf%FCrung%20von%20Interviews.pdf); Christel Hopf, 'Qualitative Interviews', in: Flick & Kardorff & Steinke, *Qualitative Forschung*, pp. 349 ff.; Karl Lenz, *Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*, 2006/07. [https://tu-de/die\\_tu\\_dresden/fakultaeten/philosophische\\_fakultaet/is/methoden/prof/lehre/unterlagen\\_ringvorlesung/qm\\_1.pdf](https://tu-de/die_tu_dresden/fakultaeten/philosophische_fakultaet/is/methoden/prof/lehre/unterlagen_ringvorlesung/qm_1.pdf). (28.04.2014).

of conversation techniques which would be most likely to evoke information valuable for this research. Open, non-directive, focussed, biographical narration on the subject of “Othona” seemed to cover the territory.<sup>339</sup> The boundaries of these interviews were flexible. At the same time this combination left space and room for unexpected topics. Most important, the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee had to take place in an atmosphere of trust.

The questions that I used can be found in Appendix IV. They were developed in a particular way. As the narrative-generating question (1), the starter, I chose a question which I could be sure would mobilise memories for everyone (Do you remember your response to Othona the very first time?) There are six questions (1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 15) which refer to my interview partners’ personal experiences directly. There are seven which deal specifically with Othona and what goes on there (essence, ethos, mission, corporate vision, future: 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 15). There are five which have at their centre theology (9, 11, 12, 13, 14). The last question (16) wants to grant the interviewees space to express whatever they think has been left out. It would also make clear that the interview was finished. Thus, going from personal to general to theological questions would build up the difficulty of the questions and grant the interviewees adjustment to what was going to be expected of them and what kind of enquiry to await.

When discerning certain distinctive elements in the interviews I want to see whether I can validate them with written statements from other members at different times, to see if it is a non-recurring, unique element or whether it is popular belief or perception

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339 Hopf, 'Qualitative Interviews', pp. 349 ff.

and common among members.

## **5.2 Choosing Interviewees**

The “gatekeeper”, the Warden of the Community, gave her permission for the interviews as long as people did it voluntarily. When choosing people for a semi-structured interview or conversation, given my knowledge of them, I chose those who could reflect and express themselves, individuals who had the time and willingness to be interviewed and to walk down the road of exploration with me.

In 2011 and 2012 I chose seven men and seven women, aged between 21 and 75, to interview. Taking all the stated points of difference into consideration, my sample group was relatively small, partly because I could only visit during a period when the Community was not busy. This was not problematic since I was concerned with quality rather than quantity. I wanted a broad spectrum of personalities, rather than selecting interviewees who might be quotable or articulate. My choice was also limited by who was actually present during my stay. Nonetheless, a biased view can never be quite entirely ruled out. In order to substantiate my findings, I needed to check if themes emerging from the conversations could be validated by statements members have made at other times.

Insofar as it is possible with the people present, I tried to choose a representative sample with regard to sex, age, and length of connection with Othona. I was able to conduct the interviews in the summers of 2011 and 2012. I selected both people I had known ever since I arrived there as well as people I had met for the first time. A list of questions (see Appendix IV) was used as a guideline to ensure that certain subjects



were covered. But on the whole it was more a flexible conversation in which I was open to accept other issues being brought to the surface, and to discover whether there were more components than the ones I had already discerned (cf. 1.4). The interviews began with the first set questions and sometimes turned into conversations because the interviewees asked their own questions. The process lasted from half an hour up to three hours depending on the eagerness and openness of the participants.

There was no ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ (see 2.10.1) during these interviews even though I realise that in describing the encounters I am co-creating the situation. “The presence and verbal interaction of the interviewer with the interviewee is mutual and reciprocal.”<sup>340</sup> The Community itself (apart from the Warden and the Trustees) is non-hierarchical, participatory, and inclusive. I selected the place for interviewing deliberately. The atmosphere and place of interviewing were established on an old sofa on the Stoep, the classic place where people meet to talk and some to smoke and which inspired the Virtual Stoep, the regular Sunday evening virtual meetings with a typing audio and video chat room. The Stoep as it is called, is the central outdoor meeting place of the community with chairs, tables, old sofas, benches and ashtrays underneath a terraced roof entwined with vine branches and flowerpots. There you can see St Peter’s-on-the-Wall from afar (in the meantime the Solar Building obscures the sight). It is the most natural, non-threatening, and appropriate place to interview Othonites about Othona.

As the word had spread that “Andrea is doing a project”, people were very willing and focussed as they prepared to reflect with me. Having known many of the participants

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340 Swinton & Mowat, Practical Theology, p. 61.

for many years, I can tell whether what they say differs or not from statements they have been making over the years.

In mapping the phenomenon of Othona, it seems essential to identify categorizations describing the *Lebenswelten* of Othona. Diverging subjects would help to see where 'bones of contention' or problems appear, and what distinctive elements members think characterise Othona. These interviews serve as a method of producing data from which categorizations may be discerned. I want to see what issues are raised, what matters to members, what concerns them, how they perceive the strange phenomenon of Othona.

### **5.3 Extracts of the Interviews**

These interview summaries are designed to help to address the Research Question of understanding the phenomenon of Othona. Significant direct quotations are included after short summaries of each person. Notably, all of them gave permission, except one (whose interview is excluded) for their real names to be used. They are listed in the order they were interviewed. This was random, whoever was there and available. Some members helped me with the introductions and were very open about themselves, others did not want me to mention how much I knew about them, and their wishes have been respected.

#### **5.3.1 Pete (40)**

Pete has got what he calls a “chequered” history. He was brought up in a dysfunctional family with an unstable mother tending to have violent outbursts. For years he had been told that he was “useless and a waste of space”. He started to prove

that by damaging relationships, family and himself. His fear and angst he covered by doing crazy things. He still walks on a tightrope emotionally. He says that “his self-destructive demon” waits for him every day and wants constantly to do damage. It is something he feels he has to check all the time.

Me and my friend discovered in the middle of nowhere a sign on the seawall hinting to the Community. It said that people work, play, pray and study there. We were curious and expected to be chased away when first coming across a woman 'as mad as a hatter'. 'A mental asylum' was our first idea.

The warden explained the ethos of the place to us. We did not understand. Why did people want to come and wash the dishes and pay for it? We were nervous and needed courage to enter but felt relaxed and comfortable after a very short while.

I am a committed, lifelong member and love the place but don't want to become too dependent on it. But it is part of my blood. It saved me from self-destruction and allowed me to try different skills I did not know I had. I even found jobs through skills that I developed there.

I struggle with the 'real world', I have the feeling of not quite 'fitting'. Othona makes me feel useful, gives me a purpose in life. It is a place where we get away from ourselves, from our loneliness. I have a long history of booze and drugs. I see the place as a substitute for lonely people who do not have families or 'regular jobs or careers'. This place — away from materialism and television — gives me stability. The people feel like “my family” having watched children grow up here.

People caring about people, the simplicity and the safety of the place, being valued and purposeful is what Othona is about. I do not know if all that leads to a belief in God. Community you have to feel and experience.

### **5.3.2 Yann (18)**

Yann is the youngest of three and plays the cello. After school, he was torn between wanting to study medicine or going for a musical career. He is now in his second year of medicine. Loving one's neighbour has been central in his growing up even though other values may be shaken up at the moment as a student. He likes to be informed about the world around him and wants to have a positive impact on the world. Therefore he is part of a student association that is solidarity-orientated and

aims to raise awareness on some issues in society.

I connect 'having fun' with Othona. Something here keeps the child in me going. I like to actively take part in offered activities. Sitting at different tables at mealtime, talking to different people from different countries and learning about them is particularly exciting for me. Thus 'loving your neighbour, living and sharing together and going to chapel twice a day' are the aims of this Community. On top of that it is a good, personal holiday place — not an anonymous holiday centre— plus an opportunity for young Europeans to work there. I am referring to the VAPs [Volunteers for Action and Peace] who come every year from all over the world.

I have been coming to Othona with my family ever since I was 3-4 years old. I live in France, close to Taizé and have been there often. It is bigger with more people and usually for younger ones between 20-30 years. Othona is smaller and you get to know everyone who is there. It seems to be more for families. I enjoy the themed weeks and the fact that there is always somebody available for activities. The Chapel impresses me particularly in the evenings when others are not seen distinctly and the space seems almost without limits.”

### **5.3.3 Valerie (64)**

Valerie is a retired teacher. Education is naturally important to her. Family means so much to her as do friends. She has two grown-up sons. She has spent a lot of time attending a 200 year old Friendly Society dedicated to benevolence.

I have just come out of hospital after having had an operation. I fell in love with the idea of the Community. I loved going there. It was especially the ecumenical aspect that fitted in with me and I gained by being with people. I am a Methodist preacher myself and I know that I have a call to preach.

I feel the tangible presence of God, a special peace, particularly in the Chapel. There is something about this building because of all the prayers absorbed by the wall. I find the Community accepting. You do not worry about what people look like and possessions are unimportant. Anyone can come and they are accepted for what they are. I have seen some weird characters down there. Children are trained to realise that you can enjoy yourself without spending money.

You take out from the Community but you decide yourself how much you put in. I particularly like that you can do Chapel services without any qualifications. I believe if you throw yourself into it you can get a lot of it. Nobody comes and is not affected by it. The world needs a place like this, where you take yourself away from the madness of the world and simply BE. The good it does must impact onto the communities we go to at home. I feel disturbed by someone mixing Christianity and Paganism in a service. There is a theology of community

and some weeks are really theology.

#### **5.3.4 Clare (37)**

Clare is the founder's granddaughter, a very gentle and empathetic person. She is the mother of two children of whom one is diagnosed with an Asperger's syndrome. She is married and searching for her place in life, not sure what she "should be doing". She has been growing up with the tremendous richness of the Community and wishes she had more energy to put into it. She regards the Community as an energy black hole and has seen her mother feeling the obligation to do too many things. She feels this impact on herself and is not always happy about that. However, she was the motor for winning the "Cut your carbon" Award that enabled the Community to erect the new Solar Building.

I see the Community as a screensaver, as something enriching that is always there. It is about humanity without status and societal structures. It is not competitive, there is no point-scoring and it is different every time. I feel more spiritually developed because I have come here. It is a necessary place in the world, a place to be authentic, accepted and welcomed, but people work hard to make it happen. I find a sense of harmony and order of things here. Othona is serving the people who come here, that is trying to walk in Jesus' footsteps, I reckon.

I think we should do more outreach for vulnerable people, i.e. refugees, but then I'm not sure we have the capacities.

Everything I know about religion I picked up here. I never understood the parable of the rich man who can't go through the eye of a needle until somebody explained it to me in a more spiritual way. Rich meant you are so loaded up with the world. This is how you get to feel sometimes down here when there is so much work and stress. Then the sea wall and the sense of wonder and creation help.

#### **5.3.5 Al (60)**

Al comes from a working class family and went to a special school, a boarding school for the blind. He had always wanted to become a computer system analyst, but ended up working for the Royal National Institute for the Blind. He produced Braille

books and did voluntary work supporting elderly blind people. He also did mystery shopping, in other words, he anonymously tested equipments and facilities for blind people and wrote reports about his experiences.

He has his own flat and a partner who is also blind. When he communicates on the Internet he has a screen reader which reads out his messages aloud. He is a long-standing member of the Community.

I came with a blind friend in the 70s. We came out of season, did maintenance work, went to the pub in Bradwell and loved the informality of the group. We felt like family. I had left home and was looking for something. Not quite sure what. I always wonder what would have happened with me and my life if I had not come down there so much. Othona is a reason why I have not travelled much. I come from a family who never went to church. This blind friend has changed my life and introduced me to religion and faith. The self-sufficiency and ecology of the place in the 70s have made a tremendous impact on me: growing vegetables, no radio and TV, the simple life. I do not like organised religion. To me faith is a myth. The Chapel sums up my faith. It is family what I get here, a sense of belonging. I can be myself and know I am loved and cared for. Othona allows me to do the same for others. It is the contentment you get through people. I consider it a privilege to know a place like Othona. It is a place where you can express yourself in many ways, it allows people to express themselves in their own way. Othona is one way into faith. There are many doors into faith, there is no right way.

The Chapel in one of the most powerful buildings I know. The power of the Chapel comes from all the issues that have been brought to it for over sixteen hundred years. The energy of it stems from people going there and praying. I once found a small village church in Kenya which reminded me of the Chapel.

I am unsure about the “all faiths and none” bit. I think we fail there and are intolerant if people do not want to go to the services. Demanding that everybody goes to chapel needs questioning.

### **5.3.6 Robert (67)**

Robert is based in London having worked as a civil servant. If anybody ever needed a place to stay in London, he was and still is the one to turn to. Robert has no family, but he has several godchildren who at times stay with him in his home. He is somebody with a sharp mind and a subtle humour, someone you can rely on. He loves

cooking and good wines.

I have been a member since 1980 and divide Community members into old and new members. Old ones are the ones who remember and met Norman Motley, the founder of Othona. I remember coming with a vicar and inquiring about the Sunday service. My friend was vague about the time. Later I found out that part of the Othona ethos is not to know when Sunday service is. After that service a young boy took my hand and said: Come, let's play. These two incidents encompass the Othona ethos for me. It gives people space when they need space, they are not left on their own when they don't want to be.

My involvement in the Community has been manifold, it ranges from cooking, to donating money, to providing hospitality in my London home as an extension of the Community. As an introvert, I have learned in the community to relate to a variety of people, I have indeed benefited from people completely different from myself. I realise that people talk different languages and I do not refer to foreign tongues. In a fragmented society the community breaks down barriers, concerning ages, background and sex. I feel a sense of belonging. The Community has taught me that I have something to offer by being myself. You can discover things about yourself you didn't know.

I concede that Community can be ghastly. I have experienced the most difficult times, so painful that I could not talk about it.

No-one can understand until they come here. Ordinary things are transformed, you recognise it when you see it. It is an amazing, enabling community. The spiritual side is not confined to the Chapel. I am renowned for starting prayers with "God our father, God our mother, God in each one of us ...". I find it difficult to talk about a godhead who is remote from what is going on.

### **5.3.7 Brenda (75)**

Brenda was born during the war. Her father went to Africa as a soldier for three years and came back as a stranger. He was a policeman and taught her many practical skills. She was the first in the family to attend a university "always trying to prove that I was not a stupid girl". She became a general practitioner, later a psychiatrist. She married a man (the founder's brother) 20 years her senior and had three daughters with him. She was widowed when two of them were still in their teens. She stopped working as a doctor and looked after her husband's business and did charitable work. She calls herself a happy grandmother and goes hiking, walking and bird watching.

Brenda is a very resolute, hands-on person with lots of practical qualities.

I came in 1946 at the age of 14 and remember the founder's daughter, Janet Marshall, aged 7, with pigtails and mud all over from the marshes jumping up to the well-dressed secretary P. It was when I realised that decorum and material things were not important here. I also recall the smell, woodworms and the earth floor in the Chapel. And very formal services: 8 o'clock on Sunday mornings, before breakfast, so that people sometimes fainted. There was no choice. They had to go. I was used to the Book of Common Prayer. At Othona everything was different. My parents hammered into me: What will the neighbours think ?, Be respectable. Do as you are told. Othona has changed that. Othona was the only way to cope with the established church because I had seen a wider vision there. And I am very grateful for having given that vision to my children.

I married the founder's brother and know therefore details about the family history. Othona is Christian faith living in Community. Community first, Christian second. Ecology, green, class-less, serious interest in wild-life, appreciating your environment, great for children. Acceptance is very important. What we stand for, changes our lives when we go back. For many people Othona is perpetual adolescence and they do outrageous things. The openness of the community has brought in paedophiles, alcoholics, addicts, young offenders on probation and the like. I love the guts of this place but it drives me mad at the same time.

### **5.3.8 Connel (21)**

Connel has eight siblings. He comes from a community where the role models for men and women are still very strict. When his community comes to visit Othona, the young men and women go bathing at different places. The women wear bathing costumes that cover knees and arms. Sometimes a young man or woman is sent to Othona, if there are problems at their community.

However, it is very difficult to address those problems because the young people have not learned to reflect upon, let alone voice those problems critically. They grow up with obedience. When Connel came to Othona, he freed himself from many restrictions, learned how to handle money for the first time, yet, could not formulate his anger and disappointment (which showed all through the interview) for not being



supported as a musician either by his parents or by his community. He avoids my attempts to contact him and is back in the USA. When I recently tried to get in touch with him again via Facebook to ask permission for his name to be used, he agreed immediately and was looking forward to reading the thesis.

I come from another Christian community in Kent. I have been granted a couple of months as a time-out to think and reflect what I want to do. It is 'chill-time'. I am at a crossroad. I am a trained electrician but very much interested in music and film, I am a pretty good singer and guitarist. My old community does not support these interests. I think my confidence has improved ever since I got here. I have become more comfortable in front of a crowd, in front of people.

I think the place itself holds the Othona Community together. You learn to work with people. Everyone mucks in. The remoteness is a way of getting away from the business of normal time. I came here because I wanted to get away from the 'Christian thing'. I feel much happier here than in the other community. On the other hand, much is similar to what I am used to, for example, the Thursday evening devotions, and that made it easy for me to fit in.

### **5.3.9 Majk (35)**

Majk came first for Othona's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2006. At first he was not sure whether to fit in as a Quaker, but the "energy, setting and feeling of the Chapel were powerful and the Community accepting and fantastic", he said. He works at a Quaker centre in Edinburgh and is rather reserved when it comes to telling details about his private life. He loves music and plays the guitar. His partner is a single mother who is also a member of the Community. The story goes that they once went to the Chapel and came back holding hands. When interviewing him, he is part of the temporary core team working and living at the Community.

The impact of Othona on my life? Most of my adult life I went from place to place. Othona is a root, a place to come to. I need this root more than I felt before. Part of the reason is that my blood family is very distant and not well tied together. Othona is part of the family I have chosen. I feel a sense of connection to the people and to the place. The Community is about building connections between different people and cultures, between ourselves and the environment and strengthening the connection with the Chapel and God. When you work here

you are sacrificing a bit of your life for the Community. I am trying to find a balance between my own needs and the Community's needs. Othona is a place to rest, a refuge, not 'normal life', however, a step closer to reality than we normally live in. I call myself spiritual not religious, and worshipping is not singing hymns, reading the Bible or saying the Grace, it is walking on the beach, for instance.

### **5.3.10 Esther (46)**

Esther is the mother of two teenage children. Her husband has been made redundant. She works as an accountant manager in London.

I came the first time with my mother at the age of 9. It was a place where you could easily make friends. You could slot in without any effort. I have been coming here on my own ever since I was 16. It gives you freedom within a structure. It is heaven. You sit there without having to do anything. I remember people pulling you back in case you were doing something you should not.

There is always an immediate network of friends. Would we all be here if we weren't thinking along the same lines? It is a welcoming Community. It can be daunting. You have to be involved. You can choose though what you want to do. You should go to Chapel. It is much a part of what we are. I feel lucky to have such a powerful place. You can benefit, however you want to, pray, meditate, sing, etc. Respect for the people and respect for the place are involved.

Acceptance is the essence. Anybody and everybody within the boundaries of being appropriate is accepted. Offending behaviour, behaviour that upsets the balance of the Community is not accepted. It is a common sense rule.

I look upon the Community as a family, an extended family. I find unity, inclusiveness, simplicity, humility, rest, relaxation, companionship, stimulating conversation, time for others, and opportunities you don't know are here.

Breaking away from formality is the speciality of this place. There is a different kind of liturgy here. I hope it keeps its simplicity.

### **5.3.11 Marilyn (37)**

Marilyn has just had another baby, a girl. She is very delighted for the two others are boys. She is living now where she used to live as a child and her children go to the same school she went to. She likes that a lot. She works with preschool children aged 2-5. When listing what is important in her life, she wrote in that order: Children, faith,

family, partner, AA. She says that all helps her to keep on a straight path.

I am fairly new in the Community having discovered it through my uncle. I love coming to a safe place with my two children. They relax there, become calm, have a break and I can be with them without stress. I am a single mother, I am divorced and my children enjoy the place.

I have experienced that people in the world think you are a bit mad when you talk about your faith. In the Community, it is 'not shoved down your throat', it is an offer if you want it.

The Community can teach you about Christianity, about the basics of Christianity: care and share, kind and caring and looking out for each other. The Community spirit is keeping the place active and alive. Since people come from all walks of life, you can learn about other cultures.

You learn to work with others, something I did not get out of Buddhist retreats. I feel something in the Chapel: a sense of peace and calmness. Emotions come up when the Holy Spirit, a presence, is there.

I would like to help the Community grow, however not too big. More fund-raising events could help to cover its cost. Self-sustaining projects would be good, too.

The essence of the place is what Jesus was about. And what he was about is there: a warm spirit.

### **5.3.12 Julie (55)**

Julie is a trained teacher for the deaf and people with hearing impairment. She stopped teaching Maths in order to do unqualified social work and decided finally to qualify in that field, specialising in child protection. In 2008 she was suffering from an undiagnosed illness which led to severe depression. Coming out of that she rediscovered things that had been important to her in her previous life such as Othona. She has back problems and needs a wheelchair. She says she "needs to stretch her mind" and is therefore studying for a law degree.

I came first in the wintertime in the 70s, interested in bird watching. At the same time there was a communion service going on in the Chapel. I was cordially invited to join and I took to the inclusiveness of the event and wanted to find out more about it, never having been in a chapel or church before, let alone participated in a service.

My background is rather leftist with parents who were peace activists. I came to the Community to find out about 'Church' and 'Christianity', and found the principles of 'reaching out', 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation' there. Norman [the founder] was reaching out, reaching towards reconciliation. He did what God wanted.

For me the underlying theme in the Community is the 'thief on the cross', i.e. people are accepted for who they are.

I would not have come into the Community without the Chapel. I find a sense of peace there, something magical and awesome: the majesty of God. Walking towards the Chapel prepares you for it, since you stop what you are doing when you are going there. You have the opportunity to share what other people offer and this act of worship is of great value. Since today people are not talking to each other in society, the Community provides something very different on a day to day basis. It brings people together. This 'Community thing' is continued via the Internet platform Facebook nowadays.

### **5.3.13 Belinda (46)**

Belinda is married, a teacher with two teenage children. She works part-time with children who have special needs.

I came first as a Brownie and remember the row of beds in the huts.

Othona has clearly altered my life. Without it I would not have gone to Germany for a year, would not have all these friends there. My children experience the same sort of impact I experienced: the freedom to roam around, meet people from different cultures, play your part in Community, become confident through mixing with people. It is like a family. It is about getting away from normal life for a while. Meeting up with people you have known all your life. A sense of place. Calm. I recharge my batteries here. We all take something away from here but we have to give as well. I am not a Christian. I am an Agnostic. I love the Chapel and going there. At home I never go to church. What you get here is not religion but spiritualism [sic!spirituality].

This place makes people feel they belong. It allows people from all walks of life to experience others. You become more tolerant. Different generations and ages mix. You thrive from the feeling of being a part of Community. The place itself holds the Community together. It is the only place I can get my head together. And wonder sometimes, what do people carry out from here?

### **5.3.14 Stephanie (21)**

Stephanie and Yann are siblings. Stephanie was born in Rwanda but grew up in France. She thinks she is a good mixture of French, English and a pinch of Rwandan

culture. Before going to university, she took a gap year staying two months in Taizé, three months in Rwanda, and one month working in a water-sports leisure centre with children. She is the 'Environment representative' at her university and has strong principles when it comes to waste and wasting, and how to treat other people. She would like a job that is ethical and helps people.

I have been coming to the Community ever since I can remember. I recall in particular playing on the beach in the mud and the silence of the Chapel and the regularity of going there. I was brought up to help, so I would always try to do my chores in the Community to my best of capacity. I have the sense of belonging to a bigger family, of people linked by faith. To me Othona is an alternative to the capitalist world, like a small village. Its main strength is that everyone contributes and adapts to everyone's needs and expectations. When you come to the Community you agree that you have to help to be part of it. I see the Community for older people as a way of having another family and a way of avoiding being isolated.

Here you learn to respect the sanctity of God. You need silence to let yourself go and focus on God. I am familiar with Taizé as well but not too keen on Catholicism. I do not like the power of priests. I call myself a feminist and think that women should become priests as well.

The essence of Othona is: Love thy neighbour and learn to share.

#### **5.4 Interview with Myself**

When writing the "Interview with Myself" I felt that I should have some critical (possibly ironical) distance towards my self-explications. I did not want to answer the questions I had posed my interviewees, for much of what I asked them has been answered concerning myself in "My first encounter with Othona" (see 1.3) and in "The Researcher's Social Location" (see 2.10.1). Since the whole thesis already has an auto-ethnographic approach, I felt awkward, placing myself again into the centre of attention. These are possibly the repercussions of my former study years. I am not used to divulging private information and do not feel comfortable doing so. Therefore I decided to ask myself those questions that I am quite often confronted with when talking about my thesis.

- 1) Don't you have anything better to do than to write a thesis about this weird Community full of strange people?

Not really. My exercise at this time of my life is to stick something out, to dig deep, to stay with one subject, to stop working superficially and to prove to myself that I can make it. I started a PhD project on Max Weber and Ancient Judaism in my early thirties (the project was even funded with a much sought-after scholarship). My daughter came along, I became a single mother and had to fend for the two of us. When Paula was three, I pondered “Where can we go for the summer where it might be interesting for her as well as for me?” Othona popped up in my mind. I had not been there for a decade. It proved to be the right decision. When she was 5, I took a sabbatical and we spent half a year in each centre. I experienced Community all year through, not only in the summer, and along with it various problems. How to raise children became the bone of contention at Bradwell. At Burton the crux or main point were authority issues. Looking at that year with a distance I would say that communication structures were difficult and unpractised. It was the first year that Bradwell was opened all year and I was the co-Warden. It was not known at that time what staff and Warden needed and how they could be supported, for instance, by the Trustees. So much went wrong at first. I stopped going to Bradwell for some years as a result. However, when it came to shutting down the camp, I remembered my old roots and went back to give my full support.

- 2) Othona's impact on my life?

My second home, my *Heimat* of choice, always there when I need it. It is my refuge. The place where I regain my equilibrium. Haydn's “Creation” happens there. There is hardly any other place where I feel so connected to nature, to God, to creation as such. It all happens there, very viscerally.

It is one of these power places which transform you. My children feel similarly. It is our *Wahl-Heimat* (tr. home by choice). In a world of quickly changing values it is a good choice! What you learn there is – to put it into Paul Tillich's words – “the courage to be”.<sup>341</sup> This is Othona's essence: to empower, to encourage people.

The common ethos is trust, inclusiveness, healing and giving. What I have always appreciated about Othona is the fact that I am not only partially appreciated there but as a whole person. I can also express my non-intellectual side. I was so used to being the thinking, reflecting person. Now, I was allowed to cook for sixty people. I would never have dared to without the experience of Othona. I worked in the office, welcomed people, cleaned, took services in the Chapel. I tend to do things there that I do not do at home. I am also allowed

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341 Paul Tillich, *Der Mut zum Sein* (Steingrüben Verlag: Stuttgart, 1953). The original version was first published in English.

to let go, not to take on too much responsibility which I am used to.

### 3) Religious experiences at Othona?

The venue itself is a religious experience reminding me of what I know about early Christianity: a counter-cultural-communist way of looking at the world. A world of sharing, of encounter, of looking out for the common goods. Encountering people is religious per se. Being completely overwhelmed by what people say or do. I have had a handful of these experiences at Othona.

## 5.5 Distinctive Elements or “Categories of Understanding”

These face-to-face interviews were talks with a special purpose: “The interviewer and interviewee working together in an open and productive manner to co-construct meaning.”<sup>342</sup> It is important to see these interviews in their contextual situation-specific place. Obtaining information in this way helped me to define the field, in this case to discern categorizations that I could juxtapose with my original assumptions. Through the interviews, I perceived some distinctive elements that help to characterise Othona. These distinctive elements are what Marton calls *categories of understanding* which emerge when classifying ways in which people ponder about facets of reality (cf. 2.5).

There are some recurring elements and motifs permeating most of the interviews. My assumption that certain elements are key to the Community has been extended by other elements. I had said that I suspected journey and home, belonging and identity, volunteering and discipleship, and place and transition shape the Community (see 1.4). My interviewees have partly confirmed my assumptions but also added aspects which I had not considered. Some of the aspects feed into subjects which will be dealt with in Chapter Seven. It is here where a disguised or implicit theology is expressed

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342 Mats Alvesson, *Interpreting Interviews* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), p. 17.

and where Research Goal Three assumes shape.

### 5.5.1 Transformation

When reading through my findings and notes later on, with distance, I was surprised by the results.

According to Robert “ordinariness and transformation” are utterly important. He says “Ordinary things are transformed; you recognise it when you see it.” So when there is interaction between people, there is more involved than seems obvious on the outside. Robert defines this as an “enabling” quality. He states “You discover things about yourself you didn’t know.” This is what Motley had hoped for. Pete confirms this : “It [Othona] ... allowed me to try different skills I did not know I had”. And Al says that Othona “allows people to express themselves in their own way.” Brenda even goes as far as to say that she could only “cope with the established church because I had seen a wider vision there.” And Yann notices that “Othona ... keeps the child in me going.” Connel states that his “confidence has improved ever since I got here. I have become more comfortable before crowds, before people.” Belinda as well confirms “Othona has clearly altered my life”.

So, all these statements show that something has happened which was not there before: a perception, an awareness, an insight. Worth, dignity, self-expression, and confidence are signs of trusting, enjoying, feeling free to tell one's story, “coping with fear, anger, despair, jealousy and sheer foolishness”<sup>343</sup> (see Brenda: “For many people

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343 David F. Ford, 'Transformation' , in: Peter Sedgwick (ed), God in the City (London/New York: Mowbray, pp. 199-209), p. 203.



Othona is perpetual adolescence and they do outrageous things”). Our identities are transformed by being part of something, by being Community. Attaining a new identity goes back to the conviction that Jesus Christ is the root of 'one new humanity', “and that this transformation is to do with creating community against all the odds”<sup>344</sup> (see 7.10.3). All this feeds into “encounter” (see Chapter 7). It is an aspect which emerged through the interviews which I did not consider.

The personal-transformative dimension of the Community and the Chapel has clearly to be taken into consideration when understanding the phenomenon of Othona and I will remit this in Chapter Six and Seven.

### **5.5.2 Alternative Family**

I had never realised how much of a substitute or alternative family Othona is for many members, men in particular. Possibly I should confine this surprise given my own longing for *Heimat*. “Family” is crucial in the evaluation. There is hardly anyone who does not look for “family” at Othona. “Being accepted for who you are” is equated with “family”. The Community is looked upon as “an extended family” (Esther). The principle of a *Grossfamilie* (big/more generation family) is found there when Yann says “Different generations and ages mix ... It [Othona] allows people from all walks of life to experience others.”

Deficiencies or difficulties in one’s own family surface when Majk explains “Othona is a root. I need this root ... Part of the reason is that my blood family is very distant and not well tied together.” Pete asserts that Othona “is part of my blood”. And Al

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344 Ford, 'Transformation', p. 206.

elucidates: “It is family what I get here, a sense of belonging. I can be myself and know I am loved and cared for. Othona allows me to do the same for others. It is the contentment you get through people.” A very young person, Stephanie, summarises “I have the feeling of belonging to a bigger family, of people linked by faith.”

Another observation is that some men in particular, who do not have families, careers, a *Sitz im Leben* (tr. a place in life), a plan for their future, who are absolutely constitutional for the Community, have the possibility to socialise there and find family.

Pete feels he is not quite “fitting” into society. He works on and off. “Othona ... gives me a purpose in life”, he states. It stabilises him. He also sees it as a substitute for lonely people who “do not have families or regular jobs or careers”.

All this relates to my assumption of making a journey to find a home, and with this home a place where we belong. Home and belonging are necessary for our identities.

In order to understand the Othona Phenomenon, therefore, the importance of family and home will be explored in Chapters Six and Seven as they relate to the Belonging — Identity and Journey — Home aspects (see 1.4).

### **5.5.3 Beyond Normality — Space — Place**

Some of my interviewees stressed the fact that they did not associate Othona with what was *normal*. People who fit in nowhere fit in here. They may be ‘marginal’ everywhere else, here they become ministers, e.g. they serve Othona. Othona

is led by, and exists for people who are outside or on the edge of the institutional churches ... (and) is reaching out to those who have rejected and never discovered institutional Christianity.<sup>345</sup>

Being on the edge (or beyond normality) is a theme that runs through the Community in many faceted ways. It does not only concern belief but also the status people feel they have in society in general (see Pete: “Othona makes me feel useful”). This marginality is multi-layered. At this point it concerns mainly a *locus* (a location) which transforms life, time and place into something extraordinary which not only geographically differs from what we usually experience. At the same time it relates to the volunteering and discipleship aspect which is combined here with place and transition facets (see 1.4).

Here are some comments how the interviewees expressed this sensation of 'being on the edge': “Getting away from the business of normal time” (Connel); “from normal life” (Majk); “I struggle with the 'real world'” (Pete); “Othona is not normal life, however, a step closer to reality than we normally live in” (Majk). It is a feeling of being privileged “to know a place like Othona” (Al). The remoteness of the place, this community “in the middle of nowhere” (Pete) is “heaven” (Esther), “a powerful place” (Al) that offers you “a connected space” (field note). It is not only the place, but the space as well. The place is of utmost importance. The Chapel, the surrounding, nature, the landscape play a crucial role in the definition of the Community and its theology or spirituality. Othona at Bradwell is not to be separated from the Chapel. This little, unpretentious building is mentioned in each interview. Whoever is somehow linked to Othona usually feels a deep connection with the Chapel!

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345 Alison Norman, Residential Lay Communities (Lulu.com), pp. 24-25.

In order to understand the Othona Phenomenon it is inevitable according to the interviews to include a theology of place which will be looked at in Chapter Seven.

#### **5.5.4 Transition**

Transition is another theme for a categorization that I had discerned. Othona is a place where people come who are on the brink of something new, on a threshold, who need space to reflect on what they want to do with their lives. Connel states that he is “at a crossroad” having been “granted a couple of months as a time-out to think and reflect.” Even though he is quiet and concentrated when he is telling all this, his anger and disappointment in being unsupported by his family and community is noticeable. His community in Kent is more interested in practical work than in artistic expression. At Othona he is allowed to try out his musical side of. He sings with others, composes music, plays the guitar to his heart's content. Nobody admonishes him as long as he does his work as well as a core member.

Belinda experiences calm and the opportunity to “recharge my batteries there”. At this point it would have been interesting to know how the effect of 'recharging one's batteries' looked like. I myself spent a sabbatical in the Community, away from work and the usual hubbub of life, when I was determined to change something in my life. When I returned to Germany, I chose not to live in Hamburg any longer, because my daughter was about to start school and I wanted that to happen in a smaller town. Besides, I wanted to support my mother who used to live in Lüneburg.

Motley pointed at the “transitional character of the Community”<sup>346</sup> referring, however,

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346 Motley, Letters, p. 48.

to administration, size, and organisation in 1977. Albeit his conviction to have “no continuing city”<sup>347</sup> “but to build Jerusalem here”<sup>348</sup> suggested a theological transition with an eschatological dimension.

### **5.5.5 Inclusivity and Co-operation**

“People caring about people” is Pete's statement about the Community. Yann sees it as “living and sharing together ... and the fact that there is always somebody available for activities.” Valerie says that “anybody can come and they are accepted for what they are.” Clare calls it “humanity without status ... a place to be authentic, accepted and welcomed.” Robert has learned to “relate to a variety of people ... people completely different from myself. I realise that people talk different languages and I do not refer to foreign tongues.” “Everyone mucks in” is Connel's way of expressing togetherness while Mayk sees it as “The Community is about building connections between different people and cultures.” Esther experiences the Community as an “immediate network of friends”, and Marilyn learns about other cultures by working with others. Julie took to the “inclusiveness” of a communion Chapel service and enjoys sharing “what other people offer”. “It brings people together”, she states. Belinda notices that “you become more tolerant” by experiencing others. For Stephanie, Othona’s “main strength is that everyone contributes and adapts to everyone’s needs and expectations”.

Doing activities together, sharing and caring about each other are the outworkings of Motley’s motto of *work, worship, study, and play* and result inevitably into a form of

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347 Motley, Letters, p. 30.

348 Motley, Letters, p. 24.

'belonging' which feeds into 'encounter'.

Working together in service for humanity and in neighbourliness is the practice of this Christian Community to “emphasize all persons' commonality, unity and equality”<sup>349</sup>.

### **5.5.6 Theological Elements**

When closely re-reading the interviews to discern theological elements in their responses, several strands were identified.

**5.5.6.1 Counter-Cultural Elements:** There are counter-cultural elements to Othona. Not only does the Chapel stand on the brink of Nowhere, the Community as well “is an alternative to the capitalist world”, as Stephanie puts it. It is a place “away from materialism and television” (Pete) and “Children are trained to realise that you can enjoy yourself without spending money,” (Valerie). Othona discourages the use of computer games and mass media equipment: there are no public televisions or radios available, and no place to shop. It wants to encourage a rest from the world of consumerism and virtual reality.

At Othona “You do not worry about what people look like and possessions are unimportant” (Valerie). Even Brenda realised very early that “decorum and material things were not important here”. In Othona's memory bag there is Kate Mulkern's story of her three wardrobes: one for work, one for casual, and one for Othona. Valerie enjoys the lack of clericalism when she states, “I particularly like that you can do Chapel services without any qualifications. Anyone can do them and the diversity has

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349 Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. 139.

been immense.” This is also what Esther cherishes: “Breaking away from formality is the speciality of this place.”

Self-sufficiency, simplicity, classlessness, an interest in wild-life and environment along with ecological aspects also featured in the interviews.

**5.5.6.2 Religion: Community First — Christian Second:** Christianity, God, and Jesus are mentioned, but as Brenda puts it “Othona is Christian faith living in Community. Community first, Christian second.”

Faith and belief seem optional (see the Chair's remark 8.5). It is not required to be a believer to be part of the Community. However, the term “Christian community open to all faiths and none” as stated in the Mission Statement is a crux for some. Al critiques people having to go to Chapel services. He does not like “organised religion” and considers “Faith ... a myth”. On the other hand, the Chapel appears to epitomise his faith: he says its power “stems from people going there and praying”. Pete is unsure if what Othona is about “leads to a belief in God.” In contrast, Valerie feels “the tangible presence of God ... particularly in the Chapel”. (She did not like the mixture of Christianity and Paganism that she experienced in one particular service led by someone inclined towards paganism).

Valerie talks about a “theology of Community” and “the ecumenical aspect” of it, being a Methodist Local Preacher herself. Clare mentions that “Othona is serving the people who come here”. She affirms that “Everything I know about religion has been picked up here” and gives her interpretation of the parable in Matthew 19:24. Robert

sees “God in each one of us”.

Connel wanted to “to get away from the ‘Christian thing’ in his time-out. He realised that “much is similar to what I am used to, for example, the Thursday evening devotions [referring to the Dedication Service], and that made it easy for me to fit in.” Mayk, a Quaker, calls himself “spiritual not religious”, “and worshipping is not singing hymns, reading the Bible or saying the Grace, it is walking on the beach, for instance.” Esther demands that “You should go to chapel”. Marilyn states that “The Community can teach you ... about the basics of Christianity: care and share, kind and caring and looking out for each other”. To her the essence of Othona is what Jesus was about: “a warm spirit”.

Julie came to the Community to find out about ‘Church’ and ‘Christianity’, and found the principles of ‘reaching out’, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘reconciliation’. She concedes that the founder “did what God wanted”.

Stephanie experiences in the silence of the Community and its environment that “you learn to respect the sanctity of God”. For myself: “There is hardly any other place where I feel so connected to nature, God, to creation as such”.

Even though the Community aspect is more emphasised than the Christian one, those two sides of the coin are inseparable as will be shown in Chapter Eight. What Brenda possibly wanted to state is that practicality comes before theory, before people are willing to listen to anything, they need to be fed.

**5.5.6.3 'For those with faith and those without':** The spectrum of people at Othona ranges from believers to non-believers. There are atheists, humanists,



people unsure and undogmatic about their beliefs, but there are no fundamentalists for Othona eschews dogmatic fundamentalism. It does not fit into what Othona stands for. So therefore, what faith or Christianity means to the interviewees responds to this wide scope of approaches. Pete is restrained when talking about his belief and does not make clear statements. Yann considers “loving your neighbour, living and sharing together and going to chapel twice a day” indicate clear Christian values. Valerie believes in the “priesthood of all believers”. Clare sees the Community as “trying to walk in Jesus’ footsteps”. Al comes “from a family who never went to church. He acknowledges Othona as “one way into faith. There are many doors into faith, and there is no right one”. Robert finds it difficult “to talk about a God-head who is remote from what is going on”. Connel feels much “happier here than in the other community”. Esther concedes that “ There is a different set of liturgy here. I hope it keeps its simplicity.” Marilyn noticed that “people in the world think you are a bit mad when you talk about your faith. In the Community ... it is an offer if you want it ... You learn to work with others.” Julie before coming to the Community had “never ... been in a chapel or church before, let alone participated in a service. My background is rather leftist with parents who were peace activists.” Belinda says: “At home I never go to church. What you get here is not religion but spiritualism [sic: spirituality].” Stephanie who considers herself a feminist, does not like the power of priests and (not recognising the self-contradiction) would like women to become ordained.

**5.5.6.4 The 'Numinous' Character of the Chapel:** There is no interviewee who does not mention the Chapel when talking about her/his relationship with the Community. Yann is particularly impressed with it in the evenings for “the space

seems almost without limits.” Valerie feels “the tangible presence of God, a special peace” in it. “There is something about this building,” she continues, “because of the prayers absorbed in the walls.” For Al, “The Chapel sums up my faith ... [It] is one of the most powerful buildings I know.” Brenda recalls the Chapel when it did not have a tiled floor: “the smell, the woodworms and the earth floor”. Mayk states that “The Community is about ... strengthening the connection with the Chapel and God.” For Esther going to Chapel “is much a part of what we are”. She cherishes “such powerful place” in which “breaking away from formality is the specialty”. Marilyn feels “something in the Chapel: a sense of peace and calmness. Emotions come up when the Holy Spirit, a presence, is there.” And Julie concedes that she “would not have come to the Community without the Chapel”. She finds “a sense of peace there, something magical and awesome – the majesty of God. Walking to the Chapel prepares you for it”. Belinda as well loves “the Chapel and going there”. Julie and Belinda highlight the preparation time to encounter the 'numinous'. Stephanie talks about the effect the Chapel has on her: “You need silence to let yourself go and focus on God.”

To come to this chapel at Bradwell, we know that we have come to the end of all buildings, to the end of the road, to the end of the track, to the end of the land ... this chapel always seems to symbolise standing on the edge ... <sup>350</sup>

These statements conform to the entries into the visitors' book of the Chapel (see 3.4). It transforms experiences, makes people experience something beyond the normal categories of place, space and being.

#### **5.5.6.5 Openess in Community:** The openness of the Community has

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350 Martin Wallace, St. Peter's Chapel, Bradwell-on-Sea: Celtic Heroes of Faith (Bradwell-on-Sea: Aquila Celtic Crafts, 1996), p. 73.

brought in not only many different people but also many varied problems. As Valerie points out “I have seen some weird characters down here.” And Brenda lists “paedophiles, alcoholics, addicts, young offenders on probation and the like”, and adds “I love the guts of this place, but it drives me mad at the same time.”

One certainly comes across people here one would never mix with voluntarily at home. Being exposed to such a range of people confronts you with problems you would have never considered. Robert concedes “that Community can be ghastly. I have experienced the most difficult times, so painful that I could not talk about it.” Pete was banned from the Community for having damaged Community property. Valerie is not happy about mixing Paganism and Christianity as she has experienced in a service. Clare feels very stressed out sometimes because the Community feels like an “energy black hole”. “You go there and realise how many things need to be done”. Al mentions the intolerance of the Community when it comes to attending a service. Connel is more concerned with criticism towards his own community and his parents and can therefore only see Othona as 'a great liberation'. Mayk (on the staff when interviewed) is looking for a “balance between my own needs and the Community’s needs”. Esther remembers being “pulled back in case you were doing something you should not”. And even though it is a welcoming Community, she concedes that “it can be daunting. You have to be involved”. Marilyn appreciates that talking about your faith is an offer in Community and “not shoved down your throat”. She must have had negative experiences when talking about her faith. Julie mentions “people not talking to each other in society” and experiencing the opposite at Othona. Stephanie emphasises that she “would do my chores in the Community to my best of my capacity”, having probably experienced that there have been other people who have

not done their duties conscientiously. Community creates problems and difficulties and can be unnerving at times.

## 5.6 Perceptions of Othona

So how do my interviewees perceive Othona? They have partly confirmed my categories but generated new ones I had not considered. While I as a theologian envisaged some theological terms, very few theological expressions have appeared — but the realities my interviewees record are described. Therefore it is important not to use my pre-defined and pre-envisioned *lingua theologica* but to stick to their wording if I want to develop any implicit theology from their answers. They offered me terms which are rich in content such as “reconciliation”, “acceptance”, “belonging”, “family”, “reaching out”, “living and sharing together” and more.

*Transformation* and *Alternative Family* are elements I did not consider in my perception of Othona. My interviewees helped me to put into words realities which are now so obvious that it amazes me that I had not seen them before. My insider perspective was presumably in the way. When trying to create an Othona-specific theology, however, that generates from the responses of my interviewees (see 2.2 Research Goal Three), I will see if these realities connect with the terms I have used. I did not mention *Being on the edge (Marginalisation)* and *Home*, although the idea of *Alternative Family* is a different way of talking about “home” and “belonging.”

Even though the Community calls itself an Intentional Christian Community (specifically: an open Christian Community [Mission Statement before 2014] or nowadays: an open and inclusive Community rooted in the Christian tradition [since

2014]), there is very little verbalised theology, with very few biblical passages mentioned. I noted only: the thief on the cross, the rich man/camel going through the needle; love your neighbour. Terms such as *vocation*, *discipleship* or *mission* were not used by the interviewees. Question No 11 was clearly too difficult (Do you have any sense of a corporate vision? Any vision for the Community? A corporate mission?). The response was very vague, if there was any at all.

People with a pre-knowledge or broader knowledge of theology have used terms which are taken up by theology in general. 'Transformation' is such a word (see Robert). However, theologically-informed expressions stemming from the narrative history of the Othona Community are named: reconciliation, acceptance, reaching out, belonging.

This outcome is not surprising for there is no dogma, no theology, no self-conscious religious language present at the Community. Othona is not interested in theology per se. Even when asking Trustees about the Vision, I received the email (cf. 4.13.12) stating that there is no Othona Vision Statement. Hence, the latest version of the Mission Statement — “Othona is an open and inclusive Community rooted in the Christian tradition and drawing on a wealth of other inspirations” — mirrors and confirms the general 'policy' of Othona.

The results gathered from my interviewees show how members experience and speak about Othona. They have partly confirmed my assumptions but generated new elements and categorizations I had not considered. The phenomenographical aim (cf. 2.5) to uncover categories of perceptions and to transmit them as categorizations has

been fulfilled. Do the results help us to understand the continued phenomenon of Othona and its *Lebenswelten* as stated in the Research Question? To get to the bottom of these categorizations I shall mirror and cross-validate them with accounts, reports, and explanations other members of the Community have made at different times. This is to complement the interviews and to uncover any diverging perspectives.

In order to develop an implicit theology from the answers I received, I will closely consider the words people use to describe their experiences and perceptions (cf. Chapter 5). I will describe the features I have discerned (Transformation, Alternative Family, Beyond Normality & Space & Place, Transition, Inclusivity and Co-Operation) and four theological elements (Counter-cultural, Community First-Christian Second, For Those with Faith and Those without, the Numinous Character of the Chapel) and tensions. Then I will compare them to specific theological approaches which resonate with my 'discoveries' before attempting to put them into more specific religious and theological language.

So the next chapter responds to these results through the eyes of the Community to see whether my assumptions (1.8) along with the perceptions of the interviewees can be 'triangulated' with former statements of Community members.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO THE RESULTS

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will start by exploring the reactions of the Community towards my outworkings. Those sessions took place with two different groups in the Chapel. When presenting the results to a group, I had direct and spontaneous replies. I also talked to various members individually at different occasions when telling them what I had found out. At the same time, I was looking for indirect repercussions in written statements of former years, that is, in the *Full Circle* in particular. I sifted through all the copies available from different decades to find statements in a similar vein or of different attitudes. I wanted to see if the categorisations deduced from the interviews could be mirrored with issues dealt with in the past and if they brought up matters the Community still has to cope with. This was to triangulate (see 2.8) as best as possible with my findings.

My experience, observation and intuition had been that the Community is characterised by the following components (see 1.8):

Journey — Home  
Place — Transition  
Belonging — Identity  
Volunteering — Discipleship

The interviews showed that facets exist which I had not considered (see 5.5). Most surprisingly and new are the elements of *Family*, *Transformation* and *On the Edge/Beyond Normality*. Perhaps they were too obvious for me to note. As much as

the word *family* is mentioned, my intuited component of a *home* did not arise, at least not in the interviews. But again, it might be because it goes without saying. Perhaps it is subsumed in the language of 'family' and can therefore only be found indirectly.

## **6.2 Disclosing the Results**

When introducing my findings (see 2.6 (1)) concerning the interviews to two groups (2.8 'discuss findings with members') in the summer of 2013, there was much amazement and astonishment. “Why didn’t you interview me?” and “It cannot be objective if you haven’t talked to me” were some unfiltered responses. I stated that it was not possible to interview the whole of Community due to time and capacity restrictions, and it was not my primary aim to gather as many reflections as possible but to understand the meanings people attach to Othona. A cross-section of members present during two summers was to represent Othona. My claim could not be to include as many people as possible but to see whether certain categorisations reappeared in people's statements about the social world we are commonly creating. The second “argument” mirrored the qualitative versus quantitative controversy. The paradigm of 'objectivity' is still prevalent. I had to explain that qualitative research had a different approach and that 'objectivity' was not an objective and not appropriate for what I was doing (see 2.8).

### **6.2.1 Presentation of Findings to the Community**

When it came to actually presenting the results — as I did in a Chapel service at St. Peter’s — most of the critics were surprised at the outcome and quite overwhelmed by some issues to which they had never given a thought (see 2.5 *Lebenswelten*). I had written the perceived distinctive elements on a chart and started



with the most obvious one — *family*. I explained the context of my findings, and expounded what my interviewees had said about the issue. Then I asked the congregation to share their thoughts on the matter, wanting to know if they could identify with the results or not (see 2.7: “materials provided by members”).

The larger group (roughly forty people or more) accepted the issues I presented by nodding or confirming later on (see 2.8.1: “I validate my data in a reciprocal process”), slightly surprised at never having thought about most of the points before, as some people confessed after the session. The group was too big to really speak its mind, and I had not prepared them. I could have given them the results beforehand, and with it time to consider them. Surely then they would have had additional comments. Some individuals came afterwards and suggested my leading a week in the summer to talk about these issues. In the process of doing this thesis, some points seem so natural to me that I tend to ask too much of people who are being confronted with them for the first time. Othona in general is not interested in theologising. It is a praxis-oriented Community. By confronting a group with the outworkings of my research I appear to have expected too much (see 2.10). The exercise was too intellectual, too theoretical. I remember another service in which I started with the experiences of the ones present and from there went to my findings. In building this bridge, it was much easier to find direct access to my results and it showed in a very vivid participation of many members. It is clear that the Chapel was not the best location for a discussion, given the special role it has for the Community, as revealed in the interviews. My experience, though, is that people come and tell you stories after a service, they add this and that, inspired by what has been going on and very willingly continue what has been brought up. As the Stoep was the ideal place for the

individual interviews, the Chapel was not the ideal place for the presentation of my findings.

The smaller group (around fifteen), however, could hardly be stopped. As a teacher I should have realised how important the size of a group is for the good dynamics but at Othona you never know how many people might attend a service. The issues I raised seemed to open up an abyss of stories each one wanted to add (see 2.4). In particular one man repeatedly insisted that the Community was about people, as he had stated in some articles in the *Full Circle* before. He refused to consider any other elements. Another man, a pastor, added that the Community for him was more and better than family, since he had experienced being criticised in family, not accepted, and constantly nagged for not doing what his parents wanted him to do. There is another statement of a member confirming the same feeling (cf. 5.6.c). *Family* evoked so many comments I could not finish my presentation, for I thought it more important to let others speak. This indicated the significance of what I had opened up. After the service people came and wanted to keep on talking about some aspects they felt had only been glimpsed (2.8). On the one hand the positive feedback disappointed me because I had hoped to uncover some points I had perhaps neglected. Unfortunately, no help came in that respect. On the other hand my presentation of the results was affirmed, which indicated that I was 'on the right track'.

Reviewing the interviews, I note that *healing* was not mentioned (though I experienced it myself the very first time I visited Othona), however it may be discerned in various circumlocutions and in articles members have written.

Reviewing my presentations, I realize that there were people I did not and could not interview, because of their psychological condition. They are wanderers looking for shoulders to cry on, or have difficulties to overcome in a variety of ways. To interview them would mean opening up therapeutic issues inappropriate for these interviews. Working on an adolescent psychiatric ward myself, I have learned not to talk about certain issues, which could be unsettling and interfere with therapy. Such individuals, of course, have an impact on the Community. The witnesses I did interview, however, also referred to private difficulties they do not want specifically mentioned. In retrospect I can see that there are common themes around such issues. Above all, they involve experiences which have to do with 'need', 'vulnerability', 'hurt', and 'boundaries'.

### **6.3 Cross-Validation of Findings**

Before delving into such themes, I want first to confirm or revise my categories of distinctive elements at Othona through statements members of the Community have made at other times.

#### **6.3.1 Transformation**

Transformation can be understood as *personal transformation* or *social transformation*. Usually people express their *personal transformation* by saying “Nobody comes and is not affected by it [Othona]” (cf. Valerie), well realising however that personal transformation has an impact on social transformation (Valerie: “The good it does must impact onto the communities we go to at home”).

Richard Symms writes: “But what really matters to us ... is that our minds are genuinely

stretched, and that we go on exploring”.<sup>351</sup> Alison Tebbs elaborates on that:

People are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings and their creativity in a way which ... allows us to meet each other again in yet another way and see beyond our limited views to a wider experience which will topple barriers and let us truly come together.<sup>352</sup>

In my field notes, Anthony talked about “social transformation”, alluding to becoming active as a consequence of having encountered a personalised community experience in Christ. Such an encounter might naturally lead to an interest in social justice. Jean Pullen phrases her *transformation* differently:

Always after a stay there [at Othona] I seem to get my life back into perspective, honouring the things that matter and not worrying so much about things that don't ... To me Bradwell will always be a very special place where my life gets back into balance.<sup>353</sup>

Pullen's experience of Othona is that of setting the right priorities, of finding wholeness by balancing out her potentials. It is exactly what Norman Motley had in mind (see beginning of Introduction).

Tony Jacques, warden for twenty years at Othona, West Dorset, contemplates *Open Christianity*<sup>354</sup> in an article in which he states the importance of being “Open to personal transformation”.

Even though the term *transformation* does not always come up, most statements indicate that change has taken place. How this personal change translates into the world we go to, is a matter of *social transformation*. Norman Motley ascribes this

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351 Full Circle, The Othona Community Newsletter, Special Edition, no year, p. 19.

352 Full Circle, Special Edition, p. 16.

353 Frogatt, Bradwell Memories 1946–2007, p. 12.

354 Full Circle, The Othona Community Newsletter. Summer 2005, pp. 15-17, p. 17.

power of transformation to the Resurrection and to “the life of Christ taking over”.<sup>355</sup>

### 6.3.2 Alternative Family

Sandra confesses that she likes being at the Community more than being with her family. In her family there is competition, while at Othona “you don’t have to prove you are better than anybody else”.<sup>356</sup> Vera Higginson writes:

It’s thirty years since we rather reluctantly — at the insistence of our teenage daughters, who said it was great — made our first visit to a very primitive Othona ... We have wondered if the Spirit of the place would survive in our comfortable home. It has. It is still extended family, always welcoming.<sup>357</sup>

“Many of us have little in common”, Hugh Savill states, “apart from being brought up in the Othona Community, but we are nonetheless bound by an invisible tie.”<sup>358</sup> Jo Harp reiterates the sense that the Community can be more than a family:

I feel, as an Othona baby, that a lot of my social skills, confidence, and empathy come from being a member of the Community. Children are not treated like fools or babies ... they are taught the power of work and the respect afforded to anyone and everyone that walks through the door ... Parents can only take you so far, but involvement in something like Othona is nothing but life enhancing for them, as it was for me.<sup>359</sup>

Othona offers more than a family can. It teaches values and virtues and provides a sense of belonging which in a fragmented world is often experienced as *family*. “Acceptance and care for all kinds of people, just as they are, are fundamental to Community life at Othona. For many people at different times in their life Othona becomes their family,”<sup>360</sup> writes Janet Marshall who has experienced Othona from the very beginning.

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355 Motley, Letters, p. 58.

356 Field notes 4.4. 2015.

357 Full Circle, The Othona Community Newsletter. October 1997, p. 19.

358 Full Circle, Special Edition, p. 8.

359 Facebook 24.9.2011 (24.09.2011).

360 Marshall & Maxey, 'Othona' in: Vincent (ed), Christian Communities, p. 93.

### 6.3.3 Beyond Normality – Space – Place

Dave Birdseye in his “Ode to Othona”<sup>361</sup> says:

Well there’s no destination that’s just quite like this  
It isn’t quite purgatory, nor perfect bliss But there’s a  
Place on this planet I frequently miss  
It’s the place we embrace called Othona.”

Not everybody can express the extraordinariness of Othona as well as the Community poet, Dave Birdseye.

Norman Motley felt the spirit of the place from the very beginning:

There is no doubt that Bradwell is what some call a ‘holy place’.  
There is a silence and a stillness ... The great skyscapes and the  
spread of the Saltings bring an immense degree of peace to mind  
and heart.<sup>362</sup>

The 'holiness' of place will be reconsidered later on (see 7.11.4).

Barbara Dyer, one of the earliest members of the Community, explains:

Othona Bradwell offers renewal, restoration, an escape from  
materialism, an encounter with spiritual refreshment ... and trusting  
and warm hearted relationships: it is unique and cannot be re-  
plicated ... Our qualities are intangible, known only by those who  
experience them and passed on by word of mouth.<sup>363</sup>

“I come away stronger”, says Sandra in my field notes when talking about Othona.

There would be, of course, endless more examples but I restrict myself within each category. Some intertwine and are interdependent. Transformation, for instance, happens also because of the unusualness (holiness?) of place. A theology of place will be acknowledged in Chapter Seven.

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361 Birdseye, *Birdseye Views - for better or worse rhyming verse*, privately published, p. 50.

362 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 19.

363 *Full Circle*, The Othona Community Newsletter, Year unknown, p. 8.

### 6.3.4 On the Edge

Susan from New Hampshire, USA and working for a summer at the Community, a so-called born-again Christian, says “My life is a bit in a flux, I’ve just quit my job. I need to make some decisions about my life and to find out what job God wants me to do.”<sup>364</sup> A young YAP member, Judith Krauss, writes about experiencing Othona for the first time:

The tasks which the YAPs ... had to fulfil during these three weeks cannot be compared to anything I had experienced before ... In particular the latter “excavation works” is by far exceeded anything I had ever done before in my life.<sup>365</sup>

On the core group at the Community are often people who have left or lost their jobs, who are rethinking their lives, who want to make a change or feel it is time for something new. The Community provides them with what they need, and they in return work there. Othona is frequently used as a place of transition, as an “in-between-place”, before the new takes shape.

### 6.3.5 Inclusivity – Acceptance:

Janet Marshall, the founder’s daughter, writes in the special edition of the *Full Circle*: “We aim to welcome all comers — people of all ages, social and religious backgrounds, including those who value the community but cannot share Christian beliefs.”<sup>366</sup> It is as simple as that: Those who come are accepted for who they are.

Hugh Beavan, a former rector of Bradwell, notices:

Unconditional love, unconditional acceptance ... is something Othona is very good at and something which I experienced and saw being experienced ... Nobody put a ‘label’ on me, I was just accepted for

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364 *Essex Magazine* Oct. 2001, pp. 16-19, Rural Retreat, p. 19.

365 *Full Circle*, Autumn 2004, p. 24.

366 *Full Circle*, Special Edition, no year, p. 5.

who I was. And perhaps the beauty of coming to stay at Othona is that everyone is equal because no one knows what sort of house you live in, what car you drive, what income you earn. Each person can be accepted for who they are and not for what they have achieved in the world.<sup>367</sup>

Bob Whorton writes in an article while Chaplain at Rampton Hospital in Nottinghamshire: “Othona has taught me about ‘being with’. As a week unfolds we are more and more present to one another.”<sup>368</sup> Instead of paying attention to the differences, Othona has made it a habit of putting emphasis on the 'being with and for'. This attitude removes boundaries as it thinks in terms of relationships, in terms of encounter. No one is side-lined. “Othona must always be foremost about people and inclusivity,” writes Tony Rickwood on the Othona Forum.<sup>369</sup> Roo Bull, Bradwell line manager, confirms this:

The essence of Othona is that an amazing mix of people comes together for the purpose of interacting with whoever they encounter, learning to live together in a way that includes everyone.<sup>370</sup>

The theological significance of Othona's unconditional acceptance and the problems that that creates will be discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight.

### **6.3.6 Healing**

This is an element that was neither included by me in my categories, nor mentioned by the interviewees directly, but it does appear in Othona literature. The minutes of 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1970 state:

One reason for the Community being brought together into being was to find out what would happen if a group got together, and worked, prayed, thought and played together. It was found that things did happen and an element of healing took place.

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367 [Full Circle](#), The Othona Community Newsletter, Spring 2000, pp. 4-5.

368 [Full Circle](#), Summer 2007, pp. 12-13.

369 Facebook 24.9.2011 in a letter to Sheila Maxey.

370 [Full Circle](#), Autumn 2006, p. 9.



In the minutes it is not specified what this element looked like or how it could be discerned. It is confirmed, however, in a report in which Sheila Maxey (the former Chair) summarises the contributions of members towards restructuring the Community:

... it was a really heartening experience to read the 145 responses because so many spoke of how important healing, life-changing Othona ... had been and still was in their lives.<sup>371</sup>

Norman Motley talked repeatedly about the therapeutic qualities of Community. He wanted Othona to become “the kind of Community which helps to give health ... to persons.”<sup>372</sup> He was of the opinion that we are all inhibited by various fears and that therefore the healing and regenerating milieu of Othona contributes to the well-being of a person. Asking core members if they could verify this *element of healing*, they came up with many examples of people “opening up” and “coming out of their shells”, of people arriving “anxiously and nervously” and leaving “cheerfully and joyously”. I can also support this with many examples I have observed. During my last visit at Easter 2015, somebody said “I feel safe here.” Safety, or the feeling of being safe, is the first step of letting go, of trusting, of starting to heal. Marilyn talks about the effect of safety on her children and herself in the interviews. Though my interviewees do not mention the word 'healing', it is implicit in many statements such as “Othona is the only place I can get my head together” (Belinda); “the place where I regain my equilibrium” (Andrea); “I feel much happier here” (Connel) and Valerie recuperates there “I have just come out of hospital after having had an operation”. All these remarks imply that something becomes better, that a healing quality is at work.

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371 Sheila Maxey (Chair of Trustees) report 2013, photocopies for internal use.

372 Motley, Letters, p. 5.

Scott Peck, the pioneer of community building, points out in *The Different Drum*:

Community is a safe place precisely because no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you or change you. Instead the members accept you as you are. You are free ... free to become your whole and holy self.<sup>373</sup>

Being unconditionally accepted, with no-one wanting to change you, enables people to feel safe and at home and therefore to discover aspects of themselves they never knew they had (see 8.2 and 8.4: Marge). Othona as a place where you can simply *be*. The question, however, arises, if a place of salutary quality is a therapeutic community?

#### **6.4 Othona – A Therapeutic Community?**

New categories lead to new questions. How does the Community deal with vulnerabilities? Is Othona seen or used as a therapeutic Community? And is there a dark side to Community in creating an alternative and parallel world by offering a closed space within which people can create what they are not and do things they would not do elsewhere? (cf. Brenda).

A place such as Othona offering acceptance, warmth, support — all in all, a home — easily attracts people in need. Some need more than others. Some stretch borders. Some exploit the Community gifts.

To keep a balance between people offering and people needing is one of the necessary and essential principles that keeps the Community running. If the equilibrium of this very fine balance is out of order, strain, uneasiness and excessive demands are quickly felt and the general atmosphere soon becomes strained. “One deeply wounded person

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373 Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), p. 68.

can affect a group far more than ten healthy people — potentially derailing the community's agenda and draining its energy.”<sup>374</sup>

Norman Motley would not have called the Community “therapeutic”, well realising that it requires professional staff to apply this term. He discerned, however, “that participation in an ‘accepting’ company of people has a strangely liberating and therapeutic effect.”<sup>375</sup> A well-established community can cope with people 'requiring more grace than others' (as the saying in our Community goes), i.e. difficult and wounded people. The *New Management Structure For Othona* from 1993<sup>376</sup> considers vulnerable and needy people, and provides some advice for the Warden:

some people’s needs are so acute that they need specialized support we cannot currently provide. Learn to distinguish between those who can play a part in community life and those who will have to be referred elsewhere.<sup>377</sup>

Penelope Robert phrases that experience of encountering vulnerability slightly differently:

We need others to love not only what we want to become, but also to love who we are now, so that illness can be healed, the darkness dispelled, the deformity understood .<sup>378</sup>

Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche Community, argues that the liberating love of God is revealed in weakness and vulnerability.<sup>379</sup> Or as Etty Hillesum, a young Jewess who died in Auschwitz, phrased it: “discovering ... the vulnerable ... God, and *being empowered by the paradoxical strength of her vulnerability.*”<sup>380</sup> All three examples

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374 Christian, *Creating a Life Together*, p. 221.

375 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 48.

376 *A New Management Structure for Othona*, unpublished paper, 1993.

377 *A New Management Structure*, p. 9.

378 Cited in: A. Norman, *Communities*, p. 14.

379 Norman, *Communities*, p. 13.

380 Cited by Mary C. Grey, *Prophesy and Mysticism – The Heart of the Postmodern Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 26.

see 'vulnerability' as something that is indispensable in community, a way for weakness, strength and deformity to be re-imagined and integrated.

So, although Othona is not a therapeutic Community, it certainly has therapeutic qualities. In experiencing acceptance, healing can and does happen. Whilst acknowledging healing qualities, matters such as 'boundaries' and settings for off-limits of participation come up.

### **6.5 Closed Space and Boundaries**

The issue whether Othona is a closed space within which people can create what they are not and do things they would not do elsewhere, depends very much on the way people perceive Othona. Many visitors experience 'things' they do not find anywhere else.

... humbling and inspiring ... the shared love, joy and support has been beyond anything words can describe ... It's different from anywhere else ... the vibe, the feeling in the air, the sense of peace emanating from the very walls ... All my friends commented that my sparkle had returned after a very long absence. I am still glowing a week on.<sup>381</sup>

It is a counter-cultural and spiritual trait that is described by nearly all the witnesses. Esther reports that "breaking away from formality is the speciality of this place." Yann adds that "it is about getting away from normal life for a while ... Different generations mix." Clearly, this inter-generational aspect is rarely found any longer for we are so used to the institutionalization and homogeneity of different age groups. Little children go to kindergartens, older children to school, students to universities, old people to nursing homes. A halfway-true exchange only takes place in families

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381 All the examples are taken from the Othona Brochure "The Othona Community", Programme 2007.

nowadays. Or in communities.

As much as we love Community, there are times when the challenge “to forgive is to recognise once again ... the covenant which binds us together with those we do not get along with well”<sup>382</sup> is too much. To quote Brenda's soundbite here seems appropriate:”I love the guts of this place but it drives me mad at the same time.” Robert and Janet Marshall mention people getting hurt in Community or not appreciated the way they should be.

When spending a sabbatical as a co-warden in the 1990s at the Community in Bradwell-on-Sea, I left after half a year due to insurmountable differences with another member on site. As an individual I would have been able to resist her, but she went against my weakest point, my daughter, who at the age of five was confronted with prejudices concerning nationality and cultural differences. I spent the rest of the year at Othona, West Dorset and could not picture at that time ever wanting to go back to the Community in Essex. I did, in fact, after my ‘rowing partner’ had left: a sad example of unsuccessful communication and cultural clashes.

In the summer of 2015 I overheard someone explain to a friend why she did not want to run a themed week (a music week, in this case) any more. She was mentioning 'both sides of the same coin'. On the one hand, she raved about her love for the Community, on the other hand, she listed all the shortcomings she knew from experience she would encounter when leading a week. It would be unstructured and chaotic. People would come late. People would turn up on a Wednesday (the weeks start on Sundays) expecting the main parts. You would encounter someone you had

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382 Jean Vanier, Community and Growth (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed, New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 38.

not seen for ages and would want to spend time with her. All those aspects prevented her from taking the responsibility for a week.

Community life is fraught with difficulties. Living together does not happen without problems. As the above material demonstrates, this is a condition we are all very aware of. Looking after each other, making sure common sense and safety prevail, allowing caring and sharing to happen, reduces the wish to kick over the traces and 'paint the town red'. The more one allows and encourages, the less the limits have to be transgressed.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

In 6.1 I had set out to compare my perceptions of the Community with those of my interviewees. At the same time I was sifting through Community literature to find confirmation of the detected elements. All in all, in this triangulation we are not far apart from each other. I asserted that there are two kinds of 'theologies': Chapter Five deals mainly with a theology of participant members without (or with very little) theological knowledge and language, while Chapter Six refers to a theology of the founder, Trustees, and members with theological background and knowledge and therefore language. How can these findings be integrated into the experiential? On the basis of theologising about them, where do these categorizations lead us? Where can Othona's religious or theological horizon be found? What does the surface tell us about the deep story? What is Othona's special genius in having survived for so many decades? Chapter Seven helps to complement perceptions about Othona's identity by discerning its implicit theology (Research Goal Three) through what we have explored.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## DISCERNMENT OF OTHONA'S THEOLOGY

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapter Seven looks at the data collected (in Chapters 5 and 6) to discern Othona's implicit theology (Research Goal 3). It considers the expressions the interviewees used to describe how they perceive Othona (Chapter 5). It also draws on the reflections of the results (Chapter 6). I will give a description of the things that are happening by naming the features I have discerned and compare them to specific theological approaches that echo with what I have discovered. Even though Othona is practical and opposes 'labelling', I am doing so in order to indicate its distinctive charism. It is a daring attempt to put into words what is happening at Othona. The aim is to uncover Othona's particular grace. I will put the findings (see 5.5 categories of understanding) discovered during my research into religious and theological language. Though Othona does not proclaim theology, or produce texts, it knows what is important — its nourishing roots. I discern elements which are 'really' there, albeit not often verbalised. Although there is no conscious and developed theology at work, there are statements of various members in the course of the history expressing their points of view concerning the work of Othona. In doing this I will demonstrate that Othona still corresponds to Norman Motley's original vision, even though this vision may be unclear to most members or is considered “becoming exhausted”<sup>383</sup>.

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383 Sheila Maxey on behalf of the Trustees, Renewing the Vision for Othona Bradwell, Discussion Document, July 2005 (for internal use).

In order to obtain 'the bigger picture' these personalised interviews are reframed by points which have also come up in the course of the research. Whilst looking at Othona's history and narrative, it has become obvious that my assumed categorizations are not separable the way I originally laid them out. Many topics of Chapter Seven feed, for instance, into my postulated 'place' (see 5.5) such as Vision, Intentionality, Family, Home, *Heimat*, What do People want and Othona's Liberative Paradigm (see 7.22 ff.). The term 'identity' is virtually part of every issue mentioned in Chapter Seven. The same applies to my other 'categorizations'. The assumed 'transformation' is inherent in nearly all the other points of Chapter Seven. My 'categorizations' are all part of this "strange phenomenon". Therefore, they do not stand by themselves any longer, but are intertwined and can only be understood as a conglomerate of the subjects touched upon. They are extended by issues which have been broached in the course of the interviews and the interpretation thereof and which are necessary to obtain a more complete picture of the Community.

This is why in Chapter Seven the order of dealing with the 'categorizations' digresses from the arrangement in Chapter Six. In this process of naming "what theology was there", I take my findings and add and expound on what I found in order to integrate aspects which have also come up in the unfolding of an endogenous theology. While doing this the categorizations (6.3.1 – 6.3.6) deduced from the interviews (Transformation, Alternative Family, Beyond Normality – Space – Place, On the Edge, Inclusivity – Acceptance, and Healing) become integrated into the narrative. They are not singled out any more but become part of the broader picture, part of the common experience. This provides the Community with expressions for something that can encompass the meanings Othonites bring to this strange phenomenon of



Othona.

## 7.2 Still on the Brink

When reviewing the data, elements of shared identity and communal belonging are immediately apparent. I see people in a similar frame of mind looking for a sense of connection and a nurturing community, people who “are searching for an identity which ... offers a freedom to be and the challenge to become.”<sup>384</sup> This reminds us how Othona advertises itself: as “a place to be”.

The interviews show “how their practice has in fact embodied pieces of the Gospel story of Jesus,”<sup>385</sup> even though there is hardly anybody who would put it that way (except Clare: “Othona is serving the people who come here, that is trying to walk in Jesus' footsteps”). Just because people nowadays are no longer familiar with biblical or religious language, does not mean that discipleship does not happen in daily practice. As the *Zeitgeist* has it, the word “Christian” disappears more and more from official statements as well, as is demonstrated by Othona's *Mission Statement*. In 1946, Othona is “firmly founded and rooted in Christ.” Then Othona becomes “a Christian Community open to all faiths and none”, in 1990. After that: “The Othona Community is an open Christian Community ... a welcoming, accepting place”. In 2015 Othona is “an open and inclusive Community, rooted in the Christian tradition and drawing on a wealth of other inspirations”. What role does the term “Christian” play in these formulations? Does it play any role at all if the Community is open towards all faiths and none? This is a question that is being asked now and again by members (cf. Gilo or David Seckelman 4.14). Though the term seems to fade, it is

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384 Laurie Green & Christopher R. Baker (eds), *Building Utopia?* (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 158.

385 Peter Howard, cited in: Vincent, *Christ in the City*, p. 89.

never quite extinguished. Othona definitely has a Christian background and, as will be shown, would not have developed and sustained to what it is today without its links to the Sacred.

Crises of the past years have shown that Othona is still experimental, in spite of the fact that it has been at work since 1946. It is still journeying, renewing and discovering itself. It is always “on the edge” (see 4.23.1). Separatist intentions of the sister community in Dorset in 2012 called members into action to devise a way forward and explain what Othona actually stands for. For that purpose, this thesis might assist Othona to understand itself. Some people say Othona is what each of us makes of it. It is not that easy. There is more to Othona than can be seen at first glance. How otherwise would it be celebrating its seventieth birthday in 2016? In order to understand Othona's longevity, its corporate identity has to be explored and be understood from within. Othona's survival tactic might be to incorporate tendencies of the *Zeitgeist*, while remaining true to its own values. While writing this I discover on Facebook (20<sup>th</sup> July 2015) a prayer from Othona Bradwell for the coming summer. In it I recognise the influence of two core members who know how to express their faith. This statement shows once again the evolving power of the Community, which is dependent on whoever is present; and this is the first time Facebook has been used for prayers:

A prayer from Othona Bradwell:

Jesus says, 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door,

I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.'

Today we open our doors to the Othona Bradwell summer season, and all the people who wish to share it with us for the next seven weeks.

We welcome the stranger and the unexpected guest. May we receive them gladly and with generosity. We welcome newcomers. May we embrace their energy and new ideas. We welcome old timers. May we treasure their stories and traditions.

We welcome the core residents. May we value their commitment and hard work.

We welcome all manner of people: the angry, the industrious, the workshy, the happy, the sad, the irritable, the good-listeners, the addicted, the childlike, the sick, the laughter-loving, the gossiping, the quiet, the brash, the 'extra-grace-required'. We could be any of these, and we welcome the living Christ in the face of each one. For the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, bringing together every misshapen brick and weathered rock to be a living temple, one body, a messy, broken and holy church.

As we work, play and study and worship together, may we grow to maturity in Christ. May the Othona Bradwell summer season be a blessing to all who stand at the door and knock, and may we recognise the blessing that every guest at our table brings. In the name of the Resurrected Jesus, Amen.

The expressed idea to “welcome the living Christ in the face of each one” is something Norman Motley had in mind when establishing this Community (see 4.6.4). So old ideas are returning in new skins.

Even though 56 members have seen that prayer by 24<sup>th</sup> July, only ten have 'liked' it on Facebook. It might be 'too Christian' for many members. In any case, anyone can publish whatever he or she wants to in connection with Othona. And making assumptions about people's responses, or lack of them, on Facebook can be misleading. The people who put this on Facebook are clearly prayer-oriented, whilst others will not be, notwithstanding the abiding influence of the Chapel.

### **7.3 The Vision**

When looking at the interviews and at the Community, it becomes obvious that members only know vaguely what Norman Motley had in mind when founding the Community. Even I, when re-reading his *Letters to a Community*, was surprised at how explicit and astute his descriptions were of how he saw Othona, namely as a *Kingdom Community*. My interviewees talk of reconciliation and international understanding (cf. Robert, Brenda and Julie), circumscribing the vision and living it. Here, they go hand in hand with the many Trustees who do not deem it necessary to

have a Vision Statement (cf. 4.23/4.24). Their perceptions of the Community do not require theological language. Their words are based on experience, on living out practical Othona values. They are bound together more by experience, than by faith, so quite the opposite of what Bonhoeffer stated when saying “We are bound together by faith, not by experience.”<sup>386</sup> The question arises then whether a stated vision is necessary. Is it important to know how Motley envisioned Othona? What is the significance of an 'original' vision for all intentional communities? Can one survive without some vision, however inarticulate?

Diane Leafe Christian writes in her book on communities *Creating a Life Together*:

Not having a common vision can blow a community apart when a major challenge or crisis occurs ... But a common vision greatly increases the probability of success.<sup>387</sup>

David Janzen, in *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook* comments that the first years in community invariably involve being “idealists with visions of the model community that would change the world.”<sup>388</sup> The communities introduced in John Vincent's book *Christian Communities* are all “the result of a vision by their founders.”<sup>389</sup> Perhaps, Othona to continue to be Othona needs to reconnect with its founder's vision. The prayer on Facebook is a step into that direction.

To keep the vision known and in sight, it might be a good idea to stick to the suggestion of one member (see 7.2) to talk about Othona's visions and aims on a

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386 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 39.

387 Christian, *Creating a Life Together*, p. 36.

388 David Janzen, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013), p. 6.

389 Janzen, *Community Handbook*, p. 23.

regular basis. It reassures the Community to know where the roots are, no matter how the vision is described nowadays. Discerning the spirit that started Othona has to be done even though the first generation is no longer available. There are people, however, who remember it! The story-telling and renewing (re-telling) of the Vision should have a permanent place in Othona's agenda. The cornucopia of stories, especially of older members, should take place in more than private conversations. We need pictures and role models to remember and show what and who we can be. Narration is remembering (see 7.7.3: Joisten). A Christian community is always an *Erzählgemeinschaft* (tr. A community of stories and narration). We have to keep the Vision alive by continuously spinning the Othona yarn!

#### **7.4 Intentionality**

Even though Othona does not have an explicit theology, I attempt to make theological sense of it based on its praxis. This attempt to construct praxis-oriented theology for this Community is hands-on. If theology happens at all, it happens in and during everyday life, in the *Lebenswelten*: while cooking, while walking to the Chapel, while picking plums. What then is the theological scope of Othona's praxis? How does it describe itself and what it does?

Othona still calls itself an “intentional” Christian Community referring back to its initial heritage of faith. It is grounded in a religious identity and open to a wide spectrum of religious expression, “drawing on a wealth of other inspirations.”<sup>390</sup>

David Janzen's “working definition” of intentional Christian communities

is a group of people deliberately sharing life in order to follow more closely the teachings and practices of Jesus with his

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390 Cf. Mission Statement. In (for instance): Programme of Events 2015, p. 2.

disciples. The more essential dimensions of life that are shared  
... the more intentional is the community.<sup>391</sup>

This does not apply to Othona. We are only sharing life in the summer, as Othona was meant to be a 'summer camp'. Staying there is restricted to three weeks, unless you are working. Of course, you can come for different weeks during a year, but the shared life is limited to your stay.

Leafe Christian, for many years the editor of *Communities* magazine, prefers the definition given by Bill Metcalf in *The Findhorn Book of Community Living*.<sup>392</sup>

Intentional communities are formed when people choose to live with or near enough to each other to carry out a shared lifestyle, with a shared culture and with a common purpose.

Othona's intentionality is limited to people joining the Community for a certain period of time. Since we do not live together all year around and are scattered all over the world, and as Othona is available for everyone, none of the above definitions is adequate. The intentionality is there only in certain circumstances or in certain practices. Even though the "common purpose" is to be Community, the question here arises whether the term *intentional* should rather be replaced by *critical* or *marginal* taking into account that Othona's intentionality is only "put on" when Community is there. It does not necessarily happen when only staff are around. The intentionality is there only under certain conditions unless it is understood as an implicit intentionality permeating Othona's *Lebenswelten* in general. It is Othona's intention to be Community. It is about receiving, giving, and participating. You cannot be a passenger, you have to join in, however minimally, and so feel nourished by this place. Something is transferred to us. And because this something is a unique,

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391 Janzen, *Community Handbook*, p. 123.

392 Quoted by Christian, *Finding Community*, p. xviii.

dynamic movement, that can be seen by the traces that it has left, by the pattern of energy that flowed through us, it is not quantifiable, but makes Othona so special. Othona's intention is to require and intervene minimally, to support spiritual development with its monastic template. The Community stands back and expects things to happen through the pattern of work, worship, study and play. Basil the Great expressed this experience in a similar vein: “No-one has ever seen the essence of God, but we believe in the essence because we experience the energy.”<sup>393</sup> This applies to Othona. As difficult as it is to describe the essence, we experience an energy and transformation through encountering others which is hard to put into words. This thesis is an attempt to do so.

## 7.5 Family

As we have seen in Chapter Five, most of my interviewees seek *family* at Othona. Pete states: “I see the place as a substitute for lonely people who do not have families”. He himself comes from a “dysfunctional family”, hence implying that Othona is 'functional'. It is what other interviewees confirm, and that is why the word *family* is mostly connoted positively (Al: “It is family what I get here, a sense of belonging”). Mayk has chosen Othona as “part of the family” because his “blood family is very distant and not well tied together”.

Othona is seen as family in the most positive sense: nobody differentiates the term. What and who is 'family' nowadays? It is not possible here to be comprehensive about something that stands at the centre of current affairs.<sup>394</sup> Hence, I only want to look at

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393 Quoted in: Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. 61

394 Cf. Stephen C. Barton, *Life Together* (Edinburgh/New York: T & T Clark, 2001), p. 10, fn. 20.

one particular strand of what family can be for Othonites. Goethe's book *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (tr. selected family/relatives) comes to mind. Do we, today, select 'family' according to attitude, convictions, and views over blood relations? An aspect that Edgar Reitz considers when working on *Heimat* (cf. 7.6.4).

Inevitably I stumbled on the synoptic story of "The true kinsmen of Jesus" (Mk 3:31-35) that indicates a breaking away from the traditional appreciation of family and a turning towards a discipleship that is unhindered by familial ties.<sup>395</sup> However, even though a Christianity based on the New Testament was ambivalent towards family, families were the core of the Church and necessary for the spread of Christianity.<sup>396</sup>

The gospel narrative suggests that whoever wanted to become part of Jesus' group had to break with his former history and family. So when being visited by his mother and brothers, Jesus does not ask them in. His true family, he says, are his *Mitstreiter* (tr. the people co-working, co-believing and co-striving with him, his co-labourers). He established a principle of bonding beyond blood ties, provenance, background, origin, or extraction. He chose to select his family.<sup>397</sup> Whoever was working towards the Kingdom of God was part of the 'family'.

Discipleship with Jesus requires self-denial and therefore the shedding of all identities attached to self ... There is no evidence quoted as from ... Jesus or his disciples ... with any ancestry, family, ethnicity, nation, religion, professional or other social category including class and gender. They place themselves beyond such categories; their sole identity is with their discipleship community or in a broader sense the numerous Kingdom communities.<sup>398</sup>

Does Othona follow in Jesus' footsteps, asks Clare? According to her, it does by being

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395 Cf. Wolfgang Reinbold, 'Zur Bedeutung der Familie in frühchristlicher Zeit', in: Christiane Burbach & Friedrich Heckmann (eds), *Generationenfragen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 62-63.

396 Reinbold, 'Bedeutung der Familie', in: Burbach & Heckmann (eds), *Generationenfragen*, pp. 51 ff.

397 Though this text suggests that Jesus is choosing his family, the situation is more ambivalent because his mother is there at the cross and at the formation of the church, and his brother was leader of the Church of Jerusalem — the mother Church.

398 Davies & Fernando, *Community*, pp. 24-25.



“about humanity without status and societal structures”. Robert adds: “In a fragmented society the Community breaks down barriers, concerning ages, background and sex.” “You can benefit, however you want”, says Esther. Coming to the Othona Community makes you part of an extended family.

Family, however, “is not an end in itself,”<sup>399</sup> according to Barton, it has also got an eschatological dimension. “It will therefore be something to do with hope, the overcoming of sin, oppression and despair, and growth towards full humanity.”<sup>400</sup> Such aspirations and beliefs of family would help many at Othona.

“Already here and now, discipleship gives one compensatory wealth, relatives, assets, homes!”<sup>401</sup> asserts John Vincent when talking about community on the basis of the Markan text. Othona is an extended family, made up by people who have nothing in common but being members of this Community that focuses on experience and encounter. In some way, therefore, it appears to be in continuity with Jesus' vision of a new family, that signals the Kingdom.

Family cannot be looked at without the concept of 'home', and it is to that that we now turn.

## **7.6 Home**

Upon entering the Chapel Motley felt “at home”. All my interviewees regard the Chapel as “a part of what we are” (Esther). Feeling at home is a vital part of human identity along with roots and the need to belong. “To be rooted,” wrote Simone Weil,

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399 Barton, *Life Together*, p. 48.

400 Barton, *Life Together*, p. 40.

401 John Vincent, *Discipleship* (Sheffield: Ashram Press, 2009), p. 33.

“is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul.”<sup>402</sup> This ‘home’ called Othona is connected with a place that seems ‘out of the world’, ‘wholly other’ (see 1.6), ‘numinous’ and ‘sacred’ (cf. 1.3). Norman Motley was clear: “There is no doubt that Bradwell is what some call a ‘holy place’.”<sup>403</sup>

### **7.6.1 Sheldrake and *Spaces for the Sacred***

Motley found a place where all the four aspects were fulfilled which Philip Sheldrake in his book *Spaces for the Sacred* classifies as ‘home’:

Home stands for the fact that we persistently need a location where we can pass through the stages of life and become the person we are potentially ... we need a place where we can belong to a community ... we need a place that offers a fruitful relationship with the natural element ... we need a place that offers access to the sacred.<sup>404</sup>

The interviewees bear testimony to the existence of precisely these four elements at Othona. Let's look at them, in turn.

(a) “Where we can pass through the stages of life”:

Yann has been coming to Othona since he was a little boy. Esther came at the age of nine, Brenda at fourteen. Most of my interviewees came to Othona as children. They came with their families. When they have families themselves, they bring their children (cp. Belinda, Marilyn, Esther, Brenda et al.). So it is one generation introducing Othona to the next one. The Community allowed Pete “to try different skills I did not know I had”, thus by “being valued and purposeful” to become the person he is. Robert learned in this “enabling Community” about his potentials. The Community helps people to contribute to the best of their ability (see Stephanie).

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402 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (1952), quoted in Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, (Baltimore/London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 7.

403 Motley, *Much Ado*, p. 19.

404 Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, p. 10.

(b) “Where we can belong to a community”:

Sheldrake's second point of belonging to a community is confirmed by most interviewees and clearly expressed by Valerie, e.g. “I gained by being with people”; and Clare: “I see the Community as something enriching that is always there”; Al: “It is family what I get here, a sense of belonging”; or Belinda: “This place makes people feel they belong”. This 'belonging' is reciprocal and goes as far as members displaying a sense of ownership when talking about the Community (“our fields, our farm, our track, my Community”).

(c) “Where we can offer a fruitful relationship with the natural element”:

The whole of the Community centres around the “natural elements”. Meals are delayed due to the tide. Pete discovers Othona “in the middle of nowhere”. Clare copes with stress “on the sea-wall and the sense of wonder and creation”. Mayk sees Community as “building connections between ... ourselves and the environment”, and Belinda states that “the place itself holds the Community together”. And in my self-interview I note that there is hardly any other place where I feel so connected to God, nature, and the elements. This is all helped by the isolation of the place — there is nowhere to go. Only the Community is there. The relationship with the natural elements is indeed fruitful. There is a constant awareness of being surrounded, being right in the middle of nature, in particular, when natural spectacles happen such as flooding, and helicopters surveying the Community to decide whether people have to be evacuated, or when in the middle of August the Perseid meteor showers litter us with falling stars.

(d) “Where we can offer access to the sacred”:

Access to the sacred, Sheldrake's fourth point is particularly expressed in connection with the Chapel. Valerie feels “the tangible presence of God, a special peace” there. Clare finds a “sense of harmony and order of things” and “something enriching that is always there”, Al talks about the energy of the Chapel which “stems from people going there and praying”. Robert explains that “ordinary things are transformed”. For Mayk “walking on the beach” is worshipping. For Marilyn “the Community spirit is keeping the place active and alive” and “the essence of the place is ... a warm spirit.” Julie finds “the majesty of God” in the Chapel and “walking towards the Chapel prepares you for it, since you stop what you are doing when you are going there.” Put in a similar vein:

The sacred place becomes the point at which the wondrous power of the divine could be seen breaking into the world's alleged ordinariness.<sup>405</sup>

This is what Robert describes when alluding to ordinary things being transformed.

There are two accounts in this thesis of former 'Othona babes' which describe the influence of the Community on their lives (4.3.4: Frances Drake and 5.6: Jo Harp). Many members have marked passages of their lives with the Community, be it illness, children, getting married or becoming divorced. Whatever happened outside, it was good to be able to return to a Community which had not changed. Or as Richard Mulkern, a long-term visitor to Othona puts it: “Whatever else is happening in my life, here there is peace.”<sup>406</sup> “And it's only by stepping out of your life and the world that you can see what you most deeply care about and find a home.”<sup>407</sup> This

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405 Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 20.

406 Essex Magazine, *Rural Retreat*, Oct 2001, pp. 16-19, p. 18.

407 Pico Iyer in: [https://www.ted.com/talks/pico\\_ayer\\_where\\_is\\_home/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ayer_where_is_home/transcript?language=en) (6.7.2015).

Community is the home for many, with the Chapel used for countless blessings and weddings of Community members.

The Community certainly offers people a locus of acceptance and growth as the interviews have shown. Belonging to that community is part of their identity. “I don’t see that it gets any better than here, it has enriched my life, it is not a place, it is a connection”,<sup>408</sup> says Sandra. Being surrounded by the natural elements is part of the magic of the place and part of Othona's daily schedule. Sheldrake notes that “the power of landscape ... is partly topographical and partly a matter of the accumulation of human histories.” Othona is full of stories and histories for “There can be no sense of place without narrative.”<sup>409</sup> This collective relationship towards the Chapel and the Community is a manifestation of identity, a multiplicity of expressions towards the sacred or Othona's theology of place. “The hunger for rootage and the yearning for turf”<sup>410</sup> is accomplished there. Othona fulfils Sheldrake's classifications of 'home'. “And home, we know, is ... the place where you become yourself.”<sup>411</sup> Robert states: “The Community has taught me that I have something to offer by being myself.” And who you are, you explore in Community, for “I have never experienced a place where the genuine character of a person is so rapidly exposed as at Othona.”<sup>412</sup> says the founder of it.

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408 Field notes from Easter 2015.

409 Essex Magazine, Rural Retreat, Oct 2001, pp. 16–19, p. 18.

410 Walter Brueggemann, The Land — Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 13.

411 Iyer in: [https://www.ted.com/talks/pico\\_ayer\\_where\\_is\\_home/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ayer_where_is_home/transcript?language=en).

412 Motley, Much Ado, p. 28.

### 7.6.2 Heftedness

Bouma-Prediger and Walsh offer in their book *Beyond Homelessness*<sup>413</sup> more aspects of *home*. Each of these aspects finds testimony in my interviews. Home is

- (a) a place of permanence and familiarity (Clare: “a screen-saver ... that is always there);
- (b) a dwelling place made up of memories and stories and relationships (Pete: “having watched children grow up here; Esther: “there is always an immediate network of friends”, Julie: “the community ... brings people together”, Yann: “you get to know everyone who is there”);
- (c) a storied place endowing it with meaning (cf. e.g. Stephanie's account );
- (d) a safe resting place (Marilyn: “ I love coming to a safe place with my children”); (e) a place of hospitality and embodied habitation (Robert: “My ... providing hospitality ... as an extension of the Community”, Valerie: “I feel the tangible presence of God”, Marilyn: “I feel something in the Chapel: a sense of peace and calmness. Emotions come up when the Holy Spirit, a presence, is there” );
- (f) a place of orientation, affiliation and belonging (Pete: “Othona ...gives me a purpose in life”, Belinda: “This place makes people feel they belong”, Stephanie: “I have the sense of belonging to a bigger family of people linked by faith”).

Or as Frederick Buechner puts it , home is “a place where you feel you belong, and which in some sense belongs to you.”<sup>414</sup> A Community member affirms this by saying

“... it is ours, the Community belongs to its members.”<sup>415</sup> Home is saturated with

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413 Steven Bouma-Prediger & Walsh, Brian J. *Beyond Homelessness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

414 Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 7.

415 *The Full Circle*, Spring 2006, p. 24.

meaning and stories.

It is this heftedness, this “inbuilt, inbred knowledge of where ... [we] come from”,<sup>416</sup> this knowing of and about a place, being earthed there, knowing the ropes, knowing the land, the sights, the familiar sound of the bells, the smells, the odour of certain rooms, being able to walk to Chapel in the dark without a torch because you have walked it endless times before, that evokes the feeling of home. Here my feet know the way to the Chapel by themselves, and all the antennae within me signal: You are in good hands. I am assured that — to cite American poet Robert Frost — “home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”<sup>417</sup>

This heftedness which conveys and implies a *Seelenlandschaft* (tr. landscape of the soul) or as Edgar Reitz describes it (see 7.7.1) as a hidden, inner landscape, goes beyond the aspects of home listed above. Richard Mulkern calls it “my sense of gravity, my spiritual home.”<sup>418</sup>

Tony Jacques, Warden of Othona, West Dorset writes:

Othona is unusual. Our particular model of community is unique. But part of the uniqueness is that if people 'get it', if Othona gets under their skin, it can go very deep. And so, many in our wide network of members and supporters feel strongly about this place as their 'other home', their 'spiritual haven'.<sup>419</sup>

The terms 'spiritual home', 'spiritual haven', home and heftedness do not seem to embrace the phenomenon, but point towards something beyond, towards what in

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416 <http://martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/jan2007/sheep.html> 'Are you hefted? If not, that's a pity' by Ben Macintyre, Jan 5, 2007.

417 Cited in Bouma-Prediger, *Beyond Homelessness*, p. 64.

418 Essex Magazine, *Rural Retreat*, Oct 2001, pp. 16-19, p. 19.

419 <http://www.othona-bb.org.uk/living-and-working-here/> (2.2.2016).

German we call *Heimat*.

## 7.7 *Heimat*

*Heimat* is difficult to translate. 'Home' does not grasp the full implications and connotations of the word. A critical German theological magazine (published fortnightly) *PUBLIK FORUM* defines it as “Everything a person needs is spelled out by this word: security, primordial trust, warmth, closeness, commitment.”<sup>420</sup> It is a laden word in German and has received over the past two centuries (since the founding of the German Reich/Deutsche Reichsgründung) a particular emotional 'heaviness'. *Heimat* has been a frowned upon word in Germany for people with leftist inclinations due to political abuse on the one hand or to sentimental handling on the other. Today there is a broad range of *Heimat* images and the term has experienced a renaissance among scholars and literati. I am part of this interest in giving the term a new meaning. Only towards the end of the last millennium and after the fall of the Wall has it been possible for reflecting people to apply that term again. It was impossible for young Germans to use the term *Heimat* after World War II, because the term had been abused by the Third-Reich-Ideology for its sinister purposes of *Blut- und Boden-Propaganda* (tr. blood and soil propaganda).

*Heimat* was lost after World War II, and not being found in the material world any more, there was a turning towards utopian concepts, to philosophy, to literature. My favourite German author, Christa Wolf, expressed this inability to find *Heimat* in one of her titles *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (tr. No place. Anywhere).<sup>421</sup> As someone who had

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420 Cf. *Publik Forum Extra: Heimat* - Alles, was der Mensch zum Leben braucht, September 2013, my translation.

421 The novel is about a fictitious encounter of two literati, Karoline von Günderode and Heinrich



moved house much in her childhood and travelled the world, I quite often felt that my *Heimat* was in literature more than anywhere else. I grew up with Ernst Bloch's statement:

Heimat ist, was allen in der Kindheit scheint und wo noch niemand war.<sup>422</sup>  
(tr.: *Heimat* is what everyone experiences in his/her childhood and where nobody has ever been).

But this famous quote in *Heimat* scholarship is nowadays found only as a starting point, but is otherwise generally neglected. As literature on *Heimat* is currently exploding, I will refer to various definitions and elaborations as they relate to Othona.

*Heimat* originally described the relationship of a person or a group of people towards a special place, region, town or country in life which has coined the identity of that person or group. It entails the experience of belonging and stability.

The interconnectedness of socio-historical place on the one hand and time in the sense of history and collective memory on the other that presents ... an implicit category for the study of intersecting individual and collective relationships to particular places.<sup>423</sup>

*Heimat* representations are so multifarious today that the place-binding category does not apply any longer: *Heimat* as a state of mind more than being bound to a place becomes more and more prominent. Hannah Arendt, the great philosopher, confirmed this in an interview with the weekly DER SPIEGEL:

Ich will verstehen. Und wenn andere Menschen verstehen, im selben Sinne, wie ich verstanden habe — dann gibt mir das eine Befriedigung, wie ein Heimatgefühl.<sup>424</sup>  
(tr. I want to understand. And when other people understand in the same way I do — then that gives me a satisfaction, like a feeling of *Heimat*).

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von Kleist. Not able to gain ground, not finding a place anywhere in the world, they commit suicide.

422 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Kluge, 2002), p. 24.

423 Eigler, Friederike & Kugele, Jens (eds), *Heimat – At the Intersection of Memory and Space* (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2012) pp. 8-9.

424 [http://www.rbb-online.de/zurperson/interview\\_archiv/arendt\\_hannah.html](http://www.rbb-online.de/zurperson/interview_archiv/arendt_hannah.html) (15.7.2015).

So when others perceive and understand something the same way she does, she experiences in this connectedness an affinity that resembles *Heimat*. Looking at the interviews, there are many perceptions of Othona that are expressed in a similar way by the interviewees, otherwise it would not have been possible to deduce categorizations such as “family”, “transformation”, “beyond normality” or “place/space” aspects. Finding resonance of a similar vein connects people and expresses their closeness. “Would we all be here if we weren't thinking along the same lines?”, is how Esther puts it in a nutshell.

It is the implications and connotations that fill out the word. The weekly DER SPIEGEL issued a magazine with thirteen different cover pictures all referring to *Heimat* entitled *Mein Herz hüpf*<sup>425</sup> (tr. My heart bounces/jumps). It is this feeling that *Heimat* elicits.

There is always a time dimension to it: childhood usually plays a key part. On the other hand *Heimat wird mehr denn je zur Sehnsucht*.<sup>426</sup> (tr. *Heimat* becomes more than ever a longing).

When talking about *Heimat* on the following pages, I refer to three Germans who have helped to make the term socially acceptable again: to one of my former professors (Steffensky) who included this word into his theology, to a philosopher who advanced and promoted the nomenclature of *Heimat* (Joisten), and first, to the director of an epic TV series (Reitz).

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425 DER SPIEGEL 15, 2012.

426 DER SPIEGEL 15, 2012, p. 69.

### 7.7.1 Edgar Reitz and *Heimat*

Edgar Reitz' TV series *Heimat* clearly triggered an interest in *Heimat* in the 1980ies. He presents *Heimat* as something nobody can escape from. He portrays an archaic family from a fictitious village in the Hunsrück, a *Mittelgebirge* (tr. low mountain range) in mid-west Germany. This family experiences the twentieth century with all its weal and woe. In clear opposition to that family stands a collective of people not related by blood but through an avant garde cultural movement in Munich. Thus, family has been replaced by a group of people linked by world-view, attitudes and culture.

The question here is: Do we strive for this kind of family which provides us with *Heimat* nowadays? Is this what Othona offers in its particular way? Not being bound by biological ties but by a culture of experience, dialogue and encounter?

The term *Heimat* has to be extended. It entails more than just place and time. *Heimat* becomes important in a globalised world, for whoever opens up to surrounding possibilities and opportunities needs to be assured of their own identity, roots and home in order not to 'get lost'.

In 2013, Reitz completed the most comprehensive film project of all times: 54 hours of *Heimat*. In 1992 he finished his *Zweite Heimat* (tr. Second *Heimat*); in 2004 *Heimat 3*; and in 2013 *Die andere Heimat* (tr. The other *Heimat*). In the last *Heimat* he goes back into history and shows the life, work, and longings of his ancestors living in the same little fictitious Hunsrück village. They seek *Heimat* in Brazil. In an

interview,<sup>427</sup> Reitz states that ever since the release of his films, *Heimat* has become a borrowed term in English.

Ich meine, dass unbemerkt auf der inneren Landkarte zahlloser Menschen ein zweites Land existiert; das eine bewohnen sie, das andere ist darin versteckt. (tr. I think that unnoticed on the inner landscape of many people a second land/country exists; one of which they inhabit, the other one is hidden within.)<sup>428</sup>

This inner landscape that we carry around, definitely applies to members of the Othona Community. We all live in different countries around the world. Within ourselves, however, we all have this longing for *Heimat*, this yearning for another place, for an anchored existence. We find it when we enter Othona.

### 7.7.2 Fulbert Steffensky and *Heimathöhle*

We all travel in order to reach Othona. This place offers something we can find nowhere else. We come from different towns and cities, different countries, yet, that particular place offers something people crave. Fulbert Steffensky — a former Benedictine monk and professor of theology (I was once his student) and Dorothee Sölle's husband — defines *Heimat* in his new book *Heimathöhle* (tr. *Heimat den*) not only as a landscape one cherishes and loves, but also as people one connects with and as objects which people have endowed with meaning.<sup>429</sup> For him, as well, the word *Heimat* has been tainted and needs to be restored to stand again for warmth, trust, security, and care. He appeals to a new asceticism:

eine Ehrfurcht den Dingen gegenüber, die ihnen erlaubt, mich in ihnen zu beheimaten.<sup>430</sup>

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427 [Sueddeutsche.de/kultur/interview-mit-heimat-regisseur-edar-reitz-das-fernsehen-ist-kein-narratives-medium-mehr-1.237367](https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/interview-mit-heimat-regisseur-edar-reitz-das-fernsehen-ist-kein-narratives-medium-mehr-1.237367).

428 [Sueddeutsche.de/kultur/interview-mit-heimat-regisseur-edar-reitz-das-fernsehen-ist-kein-narratives-medium-mehr-1.237367](https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/interview-mit-heimat-regisseur-edar-reitz-das-fernsehen-ist-kein-narratives-medium-mehr-1.237367).

429 Cf. Fulbert Steffensky, *Heimathöhle Religion* (Stuttgart: Radius-Verlag, 2015), pp. 91-92.

430 Steffensky, *Heimathöhle*, p. 92.

(tr. a reverence for the things which allow me to 'behome' myself in them/  
to house in them).

He calls for an appreciation of things and objects as opposed to our throw-away-societies. So *Heimat* for Steffensky is landscape, people, and objects.

However, in each one of us there is a desire to become more than we can be just by being ourselves. And this 'becoming more' happens in encounters with the stranger, Steffensky says, drawing upon Dorothee Sölle. This encounter enables you to become somebody else or as she puts it, provides you with *Das Recht, ein anderer zu werden*<sup>431</sup> (tr. The right to become somebody else). Spirituality, Steffensky claims, happens only in the encounter with the stranger. It is action, it is justice.<sup>432</sup> His theological résumé is found in one of his favourite texts: Psalm 139. “God you examine me and know me”. For that reason you do not have to understand everything about yourself: “Es ist ein Glück, dass wir in mehr beheimatet sind als in uns selbst.” (tr. We are lucky to find *Heimat* in more than ourselves).<sup>433</sup> So *Heimat* is not only within ourselves but also in encounters with strangers, for these encounters enrich us, change us, extend our being, 'make us become more'.

### 7.7.3 Karen Joisten and *Heimat*

One of the most recent and comprehensive publications on *Heimat*<sup>434</sup> comes from German philosopher Karen Joisten, who wrote her *Habilitation* (post-doctoral thesis)

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431 Dorothee Sölle, *Das Recht, ein anderer zu werden* (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1971).

432 Cf. Steffensky, *Heimathöhle*, pp. 143-157 (Zwiesprache I-III).

433 Steffensky, *Heimathöhle*, p. 157.

434 While writing this thesis (29.7.2015), the news of the internet provider t-online inform us that Gianis Varoufakis, former minister of economic affairs in Greece, reveals that Germany had been the “*spirituelle Heimat*” (spiritual *Heimat*) for his parents during the time of the military dictatorship [http://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/eu/id\\_74871210/gianis-varoufakis-schwaermt-von-deutschland.html](http://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/eu/id_74871210/gianis-varoufakis-schwaermt-von-deutschland.html).

on *Philosophie der Heimat — Heimat der Philosophie*.<sup>435</sup> (tr. Philosophy of *Heimat* — *Heimat* of Philosophy). The semantic field of this word is vast. Her terminology is difficult to translate for it centres around connotations of *Heimat*. There is one thread, however, of relevance for this thesis. We have to give *Heimat* new meaning and make it pertinent again for us, for it comprises essential questions and implied answers. Where do I belong? Where is the place to which my soul can always return?

Die Antwort, die man auf die Frage nach der Heimat gibt, ist nämlich zugleich die Antwort auf die Frage nach dem Sein des Menschen und seinem Sollen. Nach dem, wie er sich sieht und wie er behandelt werden möchte. Wie er andere sieht und sich zu ihnen verhalten will.<sup>436</sup>  
(tr. The answer one gives to the question about *Heimat* is at the same time the answer to the question about his/her existence and intendedness. It is the answer to how he/she sees himself/herself and how he/she wants to be treated. How he/she views others and how he/she wants to behave towards them).

This explanation of Joisten points to *Heimat* as a lifelong process. This process is dependent upon the subject who is a “narrator in her *Heimat*”,<sup>437</sup> because she belongs to the world that carries and binds her. Thus, according to Joisten, the narrator creates her *Heimat* in her narrative as well as finding herself in a *Heimat* of narrations:

Das Wesentliche, das wir von den Menschen kennen, scheinen ihre Geschichten und die Geschichten um sie zu sein. Durch seine Geschichte kommen wir mit einem Selbst in Berührung. An seine Stelle drängt sich uns seine Geschichte auf als sein Eigenliches.<sup>438</sup>  
(tr. The essential which we know about people seems to be their stories as well as the stories around them. Through their stories we come into connection with the self. In its place their stories impose upon us their very core.)

In these narrations people find two kinds of *Heimat*. On the one hand *Heimat* offers orientation and a binding quality, on the other hand the person in relating these narrations to herself produces a new kind of *Heimat*. Joisten adds

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435 Karen Joisten, *Philosophie der Heimat – Heimat der Philosophie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003).

436 Joachim Klose & Ralph Lindner, *Zukunft Heimat* (Dresden: Thelem, 2012), p. 41.

437 My translation, cp. Joisten, *Philosophie*, p. 337.

438 Wilhelm Schnapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt. Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* (Hamburg: Richard Meiner Verlag, 1953), p. 105.

Eine Erzählung ist ... Stiftung von Heimat eines Menschen, in der er seinem Leben Einheit, Sinn und Tiefe gibt.<sup>439</sup>  
(tr. A narration is the production of *Heimat* for a person by giving her life unity, sense and depth).

It is where you find both sides of *Heimat*: the narrated and the narratable *Heimat*.

These two definitions apply to the researcher as well as to the researched. By narrating Othona's history and story, the binding quality which one could also call *Heimat*, comes up as an orientation for the members, while at the same time it 'produces' *Heimat* for the researcher and researched in finding unity, depth and sense-making aspects within their lives. It is also the red thread within the researcher's life which again leads to the auto-ethnographic angle of the thesis. Narrating means encountering each other, remembering, sense-making and thus creating hope (see 8.4).

#### 7.7.4 The Researcher's *Heimat*

*Heimat* is something that triggers off strong emotions. It is something in which your heart entirely trusts. Where I love and am loved, there is *Heimat*. It is something that is experienced with all your senses: you can feel, and taste, and smell *Heimat*. Entering the Motley Building after not having been at Othona for a year, makes you within a whiff realise that you are back. *Heimat* are characteristic smells, sounds, tastes. At home it is the bell ringing at six o'clock every Saturday evening heralding the beginning of a new week. It is also the place of which I am a part, which I can shape and fashion, this is where my soul *Heimat* is. But I also have a hermeneutic *Heimat*: books, magazines, ideas, thoughts in which I dwell and feel at home. *Heimat* is also the familiar language, German in my case. When I pondered about living in the

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439 Joisten, *Philosophie*, p. 348.

USA in the late eighties, I all of a sudden realised, how German, how north German I was. I did not want to be dependent on a car: I need to walk and bicycle. So, in order to experience for yourself, what *Heimat* actually is, you need to leave it. My second *Heimat*, my *Heimat* of choice, is Othona, for many reasons: the Chapel is crucial. I have not arrived at Othona if I have not been to the Chapel (see Flavia/7.12.4). There I feel as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in a poem (which is nowadays a very popular hymn) *von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen* (tr. With every power for good to stay and guide me [that is the official translation of the poem – the literal translation though is:]) of good powers wonderfully secured.<sup>440</sup> It is this feeling of being well and securely taken care of which comes upon you when you enter the Chapel.

### 7.7.5 Final (?) Thoughts on *Heimat*

By introducing three different fields (film-making, theology, and philosophy) which all deal with *Heimat*, it becomes clear that it is a subject which busies the German mind.<sup>441</sup> I could have used German literature, music, sociology and more to show how important this issue is for modern, thinking German people. It is an activating word that calls people into continuous work on their paths of life. The term has to be understood in relation to national history and personal story. However, though the term does not exist in other languages (apart from Russian: *rodina*), this does not mean that the need for *Heimat* does not exist for others. The way I related these three different approaches of *Heimat* to the Othona Community, shows the intersubjectivity, the shared understanding of relations between social beings, or the bridges that lead from one understanding to another. Husserl's notion of

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440 <http://www.golyr.de/kirchenlieder/songtext-von-guten-maechten-wunderbar-geborgen-43html>.

441 ARD Themenwoche, October 2015, a governmental and governmentally financed TV channel dedicated a full week to *Heimat*.



'intersubjectivity' is relevant to this:

intersubjectivity is more than shared or mutual understanding and is closer to the notion of the possibility of being in the place where the Other is. Furthermore, intersubjectivity is the source of objectivity and not always or necessarily something to be achieved or negotiated through verbal communication or other means. In fact, in its most basic sense, Husserlian intersubjectivity includes a mode of participation in the natural and material world.<sup>442</sup>

For Husserl *intersubjectivity* is the process of reciprocal discernment and awareness. It is the attempt to put yourself in somebody else's shoes. The process, however, is mutual.

This entails dialectical positions within the Community. We go on a journey to reach our “spiritual” home, or as Richard Mulkern termed it, our “spiritual haven” (7.6.2). As global travellers we find identity, roots, and the feeling of belonging far away from where we live. Our *Seelenheimat* (tr. Soul *Heimat*) is where we can shape and fashion life, where we are part of it and thus belong, and where, therefore, we are 'right'. We work and volunteer for each other, we become disciples of a higher cause. Bruno Bettelheim describes it thus :

I am convinced communal life can flourish only if it exists for an aim outside itself. Community is viable if it is the outgrowth of a deep involvement in a purpose which is other than, or above, that of being in community.<sup>443</sup>

This aim outside the Community itself is the 'vision' and hence 'the Kingdom Community'. It is inherent in the cause, quite often unaware. As Tobias Jones, a visitor to many communities observed: “No community exists unless it is able to live out an interpretation of the sacred ... the sacred is the place where humans interact at the

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442 <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/duranti/Husserl-Intersubject-AT.pdf> (17.4.2012).

443 Bruno Bettelheim, *A Home for the Heart* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), cited in Tobias Jones, *Utopian Dreams: In Search of a Good Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 200.

deepest levels.”<sup>444</sup> “Whatever the name, it is the life-enhancing gift that comes when people care about each other and are willing to risk and celebrate diversity.”<sup>445</sup> Marilyn talks about “care and share” and “people come from all walks of life, you can learn about other cultures. You learn to work with others.” It is here where diversity is celebrated in 'sameness', in the same cause: but, as Janet Marshall put it, “diversity without division.”<sup>446</sup>

### 7.8 Unity — Diversity — Polarity

“Unity and multiplicity are fundamentally in dialectical relationship to each other.”<sup>447</sup> Encapsulated by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, this aphorism describes a state of being which can often be found in community. John Vincent harnesses that idea for his version of the Kingdom and calls the story of Pentecost the “vision of unity amidst diversity ... a powerful story” in which “the diversity is legitimised in that the single project of Kingdom is localised in plural character.”<sup>448</sup> In other words, the single strands which build a whole are mutually dependent on each other so that singularity and diversity each build up the other and are at the same time dependent on each other. The perceptions, accounts, and stories of Othona support the constantly growing diversity amidst a limited, concrete Community. This “community life brings out the worst in us. It puts us in relationships with people who drive us crazy.”<sup>449</sup> Diversity, like family, can be a contentious realm. Brenda puts her attitude towards the Community into a dramatic

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444 Jones, *Utopian Dreams*, pp. 200-201.

445 Motley, *Much Ado*, 2007, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 69.

446 Field notes, summer 2015.

447 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. rev. by J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., New York/London: Continuum, 2004).

448 John Vincent, *Christ in the City*, pp. 125-126.

449 Janzen, *Community Handbook*, p. 48.

sound bite “I love the guts of this place but it drives me mad at the same time.”

Community — the same as family — is of ambivalent character. We are drawn or born into it, and sometimes we wish to leave – the sooner, the better. We as Community members have all experienced times when we rejoiced in our stays. On the other hand, we all know of sinister thoughts, of wanting to leave and never come back, of having rows with each other, of being tremendously hurt (cf. Robert or Brenda). Jan Marshall talked of people putting much work and effort into Othona in every possible respect and never being acknowledged or thanked for it. And it is here that we learn about dialectic in Community for the first time: Every movement, every experience can be counterbalanced by its opposite. Othona is composed of dialectical equations, of polarity. Older members in particular will agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's warning:

He who loves his dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.<sup>450</sup>

It is inherent in the dynamics of Community to transcend both sides of these equations in order to find something new. “Communities also require a sacred discontent and a holy restlessness otherwise they become static, lifeless, and bound by tradition.”<sup>451</sup> The novel mentioned before *The Nearest Faraway Place* (cf. p. 68) hints at that. Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (cf. pp. 21/22) and Bonhoeffer's *Widerstand und Ergebung*<sup>452</sup> bear witness to this condition. The fact that we all have to go on a long journey to find our home, a *Heimat*, a place where we belong and which is part of our

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450 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 27.

451 <http://www.jesusradicals.com/individuality-in-christian-community>. P. 2, 8.10.14.

452 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961). The original, literal title “Resistance and Surrender” was translated into “Letters from Prison”.

identity, shows the controversial condition in which Community is set.

Erst aus neuen praktischen Zusammenhängen heraus reifen die Gegensätze, die Widersprüche, bis hin zur Überschreitung der Grenzen ... Die grundlegenden ... Fragen nach dem Verhältnis von Einem und Vielem werden in der Dialektik zusammengeführt mit den Fragen von Widersprüchlichkeit, Bewegung und Entwicklung.<sup>453</sup>

(tr.: Only out of these new practical relation-ships do these contrasts and contradictions come about until they cross a border ... The fundamental ... questions concerning the relationship of the One and Many are merged with the questions of contradiction, movement and development.)

But this new element that comes out of these seemingly adverse conditions and situations is not limited to one possibility. There are various options created out of the merging of thesis and anti-thesis, of action and reflection, of experience and praxis.

Polarity creates something new, more than one alternative, when used in a creative, constructive way. The former Chief Rabbi of London, Jonathan Sacks, writes about *The Dignity of Difference* and states the importance of diversity. "Difference", he says "enlarges the sphere of human possibilities."<sup>454</sup> We 'become more' (see 7.7.2) when we encounter and integrate polarity. This might seem odd at times and not easy. For that reason, Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, teacher and dean, demands religion help people open their eyes to the paradox.<sup>455</sup> Not only to the paradox, I want to add but to the unexpected, to the Incarnational, for the signs of the Kingdom are happening when we encounter someone in whom we recognise our own humanness. It is then that we realise the Kingdom is happening within ourselves (see Robert 5.3.6). Being open to the person who is different from me and honest about how difficult it is to love the other one, is the work of our Community.

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453 Hegelkongress (2002) Jena: <http://www.thur.de/philo/as141.htm> 8.10.14.

454 Sacks, *Dignity*, p. 209.

455 Richard Rohr, *Holding the Tension – The Power of Paradox*, CD, 2007.

Writing about a term which is fundamental for our being, we are drawn back to Paul Tillich and his attempt to talk of God in non-theological terms:

Gott ist ... der Name für das, was den Menschen unbedingt angeht.<sup>456</sup>  
(tr. God is the name for that which unconditionally concerns humanity).

It also applies to *Heimat*. What really concerns us, we fight for, we use our energy for, we commit civil resistance for, we engage in, we fend for. *Heimat's* former exclusivity can nowadays only be inclusive. What used to be national, can only be global. What used to be closed, has to be open. *Heimat ist ein Sehnsuchtsraum*<sup>457</sup> (tr. *Heimat* is a space of longing). We carry it around with us as a lifelong process.

### **7.9 Othona — A Kingdom Community?**

So this faith-based, dispersed Community which offers *Heimat* becomes Community by doing mundane things together such as eating, cooking, washing up, cleaning, talking, attending meetings, going to Chapel and various other activities. The ontology of Othona, the being of Othona, cannot be separated from a theology which is based on acceptance (see e.g. 4.7 (D. Forgan); Julie; 6.3.5), love, and reconciliation (see e.g. 1.3; 1.4; 3.12; Julie p. 143; 7.9). This interspersing of our mindsets is a way of validating our perceptions. Where does this fit in?

The founder, Norman Motley, was always worried about the Community losing its initial purpose by becoming too institutionalised: “We must be quite sure we did not grow into an organisation or institution. This would be disastrous. The Community must be flexible and willing to be led.”<sup>458</sup>

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456 Paul Tillich, *Systematische Theologie*, Band I (Frankfurt am Main: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1983, 7. Auflage), p. 247.

457 Klose & Lindner, *Zukunft Heimat*, p. 96.

458 *The Othona Minutes*, 26.2.1966 (The Chairman's Remarks).

He realised, however, that there is always an institutional aspect to Community that cannot be avoided when people are involved. He made it quite clear, though, how he saw the mission and purpose of the Community:

... he pointed out that Othona is essentially a place where people (not only members of the Community) can come and find a quality of life and healing which lead them into a further insight into the Kingdom. To be received, loved, to share — this is our mission.<sup>459</sup>

In Community, the “sharing caringly without judging, choosing or demanding”<sup>460</sup> leads to a new quality of life, to a spiritual reorientation, to a healing process. Hence these *Kingdom Communities* are according to Davies and Fernando basically home-based. Othona described by the interviewees as an extended family, would therefore be a domestic model and not found in large churches or large centres. Harold Johnson, a retired minister, takes up the Kingdom-idea in an article dated October 1998 :

It is not myopic nostalgia that makes me look back on the pretty awful physical conditions in which Othona then existed at Bradwell ... that to us then didn't matter. What mattered was ... that my vision of a world set free by love to love became reality ... broken lives were mended, the sick were healed, the mourners comforted, enemies reconciled ... we were set free to recognise that of Christ in every man ... Othona was a vision of the Kingdom, real there and then and yet to be realised in the world around us.<sup>461</sup>

Othona is and has been meant to be working towards and to be working within the *Kingdom of God*. Or as Norman Motley phrased it: “We still believe ... that we are called.”<sup>462</sup> Experience, encounter, practice come first, everything else such as theory and theology after that. In that sense it is clearly a form of contextual theology at work, which starts with a specific context and experiences or practices and if it theologises, does so later. As interviewee Brenda says, “Community first, Christian

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459 [The Othona Minutes](#), 3.6.1978.

460 Davies & Fernando, [Community](#), p. 17.

461 [Full Circle](#), October 1998, p. 5.

462 Motley, [Much Ado](#), p. 57.

later”.

The move to Practice Interpretation is indication among many that Liberation Theology has not disappeared, but rather has metamorphosed into specific practice in different theological and methodological developments.<sup>463</sup>

One can easily be led into thinking that Liberation Theology (cf. 7.12.1) is at work at Othona, for its theology has been transformed into something practical, as Othona does not theologise. John Vincent’s statement about *practice interpretation* applies to Othona in an attenuated form. While practice and action dominate, *practice interpretation*<sup>464</sup> seeks to actualise a Bible text, to define the present situation through past experiences, to re-appropriate a story within one's own context. This happens only sporadically. Othona is unpractised in this domain and too busy 'doing' things, yet not uninterested as occasional attempts at modern exegesis show in chapel services.

### **7.10 What do people want ?**

Many who come to Othona are ‘poor in spirit’. They experience how difficult it is to survive as losers in a society which is obsessed with winning. They lack pictures of hope. They are without visions for their lives. They are depressed, marginalised, wounded, out of jobs, made ‘redundant’, former prisoners, desperate, fearful, schizophrenic, anxious, vulnerable, ostracised by society, law-breakers, autistic, etc. The list is incomplete.

Those who come look for soul-food. They want to ‘recharge’ their batteries (cf.

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463 John Vincent, 'British Liberation Theology 2000 – 2012', in: Chris Rowland & John Vincent (eds), *For Church and Nation - British Liberation Theology* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2013), p. 51.

464 For further reading see John Vincent (ed), *Stilling the Storm*, Practice Interpretation 1 (Dorchester: Deo Publishing, 2011) and John Vincent (ed), *Mark – Gospel of Action* (London: SPCK, 2006).

Belinda), they need a vision, a life to strive for, a place to experience *Shalom*<sup>465</sup> ('wholeness' in the old Hebraic sense of 'whole', 'unharmd', 'reconstituted'). "The biblical urge for justice and shalom" and an 'option for the poor' are "the distinctive marks of Liberation Theology".<sup>466</sup> Therefore, Othona is not far from Liberation Theology but another kind of theology seems to be more fitting as we shall see. Experiencing *Shalom* "meaning security, reconciliation, fullness and peace"<sup>467</sup> — being accepted wholly and holistically, is something many members acknowledge. Jonney Aldridge, a long-term member and the technical hand of the Community expresses this very succinctly:

So what is it that makes Othona special? ... it recognises us as whole people ... part of life is spiritual, part physical, and part intellectual ... Othona is different to everywhere else .... God works through us because we have this holistic approach.<sup>468</sup>

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche Community, comments on these aims:

Communities and their members are called ... to do impossible things, such as to build community, and to bring healing, reconciliation, forgiveness and wholeness to people.<sup>469</sup>

So, the holistic approach does not seem to be Othona's specialty alone. There must be more to it as we will see later on (see 8.7).

People who come want to be addressed. They want relationship. They appreciate good, wholesome food. They search for connectedness and belonging, for structure and an open ear, for neighbourhood and acceptance, for honesty and inclusivity, for music and song, for resonance. They become volunteers in search of faith and

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465 Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (17. Auflage, Berlin et al.: Springer Verlag, 1962).

466 Vincent, 'British Liberation Theology 2000 – 2012', p. 48.

467 Vincent, 'Liberation Theology and the Gospel of Jesus', in: Rowland & Vincent, p. 15.

468 *Full Circle*, Jonney Aldridge, 'What makes Othona different?' Spring 2006, pp. 23-24.

469 Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p. 87.



spirituality: Othona is a means of intellectual and spiritual regeneration in an alternative family. Although it has lost its specific Christian language it operates in terms of a *marginal ecclesia*, as a church on the margins. It is the *marginal ecclesia* as Veling puts it<sup>470</sup> “for it belongs to our condition to remain always on the way.”<sup>471</sup> Life consists of transitory experiences (cf. 5.5.4) and for J.B. Metz this condition of faith “means above all a being-on-the-road, a being underway, even a being homeless, in brief: discipleship.”<sup>472</sup> In my experience, one can meet many people in that frame of mind at Othona.

### 7.11 “Religious Creatives”

People who want to make a difference “change a world that is changing them.”<sup>473</sup> By recognising our own humanness when encountering others, we realise the Kingdom is happening within ourselves, that we are the Kingdom<sup>474</sup> and at the same time working on it. It is this dialectic between the transcendent and God-in-each-one-of-us (see Robert) which confronts us with the sacred. “Yet, Jesus in his *incarnation* also confronts us with the 'holy' ... His incarnate presence conveys 'sanctuary’” and “demonstrates the unity of the sacred and the secular.”<sup>475</sup> The vestiges of the Kingdom are not named and not organised nor expected, but in its happenings, between the Stoep and on the way to the Chapel, there are senses of the experience of the numinous (Julie “walking towards the Chapel prepares you for ... something magical and awesome”). It is the sensing and naming of the religious and the secular — the in-

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470 Terry A. Veling, *Living in the Margins* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p. xvi.

471 Veling, *Living in the Margins*, p. xvi.

472 Veling, *Living in the Margins*, p. 178.

473 Andy Merriemfield, *Dialectical Urbanism: Social Struggles in the Capitalist City* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), p. 17.

474 Cf. Motley, *Letters*, p. 72.

475 Susan Hope, 'Sanctuary', in: Peter Sedgwick (ed), *God in the City*, pp.191-198, p. 192.

carnation and the in-mundation<sup>476</sup> (the being in the flesh and the being in the world) taking place in the continual praxis of the Othona Community. It is the overcoming of dualistic thinking, or as Nikolaus von Kues argued, the *coincidentia oppositorum*,<sup>477</sup> where you reach a capacity of discernment in which the so called 'opposites' collapse and merge. In the reconciliation of opposites, he says, God can be found<sup>478</sup> (in 6.2 Richard Syms talks about seeing “beyond our limited views to a wider experience which will topple barriers”). In the reconciliation of former enemies this can happen as well (cf. 1.5 aims of Nails Movement).

Othona fulfils a role that neither society nor churches can achieve (see Introduction: People experience something there that they do not normally experience). It provides space (Robert: “It gives people space when they need space”), and mental zones for recreation (Clare: “I find a sense of harmony and order of things here”; Belinda: “It is the only place I can get my head together”), for resonance, for the sacred (Valerie: “I feel the tangible presence of God”). It provides a place (7.11.4), where people are earthed. 'Place' is according to Walter Brueggemann “a primary category of faith.”<sup>479</sup> Othona as a Kingdom Community (see 7.8) even provides images of the Transcendent and Numinous (3.4 and 4.5). This is how Sue Hope expresses it:

The life of the authentic Christian community is one in which transcendence and the numinous, including ... the pentecostal gifts and charisms, and the incarnate 'ordinariness' of love and relationships and commitment and joy and pain sharing are woven into one fabric — a tapestry which proclaims in many colours the good news of the gospel.<sup>480</sup>

The Chapel plays a vital part in opening up this numinous strand, and walking

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476 For 'inmundation' cf. John J. Vincent, *Secular Christ* (Lutterworth Press, 1967).

477 <http://urts99.uni-trier.de/cusanus/content/lw.php> (26.6.2014).

478 <http://urts99.uni-trier.de/cusanus/content/lw.php> (26.6.2014).

479 Brueggemann, *The Land*, p. 4.

480 Hope, 'Sanctuary', in: Peter Sedgwick (ed), *God in the City*, p. 196.

towards it is highlighted by members and non-members alike (see 7.10). Whatever happens there does not cease to amaze us (e.g. 7.11.3: Arthur, Inaki). Living in the vicinity of the Chapel, being associated with it, gives the Community spiritual nourishment, and demonstrates that “Community and places each build up the identity of the other”<sup>481</sup>.

The Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz assumes that communities have also a prophetic task in church and society.<sup>482</sup> By having a pronouncedly spiritual life they are a highly visible challenge to the “self-secularisation” of large parts of western Christendom.<sup>483</sup> Mary C. Grey argues that “*the community as prophet*” is needed and that to be “prophetic ... is inseparable from being a *mystical* community.”<sup>484</sup> It is these transformative and therefore healing elements which are needed in a fragmented society (see 4.4.4: for Norman Motley Othona's “reason for existence” includes “healing and re-generating factors”). On the other hand, this turning towards oneself, living secular lives (cp. Belinda) and becoming cultural Christians does not prevent people from retaining 'sacred hearts', from being spiritual beings as Alan Billings analyses in *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts*.<sup>485</sup>

## 7.12 Othona's Liberative Paradigm: Theology of Encountering Relationship

So, in which theological context can Othona be seen when looking at what it does: it seeks various ways of reconciliation, puts encounter and people centre stage, is based on acceptance and respect, builds a culture of hospitality, cares about nature and

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481 Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. xi.

482 [http://www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/ekd\\_texte\\_88\\_1.html](http://www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/ekd_texte_88_1.html) (24.11.2015).

483 Cf. [http://www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/ekd\\_texte\\_88\\_1.html](http://www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/ekd_texte_88_1.html) (12.7.2015).

484 Grey, *Prophesy and Mysticism*, p. 2.

485 Alan Billings, *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts* (London: SPCK, 2004), see pp. 20-37.

environment, and worships with people who have “all faiths and none”?

### 7.12.1 Liberation Theology

Though nobody has ever used the term *liberation theology* with regard to Othona's aims, yet by doing its work, the Community offers a liberating, an enabling potential. The very charism of Othona is that of making people realise their potential (cf. Robert “enabling Community“; Pete “... allowed me to try different skills I did not know I had; Al “it allows people to express themselves in their own way“; Connel “I think my confidence has improved ever since I got here”), of empowering them to see their gifts, of learning together that others or the other are not a threat but a gift and blessing. It creates opportunities for people to interact. In Othona's *memory bag* the story of the Polish student circulates: “Before I came to Othona I hated all Germans but now I know, we have much in common and I have made several German friends.”<sup>486</sup> Being exposed to each other, providing possibilities to communicate on different levels, encourages people and provides great opportunities.

The fact that there is no conscious, written, developed theology of what Othona is fits in with John Vincent's view of embedded practitioners:

... most of those who are steeped in the essential elements of it [liberation theology], and are busy working practically on the basis of it, do not have the time or the spare energy to sit down and write systematically about it.<sup>487</sup>

Even though the term *liberation theology* or any other theology has not been mentioned in Othona's publications — due to a certain invisibility of *Liberation Theology* — the work Othona has been doing comes into focus again with the new

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486 Marshall & Maxey, 'Othona', in: John Vincent, *Christian Communities*, p. 91.

487 Vincent, 'British Liberation Theology 2000 – 2012', p. 45.

Pope whose roots and traditions can be found in Liberation Theology. Not only does Pope Francis take a clear stand in numerous interviews but also in his apostolic writing *Evangelii gaudium*.<sup>488</sup> Pope Francis states very strongly that our economic system kills<sup>489</sup> and demands a turnaround in favour of people and the environment. This is exactly what Othona is offering. Here people are compassionate about people (cf. Marilyn: “kind and caring and looking out for each other”; Pete: “people caring about people”; Al: “I am loved and cared for”) and the environment. Though we would not have used the expression, a form of Liberation Theology has been at work at Othona ever since it started.

### 7.12.2 Emil Brunner: Truth as Encounter

For Emil Brunner, prominent systematic theologian of the last century and influenced by Buber (as was Motley) as can be seen in the quotation, “the Biblical conception of truth is ... encounter.”<sup>490</sup> in which “God is always and inconvertibly the first, man always and inconvertibly the second in this relation.”<sup>491</sup> The relationship between the two is a *Geschehen*<sup>492</sup> (tr. an event) and therefore the appropriate form to describe it is 'narration' (see 7.7.3). This extends to Othona. Whatever happens there, the proper form to convey it is story. This mutual relationship between people and God is what Brunner calls 'personal correspondence'. It happens in faith through personal fellowship. He describes the moment:

while he discloses himself to me, and so surrenders himself to me, I disclose

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488 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

489 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), chapter 53.

490 Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, translated by Amandus W. Loos (Westport, CO: Greenwood Press, 1943), p. 7.

491 Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 49.

492 Emil Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1938), p. 34.

myself to him and receive him, while I surrender myself to him. In this moment he ... becomes a 'Thou'. In that moment ... he ... transforms ... the Object-Subject relation into a relation of personal correspondence: we have fellowship together.<sup>493</sup>

Therefore, “Faith is ... personal encounter, trust, obedience, and love”,<sup>494</sup> for “Being person [*Person- Sein*] and being in fellowship [*In-Gemeinschaft- Sein*] are identical.”<sup>495</sup> According to Brunner, God's real goal is fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*).<sup>496</sup> And fellowship we experience in many different facets at Othona. This is what the Community has been working at since its early beginnings: granting a place of encounter to practise becoming human by encountering oneself and others in fellowship. It is a *Theology of Encounter* whereby we encounter ourselves alongside others. Richard Syms, a vicar and actor, writes:

Othona ... can still offer to a world and even to churches ... a sense of reality. It happens at a personal level ... because community demands more reality than socialising does ... God is us, the kingdom is here. Only community can really prove it.<sup>497</sup>

Living implicitly the *Kingdom* without being able to put a name to it explicitly (unless a vicar speaks), is what Othona does.

We are “cultural and religious creatives”<sup>498</sup> who consider ourselves to be in a post-growth system and work in a de-growth movement. Entering the path of resistance, going against mainstream concepts of the *enemy*, against economic structures and joining counter-cultural movements along with social justice inquiries (see aims of Qualitative Research) have always been issues for Christians. When Norman Motley started the Nails Movement, he had those issues in mind when working on and

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493 Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 86.

494 Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 112.

495 Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 141.

496 Brunner, *Wahrheit*, p. 111.

497 Richard Syms, *Full Circle*, Winter 2001, p. 5.

498 Cf. Christian, *Finding Community*, pp. xvii/xviii.

towards the Kingdom of God. The call for justice always demands action (see Steffensky 7.6.5), yet implies a confrontation with suffering and injustice beforehand. As Jürgen Manemann, a pupil of J.B. Metz, a catholic theologian and philosopher himself, puts it:

Die Forderung nach Gerechtigkeit enthält den Imperativ, sich den Leiden des Anderen in seiner Einzigartigkeit auszusetzen<sup>499</sup>  
(tr. The demand for justice contains the imperative to expose yourself to the suffering of the other in their uniqueness).

Justice requires what Othona practices: empathy, closeness, attention and care. One of the pioneers of political theology identified the theological word for this kind of work: compassion (also influenced by Metz).<sup>500</sup> Cornel West, Afro-American philosopher and preacher discovers this compassion in the cross: for him it is a place of encounter. For him there is no justice without love and no justice without encounter. By encountering people who had been at war with each other, it was possible to realise their humanity after World War II and to learn reconciliation as happened in the Othona Community.

Joan Watson writes about her first encounter with Othona in 1948 when she was working for the International Voluntary Service for Peace:

It seemed that Archbishop Temple had died hoping that this [Othona] was the first small spark which would ignite a new Reformation (and no doubt, a new Counter-Reformation) ... I found the place enchanting ... Here raiment, food, shelter were seen for what they were — necessary only in as much as they helped in the search for life's purpose.<sup>501</sup>

Being open to and for all, with a low threshold and thin boundaries, living alongside each other, intentionally designed to learn from each other, experiencing God from

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499 Jürgen Manemann, Prophetischer Pragmatismus (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2013), p. 6.

500 E.g. <http://occupiedmedia.us/2011/11/a-love-supreme/> or <http://christopherblosser.blogspot.de/2010/12/robert-p-george-and-cornel-west-on.html> (22.10.2015).

501 Joan Watson, Full Circle, Autumn 2000, pp. 4-5.

within, multifaceted Othona offers a liberating paradigm which is rooted in the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. This theology is in essence practical and narrative, it starts “with the ordinary and everyday, with personal life, with corporate stories”<sup>502</sup> within the *Lebenswelten* of the Community.

So Othona is, to use Christopher Rowland's words, “a way, a discipline, an exercise which has to be lived ...”<sup>503</sup> to be understood. It is also in Diane Butler's words “about recognising our interdependence rather than our independence, struggling to work out our humanity in mutuality, and having a sense of belonging.”<sup>504</sup> Othona has been working for inclusion and against exclusion from the very beginning.

Theology that develops resistance to the powers of exclusion may help to develop new models that prove useful in reconstructing not only the process of theological reflection but also the church and, ultimately, even society at large.<sup>505</sup>

### 7.12.3 Transformation through Encounter

Whenever transformation (see 5.5.1 and 6.3.1) happens at Othona, it may be seen as a symbolic action indicating something beyond the actual facts, or as Peter Biehl says it: “weist über sich hinaus auf eine Wirklichkeit, ... die nicht unmittelbar zugänglich ist.”<sup>506</sup> (tr. It indicates a reality which is not directly accessible).

The Reverend Professor Frances Young, a patron of the Community, describes in her

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502 Sally McFague, 'Parable, Metaphor and Theology', in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, pp. 630-45, p. 645.

503 Christopher Rowland, *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), p. 4.

504 Cited in John Vincent, 'A New Theology and Spirituality', in: Chris Rowland & John Vincent (eds), *Liberation Spirituality* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit 1999), p. 101

505 Rieger, *God and the Excluded*, p. 3.

506 Peter Biehl, *Symbole geben zu lernen* (Neukirchen: Vln, 1991), pp. 46-48.



book *Face to Face*<sup>507</sup> her visit to the Community with her severely challenged son

Arthur:

I had been invited to share with the Othona community for a week, providing a lecture each afternoon and joining the community in its worship, work and holiday for that period. Some of my family came too, including Arthur. Each morning and evening we gathered for prayers in the oldest place of Christian worship still in use, St Peter's Bradwell ... Members of the community humped Arthur's chair across the fields. Birds flitted around the bare stone chapel, and on the altar was a cross of nails, a reminder of the purpose of the community, founded to work for reconciliation between peoples after the last war.

As usual Arthur could not be kept quiet. So one evening the person leading prayers created 'silence' through the music of the Othona Psalms — and Arthur suddenly seemed to be the Christ among us.

It is this sort of encounter that changes people. In instances like this, the incarnational (the experiential form of this transformative moment) becomes part of the Community, and is experienced by the participants without them being able to name what is going on. People intuit something extraordinary. This is how Janet Marshall phrases the unusualness of these moments

Although we have all experienced these amazing moments of recognition, when we suddenly see something as if for the first time, when the light suddenly dawns and transforms how we see and feel, there are certain circumstances and conditions which facilitate these times. It was to create such a time and space that Othona ... [has] come into being.<sup>508</sup>

Another of Othona's many stories illustrates the above:

It happened at the end of the marvellous “River” week. Ignaci from Spain was taking the service and telling us about his heart transplant. He confessed that the only thing he knew about his donor was his age (21) and that he had died in a car accident. That alone would have been enough for we were all very moved hearing him talk about his young heart. But then something unplanned and unforeseeable happened. A newcomer, a first-timer to the Community started to pray for her brother who had lost his life in a car accident at the age of 21 some years ago in Essex. We held our breaths.

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507 Frances Young, *Face to Face: Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., London: T. & T. Clark, 1990), pp. 136 ff.

508 Jan Marshall, 'Holy Ground', *Full Circle* 2014, pp. 18-20.

Ignaci finished off the service and was about to leave the chapel. Kate, the woman who had lost her brother, followed him. At the chapel door she got hold of him and took his hand. Hand in hand they left the chapel together.

It took me hours to recover from that picture. Whatever Norman had meant by the term 'reconciliation', I had seen it at work there and then.<sup>509</sup>

Those two stories demonstrate exemplarily the transformative powers at work in the Community. According to Laurie Green “theology worthy of the name must be transformative theology. Good Christian theology is able to change us and change situations.”<sup>510</sup> Thus living according to the radical spirit of Jesus and being open to personal transformation<sup>511</sup> means living a lifelong process of transformation (see Joisten 7.6.6). “Encounter ought to revise our judgement about who we truly are and why.”<sup>512</sup> So only in personal encounter with the Other, do we experience facets of our own self. “Christian transformation is ... essentially face to face. ... that is how we are formed — face to face ... that is also how we can be transformed.”<sup>513</sup> This transformation allows us to change, allows us to start anew or, to cite Dorothee Sölle again, gives us *Das Recht, ein anderer zu werden* (tr. the right to become someone else): allows us to become someone we did not know was also there, someone who wants to surface and claims her right to be there, too. This personal transformation reflects a praxis that “tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed”<sup>514</sup> (see also Anthony 6.3.1).

These encounters not only lead to a transformation of the individual but to a

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509 Andrea Mislter, 'THE Picture of the Summer', *Full Circle*, Winter 2012, p. 17.

510 Green, *Let's do Theology*, p. iii.

511 Cf. Jacques, *Mentioning the Unmentionable*, pp. 2-3.

512 Kenneth Cragg, *Troubled by Truth: Biographies in the Presence of Mystery* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), p. 265.

513 David F. Ford, 'Transformation', p. 201.

514 Gustav Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press), p. 15.

transformation of the place as well. “The role of such places is to root believers in their faith and point them towards the redemption of all places in Christ<sup>515</sup>” as the example of Flavia will show in the next section.

#### **7.12.4 The Theological Significance of Place**

If religion and spirituality and a connectedness with deeper questions have a place (see 5.5.3 and 6.3.3) in our busy every-day-lives, then Othona offers a space and place for that part of the human soul that wishes to express itself. Going twice a day on a pilgrimage with a knowledge, as Othona does, to worship in that Chapel, shows that

when a place is sacralized, the dimension of history becomes added to personal identity and individual experience, giving it particular cultural significance.<sup>516</sup>

As examples in 7.12.3 have shown, we always add our personal experiences to places and thus add a new dimension to that particular venue. Some people ascribe the ambience and power of the Chapel to as AI put it: “all the issues that have been brought to it for over sixteen hundred years. The energy of it stems from people going there and praying.”

This significance is stated in the repeated expressions of extraordinariness and privilege of knowing such a place, of having access to it, having access to one's own self. The chapter on *Heimat* has shown that places form our beings as humans. They can root and anchor us at our deepest levels. We feel nourished by a place. Place carries its own energy, dynamic movement and power. Othona is located in a landscape for healing. It is the experience of connectedness, of multiple dimensions, yet, has to refer to personal experience as well in order to be seen as 'sacred'. Flavia,

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515 Inge, Theology of Place, p. 86.

516 Inge, Theology of Place, p. 86.

diagnosed with cancer for the second time, calls the Chapel her “bolt-hole”, the Community her “spiritual home”. Whenever she comes to Othona, the first thing she does is go to the Chapel and sing “Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here”.<sup>517</sup> For her, this song embodies the Chapel.<sup>518</sup>

Othona is a special place, a so-called “thin place” as the Celts named it:

A thin place requires us to step from one world to another and that often means travelling to a place where we have less control and where the unpredictable becomes the means of discovery.<sup>519</sup>

Or to cite George McLeod again, the founder of the Iona Community and friend of Norman Motley: A thin place is “Where the membrane between the world and the other world, between the material and spiritual, was very permeable.”<sup>520</sup> It is in “thin places” where we encounter the “wholly other” (cp. 1.6).

It is a venue where the distance between heaven and earth is suspended. It is ineffable because there is some kind of continual religious praxis related to it. It is this truthful expression of experience which makes us look at 'holy' in a different way. It takes place in the inexpressible territory which is quite often beyond the power of language, therefore words and connotations around 'extraordinary', 'special' and 'holy' come up (see Chapter Two) when relating to it. Al: “the most powerful building I know”; Marilyn “a sense of peace and calmness”, “something magical and awesome”. (Compare entries into the visitors' book 3.4).

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517 *Celebration Hymnal for Everyone*, people's edition (Great Watering, Essex: McCrimmon Publishing, 2012), pp. 72-73.

518 Field notes, summer 2015.

519 Sylvia Maddox, 'Where can I touch the Edge of Heaven?', in: <http://explorefaith.org/mystery/mysteryThinPlaces.html> (9.9.2015).

520 Cited in: Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. 79.

Thin places are places at the end of the line. They are needed in the family of people. The ethos is that people can be themselves, more than themselves there (see Steffensky 7.7.2). Jan Marshall talks in an article on Othona about *Holy Ground*.<sup>521</sup> It is not the term that springs to mind when entering the main building, especially at a mealtime. However, walking to the nearby Chapel evokes it.

The Chapel becomes “a limen, and so symbolic of journey to the divine”.<sup>522</sup> We, who come from all over the world, who are place-less at times in society, walk to this sacred place twice a day to reconnect and re-root ourselves, protesting against the loss of place, against the uprootedness we are facing in our societies. John Inge analysed this situation very astutely when citing B. Forte that going

to these places becomes an authentic experience of the exodic condition of the human heart and of the encounter with the Other, transcendent and divine, for which it longs.<sup>523</sup>

Preparing ourselves for the journey to the Chapel in a symbolic pilgrimage, adds the historical dimension to individual experience and incorporates personal identity, whereby “holiness is built into the story of a place so that the Christian community can be built up in faith by association with it.”<sup>524</sup> It is a 'profane holiness', one that is experienced every day and that is part of the Othona life. “The periphery often becomes the locus of the holy”, Lane says.<sup>525</sup> It is here on the edge that new things may happen. These new things do not have to be extraordinary at all as Robert stated: “Ordinary things are transformed; you recognise it when you see it.”

However, they are not restricted to cognitive perception, as Lane adds:

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521 Marshall, 'Holy Ground', pp. 18-20.

522 Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. 102.

523 Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. 92.

524 Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, Expanded Edition, 2002) p. 47.

525 Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 48.

In Christian thought, the one great truth of the incarnation is that the ordinary is no longer what it appears. Common things, common action, common relationships are all granted new definition because the holy has once and for all become ordinary in Jesus Christ ... Christianity is simply the process whereby men and women are restored to normal humanity, reclaiming everyday existence.<sup>526</sup>

This process of being restored to one's own humanity alongside the humanity of others is what one encounters at Othona. A thin place where the heavens and earth merge, transcends boundaries (see Yann: "others are not seen distinctly and the space seems almost without limits") and helps people to think in terms of relationships, in terms of encounter:

places whose power persist through centuries of indifference and neglect to be revealed again when men are ready for it, places which display the potential holiness of all this earth which man has loved so much but ravaged.<sup>527</sup>

There is hardly a sentence which hits the mark concerning the Chapel so profoundly. It shows again that place, stories, and Community are interconnected in the encounter between people, and in the encounter between people and the Holy.

When the Chapel is seen as a physical object endowed with sacred meaning, we all have a profound attachment to it which seems to quench our spiritual needs.

### **7.13 Conclusion**

By creating a new culture in our Christian Community, we construct

a culture not of growth, but of material modesty; one not of militarism, but of cooperation and negotiation. How and where will the needed new attitudes and practices be pioneered, if not in small experimental communities?<sup>528</sup>

We experience something at Othona that we can learn nowhere else. In our being

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526 Lane, *Landscapes*, pp. 65-66.

527 Cited in Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. 82.

528 Christian, *Finding Community*, p. xv.

together and in mutual support, Community unfolds, and we discover *Heimat*. Is *Heimat* applicable to what members and visitors receive from Othona? Are they looking for *Heimat*? And “heftedness”? Are they hefted and attached to a particular location, a place that is “bred in the bone”?<sup>529</sup> I want to explore if Othona fulfils a human need for locality and belonging, and if this collective relationship towards a particular place is a manifestation of identity, a multiplicity of expressions of the journey towards the divine. These matters go back to the very beginning when Norman Motley wanted to create a venue where reconciliation could take place. It is not a reconciliation of former enemies any longer as in 1946 but a reconciliation of ourselves, nature, and the Other which demonstrates that Othona with its “global ecumenism” is willing to be in touch with the needs of today.

In the last Chapter I will revisit the Research Question to see how it may now be answered in the light of the research. I also want to talk about what remains hidden, beyond investigation. Othona's gift to the world and to the Church will be discussed. And what does Othona need to do and to be in order to remain faithful to itself and its charism in the future?

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529 Martin Frost in: <http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/jan2007/sheep.html> (09.09.2012).

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## OTHONA: ON ITS OWN TERMS

### 8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I return to the Research Question and attempt to answer it in the light of my findings, building on the ways in which my original ‘insider’ assumptions contributed to comprehending this strange phenomenon. This is only possible by looking at the fruit of the research: the categories of understanding deduced from the interviews and developed in Chapters Six and Seven. I was right in assuming that journey, home, belonging, identity, volunteering, discipleship, place and transition (see 1.5) shape Othona. My interviewees have confirmed and expanded my categorizations (Chapter Seven), not verbatim and not word-for-word but in their way of expressing perceptions. The theological questions I devised for the interviews were in practice not always asked, they were not formulated in the language of the members. However, people used their own terms to describe things and experiences that the theological questions had sought to uncover. Looking at these, I found significant common elements after having compared and confirmed them with Community literature.

As explicitly theological language (Kingdom of God, Theology of Encounter, *Heimat*, etc.) is only used by theologians (Trustees, vicars, pastors, people with a theological predisposition, myself), I have wrestled in the thesis process with “what theology was there”, based on people's comments, where they have been implicitly theological, working out an *endogenous theology*. The process is described in Chapter Seven. I chose the concepts of *Heimat* and *Theology of Encounter* for this and discerned an



implicit theology by taking my categorizations into account and extending them with the ones the interviewees provided. All these expressions manifest themselves in a phenomenon that lies at the heart of this Community. This phenomenon can only be captured in dialectical statements. It is never only one 'thing'. It is always 'as well as'. Drawing on Gadamer (see 7.8) this interdependence, dialectic and strangeness manifests itself when looking at what Othona is and has become (see 8.2 – 8.5). Chapter Eight offers new ways of understanding the phenomenon by using four different categories of describing the Community

- A Community of temporary Withdrawal and Restoration
- A Community to learn from Differences and model the Kingdom
- A Community of narrative Encounter on the Margins
- A Community offering *Heimat* through Belonging and Significance

These categories apply differently to members of the Community depending on the extent you allow them to “get under your skin” (see 7.6.2: Tony Jacques) and on the ties you have with the Community.

As these newly formulated categories are clarified, the special character and changing nature of Community also presents challenges to the research, into which Chapter Eight will delve in a section on limitations. Finally it will highlight what original contributions this work has created in the field of theology and end with two conclusions (compare Introduction and Alternative Introduction).

So how can we now understand the continuing strange phenomenon of the Othona Community and its *Lebenswelten*? How has the research helped us to address the fundamental Research Question to understand the phenomenon of the Othona Community in the twenty-first century?

## 8.2 A Community of Temporary Withdrawal and Restoration

One conclusion is that, being exposed to so many impressions and connections in the wider world, people need places to withdraw, to regain their equilibrium, to recharge their batteries (cf. Belinda 5.4.13). Othona is one of these places. Jesus had to do the same when exposed to crowds and healing people: he withdrew to pray and to be on his own (Mk 1:35; 1:45; 3:7; Lk 4:42; 6:12) or went into the desert (a place of withdrawal, see Mt 4:1.2). In Mt 4:18 he is walking along the sea. It could be the seawall at Othona (see Clare 5.3.4). We need places apart from the hustle and bustle of the world where we walk a different pace. We come from busy environments and have to learn to slow down. Usually, it takes people two to three days to adjust to the Othona-pace. Valerie said “The world needs a place like this, where you take yourself away from the madcap of the world and simply *be*.” This is how Othona advertises itself today, as “a place to be”. This advertisement is more cryptic and less explicit than Motley's original vision, namely “a place where people ... can come and find a quality of life and healing which lead them into a further insight into the Kingdom.”<sup>530</sup> In order to be inclusive, Othona has lost some of Motley's explicitness but nothing of its content.

As often with Jesus, this retreat takes place alongside others. As Community, we crave to live in relations with others (Valerie: “fell in love with the idea of the Community”). Othona is about relationships (Al: “it is the contentment you get through people”), about discovering our strengths and shortcomings. We want to find people, places and objects that resonate with us (see Steffensky: 7.5.5), that touch us.

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530 The Othona Minutes, 3.3.1978.

We experience moments of being transported with strong emotions (7.10.2: Flavia; 7.12.3: Arthur/Inaki), being affected by people and nature: experience is what we want. We want to relate, connect and act together. We work against the superficiality of social media because we are real flesh-and-blood people with a real shared cause, and, therefore, sometimes experience real problems. This kind of conflict requires a certain asceticism at times (cf. Pete “away from materialism”; or cf. 7.5.1.2 Steffensky) for we need to concentrate on what is important. We feel a responsibility for our Community and for society in general (see Stephanie 5.3.14/Yann 5.3.2). We recreate in this environment (Marilyn: “My two children ... relax there, become calm ... and I can be with them without stress”), to be able to take up our cause again when we go back into the world (Brenda: “What we stand for changes our lives when we go back”). Othona does not advocate a retreat from reality or an escape from the every day.

It seeks the stimulus of a spirit that will drive men back into the world to work with a new understanding and will lead to the coming together of groups of people with a new vision: a positive purpose and will to service, firmly founded and rooted in Christ.<sup>531</sup>

This is how the original leaflet of 1946 stated Othona's purpose. It is what we still do: we find restoration at Othona and then go back into our worlds again.

### **8.3 A Community to learn from Differences and model the Kingdom**

As (not necessarily conscious) ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18), and as Community we are driven by the need to change things. We are indignant<sup>532</sup> about the state of the world and would like another one: a better, just one, a society which does not wish to harm people or the environment (see Stephanie 5.3.14). This is why we

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531 Original Leaflet, 1946. Quoted in: Marshall & Maxey, 'Othona', p. 90.

532 I am drawing on Stephane Hessel, *Indignez vous* (Empört Euch!) (Berlin: Ullstein, 2010).

leave our comfort zones and demonstrate visibly by living against the grain (Valerie 5.3.3: “possessions are unimportant”; Stephanie 5.3.14: “an alternative to the capitalist world”), by going against the dictates of majorities, we open, with our resistance, new room for alternatives. We are part of a collective process which wants better conditions of a yet unknown world. As Community we work on the task “to provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined”<sup>533</sup>.

Othona's world teaches a lifestyle based on tolerance, respect, difference, and diversity (see Roo Bull 6.3.5). “Meeting people who are unlike ourselves suddenly becomes a fundamental reason, not a peculiarity!”<sup>534</sup> Where else do we have the chance to live and learn with birds of different feathers? Inter-national, inter-generational, inter-cultural (and inter-faith) aspects happen naturally in the Community (see Bob Wharton 6.3.5). Othona welcomes and accepts people as they are and immediately a healing process starts (see Pete 5.3.1). This notion is particularly important for young people, since many do not have the feeling in our societies of being wanted and needed any longer. Our economic system does not welcome them. When looking at unemployment figures and seeing how many young people are on social benefits, it becomes clear that they can feel superfluous when they are unemployed or unable to integrate into society. It is an issue that politicians should take to heart: “You are needed, and you are wanted just the way you are”, should be the message young people hear at schools and from politicians. However, working on a psychiatric ward, I come across increasingly younger teenagers suffering from feelings of inadequacy which inevitably creates enormous anxiety.

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533 Walter Brueggemann. Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 19-20. See also Brueggemann, The Land, p. 4.

534 Ruth Bull, Full Circle, October 1996.

#### 8.4 A Community of Narrative Encounter on the Margins

Othona is a Community of Encounter (7.9 and 7.10): encounters with the stranger, with the place, with the sacred (4.23: Mission Statement) or the numinous, with the vulnerable and needy, with co-workers, and with yourself. The encounter can be both a challenge and also a way to truth and healing that releases possibilities and opens new futures for people (see e.g. Pete and Connel).

This place of encounter connects two worlds, the immanent and the transcendent, the horizontal and the vertical, the experiential and the incarnational, the narrated and the narratable (see 7.4.4) which gives us “some sense of another, divine reality that draws us beyond our own”<sup>535</sup> (7.5.3 Steffensky; cf. 7.11.2). “Relation is mutual”, says Martin Buber on whom Motley draws, and “All real living is meeting”<sup>536</sup> (cf. footnote 466: “becoming a Thou”). In similar vein, Mary C. Grey states: “To be a person is to live from the yeast of connectedness or from a matrix of connections”<sup>537</sup> (see 6.2 Alternative Family). For Brunner “Faith is ... personal encounter, trust, obedience, and love”,<sup>538</sup> all of which is experienced at the Community.

The meaning of Othona can only be told in story (7.5.4 narration for Joisten), experiences, memories and practical work, as the people live between Chapel and Stoep. Othona's world is opened up by narration. Narration opens eyes, ears, hearts and minds. The stories of people abolish judgements, prejudices and hierarchy. To

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535 David Brown, God and Enchantment of Place – Reclaiming Human Experience (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 37.

536 Martin Buber, I and Thou, translated by R. G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 8, 11.

537 Grey, Prophesy and Mysticism, p. 24.

538 Brunner, Encounter, p. 112.

narrate means to put what is inside outside, to experience sense and interpretation of what is one's innermost. So narration creates community (see Brunner: 7.12.2) and is therefore a bond with a sense-making quality providing unity, depth and an anchored existence (see 7.6.6). Othona offers concrete encounters of all kinds and therefore resists abstraction and conceptualization (see the “blood-sweating” Trustees in 4.23) as the strange, particular, historical, human phenomenon it is.

Even Norman Motley conceded that “the deepest and profoundest things in life cannot ... be explained.”<sup>539</sup> Othona, indeed, cannot be reduced to ideas or concepts or mundane human categories or sociological terms because it stays an 'experience on the edge', a praxis, a lived reality, and participates in the sacred and embodies existential truth.<sup>540</sup> This living on the margins is threefold: firstly, the locality is where heaven and earth meet, wide horizons and starry nights, a thin place (see 7.10.4 or 8.5 Steve). Secondly, “Othona is reaching out to those who have rejected or never discovered institutional Christianity.”<sup>541</sup> Marge puts it differently: “I feel better when I don't go to a church at all. They all wanted me to be this and that and change.”<sup>542</sup> However, Marge comes to Othona and loves it.

Thirdly, and not necessarily generally applying to all members but to quite a few: people who come to intentional communities are quite often in a psychological crisis (see Brenda's list; Valerie “some weird characters”; 6.5: examples of straining the rules ), in transition (compare 6.2.d and Connel), or on the verge of something new.

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539 Motley, Letters, p. 51.

540 See Brunner, Encounter, pp. 195 ff.

541 Norman, Communities, p. 25.

542 Field Notes, summer 2015.

So, on the edge, Othona is a place of community, narrative encounter and mutual relations.

### **8.5 A Community offering *Heimat* through Belonging and Significance**

The Church and other communities can learn from Othona that people want to be connected, they want family and a home, an identity, real encounters, roots and belonging, stories and places where the story-telling and community-making can happen. They yearn for *Heimat* which provides all these things. They want an access to the sacred, a place where they feel their soul is in connection with “yonder”, to a place that is “full of being”. “Our interviewees constantly lamented the lack of community building and the sacred spaces which help to give an area a soul,”<sup>543</sup> is what pastoral city developers tell, confirming the above. To be needed and useful is of crucial importance to well-being (Motley 4.9 and Pete). People want to have a communal cause to work on, something that binds them together. “Human beings cannot be fully human apart from community.”<sup>544</sup> As fragmented people in a fragmented world, community unites and restores us and thus helps us grow. “We are designed to work best in communities which respect differences, learn from them and celebrate them.”<sup>545</sup>

We need to find perspectives that touch us. Through our experiences with others we learn that reconciliation and peace are “predicated on diversity, not on uniformity ... It is about the 'We' that gives identity to the 'I'”<sup>546</sup> or the “Thou-ness”<sup>547</sup> as Buber put it, encountering someone as a relational being. A Community chaplain, Bob Whorton,

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543 Green & Baker (eds), *Building Utopia?*, p. 122.

544 Green & Baker, *Building Utopia?*, p. 121.

545 Green & Baker, *Building Utopia?*, p. 121.

546 Sacks, *Dignity*, p. 202.

547 Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 1,8.

bears on this difference when writing:

We are aware of each other in a new way, aware of our fragility, beauty and power as human beings. We value one another whoever we are, whatever we are, wherever we come from.<sup>548</sup>

We acknowledge our complementarity and do not deny our differences, even if it hurts at times (cf. Robert 5.3.6).

When asking clergy what they appreciated about Othona, I received the following answers. Ruth, a minister who works for Church without Walls, considers her work very similar to what Othona is doing: Creating a space with a sense of belonging without demanding belief. Belonging comes before believing. An ethos of welcome exists. The tension though remains whether to say “This is church”.

The new Chair of Trustees, Colin Hodgetts, summarises the latest development in the Community in 2012:

Thirty years ago one could assume that most of those spending time at one of the [Othona] centres had a working knowledge of Christianity even if they were cool about their commitment to it. Today this is no longer true and faith can be seen as an optional extra and almost any faith will do ...

Though I have a profound respect for other faiths, Christianity is the sea in which most of us swim. It still has a lot going for it. We must not be swayed by its lack of popularity ...

So I come with a keen desire to see a revitalisation of Christianity, which probably means new forms and new expressions, not imposed from above but developed through discussion, prayer and the creative spirit.<sup>549</sup>

Hodgett's hope for a 'new' form of Christianity, which is not imposed upon the Community but evolves from a creative discourse within, can be found when taking a closer look at the evaluation of the interviews (see Chapters 5 and 6). Considering the

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548 Bob Whorton, 'Making a Difference', Full Circle, Summer 2007, p. 13.

549 Full Circle, Winter 2012, pp. 6-8.



'Facebook prayer' (7.2) and all the other platforms that Othona people have created on the Internet (see 8.9) show the unfolding power of the 'creative spirit'. It is, of course, not limited to virtual reality but always stems from experiences and encounters at the centre directly.

Steve, another vicar, delights in Othona's inclusivity. "Here", he says, "you find faith about the whole of life. In church three elements being practised here are missing. In church we worship. Here we also work, study and play together."<sup>550</sup> He rates highly getting disabled people to do something. They are not excluded from interacting, working, and being part of everything. Othona is important and refreshing to specific individuals. According to him, people find connection with nature, with meteor showers and dark starry skies and with ancient stones. While the power station nearby is dismantled after fifty years, the Chapel keeps its secret.

Our perceptions are altered through experiences at Othona because it offers Community experience, with new awareness and possibilities demonstrating a transformation (7.10.2). The feeling of structure but not of rigidity makes it "one of the freest places I have ever stayed", says Dorothy.<sup>551</sup>

What people tell most often is that they feel appreciated at the Community. Not being valued and cherished is the opposite of what many of us experience at work, or at home. Being received differently, appreciatively, is the experience of significance many people talk about. Hence being a member of the Community shapes one's

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550 Field notes, summer 2015.

551 Field notes, summer 2014.

perceptions, creative imagination, one's view of the world, one's political attitude, emotions, thinking, and learning. Here people gain human significance.

## **8.6 Issues Remaining at the End of the Thesis**

Even so many years after having discovered Othona, the great forethought of the founder still surprises me. Rereading Motley's letters, the scales literally fell from my eyes. His foresight, his clear thinking and resolute work towards the *Kingdom* was so absolute and unfettered that he wrote a month before his death “we have to learn to know, perhaps even to become the Kingdom.”<sup>552</sup> He wanted people to become that for which they were created. What surprised me most is the fact that his ideas are still there, still at work, though nobody uses his language any longer. The Community has moved into the new Millennium, so has the language.

### **8.6.1 Ethnical Diversity of Christian Intentional Communities?**

One issue which remains unanswered is why “The Christian intentional community movement is largely a white phenomenon”.<sup>553</sup> It certainly applies to Othona. How can Christian intentional communities become more ethnically diverse? A social worker from London who grew up in South Africa, thought that it is first and foremost a matter of language that is used in leaflets and in outreach in general. As mentioned before, that is an aspect which can only be broached and noted but cannot be explained. The question, however, remains, whether this fact undermines the rhetoric of encounter and embracing difference?

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552 Motley, Letters, p. 72.

553 Janzen, Community Handbook, p. 135.

Clare talks about wanting to integrate more vulnerable people, such as refugees, but realises at the same time that Othona might not have the capacity to do so. This is a very topical and relevant question in 2015-2016, when the number of refugees coming particularly from Syria does not seem to end. The question is not only how to integrate them into communities but into society in general. Othona has learned to pay close attention to the balance between needy and giving people, realising how easily wounded people can derail the Community.

### **8.6.2 Reflections on Methodology**

Were I to do the research again, I would refrain from the theologically-worded questions. Most of my interviewees had problems with them and could not answer them, though in fact they have been answered in the Research. But I should have known as a teacher about contemporary 'religious illiteracy'; I did not necessarily transfer this to Othona. As a theologian, teacher and researcher I am quick at labelling and categorizing experiences, I am in the dualism of 'objectivity' and subjectivity, of sacred and profane, of observer and participant. This stops me sometimes from being 'all ear' to particularly incommensurable phenomena. My methodology has shown that wanting to reduce phenomena to constructions of the mind does not always work. I found it difficult though to be brave enough, to dare to go beyond anything 'on offer'. But books such as *Landscapes of the Sacred* by Belden C. Lane<sup>554</sup>, are definite encouragements to go beyond offered methodologies in extending, for instance, what is written by music, films, or other pieces of art.

The available interpretive paradigms do not suffice for what in fact came from the

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554 See footnote 522.

witnesses. Doing partly Qualitative Research lured me into thinking that I was working with a constructivist interpretive paradigm. I experienced the limitations very quickly. How do you describe “the imaginative entry to the landscapes of the holy”;<sup>555</sup> and how do you put into words this “connector of the soul with Being”?<sup>556</sup> How do you convey the connotations of *Heimat*, and how do you explain to a non-German the longing that this word creates? All these questions cannot be answered within a paradigm which considers phenomena as 'constructed'. They could have been tentatively approached in narrative style, by comparison, or with a creative montage of language culled from the research. A wider methodology, poetic and artistic language as well as “provocative interdisciplinarity”<sup>557</sup> might have helped to put down the imprint the Community leaves on you.

So a modification of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm was appropriate. It was through negotiating the hard data in standard methods with the soft data (interviewee perceptions) alongside the researcher's own perspective that I in the end addressed the Research Question.

This reflection on methodology could be pertinent to other Christian communities: multi-dimensional, phenomenographic and auto-ethnographical aspects are highlighted by the particular experience I have been able to bring to the research from the “inside”.

Were I to do it again, I would try to be even more open towards my interviewees and

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555 Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 12.

556 Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 20.

557 Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 10.

leave more space for their own stories, extrapolation and versions. I would try to ask questions that might elicit the theological “answers” I have since discerned. I would dig deeper and not be satisfied with superficial answers. The number of interviewees might have to be reduced to enable more in-depth-interviews. Spending more time with one person, continuing the interview over days (which is possible at Othona) might be a way of extracting information and giving the person time to re-think what he/she has said, giving them the opportunity to restate what they have been formulating. I would concentrate on fewer people.

### **8.6.3 Othona and Liberation Theology or Othona and a Theology of Encounter?**

One last point concerns Othona's encounter with Liberation Theology. Looking back at my outworkings and results, I am no longer convinced that I would categorise Othona within the spectrum of Liberation Theology. A *Theology of Encounter* seems more appropriate, because “These encounters ... lead to a transformation of the place as well as the individuals and communities associated with them.”<sup>558</sup> These transformations go back to Husserl's *intersubjectivity* (see 7.5.7) in depicting reciprocal discernment: How am I transformed through my experience at the Community and how does this influence impact on the world I go back to? What is the effect of our Community experience on our lives? Or as Belinda puts it “What do people carry out of here?” This remains unanswered, though Valerie hints at it by saying “the good it does must have an impact onto the communities we go to at home.” Brenda agrees “What we stand for, changes our lives when we go back”. In other words, what we take out of the Community has an impact on what we do in the

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558 Inge, *Theology of Place*, p. 86.

world outside, in our jobs, has an impact on us, on how we behave towards others (see 7.7.3).

It would be interesting to research further into the informal life of intentional communities, into group dynamics, into community building, into inter-subjectivity, to name the bridges that lead from the community experience back into our normal lives. These transformations are not considered in this thesis for they would spawn another PhD thesis.

## **8.7 Original Contribution**

Though the Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall has been part of archaeological digs and inquiries, the Othona Community has only been in the centre of interest as long as it provided links with the Chapel. Othona occupies a special place among Intentional Christian communities, which have overall received limited attention from academic research. This thesis is the very first attempt to depict thoroughly the fabric of community using thick description and applying the concept of *Lebenswelten*. The distinctiveness of Othona relies in an important way on the meanings assigned to it by those experiencing and identifying with it. This is why an analysis of the origins, developments, organisational matters, and charisms of some other already existing communities would have been restricting and fragmentary. By looking into the phenomenon of this Community alone, two essential terms have emerged. *Heimat* is a new tool introduced into theology to help to define this phenomenon. Bearing *Heimat* in mind makes it possible potentially to understand other communities. The second term that has transpired when delving into the fabric of community is a *Theology of Encounter*. Though this is not a new term within theology, it certainly is when

juxtaposing it with *Heimat*. In encountering others and the Other, people find *Heimat*.

The original contribution of this research lies in the combination of an auto-ethnographic approach, a phenomenographic methodology tailored to the discipline of theology, and the findings that this has produced about a “strange phenomenon.”

My thesis has added to the sum of knowledge in three key ways:

1. It is the first in-depth investigation of the phenomenon that is Othona and the first articulation of its implicit theology in the twenty-first century.
2. It has developed a multi-dimensional methodology that is transferable to research into other Intentional Christian Communities.
3. It has demonstrated the significance of the concept *Heimat* and a Theology of Encounter for understanding Intentional Christian Communities.

The distinctiveness lies also in the time dimension which I am able to add to this research, as the observations have somewhat been ongoing since my youth. I am hence familiar with this place but also interwoven in its existence, in its history and in its presence. Having always been an observant participant makes me unusual as a researcher. Ethnographers or other academics doing field work normally do not spend the amount of time I have in my 'field'. I have experienced the multi-facetness of the Community, I know the ropes and more. I can compare over time.

So, Christian Intentional Communities are good news for people for which other possibilities (i.e. the Church) have failed (compare 8.3 Marge). It is often the case that most people who are in an intentional Christian community are eccentric Christians, very dissatisfied with church in general. The reason for that could be that intentional communities attract “all things counter, original, spare, strange. In the specific and

concrete—even the grotesque—it returns always, through Christ, to the holy.”<sup>559</sup>

Communities 'normalise' (i.e. give them the feeling that they are just right the way they are) the eccentric without wanting to change them, and offer them a place where they find *Heimat*. And *Heimat* entails roots, a sense of belonging, a family and access to the Sacred. Therefore, “small Christian communities matter; they have consequences”<sup>560</sup> (see Brenda, Belinda, Valerie, Marilyn) as the thesis has demonstrated.

But have we answered our fundamental question? To that we now turn.

## 8.8 The Research Question

How can we now understand the strange phenomenon of the Othona Community and its special charism?

Researching an Intentional Community that has generated a Sister Community in Dorset brings up the question about the distinctiveness of the Othona Community. What is a distinctive phenomenon? Is not a phenomenon *sui generis* distinctive as it is single and exclusive? How can a Community that is incommensurable, and even 'mysterious' be understood? Can it be compared to other communities of practice? In what way is Othona different from other religious and intentional communities?

Having lived at Othona, West Dorset for half a year, having visited Hilfield

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559 Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 11.

560 Bernhard J. Lee & William V d'Antonio & Virgilio P. Elizondo, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (New York/ Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 4.



Community and Pilsdon Community, being a supportive member of the Ashram Community in Sheffield, and having participated in the community week that took place at the Othona Community in 2010, organised by John Vincent and attended by fourteen different community representatives, have taught me about the idiosyncratic nature of community. Each community can only be understood *in its own terms*. What unites them is the fact that “Christian intentional communities have been seized by a gospel vision so radical that they are countercultural within Christianity itself.”<sup>561</sup> These counter-cultural elements pervade Othona and its *Lebenswelten*. Every community is unique, given its geography, history, stories, make-up of people, intention, character, and more. No human community is ever quite like another, but each has its own identity, just like each human person. Othona is an Intentional Christian Community. This does not make it inimitable. It is a transitory, at times occasional Community that becomes community when people convene. It is at times a therapeutic Community, though Othona eschews the description. It is a Community based upon work, study, prayer and play, a monastic pattern that Othona again avoids in its self-description. It is a Community based upon practice rather than theology. And it is a Christian Community, with an umbilical link between the Community and the holy place where it is located. None of these characteristics alone can be claimed as inimitable. Though sensing it, people fail to name the speciality, the unusualness, the extraordinariness, the strange phenomenon of Othona (see 7.12.3: Janet Marshall's account).

One way to describe Othona is as a movement. Norman Motley described Othona as

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561 Janzen, Community Handbook, p. 173.

such as early as 1949.<sup>562</sup> As a movement, Othona has the classic charismatic stimulus of its founder. Like other groups existing over time, “the movement of the spirit” has experienced a certain institutionalisation or a “routinization of charisma”<sup>563</sup>, as sociologist Max Weber phrased it, as expressed in its development of aims, structures, and processes (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, after Motley's death in 1980, Othona has maintained its special genius beyond its founder through the seed that he had sown. It has kept its

- Values (of welcome, encounter, openness, inclusivity, exchange, and more)
- Daily structure (of work, study, pray, play — rather than confession of faith or vision statements)
- Location (sacred place rather than sacred routines)
- Members who transmit the values and bear the tradition (rather than texts)

Central to this development has been the continuous attempt to be welcoming and accepting to whoever comes. An open-door policy has been maintained. However, the location of Othona on the edge, of being separate, the impossibility of running away, of a programmed environment, with its somewhat 'spartan' style (even if less today than it used to be) discourages the casual visitor, and filters who comes. This means that, on the whole, Othona attracts particular groups of people (but, strikingly, not people of other ethnicities):

- The committed
- The determined
- The 'odd balls'
- The needy (if they have got sufficient money)
- People themselves on the edge
- People in transition
- People seeking 'home' beyond its normal manifestations
- People seeking themselves away from the ordinary world
- People with an impetus towards expansion and change
- People aware of social justice issues.

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562 Compare Motley, Letter to Constance Marie, in connection with Summer Programme for 1949 (Othona Archives).

563 Max Weber (S. N. Eisenstadt, ed), On Charisma and Institution Building (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. xxi.

This, in itself, starts to distinguish Othona from other communities. But it is going too far to say that, on this basis, Othona is singular. None of the above, by themselves, enable Othona to be described as extraordinarily distinctive. So, how is this designation possible, beyond mere assertion?

Othona's special nature can be seen in the constellation of the above elements (and more, and others that need to be added individually). It is cemented in the particularity of place, with a risky, open-ended tradition that flirts outrageously with dismemberment and dispersal, in a highly unpromising place, with a somewhat discouraging style, and yet evokes *Heimat* in those who make the journey. In this 'thin place' that can only be adequately described 'thickly', a strange phenomenon exists for those able to perceive it. Part of the strangeness of this phenomenon is the fact that it still exists. The seventieth anniversary is at hand (summer 2016). Othona endures the imponderability and vicissitudes of life. It is so easy to imagine Othona not existing, yet it exists: it stands out, where it is, in its own distinctive and idiosyncratic way, for its equally idiosyncratic participants — and, yet, here people find Community as they move back and forth between Chapel and Stoep. The Othona Community exists, only truly exists, when it gathers — and moves between Chapel and Stoep — just as the Church only exists when its members assemble to worship or practise. This approach of the reformed churches is epitomised by Karl Barth when describing the *True Church* as *Gemeinde als ein Ereignis*<sup>564</sup> (tr. Community as an event ) (cf. Brunner 7.12.2):

Die wirkliche Kirche ... wird sichtbar, indem sie als solche in der Kraft

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564 Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (ausgewählt und eingeleitet von Helmut Gollwitzer; München/Hamburg: Siebenstern, 1965), p. 225 (iv 1, 798).

des Heiligen Geistes ... aus ihrer Verborgenheit ... *hervorbricht* und *herausleuchtet*.<sup>565</sup>

(tr. The real Church ... becomes visible, when she as such with the power of the Holy Spirit ... bursts out and shines out ... of her hiddenness).

This bursting and shining out, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is how we might describe Othona.

In this sense, true Community is experienced through the Holy Spirit, and Othona appears sustained by God's grace — only so can one explain its curious, continuous existence. Though the founder concedes “We shall never fully explain the mystery of our appeal.”<sup>566</sup> To him Othona remains “an instrument in the Divine purpose.”<sup>567</sup>

The “Divine Purpose” is “to discover the meaning of the Kingdom.”<sup>568</sup> And this is where Othona is special, if not unique: it is a two-fold reality where place and Community are vitally entwined and in which you find an authentic, if fragmentary, expression of the *Heimat* that we all long for and which will only be discovered, however, in its fullness in the Kingdom. This longing for *Heimat* — since here we find no abiding city (Hebrews 13:14) — is two-fold: here and now, and also future, what is anticipated, expected, and enjoyed in its fullness. Everybody at Othona knows the engraving in the Bank: the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof (Psalm 24:1). And a two-fold *encounter* (see 7.12.2 Brunner) lies at the heart of the experience of *Heimat* at Othona: encounter between people in the Community — between a person and the “Other” represented by the Stoep, and between people and the Holy, between a person and the “Wholly Other”, represented by the Chapel. What

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565 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, pp. 225-226 (iv 2, 700-701).

566 Motley, *Letters*, p. 51

567 Motley, *Letters*, p. 47

568 Motley, *Letters*, p. 47.

makes Othona special are these encounters which replenish and nourish us. Both Chapel and Stoep are places of encounter where *Heimat* happens and the Kingdom is experienced and anticipated. Distinctions between sacred and profane become blurred, as they do between priest and people, members and non-members, believers and non-believers.

## **8.9 Alternative Conclusion**

When my son was little he used to cry for days after having left Othona. He was inconsolable. It took him a week to adjust to our 'normal' life again. I always had to think of the African proverb that it takes a whole village to raise a child, in this case a whole Community. He thrived in that environment of having several 'siblings' and 'relatives' or as Yann said “always somebody available for activities”.

Penny, Hendrik and Elsa from Berlin came the other week to visit. Anke from Düsseldorf wants to know via Facebook how the thesis is going, and Dorothy from Nottingham is waiting for the final version to do the proof reading. Martin from Pinneberg gave me some interesting hints and corrected some facts. Helga took some of my luggage with her in the summer and is due to visit with her daughter when the Christmas market starts at the end of November. And after Christmas there is the traditional Othona meeting at Martin's.

The list could go on and on. Othona is not just something for the summer. It continues 'outside'. The net-working is immense. Facebook has four Othona groups at the moment (The Othona Community, Othona Forum, Othona Community [West Dorset], BBB [Back Bradwell Build]). There is a regular 'virtual stoep meeting' every Sunday

night, in which ideas are exchanged, plans are made, comments or suggestions for improvement given. Current and topical discussions, observations and criticism take place. Always evolving. Julie states: “This ‘Community thing’ is continued via the Internet platform Facebook nowadays.”

The report of the Annual General Meeting and Financial Statements of 2014-15 came today (March 2016) by post, sent to all the members for the first time, in a new glossy layout, reflecting how both centres have worked over the year. And – to my great surprise – since coming events cast their shadows before them, the idea of the Kingdom has reappeared in a statement in this official leaflet:

Othona is a place where we strive to enable all who come to be able to contribute to the best of their ability, so that we may fully experience living in community and discover a little of God's Kingdom here on earth.<sup>569</sup>

This shows again that on the one hand the small English summer camp from the 1940ies has become a mostly Europe-wide, international networking organisation but on the other hand continues to provide a place where the Kingdom of God can be lived and experienced.

## **8.10 Conclusion**

Stories of life change, and journeys of transformation show the need of a shared life in our fragmented society. “We crave connection. Intentional Christian community offers this connection as it relocalizes and reintegrates our lives.”<sup>570</sup> However, there are experiences which remain inaccessible to the researcher. Even if they are accessible to a degree to the observant participator, there are the boundaries of language.

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569 Othona Community, Report of the Annual General Meeting & Financial Statement (Burton Bradstock, Bridport, 2015).

570 Janzen, Community Handbook, p. 33.

Encounters with people, spiritual experiences, emotions and ambience have no adequate language for translation. Othona would need a wider methodology, richer in artistic expression to include experiences of the soul, spaces of the sacred, descriptions of the Holy, encounters with the Incarnational in order to fill the lacunae of longing, to provide anchored existence and to offer a *Seelenheimat* (tr. a *Heimat* for the soul).

These encounters at Othona induce a transformation of place and people alike. In this linking of place and Community a strange phenomenon presents itself as a reality which people can enter and discover something greater that could never be manufactured by human hands alone — although human, practical hands are needed. (see song by member Chris Jones: Many hands from many lands have made our dream come true, and many strangers now are friends). Othona is inimitable not because no one anywhere else cannot experience something similar, but because this encounter and experience of *Heimat* has a character peculiar to Othona, to the sacredness of the Chapel and the experience and practice of the Othona Community since 1946.

Othona is so much more than it seems to be on the outside. It is more than a lifestyle or mind-set or holiday place. It represents values which stand for the Kingdom: “the practice of hospitality in the margins,”<sup>571</sup> of offering radical hospitality, solidarity, inclusivity, diversity, a place of healing, a supportive family, and a rootedness called *Heimat*.

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571 Paul Shackerley, 'The Church in the City: Partnership and Hospitality', Urban Theology Unit/Sheffield University, PhD Thesis cited in John Vincent, *Christ in the City* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2013), p. 85.

Rosemary Wells, a member, wrote a short poem to grasp Othona's distinctive marks:

Othona

Is Othona a place  
An experience  
Or an attitude of life?  
Offering the experience of acceptance  
Of a person in his wholeness  
An attitude of life we take with us  
Wherever we go.<sup>572</sup>

Even though Othona is all of it and more, as we have seen, and shapes and coins us, the *genius loci* is not available to scrutiny. Humans have no control over it. Othona creates people, and people create Othona. It is different every time.

In other words, Othona transcends normal attempts at categorization. It remains a “strange phenomenon.” All reductionist efforts to understand Othona will remain attempts at understanding the unexplainable, the unfathomable. Efforts to understand Othona can only be marginal because of its incommensurability and its links to the sacred (7.12.3 “Holy Ground”). It is what it is, *sui generis*, and Othonites know it.

Othona remains elusive as an echo, a glimpse, a rumour, a hint or a taste of the Kingdom of God. It “exists to be a sign of the hope and the promise that together we shall get there.”<sup>573</sup> Or to quote Norman Motley at the end of the thesis again: “Long live Othona [this strange phenomenon] ... as an instrument in the Divine Purpose.”<sup>574</sup>

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572 Rosemary Wells, 'Othona', *Full Circle*, Spring 2010, p. 11.

573 Harold Johnson, 'Good News', *Full Circle*, October 1998, pp. 4-5.

574 Motley, *Letters*, p. 47.



**Fig. 15 The View Ahead**

