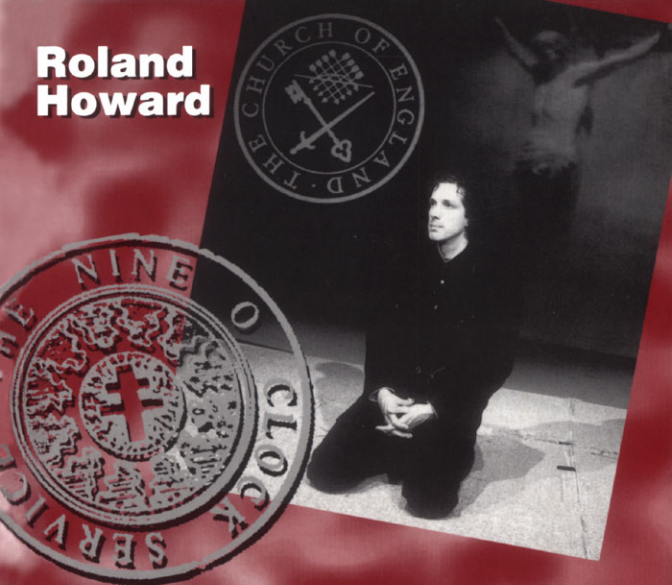
Roland Howard



The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service

A cult within the church?

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Addendum

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"At that stage, the press were not involved, but the community were anxious about the possibility of the media descending on them and Lowe was still uncertain about the full extent of what had happened. However, Jennings advised that once proper pastoral care had been arranged for all concerned, the Diocese should issue a full statement on the following Monday, or earlier if the press asked about NOS. Following that, a policy of complete openness with the media would be essential."

Introduction

Before the Nine O'Clock Service (NOS) hit the headlines in August 1995, the story was a radical nightclub-style Church of England, raving in the aisles. Then in the media frenzy the story was a Randy Vicar story; a Randy Vicar story on an unprecedented level, involving a score of women and spiced up by bikini-clad dancers performing in services. The real story is more disturbing.

NOS was a Church of England flagship congregation not simply because of its experimental worship, which resembled a state-of-the-art nightclub with film loops, projections, multi-track mixing desks and 'attitude', but also because of its radical state-of-the-art 'post-modern' theology. Here was a church facing squarely the issues that other churches ignored: poverty; racism; sexuality; and the environmental crisis. Here was a church reaching out intelligently to a 'godless generation', bringing them Christianity with a passion for, and commitment to, their issues. NOS was refreshing the parts that other churches couldn't reach.

Yet two of NOS's rave service film loops inadvertently betrayed a deeper reality. One was of a fish washed up and floundering in the shallows of a polluted stream, struggling for survival. The other is a computer-generated image of going through a never-ending series of doors, going deeper and deeper inside, but getting nowhere. Both are resonant symbols of what life was like for members of the congregation. To exist in NOS involved being 'vortexed' through increasingly strange doors of perception, deeper into a controlling organisation. It was a struggle for survival and the stream was poisoned.

Underneath the carefully manicured exterior, the real story is of a man who seemed, according to many, to have a megalomaniac desire to control other people; of a complex, secretive organisation, where unknown to many, abuse existed; of a leadership convinced that their leader was God's mouthpiece who was going to save Western civilisation. Yet it is also clear that the Revd Chris Brain was no mere pantomime villain. The 'vision' that he held out to his congregation was intelligent and relevant, and although most members I interviewed believe that he behaved cynically and cruelly, others point to a struggle within him between his passion for justice and his desire for power. Some are convinced that his mission was

genuine, while others suggest that he lost his way. Many are convinced that he was a skilful and ruthless power seeker.

The real story is of a congregation's sacrifice. The sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of pounds, of their careers, and of their minds, bodies, souls and dress sense to their enigmatic, charismatic and 'pure' leader. The real story is of lawyers, doctors, professors, psychiatrists, theologians, football fans and clubbers convinced that their leader was a prophet who could change the world.

The real story is of betrayal and abuse, of a leader living in luxury and travelling round the world in designer clothes whilst his congregation largely lived in the 'simple lifestyle'. It is of a minister, according to some, sexually involved with over 40 female members of his congregation. Moreover, it is of a priest manipulating, controlling and dominating the minds of several hundred members who thought he was ministering to them. The real story is about an insatiable desire for power, which was fulfilled by money and sexual involvement. This power was power to damn, power to humiliate, power to enter people's minds and power to control them. The real story is of a cult in the Church of England.

Central to every cult is a charismatic leader. Brain had the sort of charisma that could elicit massive financial gifts from followers to support his lifestyle; that could persuade young women to form a secretive team of handmaidens who started out by cleaning and shopping but ended up exploring sexual intimacy, convinced that he was ministering to them; that won plaudits from the Archbishop of Canterbury, and internationally known academics, and had senior Anglicans convinced that his radical approach and his church were the future for the Church of England. But, it was also the sort of charisma that made everyone freeze when he came in the room.

This is the story of Chris Brain and of his disciples, whose commitment and idealism were awesome and whose betrayal was devastating. This is a story of pioneering, visionary and relevant theology, corrupted into systematic abuse. But the Nine O'Clock Service is not only a story concerning abuse; it is also a story of integrity and idealism, of wrestling with the complexities and addictions of contemporary life as Christians. Many would say that

it still has much to offer, now that their leader has been exposed. For most it was the importance and relevance of the church's vision that held their loyalty, and that made it harder to recognise the abuse. The corruption of the best, they say, is the worst.

Finally I would like to say that this book is not the whole story. Although it is intended to be the story of the NOS community, each individual has a different, frequently harrowing, tale to tell. Some stories have not been included in the interests of taste and sensitivity, others because of space. It has presented me with many difficult decisions as people try to put NOS behind them and start life anew. It has been a disturbing book to write.

It is with this in mind that the book is dedicated to the former members of the Nine O'Clock Service who have made themselves vulnerable at a time when they might have been tempted to silence. It is also dedicated to the integrity and idealism which fuelled their vision which, whatever its faults, will surely resonate with hope into the next millennium.

1

Origins of a Visionary

In many ways, as a young man Chris Brain was fairly unremarkable. Born in June 1957, he had a brother and sister and initially lived with both his parents. His father was a photographer and his mother worked in a shop in Harrogate. Brain told some who were close to him that he spent his childhood surrounded by beautiful women and, according to others, his father at some stage ran a modelling agency. He passed the eleven plus and attended the local school, Harrogate Granby High, where his behaviour has been variously described as quiet, confident, rebellious, deceptive and secretive.

Motorbikes were of greater interest than academic study, and he left school at the age of 17 with a 125cc motorbike and indifferent exam results. He was a 'member' of a motorbike gang and was known as quietly rebellious, a 'fly lad'. Another fairly typical teenage trait was getting into trouble. He told a friend that he had been sacked from working as a petrol pump attendant. Soon after leaving school, Brain became interested in Christianity through an old school friend, Roy Searle, who had been recently converted on a Christian retreat in Scotland.

According to Searle, Brain was a 'canny' character who was known as 'a good laugh' and who always had a questioning, radical streak. It was during his final year at school that Searle and Brain became friends, and Searle remembers him asking big questions about what direction his life was taking. Searle told him about his recent conversion and, over several months, Brain became interested in Christianity. It was on Bamburgh Beach, Northumberland, that he remembers Brain becoming a Christian. 'Chris experienced a quiet, but profound change', he says, 'he showed a genuine love for God.' Searle remembers a much gentler side to Brain's character emerging. They started attending a thriving youth group in Harrogate Baptist Church and Brain and Searle were soon involved in the leadership committee.

Brain's conversion was into the evangelical wing of the Christian Church, which is characterised by a belief that the bible is the inspired Word of God without error, and by an emphasis on an intense and personal relationship with Jesus. This personal

relationship tends to focus on a conviction of personal sin, and receiving forgiveness for this sin, followed by a struggle to conquer it through prayer, bible study, good living and ongoing repentance, which should lead to holiness. Out of this intense and personal relationship comes the other characteristic of the movement, a desire to bring everyone to realise their need of the Saviour. The radical, life-changing conversion experience empowers this messianic vision to bring the world to repentance and life in relationship with Jesus, at which point the world's troubles will fall away.

Brain approached his faith with all the enthusiasm and seriousness of a young convert. He was baptised by full immersion (as a sign of becoming a new creation in Christ) in 1975 at the Baptist Church by the Revd Jack Pike. He took Christ's injunctions about helping the disadvantaged seriously and worked as a care assistant at a Red Cross home for the handicapped. Searle remembers the compassion and creativity with which he approached his work. Brain was liked by staff and patients. He also started telling friends and acquaintances about Christ. Clearly he had the charisma to bring others to faith.

One of the first people he made an impression on was Lynn Bulmer, a girl two years younger than him, from Harrogate Granby High School. Lynn was a quiet, studious girl and a talented musician. She played in the school orchestra and often played the piano in school assemblies and was a conventional, 'straight' and unassuming girl. It was a surprise to many of Lynn's friends when she became friendly with Brain, a long haired 'youth' with a motorbike. It was not long before Lynn was attending the Baptist Church with Brain and a number of his friends.

This friendship developed into romance and in August 1977 they were married at Harrogate Baptist Church. There were misgivings on the part of some relatives about the couple marrying so young, but it was seen by church members as a serious and positive step on their journey with God. The wedding was a tense occasion because the parents of both bride and groom had been divorced and remarried, but with his old school friend, Roy Searle, as best man and their evangelical friends to support them, Brain's marriage to Lynn (who later changed her name to Winnie) seemed a success and the couple moved into a flat in Harrogate.

During the following months, the Brains drifted away from the Baptist Church and started attending St Luke's, an Anglican church with livelier worship and charismatic leanings (the practice of spiritual gifts, whether prophecy, healing, or speaking in tongues). It was soon after the marriage that Brain believed that God had told him to start a rock band. The band was to be God's tool to bring young people to faith, to show young people that you didn't have to be 'square' to be a Christian. The band was called *Candescence* and made up of Brain and Winnie, and Pip Brain (Chris's brother) and had two roadies, Mark Estdale and Simon Towlson. When they needed a guitarist and backing singer, Jon Ingham, an eighteen-year-old enthusiast who had been deejaying and playing in punk rock bands for years, was asked to audition by Nina (not her real name), one of the band's growing entourage of helpers and supporters. He tells how he got half way through his audition and realised that punk rock wasn't what was needed, to play with *Candescence* he needed musical ability.

It was through talks with Nina that Ingham had become interested in Christianity. Initially Ingham had rejected Christianity, but Nina and Brain seemed to be reassuringly normal. After he spent some months toying with the idea, Brain brought him to the point of conversion. Ingham says: 'Chris brought me to faith, it was a major hold on me. He was my spiritual father, I understood the faith through him.' As the relationship deepened and grew, Ingham got Brain a job as a painter and decorator, and became *Candescence's* manager. Despite the fact that they were largely playing small youth clubs they took their work for *Candescence* seriously; it was, after all, 'God's work.' Ingham opened a bank account, they had minuted band meetings which always ended in prayer and they played wherever they were invited to.

Their commitment was such that they travelled widely for little or no money. On one occasion they travelled across the country to play at an outdoor evangelistic event at Great Salkeld, a tiny village in Cumbria. The outdoor event was rained off and they had to play in a small village hall to a dozen old ladies and just a handful of local youths. But their professionalism was such that they half filled the hall with meticulously set up equipment and played a full set. Although Winnie was the main musical force behind the group, Brain was the unstated leader and creative visionary. He took his

work so seriously that he frequently asked Alastair Kendall, a slightly older member of St Luke's, if he would be willing to have 'spiritual oversight' of the band. Brain was a strong personality, and, perhaps realising this, he was asking for someone to be accountable to, Kendall declined.

The late David Watson, a respected Anglican charismatic, was a major influence on the band. His emphasis on a radical discipleship involving a simple lifestyle and a commitment to social justice was embraced by Brain and the band members. David Watson's church, St Michael-le-Belfrey, York, was experimenting in forms of income sharing to release members of the congregation for evangelistic work and this idea was later to take shape within the Nine O'Clock Service in Sheffield. They would sometimes visit St Michael-le-Belfrey, which was a thriving, radical and nationally known church. Watson's intellectual and articulate approach to Christianity presented them with their first vision of a radical, potentially world-changing picture of their faith, a faith which didn't hide from the complexity of contemporary culture. Watson was no pietistic fundamentalist; he was addressing the modern world with a thought out and apparently relevant charismatic approach.

Candescence were really non-conformist, radical Christians beginning to experiment with charismatic gifts (prophecy and speaking in tongues) who were seeking to promote this vision (which had changed their lives) to their generation which they saw as a lost culture. In 1978 Jon Ingham had a vision which he believed was prophetic. He saw a theatre full of people with a band playing ambient music in the darkness on the right and some performers centre stage, dressed as City gents walking inside a treadmill. The set was backed by a massive projection accompanied by a *sotto voce* narration. It was a picture of avant-garde performance art which was touring the country. Ingham's mother was in the audience and Jon was behind the audience organising the show. He told Brain about the vision and Brain left to talk to Winnie who had said that she'd had a strange dream. Brain returned saying that the vision and the dream were identical and that it must be a sign from God about their future. They were on a mission from God which demanded total commitment.

In 1978 Winnie Brain was accepted at Sheffield University on an honours degree course in music. The Brains settled in Crookes, a suburb to the west of the city and started attending St Thomas's, a thriving and strongly charismatic Anglican church led by the Revd Robert Warren. The band, and members of its entourage, settled in the same area and they renamed themselves *Present Tense*. Within a year Brain was a home group (a pastoral and bible study group) leader with Robert Warren in his group. Despite being members of St Thomas's, the band and its supporters were not uncritical of the church. They resented what they saw as the church's middle class values and attended Sunday services as a group sitting disgruntled at the back with their arms folded.

Yet the seriousness with which they approached their faith was demonstrated in more than just attitude. In 1978 Simon Towlson used a £20,000 inheritance to buy a house which he was to share with the Brains as the centre for the Christian community and the band. His commitment to a radical community lifestyle was such that he agreed to include the Brains on the title deeds of the house in Parkers Road. It was a demonstration of trust based on his understanding of early Christian values found in the New Testament. He bought the house, assuming that once it was sold the proceeds would be returned to him. At this time Ingham inherited about £50,000. His belief in the vision was such that he decided to donate it to *Candescence* (with some persuasion from Brain) despite objections from his family. The inheritance was taken as confirmation of Ingham's vision and the minutes of a band meeting in October 1978 note a request for prayer concerning the availability of the money and how it should be used. When the money finally arrived it was invested in state-of-the-art equipment to prepare them to fulfil the vision.

Despite these idealistic, if naive, beginnings, all was not as it seemed with *Candescence*. Estdale and Ingham have since discovered that before, and during, his marriage Brain had secret sexual encounters with members of the group. Mark Estdale's girlfriend had been involved with Brain, as had a singer who subsequently left. Brain had managed secretly to push a wedge between Estdale and his girlfriend, Nina, and to create mutual suspicion between her and Ingham, one of her oldest friends. Ingham was told that Nina was part of his 'old life' and was told to

stop seeing her alone and to be suspicious of the motives behind her friendship with him. Brain's influence was such that Ingham was also instructed to give up his deejaying business as part of his discipleship. It was seen as part of his old life which he needed to give up. His equipment was donated to *Candescence*.

Mark Estdale also noted Brain's uncanny ability to 'read people' which he was later to use to devastating effect in the Nine O'Clock Service. He remembers Brain's outspoken criticism of a St Luke's youth leader and a prediction that he was being unfaithful to his wife and would leave her. 'He had only met the guy once', Estdale says, 'and he slated him severely.' Sometime later the youth leader left his wife for another woman. However, Estdale also remembers Brain more positively in the early years as 'a bit nutty'; he was exciting, passionate and energetic. He was an articulate dedicated catalyst but he was not without compassion. The likeable aspects of Brain's personality were also apparent to Ingham: 'Chris was a vibrant, active person, you never knew what he was going to do next. He also had a sharp sense of humour and a likeable charm. We took the good with the bad and accepted it.'

At this stage Brain and the band were exposed to dance music and fairly quickly adapted to the Sheffield dance and 'industrial' music scene. *Present Tense* (later named *Tense*) soon had a following of hundreds, mainly Christians, but they were fast developing credibility on the secular circuit. The vision at this stage was far more sophisticated. They eschewed the idea of overt evangelism as far too obvious and embarked on an avant-garde mission to infiltrate and subvert Western culture and thus to bring about more significant change by presenting radical Christian values which could make a long term, more substantial, difference. To get famous was to get themselves a 'prophetic platform' with which they could impact on contemporary culture.

They saw artists as the modern equivalent of biblical prophets because they were often at the formative edge of cultural development. Brain referred to the band as Urban Art Terrorists because their art was meant to seriously challenge Western culture with an enticing and radical alternative. 'Bomb in the back pocket' was the phrase Brain used of their relationship to the church because they were to get deeply involved with the church and then, at a later stage, reveal their true agenda and destroy the false

middle class edifice which they saw as merely a spiritual reflection of worldly consumerism. Although in another sense the Nine O'Clock Service was to become a bomb in the Church of England's back pocket, these concepts may reveal more than Brain's sense of self importance. They may also reveal more than a crude iconoclasm in that they point to a brutal understanding of how to 'teach and lead' which Brain was to develop in the coming years.

Their first secular concert was at *The Limit* club in 1981. But their professionalism and credibility was most notably demonstrated in a benefit concert for the Lead Mill arts centre in which they supported The Fall and Cabaret Voltaire. They also played alongside a nascent U2 at Greenbelt Festival, weeks after U2's first single was released. They were offered the support slot on a national tour with U2 but turned it down because U2 were too overtly associated with Christianity. Jon Ingham says: 'We didn't want to have the Christian tag, we were trying to get rid of it.'

At this point Brain said that God had told him that the band was to stop playing live dates. They were to concentrate on writing new songs, rehearsing, working on image and producing an alternative avant-garde show. Another prophetic vision for the band started to emerge. It was based on the Old Testament Exodus story of the children of Israel leaving Egypt and entering the Promised Land. They were to live out the narrative in an allegorical fashion in which the stifling church culture was seen as Egypt and the Promised Land was club culture and the music industry which they were to reclaim for God. Brain, as the prophetic spiritual leader was seen as Moses and John Ingham, who as well as managing the band was acting as Brain's spokesperson, was seen as Aaron. 'My job was to make contact with outsiders, to establish a rapport with them, before introducing them to Chris, who wasn't good with people on first meetings', says Ingham.

As they sought to live out the biblical narrative, people associated with the band were sent as 'spies' into enemy territory to see how the enemy operated. That is, they went into clubs or concerts and reported back on what they had learned. The period in which the band were told to stop playing was called the 'wilderness years' and they shared their frustration as they waited for God to tell them when they should 'cross the river'. They were thorough in their preparations, researching cultural trends and the internal

workings of the music industry. The inheritances, gifts and finances which were given to the project were seen as manna given by God. Just as the Israelites had to consume all the manna as an act of trust in God to supply their needs in the future, so the band had to spend all the money without saving any for the future. They saw no contradiction with their anti-consumption and simple lifestyle values. Neither did they see the potentially dangerous dualism of their approach to the outside world, which they saw as the enemy in dire need of their redemptive influence for Christ.

Perhaps, more significantly, this dualistic 'us and them', 'saved and unsaved' approach was the platform for their increasingly grand and wide ranging attacks on secular 'worldly values' of consumerism, greed, waste, lust, fame and power. The more fervent and idealistic their attacks on worldly values, the more insular, close-knit and defensive they became. Ingham recalls: 'We had a very strong identity as a community, there was us and there was everybody else, and they were all middle class people who were fudging the gospel.' They were still on a 'mission from God' but they were becoming increasingly cut off from the church as well as the outside world. As Brain said to me years later: 'We are on a dual exodus from church and from the values of modern society.' With the prophet and his lieutenants in place, a 'total vision', and a clearly shared ethos and culture, they had several cult-like characteristics which were to develop more fully as the vision unfolded.

By this time, they had set up the Nairn Street Community as a way of realising their vision. This was based on the call to a simple lifestyle by radical evangelical leaders like David Watson, Ronald Sider (author of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*) and Jim Punton, leader of the Frontier Youth Trust. The community of about 30 lived together in houses (one of which was on Nairn St, adjacent to St Thomas's) in Crookes, shared their incomes and had weekly community meetings where they read the bible, prayed and discussed politics, culture and any issues that had come up for community members. They became a recognised fellowship group within St Thomas's with Brain as overall leader, Steve Williams, a former youth worker at St Thomas's, later to become pastoral leader, and Ingham as 'practical' leader or manager.

The Nairn Street policy document states: 'There should be genuine submission to the authority of the leaders.' It adds: 'Fellowship