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Editorial: God's Jazz

Anthony Woollard

In our last edition, I made reference to the proposals for upgrading and updating this newsletter. By the time you read this, they should have been further confirmed by our residential Council meeting in Leeds, which this year was unfortunately too late for a report in the April edition (something to look forward to in July!) But this may be an opportunity for looking back as well as forwards.

The Church of England and other denominations, and Modern Church itself, have seen some momentous developments over the past few years, both in their own lives and, with some particular dramas (I need only mention Trump and Brexit), in the wider life of society. *Signs of the Times* has sought to reflect these, but - as first responses to our questionnaire in the last issue are confirming - we need more contributors on such topical matters who will help us to think on their implications for Christians and others. However, the big issue for Modern Church - the fault-line between a liberal faith and its more conservative manifestations - has not gone away, and these pages have mainly been a series of reflections on that.

Looking back at recent editions, I was particularly struck by the title of a book reviewed in our October 2018 edition: *God, Improv, and the Art of Living*. The term "improv" is of course familiar to all fans of jazz and stand-up comedy (and indeed quite a lot of theatrical and other performance). A significant influence on my own thought was reading W H Vanstone's seminal *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, in which he describes the process of creation, divine and human alike, as itself a sort of "improv" rather than the working out of a rigidly fixed plan. I remember



also that Richard Holloway somewhere refers to improvised jazz as an analogy for creation, co-creation and re-creation.

Of course, one can find passages in Scripture which speak of “God’s plan” as something fixed for all eternity. In outline, no doubt; but in detail? Perhaps this is one of the points where the fault-line mentioned earlier is clearest. Those Christians who see a detailed and invariable plan in Scripture are those who are most likely to take a legalistic approach to faith and human behaviour, not least in the area of sexuality, and to deny fellowship to those who do not buy into such a vision (the deviants, presumably, being predestined to their fate). As we know, such approaches exist within the Anglican Communion and within the Church of England itself. And it is at this point that Modern Church must remind such people of a truth to which Scripture itself bears witness (in the words after the Last Supper in John’s Gospel, and less clearly in some of Paul’s writings). Whilst there is a clear narrative thread in Christian tradition, from which we can hardly depart whilst still calling ourselves Christians, that does not mean that all the details of what we call revelation are fixed or final. As the Pilgrim Fathers recognised, there is “yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy Word”, and sometimes that may lead to apparent conflicts between the letter and the spirit, and challenges which some of our co-religionists cannot yet bear.

We are about to enter that period in the Church’s year when such differences of approach can be tested to the uttermost: our understandings of the Cross and the Resurrection.

Some understandings of the Cross, if pushed to their literal conclusion, are pretty monstrous, picturing a God who demands punishment for sin, and if he can’t have it from us will have it from Jesus instead. But that is not the only possible approach which is true to the Biblical imagery of “sacrifice” and “ransom”. The work of Rene Girard and James Alison has taken to a new level our understanding of Jesus as the Scapegoat, carrying the brokenness of the world on behalf of all victims everywhere. And, since all of us are to some extent both perpetrators and victims, there is – as I recently heard suggested in a powerful sermon – a sense in which it is to us, the human race (and perhaps all creation), that the ransom is paid, rather than to God or the Devil. How well that fits in with Sydney Carter’s wonderful song *Friday Morning*: “It’s God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me”.

I wonder how all that reads across to Lorraine Cavanagh’s article below on forgiveness? However

we understand the Cross, the concept of forgiveness would seem to be basic to the Gospel – and perhaps, as she suggests, especially relevant in the context of Brexit. Comments on this article would be particularly welcome.

The Resurrection poses a different set of issues, though James Alison in particular demonstrates to great effect how Cross and Resurrection must hang together. For some members of Modern Church, and many believers and half-believers, this is where another quote from Carter (followed by John Robinson) comes in: “But that I can’t believe!” If we try to define in literal, quasi-scientific terms what happened on that first Easter morning, as post-Enlightenment fundamentalism tries to do, we get into serious trouble. Surely we must say that something **did** happen, something which made an eternity of difference – but what it was, or rather is, must be beyond our comprehension. And even the New Testament presents the story in a variety of registers, veering from an insistence at times on an almost crudely physical phenomenon to a very different and more mystical portrayal at others. This is one of those points at which, as Brenda Watson has been arguing in her series of articles, a purely scientific, materialistic approach to knowledge lets us down.

This, then, is where the mission of Modern Church lies. To respect the facts of reason and science a good deal more than our forebears have sometimes done, and to call out the purveyors of “alternative facts”, but also to keep open that area of knowledge/Wisdom which will not fit into the neat categories of literal description and over-definition. This is an area where believers, individually and collectively, may be free to “improvise” within the bounds of a belief tradition which is generous enough to allow for that. Who knows – in doing so, they may be imitators of God.

That is, of course, if God is “real”. Two articles in this edition relate to that question: David Simon’s article below, and, less directly, Adrian Alker’s invitation to an upcoming PCN conference. I hope that others will want to respond to David; the “non-realist” approach has a place within Christian liberalism, but raises all sorts of questions – to which of course the PCN conference, with its remarkable line-up of speakers, may offer answers or at least clues. I urge readers to join the debate! □

Non Realist Christian Theology: An Introduction

David Simon

It is now 30 years since the debate about non-realist Christianity was prominent in the media. It was widely and popularly communicated through the BBC Television series *The Sea of Faith* where Don Cupitt put forward his arguments in an accessible and appealing way. In the intervening period there have been substantial developments in science, particularly cosmology and evolutionary biology, and a relatively strong reactionary movement in theology, notably in the developments following the logic of *Radical Orthodoxy* advanced by John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock.

In an attempt to reintroduce or revive the debate about non-realist theology, this essay will suggest that religious language does not need to satisfy both the correspondence and the coherence concepts of truth to enable an individual beneficially, satisfyingly and logically to adopt a confession of Christian faith. It suggests that the word 'god' is used by Christians to encompass the arguments which attempt to explain why there is something rather than nothing, and the terms 'salvation' and 'life after death' to encompass the arguments underlying the hope that there is some purpose for self-conscious individual existence, and the term 'eternal life' to indicate the experience of a quality of life in which individuals find themselves satisfyingly unaware of the passage of time.

Concepts of Truth

It is colloquially accepted that for a statement to be considered true it should correspond to some verifiable objective 'fact' or event. Differently, but more rigorously, it is expected that any set of true statements must logically be mutually consistent, providing a coherent whole. These two expectations of true statements may be coined respectively 'the correspondence' and 'the coherence' notions of truth. The most satisfactory understanding of a true statement is one which satisfies both notions simultaneously, but it may be argued that any set of statements that satisfies only one of the notions may be regarded as true.

Cosmic Existence

Quantum mechanics suggests to us that universes spring into and out of existence, apparently spontaneously. When this happens both space and time appear or disappear. These universes seem to come from and disappear to nothing. From within a

universe it will probably be impossible to ascertain either the context of that universe or any existence outside that universe.

While it may not be possible explain why the generation of a universe happens, it is clear, probabilistically, that such occurrences are possible: and if possible, then highly likely to occur over a sufficiently long period or a sufficiently large number of attempts.

The 'Big Bang' explanation of the origins of the universe fits within this likelihood and accounts for the continuous present.

Individual Existence

Within the cosmic universe it is possible for various life forms to emerge, including the human. Each life-form seems programmed to work for its own continued existence within the universe (c.f. Richard Dawkins' argument in *The Selfish Gene*). Thus, where consciousness or self-consciousness has emerged, it may be inferred that this is beneficial to the goal of that life-form's continued existence, and will be used to work towards that aim.

There can be both advantages and disadvantages for particular life-forms in cooperation and in competition with other life-forms at both the individual and corporate level. Hence, limited cooperation with some other life-forms in order to enhance successful competition against other life-forms becomes explicable.

Observation suggests that a belief that existence has a significance and purpose beyond immediate survival seems to confer motivational advantages in exerting the necessary effort for maintaining continued existence.

Satisfying Experiences

Satisfying, or more colloquially pleasurable, experiences appear to be one of the ways by which (self-) conscious life forms are motivated to act by default (instinct?) to promote their continued existence.

Thus, for human beings the instinctive experiences of reproduction through sexual intercourse, gaining sustenance through food, securing warmth and shelter - and even appreciating distant views that provide surety against the covert attack of enemies and aesthetic art forms that give relaxation to the mind - make utilitarian existential sense.

For many people, while experiencing these satisfying feelings, there can be a sense of detachment from the passage of time - for example when totally immersed in a pleasurable or satisfying activity.

Thus, it can be argued that satisfying experiences are generally associated with, and help to inspire, forms of action that contribute to the sustenance and potential flourishing of the existing life-form, and that these experiences can enable an individual to enter a state of knowing that seems to be outside time (in strict definitional terms 'eternal').

Religion

For human society, religion has very successfully played a part in the sustenance of existence within the universe.

It has provided:

a description of a purpose for existence, a rationale for groups of individuals to combine and cooperate in order the better to compete with other individuals and groups;
a common set of agreed acceptable actions (generally codified as ritual and ethics);
a basis for cooperation; and
a means of identifying the set of individuals choosing to cooperate.

Given human (self-) consciousness, it has been found beneficial to locate the source of authority for the acceptable actions as coming from outside the group which has adopted them: both enhancing the cohesion and minimising the likelihood of fracture or fragmentation of the group.

One of the most significant religious agreements (termed 'covenants', 'contracts' or 'truths') for human beings is about purpose for the individual and for the universe. Members of religious organisations tend to ground their satisfying experiences and their sense of timelessness in this concept of purpose.

A brief summary of these aspects of religious culture suggests an acceptance that the universe purposively came into being and that for every (self-) conscious individual there is a purpose which transcends temporal existence.

Non-Realist Christian Theology

From this understanding of the drive for life-form salience in a potentially randomly generated universe, it is a relatively small step to suggest: that the assumed purpose of the existence of the universe (as opposed to its non-existence) can be

expressed by the use of the word 'god'; that the immersive experience of satisfying actions such that the individual loses consciousness of the passage of time can be expressed by the adjective 'eternal' (to indicate a quality of life); and that the inevitable influence of the actions of an individual on successive generations (through memory, reproduction and changed physical conditions) can be expressed by the monikers 'vocation'/'individual purpose' and 'life after death'. Used in this way, these terms form a coherent argument which does not logically require the existence of an objective external correlative in order to be considered 'true' – a non-realist theology.

The whole gamut of Christian theology (a single divine self who is creator of the universe and authority for all that is found within it, divine self-revelation in a particular human being, a particular set of texts at particular historical times, divine imperative to undertake apparently altruistic action, the potential to experience life which seems to transcend time, and so on) may be seen as an internally consistent logical pattern developed over centuries of debate which can be recognised as having been beneficial to the sustenance of at least one part of human existence within the universe.

Individuals may be seen as choosing to adopt, and associate with others adopting, that particular worldview commonly described as 'Christian': a theological paradigm within which the individuals gain satisfying/pleasurable experiences which assist the sustenance of the (self-) conscious life-form. At a minimum, members of such groups will use the language of:

- god (creator, father) to refer to a purposeful generation of a universe and as an authority for the cultic practices of the group;
- of salvation ('life after death', anointed one, saviour or christ) as guarantor of purposive of individual existence.

They will locate present concepts of 'right' behaviour (that is the behaviour that will enhance the likelihood of continued existence of the life-form) in authoritative literature and practices from the past (scripture and tradition). They will advocate life enhancing actions which lead to experiences where time seems irrelevant or absent (seeking eternal life - the eternal quality of life).

Such an understanding of Christianity would be true, in the sense that it has logical coherence, despite not being shown to have a direct correspondence with

the literal sense of the language through which the group expresses its rituals, ethics and identity. It can logically, satisfyingly and beneficially be professed by (self-) conscious individuals - and may validly be described as 'non-realist' Christian theology. □

AS WE FORGIVE

Lorraine Cavanagh

I am tempted to give Lent a miss this year, partly out of laziness and partly because the whole business of giving up, or not giving up, sets me off on a downward spiral of guilt and thence to guilt induced depression. At the same time, I know that guilt is the great imposter when it comes to the meaning and purpose of Lent.

Lent is a season of purgation, or 'refinement', of lightness of being. It is a time for laying bare what is hidden, so that we can be truer to ourselves and thereby more truthful to God. It is a time of unmasking, of getting rid of the distracting clutter which impedes our ability to love better and more truthfully. I am not sure whether giving up alcohol or chocolate really makes any difference in this regard. So what is the work we are really being called to do?

There is a paradox here. It has to do with giving in rather than giving up. Lent is about surrender, and surrendering makes us vulnerable. In surrendering material things, such as things we like to eat or drink, we experience hunger or thirst, usually to a very limited extent, but enough to serve as a reminder of what it must be like to not know where the next meal is coming from, or even if it will come at all. This feeling can of course return us to guilt, unless we are prepared to complement it with a different kind of surrendering, a surrendering that takes us first into the realm of human relationships or, when thought of in a far wider context, of human relatedness.

In both of these contexts, the familial and the global, surrendering has to do with the 'letting go' of forgiveness, a repeated 'letting go' of the things we would still like to do, say or think about someone who is hurting us, or who has hurt us in the past. This is where forgiving gets confused with 'forgetting'. They are not the same thing and they do not necessarily belong together. Forgiving is about accepting ongoing pain, rather than pretending to ignore or forget it.

The forgiving process also involves bearing the ongoing pain of the other person, group or nation.

We surrender to its existence and accept, or understand it, as we do our own. This may in turn permit us to conceive of the possibility that the other person or group is experiencing a similar reciprocity of pain.



Forgiving and forgetting are not one and the same

We are all going to have to do something like this after the 29th of March when Brexit will have become something ranging from 'hard', to not happening at all. We are going to have to surrender into the pain of those who will wish that things had turned out differently. We shall need to do this surrendering, not simply because it will still be Lent, or even because we call ourselves Christians, but because we belong together as a single body, or nation.

From surrendering into the pain of the other we may begin to get an idea of what it is that has been tearing us apart as a nation, at a very deep level, long before the issue of Brexit arose, or even before we joined the EU. But it will not be possible to know what this destructive force is, let alone heal it, until we have all done the surrendering. Some imaginative re-thinking of history might help here.

This is possibly the closest we have come to civil war since the 17th century. There is something implacable about our entrenched attitudes which resonates in a disturbing way with those times. Our fears, and the attitudes they foment, feed other areas of distrust and hatred, all of them having to do with fear of the unknown 'other'. In the last hundred years, or less, we and our parents saw what these fears and hatreds can burgeon into. At the same time, over-simplification of the truth about the past does not help to rebuild trust in the present. To speak too lightly of forgiveness in regard to the Second World War, for example, suggests appeasement, as was made clear at the time. Many would say that appeasing evil and bullying is not the work of forgiveness, and I would agree with them.

This returns us to the heart of the great Christian prayer 'forgive us as we forgive them'. It can be helpful to think of these words as a call to forgive, as far as humanly possible, in the manner we forgive others, rather than to the extent that we forgive them. The latter tends to return us to guilt and leads nowhere. But we can, with grace, work on the manner in which we forgive, how and to what extent we are prepared to bear the pain of those we fear and distrust, or who have wounded us. And if we cannot conceive of a possibility for doing this, might it be possible to surrender them, as we surrender ourselves and our memories, into the darkness of God?

Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide?

PCN Britain Day Conference on 8 June 2019: French Protestant Church, Soho Square, London.

Adrian Alker

At the recent memorial service for David Edwards, a former Dean of Southwark and before that Dean of Norwich and a writer well known to Modern Church members, the present Dean of Southwark, Andrew Nunn, reflected in his address at the paucity of rigorous theological debate in the Church of England, not least amongst the bench of bishops. Modern Church members will have some sympathy with this view, as most of us can recall past decades when the complex and difficult questions of faith and doubt were at least honestly and openly discussed (Honest to God, the Myth of God Incarnate debates, 'troublesome' bishops like David Jenkins et al).

Modern Church, PCN Britain and other like-minded organisations have continued, at least, to keep the flame of theological enquiry burning brightly thanks to people like Martyn Percy, Diana Butler Bass, Marcus Borg and others. Today the Church of England still seems to spend any of its theological thinking time on sexuality and gender issues when much greater challenges are posed by a largely unbelieving nation. Whilst church leaders devote energies to mission strategies, resource churches, growth agendas, leadership and management training, on the fringes of faith but at the heart of popular discourse are the

questions and challenges posed by the public face of atheism.

Beyond the dogmatic fundamentalism exemplified surprisingly by highly intelligent and respected academics such as Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins, there are a host of philosophers, writers and theologians who wish to engage in public debate and to go beyond the divide between religion and atheism, seeking deeper ways to have meaningful conversations about our world, meaning and the place of religion. Modern Church through its past conferences has sought to engage in this debate.

PCN Britain has therefore set up a day conference in London on Saturday 8 June when we are delighted to have four speakers in dialogue with each other: Julian Baggini, philosopher, Guardian writer and author, Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, Harriet Harris (well known to MC members) chaplain at Edinburgh University and author, and Fiona Ellis, Professor of Philosophy at Roehampton.

Our hopeful intention is to have a day of honest challenge, lived experience and respectful conversation where people who are at different points on that spectrum from atheism through agnosticism to deep and committed faith, can converse, learn and seek ways forward in our increasingly divisive world. Come and join us!

The day is priced at a modest £20 (£15 for PCN members) and will be hosted at the French Protestant Church of London, situated on Soho Square in the heart of the West End. Full details can be found on the MC and PCN websites and bookings can be made via the PCN website.

BOOK REVIEWS

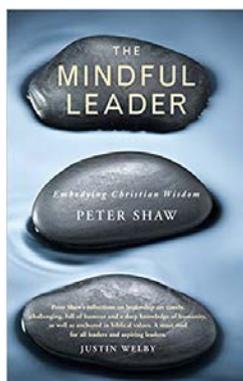
Peter Shaw: *The Mindful Leader (Canterbury Press 2018)*

Trevor Pitt

Despite its title, this short book has little to offer from fashionable mindfulness techniques - instead, it seeks to draw out a range of themes from the heart of the Christian gospel in terms of their relevance for leaders, managers and those who work in teams. In

recent decades, the Church has placed huge emphasis on developing practical skills of leadership, especially in relation to its senior personnel, but also in the formation of its future clergy, which has become a significantly more managerial and less theological process. But this book has a wider focus beyond leadership roles within the church - indeed, 'the church' is hardly mentioned.

The author is a widely published executive mentor/leadership coach who worked for many years at a high Government level in the Civil Service. His emphasis is on ways in which the development of personal Christian character and values can both affect and guide the direction of our individual working lives in all public, private and voluntary business organizations. The aim is to bring out the best of individual people in the workplace (though I missed examples from the shop-floor or the Trade Unions).



The book has a simple structure, taking ten biblical themes and ten individual characteristics or virtues, and relating them to the personal needs of those in leadership roles or with leadership responsibilities. These points are developed under three related perspectives - emotional, rational and practical. Each brief section follows the same format, mixing wide-ranging but random Biblical quotations and references with generalized advice, positive examples, discussion of problematic issues and further points for reflection, and concluding with a brief consideration of an actual issue involving some personally named individual. Some observations are more challenging than others - personal vulnerability, for example, draws out a telling quote from Henri Nouwen p.30).

I looked in vain for some notion of what 'leadership' is, as there is no discussion or theological critique of the workplace organization or system itself. Terms such as 'leader' and 'manager' (and even 'boss') were at times used interchangeably. If leaders are simply those who rise to the top of a system, how can leaders do so from below? Succession planning? Ambition? Talent? And how does change management work? I sensed that an entrepreneurial preoccupation with order, control and authority was here taken for granted at the expense of more daring themes also at the heart of the Christian gospel - prophecy, improvisation, mutuality. Or 'kingdom of heaven', perhaps best translated as 'the way God does things'.

□

Trevor Pitt is the retired Principal of NEOC (1991-2010), Canon Emeritus of Newcastle, Anglican Priest & Methodist Presbyter for Hamsterley LEP, Co. Durham.

David Runcorn *The Language of Tears: Their gift, mystery and meaning* (Canterbury Press 2018)

Peter Varney

This book offers something for everyone, and especially those who need encouragement on their journey through life and those who support them. David Runcorn has taught at Trinity Bristol and St John's Nottingham but has moved to a more open theological approach. In this review some of Runcorn's own words are included; they address an eclectic range of situations and make helpful suggestions for working with them.



Runcorn's approach to counselling and psychotherapy has at its heart a Jungian model which attempts to bring the conscious and unconscious to the light and help the individual person towards a more balanced whole. There is a careful explanation of the cognitive theory of emotions that the response to a situation involves mind, will and actions. This may be, he suggests, "how God feels in the fullness of his being".

Tears are a language for the whole of life not just the grieving or serious bits. Runcorn identifies three kinds. Two have obvious health benefits: reflex, after smoke gets in our eyes and continuous, which keep our eyes lubricated. But a third kind, emotional tears, excrete the toxins which build up during stress and stimulate endorphins; after these tears we enter a calmer biological and emotional state. This leads to the comforting image in Psalm 56 of our tears collected in God's flask.

Many chapters address difficult questions, such as the use of the imprecatory psalms with their cursing, judgment and revenge on God's enemies. We are given thoughtful and helpful ways of considering them. Runcorn points out that they have been at the core of the Church's daily prayer, they speak of our vulnerability and offer a way of joining with all humanity before God. Our vocabulary and emotional responses need to embrace the language of the

psalms, including anger and lament. If not, we can become “too confined by the kind of world we inhabit”.

Tears flow from authentic places within us; they may be both a sign of loss of power or control and be a sign of entering something new, finding life after being close to losing it. This is explored in a helpful chapter focusing on grief and the transforming work of tears, particularly in relationship to mourning for someone close. The unshed tears do not go away, and feelings will not decompose if buried. They need expression so that the search for meaning and purpose in life can be re-engaged. In the new heaven and earth ‘we will discover that all is transformed’.

When Runcorn moves on to consider priestly ministry he finds it has been for him “a calling to tears”. He offers sensitive support to those who include hearing confessions in their ministry. There must be time and silence so that tears may flow; worship must allow space for those who cannot celebrate. He repeats that it is “in the tears of passion and lament that we meet God”.

The three appendices, and other suggestions throughout the book, suggest ways for us to follow up what is written by providing simple outlines for further personal exploration. The references include a website with images of tears originating from different causes. Readers who go there will see under a microscope both simplicity and beauty. This image points us, as the whole book does, to a way of discovering more about ourselves and deepening our spiritual life. Readers will want to ‘highly commend’ this book to others. □

Peter Varney is a Quaker, a retired Anglican priest and psychotherapist, and lives in Norwich.

Marcus Braybrooke *Sikhism – A Christian Approach* (Braybrooke Press 2018)

David Greenwood

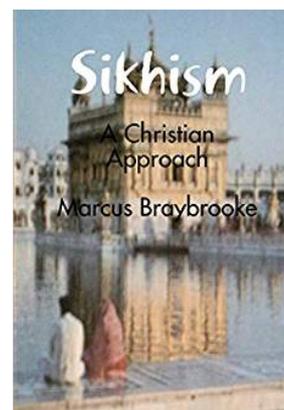
It is ironic that a religion with such a strong commitment to peace and universalism should have had its history so marred in violence. The religion was founded by Guru Nanak, developed by a further nine Gurus and established at the beginning of the seventeenth century with the sacred manuscript known as the Guru Granth Sahib. This sacred manuscript, the writing of which had begun in around 1550 and finalised in 1604, was housed in the Golden

Temple at Amritsar (built in 1601) at a ceremony on 16th August, 1604.

In this concise book of 120 pages, Braybrooke has set out a very

short introduction to the history, development and theology of Sikhism concluding with a description of the place of Sikhism in the world today. The lives of each of the founding gurus are described enumerating the many areas of tension and battles with the established religions of Islam and Hinduism as well as with the secular governments. In spite of all these battles, the Sikh Empire was established covering much of the Punjab which was then gradually dismantled during the ten years following the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839. There then followed a relatively quiet period during the British occupation, at the end of which in 1947 the whole of India erupted into violence. The second part of the book describes the Sikh diaspora concluding with a more detailed description of the Sikhs in Britain. There then follows a section on Sikh theology which deals with the relationship between the religion and Christianity in some detail, thus justifying the subtitle of the book, which does actually form part of a series which includes Christian approaches to Islam and Hinduism. The book concludes with a description of current Sikh devotions and ceremonies ending with a chapter on Sikhism’s message for today. In today’s much divided world that message of peace, of universalism is so badly needed – ‘that there is only one God whom people worship by different names – that speaks to the wider world.’

There can be no one better qualified to write this book and the other two in the series than Marcus Braybrooke. He is an Anglican priest who became secretary of the World Congress of Faiths in 1967, having been inspired by the founder of that organisation, Sir Francis Younghusband who wrote ‘I had visions of a far greater religious faith yet to be, and of a God as much greater than our English God as a Himalayan giant is greater than an English hill’. Interfaith dialogue has been a lifelong passion of Braybrooke and I have no hesitation in recommending



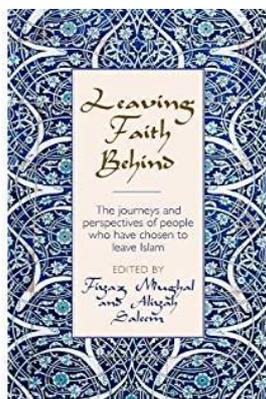
this paperback to any who may be seeking a cogent description of the Sikh religion. There are just one or two minor criticisms – a glossary of Sikh terms would be very helpful for ready reference and there are a few typos which perhaps could be corrected for the next edition. Overall *Sikhism* is a miniature masterpiece of concise writing. □

David Greenwood is Vice-Chair and Treasurer of the Alister Hardy Trust, Reader in the Diocese and author of Art and Spiritual Experience.

**Fiyaz Mughal and Aliyah Saleem (eds),
Leaving Faith Behind (Darton, Longman and
Todd 2018)**

Guy Wilkinson

Leaving Faith behind is a series of chapters by different authors who have chosen to leave Islam. One of them, Aliyah Saleem, has co-edited the collection with Fiyaz Mughal a continuing Muslim.



This is a book well worth reading for three main reasons. First because although the essays are all by people who have left Islam, much of what is written would apply to people leaving any religious community. The issues of gender and sexuality, reason and loss of faith are to be found amongst people leaving all the main religions.

Secondly, because the accounts are personal rather than polemical. In other words, as would be expected from Fiyaz Mughal, a believing Muslim, this short book does not read as an attack on Islam but as a plea for a more liberal understanding by religious communities of those who ask questions.

Thirdly, because this book is a plea for an honest conversation between those who have left Islam and their religious communities about their respective futures. He is much concerned that the Islamism of those who have retreated into narrow fundamentalisms, not only betrays classical Islam, but increases the numbers of those leaving the faith. He calls for an honest conversation within Islam to diminish the very real dangers for those who leave

Islam and for the Islamic community to recognize that such attitudes damage the faith itself.

Through all the five personal accounts a woundedness and regret is clearly present – of both the person leaving and of those around them, their families and friends – as well as a strong sense of freedom and integrity gained.

Aliyah Saleem, co-editor, speaks of her journey from a rebellious teenager to a “fully veiled fundamentalist Muslim” from where as she studied and argued, her faith” started slowly to ebb away”, bringing her eventually to the atheist that she is today. Her hope is that her story will enable those who leave “to find the courage inside that is necessary to live an authentic life without the most debilitating of emotions: shame”.

Hassan Radwan’s loss of faith was a more gradual process of questioning the roots of the spiritual awakening he experienced. He felt at home in the Tablighi Jamaat and “admired the writings of some of the great Sufi luminaries” and taught at the Islamia school for fifteen years. His loss of faith was triggered by 9/11 and the rise of Islamism and began with questioning about the place of women and the hellish fate of non-Muslims, but it was not until in his fifties that his faith finally dissipated when he came to feel “reinvigorated”.

For Jimmy Bangash it was about gender and sexuality. He opens his chapter with the striking statement that: “the twenty first century belongs to women of Muslim heritage... who will claim their rightful place within the world”. He writes very personally of the experiences of his sister at the hands of his brothers, of honour, guardianship and obedience and then turns to his own experience as a gay Muslim man.

Marwa Shami, for whom her loss of faith was rooted, as for so many, in the restrictions and constraints on women, has kept her loss of faith more private.

For Aisha Hussain the online world initially became the place to defend the Islam she had grown up into until at some time at university her deep questions about meaning brought about increasing doubt, transition and confrontation.

Fiyaz confirms what we know from general human experience – that where communities feel themselves under threat, as do many Muslim communities, their ability to tolerate dissent and what is seen as disloyalty, is diminished and liberal and tolerant voices are increasingly embattled.

The lesson for all, religious or not, is that we need a society in which no one has to fear because of their faith or loss of it. □

Guy Wilkinson is a former Inter Religious Affairs adviser to the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Eve Poole: *Buying God: Consumerism & Theology* (SCM Press 2018)

Rebekah Hanson

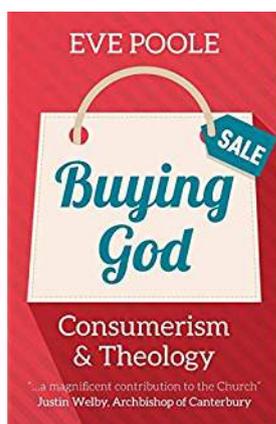
The book, *Buying God: Consumerism & Theology*, by Eve Poole, engages with questions concerning the complexities of modern-day economic responsibilities that Western individuals have, and more specifically, the responsibilities that Christians have to God and the world in a Western, secular, capitalist context.

The author organizes her book into two main sections to help explain her

perspective as rooted in public theology. The first four chapters of the book make up the section 'How to do Theology' where she discusses the key issues of public theology,

particularly concerning the audience(s) to which the theologian addresses, and the different ways of communicating one's theological perspective to different publics. From there she explains where she sits among the different methods of communication to help the reader understand where she is coming from in the second section called, 'God and Consumerism.' This is followed by a 'Resources' section which invites further spiritual reflection and action. In terms of intended audience, the book is primarily aimed at Christians, 'while drawing on those parallel secular resources that might have currency in the public square.' (p.65) In this way she makes use of secular wisdom in the shaping of her theological arguments, so that the book can be accessible to audiences both inside and outside the Church.

In the first section she focuses more directly on theological issues. Christian readers may be more familiar with the language and concepts of this section than non-Christians, but it is not saturated with



academic or obscure theological language either. She also makes economic terms and concepts easy to understand for readers unfamiliar with the complexities of the economic language of capitalism. Theological reflection on the environmental and human impact of modern-day consumerist practices in the second section informs the nature of the capitalist reforms she calls for. This enables her to expand upon her argument that 'The rhythms of Christian belief can offer an alternative routine that puts consumerism back into perspective.' (p.95) In this way, she also shows how Christians, wishing to engage in public conversations about issues concerning the economy and environment, can make their Christian perspectives relevant and respectful in response to secular views and practices.

The book offers guidance on everyday changes that people can make in their lives, thus drawing out the spiritual implications of our consumerist habits. In the section on 'God and Consumerism' she largely focuses on individual will-power and personal transformation. This provides helpful advice on the ethical changes individuals can make to contribute to wider change. However, her suggestions and arguments could have potentially been strengthened by including a chapter which focused on the power of community involvement, and particularly church communities, where people can support one another as they strive to make changes in consumer habits together, thus reflecting further on 'the rhythms of Christian belief'. That said, she does mention some key actions the Church has taken, which could serve to inspire further action, and the 'Resources' section at the end of the book could be used and adapted for church communities and reading groups to discuss changes in habits together.

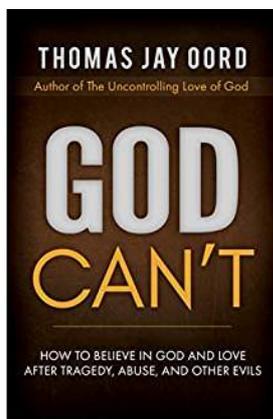
Some readers may agree with Poole's vision of how her suggested changes in consumer practices can reform capitalism for the greater good of human flourishing and the environment. Other readers may be sceptical of how far individual consumer habits can transform the economic impact on the global issues she discusses. Nevertheless, the book offers challenges and insights for the reader to reflect upon regarding the spiritual, economic, and environmental impact of everyday consumerism. □

Rebekah Hanson has just started a PhD focusing on the Bible and Digital Culture.

Thomas Jay Oord: *God Can't: How to believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse and Other Evils* (SacraSage Press USA 2019)

John Reader

The subtitle of the book sums up the author's objective and reflects what is to be found in this text. Alongside the theological reflections are to be found a series of real-life accounts (with names changed) of people who have indeed been through tragedies and suffering of various kinds. At the end of each section is a list of questions for consideration so this is designed to be studied and discussed by individuals or groups, and it could be the basis for a Lent course. The context is American and what might be seen to be an orthodox, evangelical and strongly biblically based Christian culture. By that I mean that some of the material presented would not come as a surprise to a more liberal audience who have already struggled with these questions and formulated similar answers at an earlier stage in their faith journey. This is not to decry the value of the book which does grapple with some of the most difficult and frequently raised objections to Christian belief.



There are five main chapters, each addressing a different perspective on the problem of evil, not to be read in isolation but rather as a cumulative argument. "God can't prevent evil" is the opening section, to which the response is that God is not in control, so "unable to control people, other creatures, or circumstances that cause evil" (P27). God's nature is uncontrolling love. We are not robots, nor is a retreat to the supposed solution that it is all a mystery an adequate response in the way that, for instance "The Shack" attempts to propose. I am reminded of Moltmann's "The Crucified God" which established the non-controlling argument for me many years ago. Chapter Two argues that God feels our pain, which despite the hackneyed tone of that phrase means that God also suffers with us, which I would have thought is a clear implication of incarnation, but that does not get a mention. Next the suggestion is that God works to heal, and that chapter closes with a summary of the myths and realities surrounding this subject (Pp103-106), for instance that pain, suffering and abuse are

part of God's pre-ordained plan; that God can heal single-handedly, and that those who are not healed did not have enough faith. I recall such questions arising for UK evangelicals in the case of David Watson many years ago, and it is good to see those being addressed head-on.

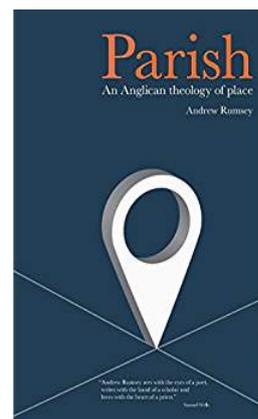
Chapter Four proposes that God squeezes good from bad. Another difficult area as one must avoid the interpretation that God deliberately creates or refuses to prevent evil in order that some good may indeed come about. As with the previous chapters Oord gets round this quite well: "God works with creation to squeeze good from the evil that God didn't want in the first place" (P136). Then, finally, God needs our cooperation: "creatures play a necessary part in God's goals to restore creation and help us all to flourish" (P142). The "sting in the tail" is when Oord opens about his own trials which include being laid off his job as a theologian unjustly and this receiving national coverage (P173). Sounds familiar perhaps? "Been there, got the scars to prove it" adds authenticity to the book. I'm not sure that the claim that the ideas will solve the problem of evil (P10) quite stands up, but this is an important and valuable contribution to the subject. □

John Reader is Rector of the Ironstone Benefice and Associate Research Fellow with the William Temple Foundation.

Andrew Rumsey Parish: *An Anglican Theology of Place* (SCM Press 2017)

Alan Jeans

The acceptance of the invitation to review this book, when the author is your new Suffragan Bishop, is either super confidence, or foolhardy. But when the reviewer has been an Archdeacon for 16 years, and this is his fourth Suffragan Bishop, there will be an understanding between us.



This book has already published reviews, by more significant and esteemed reviewers than me, which mark this work as a watershed moment within the documented analysis of the English Parish.

The book is well structured – Part One offering the Anglican Parish in Theoretical Perspective, with

chapters on place-formation cycle; Christology of Place; and spatial theory and parochial practice. Part Two offers more on history and practice of the Anglican parish, with chapters on parish and the national myth; parish as neighbourhood; and parish, landscape and nostalgia.

It is an intriguing and interesting read, in that Andrew Rumsey begins each chapter with an anecdotal reflection from his parish ministry to date. A different print font distinguishes this from the remainder of each chapter, where more analysis of the parish's theology of place emerges. I'm always wary when anecdote enters any form of discourse – "you had to be there to understand" often follows as an explanation. But Rumsey's anecdotes, whilst all urban/suburban, give us a good insight into his ministry as parish priest. It may not chime with my ministerial experience, but it does root the theological reflections that follow into the grounds of Rumsey's doctoral research. It can be a challenge to turn an essentially academic piece of research into a narrative that can inform and speak into a pastoral ministry in a wonderfully diverse and complex context of our Church of England.

Rumsey peppers his exploration of parish as a sacred place with good use of scripture and a broad drawing down from philosophers, poets and theologians. For example, Chapter One begins with Jacob's encounter with God at Bethel; then picks up Barth's thoughts around divine-human relationships depending upon where we are; followed by Brueggemann's ideas of Old Testament understanding of land as gift – promised and prepared by God for his people; then Kant's synthesis of place through the eyes of the viewer – of what is known and seen, and what is unknown, but still there. The Chapter concludes with a reflection on Coleridge the poet, who dialogues the object and subject impressions of the reality of place, which helps determine a place-formation cycle: Vocation – Being – Revelation – Tradition. The second chapter focusses on Christology; the parish being the Christocentric expression of Church as both being and action. Chapter three takes us into the geography of the parish; understanding the historical changes in society, movement of people, and the behaviours of neighbourhood.

Part Two contains a speedy narrative of the parish relating to the nation's history and politics, and its Established Church particularities. There's an interesting historical panorama of the parish, beginning as sacred community in the Middle Ages; documenting the social upheavals alongside Reformation and political and social changes; which leads us to the

persistent parish following the Second World War. Here we find boundaries are less recognized outside of the Diocesan Office, and the current notion of reconfiguring parish and benefice dividing lines on maps, which can only play catch up to the population's habits, moving from their dormitory homes to places of work, retail therapy and self-defining recreation.

I found the book both fascinating and frustrating. I enjoyed the informative historical story of the local church, with the constant affirmation of relationships and pastoral care – of being known and knowing the defined souls within the parish. Yes, to the Christocentric heart of incarnation and being as essential to the Anglican mission and ministry. Amen, to the recognition that the landscape of our nation is essential to understand our behaviours both in and out of church. Whereas rivers and hills defined local church in the past, we are now learning that our parish boundaries are defined by social trends, motorways, new housing estates, and retail parks.

I am left with still wanting more. Whilst Rumsey alludes to the necessary re-imagining of mission and ministry within the local church, there are few pointers to what that might look like. Perhaps that will be Bishop Andrew's next book. I trust that the reader will embrace the insights within this book, and then re-vision the locality to understand how the Church of England has been formed in the past, and where God could be leading the local church into a confident future. □

Alan Jeans is the Archdeacon of Sarum in the Diocese of Salisbury



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