

SUMMER 2019

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

NEWS, FEATURES, COMMENTARY & REVIEWS FROM MODERN CHURCH



Spirituality, Art & Innocence

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Colin Heber-Percy



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Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology. Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England, we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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EDITORIAL



Anthony Woollard
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“THEY USE LONG WORDS”

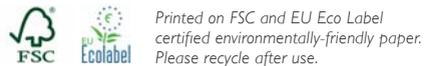
Welcome to this redesigned, bumper edition of *Signs of the Times*. A particular welcome to any who are reading it for the first time, perhaps having picked up a copy at Greenbelt (of which Modern Church is proud to be a supporter). This magazine is the quarterly journal for members of Modern Church, a group which seeks to stand up for and encourage liberal voices in Church.

The late Eric Mascall was a mid-20th-century traditionalist Anglo-Catholic theologian, distinguished at the time but now largely forgotten. His most memorable contribution was the

witty little book of verses Pi in the High in which he caricatured the ecclesiastical and theological fashions of his day. His poem The Road to Switzerland mocks those theologians influenced by Bultmann and existentialism. At one stage, “a country clergyman” is quoted as saying of such people “They use long words, and do not think of us”.

That sentence may speak to many in Modern Church – and those further outside the magic circles of academic theology. Modern Church began as a theological society, but one which has tried to relate *continued >*

Signs of the Times is published in January, April, July and October. It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying images. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective – in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard. Send material to the editor by 8th December, 8th March, 8th June or 8th September. Articles should not exceed 1,000 words. We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).



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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL LEUNIG



JANKO FERLIC

Our theology should be expressed in plain language. But we also need to address the world of academic theology and religious studies, where “long words” appear increasingly to be the norm and the pressures of the system lead inexorably towards increasingly “niche” research.

to ordinary believers (and others), clergy and lay, who seek to explore faith. Our charitable objects specify, in fact, that our theology should be expressed in plain language. But we also need to address the world of academic theology and religious studies, where “long words” appear increasingly to be the norm – almost a virtue – and the pressures of the system lead inexorably towards increasingly “niche” research.

Modern Church believes that accessible but serious theology is not impossible. The books (mostly on gender and sexuality) by Prof Adrian Thatcher – one of our Trustees, who helped us greatly at a recent residential meeting of Council to understand queer theology – are a particular example of how to do it, as is other writing by leading members such as Martyn Percy and Jonathan Clatworthy. And since Adrian has now become Managing Editor

of Modern Church’s academic journal *Modern Believing*, we can look forward in hope that that journal will model this ever more effectively in future.

We hope also that this new look *Signs* will encourage the kind of debate so sorely needed in our churches. Highlights in this issue include an article by one member on her experience with *Extinction Rebellion* and one on the sacramental nature of cinema. Both are deeply relevant to all of us.

In another step change, *Signs* will now be available not only to existing members but also to the new category of affiliates, which has just been launched. This affiliation scheme offers a new way of joining Modern Church without full membership, and comes with a minimum donation model rather than a subscription. We hope this new way of belonging to Modern Church will enable people to join in debates, discover new resources and avenues of thought, and at the same time know that by belonging, we are strengthening the liberal voice in our churches – in a way that avoids too many long words!

WELCOME

Modern Church has been making its distinctive contribution to theological and church debates and thinking for over 120 years. Its approach to theology – using ordinary language, engaging with relevant issues, being respectful and willing to listen, open to truth wherever it comes from – is as important today as it has ever been. Information, new knowledge, and fresh understandings come at us with amazing speed and demand thoughtful, open, and considered responses: we believe that Modern Church is well placed to do that, and to offer resources that can help others too.

Part of our work is engaging with others in making progressive views better known, and we are proud to be working with Greenbelt again this year by sponsoring Nadia Boltz-Weber and Michael Leunig – both of whom bring fresh thinking to contemporary debates. Come and see them if you can.

Modern Church puts on an annual conference in July of each year. This year, we’re looking at doing theology in the ‘public square’ – how we respond and contribute theologically to important public debates. In July 2020, the conference will look closely at issues around gender and sexuality

and will be examining biblical, historical, theological, and scientific material. All are welcome (see www.modernchurch.org.uk for more information).

Modern Church also puts on, supports or sponsors local and regional events. In February 2019 we co-hosted a conference on ‘Liberal Approaches to Evangelism’ in Liverpool, and the papers are published in *Modern Believing*. Groups like those in the South West and East Midlands meet regularly to hear and discuss new ideas and approaches. The network is expanding and provides welcome support and encouragement to those who hold progressive views on theology, ethics, and faith in the world.

You can be a part of the Modern Church network too. You can be a member and receive our Quarterly journal *Modern Believing* and *Signs of the Times*; or you can be an Affiliate and receive *Signs of the Times*. Whichever way you choose, add your voice to the conversation about what it means to have faith in today’s world.

Very Revd Dr Jonathan Draper
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SPIRITUALITY, ART & INNOCENCE

A Holy Trinity in the ecosystem of love

By Michael Leunig

*“Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s
but give your art to God.”*

*“Love one another and you will be
happy. It’s as simple and difficult
as that...”*

In a world that is going faster each day, where speed is an ultimate value and patience is so easily lost, it is interesting and wise to consider the idea that nothing much can be loved at speed.

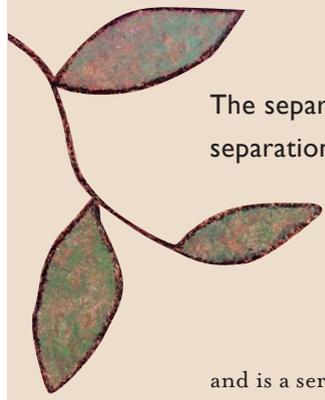
The success of human society depends on love; the vital, central condition that strangely enough seems barely considered in the political and economic affairs of modern secular society, and indeed, we could be looking at a serious loss of love in Western culture. This may be due to an inability to understand, value, or uphold love as a crucial element in

personal life and civil society, and also because the massively increased velocity of ordinary existence results in a diminishing of love’s blessings: the skill, devotion, care, integrity, attention and joy, enough to ensure the health and happiness of each other and the planet earth.

Love has many dimensions, but it is certainly a complex ecosystem, and like our broader natural environment, the human capacity for love in the high velocity world has been narrowed, neglected, misunderstood and abused, to the point of being in crisis. Love is surely central to human happiness, but when the centre is diminished and cannot hold, things fall apart, as the poet Yeats has reminded us in his poem *The Second Coming*. This disintegration, this failure and falling apart is cause for enormous anxiety, grief and dysfunction in society, *continued >*

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL LEUNIG





The separation of church and state has been wise but the separation of spirituality and state has been disastrous.

and is a serious looming problem for governments and science that seem largely unable to recognise the failure of love and its social and psychological impact, let alone do anything about it.

The separation of church and state has been wise but the separation of spirituality and state has been disastrous. And alarmingly, because of humanity's radical influence on the natural environment, these spiritual failures matter to nature's broader ecosystem upon which we all depend. It is possible to reasonably imagine that love, as a psychological strength, is being displaced by fear.

So where do we turn for the restoration of love, for the salvation of this human ecosystem and this beautiful wilderness? It has

been said that love is like bread, it has to be made fresh each day, and of course this would mean ongoing work and commitment – but not necessarily without great pleasure, it must be noted.

If the parliaments, the media and the laboratories cannot help us with this task, then the kitchen tables can, where valuable conversations

can be created – and on street corners too, or in parks, in waiting rooms, on train stations and in all the places where friends or strangers connect and find heart-felt interest or meaning in each other. In these places the ordinary everyday work of love can be done, and indeed, it is very doable: this simple, not-for-profit conversation that is in effect humanity's common psychotherapy: conversation as a healing act of simple love, where every bit helps, and in circuitous soulful ways is of fertile consequence to the greater ecosystem. Yes, love is like bread and it must be made fresh each day.

So here in this humble unself-conscious therapy we may witness creativity, sanity and courage in everyday things, we may see forms of innocence and spirituality which might bear a resemblance to the making of art. No great amazing new solution to humanity's ills here, just the ongoing work of love as our ancestors advised; the seeing, caring, knowing and listening to one another and taking each other seriously.

Spirituality, art and innocence form a kind of holy trinity for modern life; a trinity composed



Mature innocence... is the natural spiritual genius that belongs to us all – if only we dare to claim it...

of interrelated human treasures that matter hugely to the health and happiness of the individual, society and the planet.

Spirituality: the innate, idiosyncratic and natural metaphysical realm within; a capacity in all of us, our necessary refuge from prosaic worldly matters, our lyrical vision, our mysterious poetic yearning, our genius for transcendence and indeed a cradle for love and joy.

Art: the ways and forms we create and express with sincerity and imagination; offered into the world with courage and love as a liberating or inspiring possibility.

Innocence: most of us had it at the beginning as children; the wonder of seeing and feeling life for the first time with an open, primal heart – a time of powerful raw experience which marked us indelibly, and perhaps fired a lifetime of mystical sensibility. We can still have it in adulthood as mature

innocence – provided we have valued, cared for and revered the rich mysticism of our childhood. We may feel, speak and create with great clarity and originality from this mature innocence; it is the natural spiritual genius that belongs to us all – if only we dare to claim it, maintain it and use it.

In the ecosystem of love, this holy trinity of spirituality, art and innocence may be the reliable source of vitality, beauty, wisdom and sanity enough, to help us and Mother Nature onwards in this strange, difficult and sometimes ecstatic journey through these disturbing times.

Michael Leunig is an Australian cartoonist, writer, painter, philosopher and poet. His commentary on political, cultural and emotional life spans more than forty years and has often explored the idea of an innocent and sacred personal world.

Blessed



Nadia Bolz-Weber reimagines the beatitudes for the postmodern world

Maybe the Sermon on the Mount is all about Jesus's lavish blessing of the people around him on that hillside, blessing all the accidental saints in this world, especially those who that world—like ours—didn't seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.

You may admire strength and might,
but I am blessing all human weakness.
You may seek power, but I am
blessing all human vulnerability.

Maybe Jesus was simply blessing the ones around him that day who didn't otherwise receive blessing, who had come to believe that, for them, blessings would never be in the cards. I mean, come on, doesn't that just sound like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?

So I imagine Jesus standing among us offering some new beatitudes:

Blessed are the agnostics.
Blessed are they who doubt.

Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer.

Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.

Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried.

Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.

Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet."

Blessed are those who mourn.

You are of heaven and Jesus

blesses you.

continued >

Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the under-represented.

Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.

Blessed are foster kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.

Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.

Blessed are the kindhearted football players and the fundraising trophy wives.

Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who hear that they

are forgiven.

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.

I imagine Jesus standing there blessing us all because I believe that is our Lord's nature. Because, after all, it was Jesus who had all the powers of the universe at his disposal but did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited. Instead, he came to us in the most vulnerable of ways, as a powerless, flesh-and-blood newborn. As if to say, "You may hate your bodies, but I am blessing all human flesh. You may admire strength and might, but I am blessing all human weakness. You may seek power, but I am blessing all human vulnerability." This Jesus whom we follow cried at the tomb of his friend and turned the other cheek and forgave those who hung him on a cross. He was God's Beatitude—God's blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a best-selling author, former stand-up comic, founder and former pastor of a Lutheran congregation in Denver, House for All Sinners and Saints. She speaks at colleges and conferences around the globe.



Extinction *Rebellion*

Helen Burnett practices
'Kingdom' living over Easter

In October 2018, amidst increasingly alarming reports about climate change and with extreme weather conditions beginning to affect privileged white communities long after it had wreaked havoc with those most vulnerable to serious climate breakdown, a letter was written to The Guardian endorsing the use of non-violent civil disobedience as a necessary and reasonable response to what was increasingly referred to as the sixth mass extinction. The fact that Rowan Williams was a signatory to this letter added to my mounting feeling that words, petitions, marches were not enough.

The realisation that humanity is now the single biggest factor in environmental change, and a sense of deep despair about the future of the planet and what that meant for my nearest and dearest, found me standing in Parliament Square in October for the launch of a new initiative 'Extinction Rebellion'. Highly visible and all alone in a clerical collar, I was surprised to be approached over and over again by people pleased to see a visible Christian presence.

I went straight from the launch to an event at Southwark Cathedral where I 'flyered' the seats in the Nave during a clergy conference. I had permission from the Dean so it was hardly 'disobedience' but it felt like the beginning of

something new...

When this goes to press Extinction Rebellion will no longer be the new exciting phenomena, it will have stumbled, as I write there is discord over proposed actions around Heathrow. How the 'rebellion' continues is not clear but on two Saturdays in October and for a spell of 10 days over Holy Week and Easter I experienced something quite extraordinary.

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is founded on the principle that the climate catastrophe we now face is a result of both a material and a spiritual crisis for humanity; that the disconnect between consumer and producer, the reduction of everything to economic value and growth compels us to respond to the crisis; and that the response must be grounded emotionally as well as practically.

XR has a flair for using symbols and ritual. As the first day of action, in which five London bridges were blocked, drew to a close, hundreds of protesters returned to Parliament Square for interfaith prayers and tree planting. The following week the celebration of peaceful protest on the bridges turned to a solemn funeral procession, including once again the use of 'the Pause.' Stopping all noise and sitting or kneeling on the tarmac outside 10 Downing Street protesters prayed, paused, fell silent, a young man placed his hand on my shoulder, it

felt as if, as one, we all 'held' our grief and our planet in our hearts and minds and before whatever each of us knew as God.

I have always been drawn to both contemplation and activism and I was discovering a place where my life and my ministry felt completely integrated. By the time I arrived at Marble Arch on day one of the Easter action I was both terrified and determined. At home I had preached on 'crucifying creation,' I had sited Phil Kingston in sermons and now I was a signed up member of Christian Climate Action and Extinction rebellion.

From Palm Sunday to Easter Week I lived between my parish and Marble Arch, the protesters gathered there created the most open, selfless and loving community I have ever experienced. This was 'Kingdom' living, my theology and my life were fully assimilated. At times I was more frightened than I have ever been, not of arrest but of where I was taken by events, catapulted into the limelight by virtue of a collar, called upon and applauded by people who would never dream of attending a church service. Speaking in Oxford Circus on the pink 'Tell the Truth' boat, praying as protesters were arrested, holding a whole situation in prayer – protesters and police alike, taking to the stage in Marble Arch on a daily basis to proclaim the 'Vision Statement,' de-escalating a



Rowan Williams at London's Extinction Rebellion protest

situation with the police by leading protesters in song.

Before the days of rebellion began a huge variety of actions were planned for each day, I was part of the XR Vision Sensing team tasked with holding the 'heart centre' of the rebellion and the one of only two distinctively Christian voices in a group made up mostly of Buddhists and Pagans. This was Holy Week, when asked to give a Christian Perspective on non-violent action and rebellion the material was right there – the Palm Sunday Procession as protest not parade. Foot washing on Maundy Thursday would have been a weird intervention had I not been embedded in the community. As it was, by Thursday, I was known by the Marble Arch campers. *continued >*



Helen Burnett at the Extinction Rebellion protest in London

My tent was on the front line of the Edgware Rd blockade, and so turning up with bowls and towels to wash the feet of rebels was entirely appropriate, received with gratitude and with interest. Grounded in the Tridium, commuting between

leafy Surrey and the gritty realities of protest, never before has the liturgy felt so raw and so powerful.

As we walked through the Passion to the crucifixion, and towards the active hope that Christ brings in the new creation. The horror of a creation that has been crucified – countered by a group of people living in love and seeking the risen life for all that lives and all that has been destroyed.

Where next?

A thread that runs throughout the rebellion movement is the need for grieving, for facing the truth and sitting with that truth. Again and again I have turned to the psalms to find the language of lament and protest, again and again I was struck by the process people had gone through to arrive at the point of rebellion, again and again we shared stories of lying awake at night gripped with fear for the future. Here was a place where that fear was named and acknowledged. Returning to ‘normality’ it is clear that the majority cannot face that fear, that we block the

reality because it is too much to bear. I think that the church could have a vital role to play in walking alongside the world as it moves inexorably towards the sixth mass extinction.

But what is it we walk with?

Are we accompanying a funeral carriage and hosting a wake, or are we midwives to something new?

I suspect we are a bit of both, I sense a shift in the vocabulary, the media have now adopted the phrase ‘climate emergency’ in place of ‘climate change’ extinction is spoken of, lost species are listed. We have our prophets (David Attenborough, Greta Thurnberg), we have our lawgivers (Polly Higgins), we have our thinkers (Jem Bendell, Rowan Williams), we have our politicians (Caroline Lucas), we have our activists (Christian Climate Action and Extinction Rebels), and we as Christians have a unique narrative that we can offer as humanity faces the challenges wrought by our desecration of the planet.

Above all we have the Holy Spirit, something that as a liberal and non-realist I wrestle with, but I think I would be content to say that the spirit moved in central London this April, and that is something I want to witness again, a risen life for all creation is something for which I will disobey earthly powers.

Helen Burnett is an Assistant Priest in the Caterham Team Ministry and a member of the Council of Modern Church.



Plato's Allegory of the Cave (1604) by Jan Pietersz Saenredam, after Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem

Sacramental Cinema

By Colin Heber-Percy

Sacramental cinema? Really? **Can cinema be sacramental? I want to suggest that cinema cannot not be sacramental. Not by arguing that cinema cynically borrows certain sacramental stylings, but that the very mechanism of cinema itself – our turning in the dark to face the light, to hear a shared story – displays radical commonalities with sacramental witness and worship.**

In Plato's best-known thought experiment, prisoners are shackled and forced to face the wall of a cave onto which are projected shadows cast by objects moving back and forth behind them and in front of a light source. Prisoners from birth, these people assume the shadows constitute reality. In effect, it's a prototype cinema. But Plato's cave dwellers are compelled to watch an illusion. We buy *continued* >

tickets! So, when we go to the cinema or watch a movie at home, are we choosing to sit in front of a fantasy, a trick?

It's hard to see, but there's a quote running along the top of the illustration above. It's from John 3:19: "Light came into the world, but men loved darkness more than the light." But these people don't love darkness, they categorically don't choose it; it's the medium in which, and by means of which, they experience the light. The notion that darkness and ignorance are essential components in our experience of cinema, perhaps of reality, alerts us to our own place and circumstances, and calls to mind another pre-cinema model of cinema.

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. (Mark 9:2-3)

We could even go so far as to suggest, that the ultimate model for cinema itself is the transfigured Jesus. We have all the ingredients here: a dazzling white light, an awestruck, spellbound audience still in the dark, and we clearly have special effects.

Like Peter's response to the Transfiguration – the construction of tabernacles on Mt Tabor – cinema is our own Heath-Robinson response to mystery, our own ceremony. Cinema teases us with a taste

of transcendence. But it's a real taste, just as the sacraments are, for many Christians, real glimpses of God's grace instrumental in the world. Perhaps, as for Peter, the only way we can approach this dazzling truth is by building a shelter, a tabernacle, by looking through a veil, a ceremony, a screen. The truth itself – like Plato's sun, or the projector, or our Lord – is too bright to behold unaided.

So, ultimately, Peter's proposed shelters, or tabernacles – are ourselves. The screen on which the light is projected is us. We remain blank throughout: our purpose is to receive the light. In his first homily on Genesis, the third century theologian, Origen, says

The more we rise Christward and expose ourselves to the splendour of his light, the more wonderfully and brilliantly we too shall be flooded with his brightness.

We are the screens. We are not the light, we bear witness to the light, receive the light. And as screens facing the light, we become more and more flooded with that light – the story unfolds in us, in our lives. This is the insight of Clare of Assisi, friend of Francis and founder in 1212 of the Franciscan Order of the Poor Clares. In a letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare writes:

Place your mind in the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead itself through contemplation.

When we worship, just as when we watch a film, we are readying ourselves in the darkness, not for an illusion or a trick, but for the transfiguring truth, a conversion experience.

Mirror, brilliant light, image, contemplation, transformation. This is an instruction manual for a cinema of the soul.

A cinema of the soul sounds important and grand. So, we might ask, which films would qualify for screening in such a cinema? Only films with explicitly religious subject matter? Or films with religious messages or themes? Not *Mamma Mia* then.

A relatively new but vibrant research field, the theology of film has tended to limit itself to two strategies, either to mine films for religious "meaning," or to map religious messages onto specific films. In short, theological engagement with film is a second-order exercise in deciphering or decoding. But I think this academic approach leaves out something absolutely crucial: us, sitting in the dark. As in worship so in the cinema, we should be attentive to our own subjective and emotional responses. It's only by attending to our response that we are able to distinguish between an habitual pastime and a transformative experience, between convention and conversion. So... *Mamma Mia*? Why not? We can't prescribe which movies should or shouldn't be screened in our cinema of the soul any more than we can prescribe God's grace in the world.

The idea of the cinema – like

the idea of a church actually – is a matrix of meanings. Personal, communal, cultural, historical, political. It has a complex history that will, in part, be our own history. I had my first cigarette in the stalls of a fleapit cinema. I can remember the brand, and the name of the girl that gave it me. Thanks, Lizzie. And all this needs to be born in mind when we approach film theologically. My point is: it's complex, personal and social. Like worship. There is a ritualised, even sacramental component to film that we can recognise and relish when we abandon our impulse to decipher and decode, and allow ourselves to turn aside and look at the burning light (Exodus 3:3), and be receptive, as receptive as a screen. When we worship, just as when we watch a film, we are readying ourselves in the darkness, not for an illusion or a trick, but for the transfiguring truth, a conversion experience.

Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light. (John 12:36).

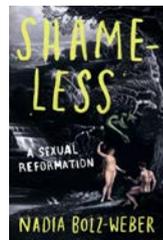
Colin Heber-Percy is a screenwriter whose work for TV and film has won many awards and been shown all over the world. He is a priest in the Church of England, and his book on faith and film, *Perfect in Weakness*, is out now.



Theological Insight and a Deep Sense of God's Love for Us

Nadia Bolz-Weber was a remarkable pastor of a Lutheran Church in Denver called the House for All Sinners and Saints. The congregation seems to consist of people who have been gravely harmed by standard, conservative sexual teachings, and the book, while short on academic theology, is long on pastoral care. It demonstrates a profound Christ-like solidarity with all kinds of people who have been spurned by their churches for failing to comply with compulsory heteronormativity, and whose lives have been marred by guilt, shame, and self-hatred: in short, deep unhappiness.

As a Lutheran, the author is



Nadia Bolz-Weber
*Shameless:
A Sexual Reformation*
Canterbury Press, 2019

aware of the old controversy whether salvation is secured by faith or by works (or both) and accuses evangelicalism of a new form of salvation by works, i.e., compliance with its impossible sexual teachings and theologies of the body. She seeks a new Christian ethic that is 'based not on a standardized list of thou shalt nots but on concern

for each other's flourishing' (13). Mixing expletives with scatological metaphors, this is how she deals with Augustine: 'when it came to his ideas around sex and gender, he basically took a dump and the church encased it in amber. But instead of realizing this was one guy's personal shit, we assumed it

'Viewing sexually explicit images doesn't have to be harmful, just like eating cake doesn't have to be harmful. But there is potential harm in both...'

was straight from God' (43).

When she read the fourteen articles of the Nashville Statement (an evangelical Christian statement of faith relating to human sexuality and gender), she felt as if she had been punched in the stomach fourteen times. The book has a useful counter statement, contesting every article. Sexual pleasure, she insists, is a divine gift which should not be squandered. 'Consider, if you will, the humble clitoris, that magical bundle of nerve endings whose only biological function is to provide sexual pleasure for women. Unlike the penis, which is a multitasker, the clitoris literally has no other function but pleasure' (146).

Her advice about 'impure thoughts' is, don't 'struggle with' them (139). Pornhub is a fact of digital life, and she makes connections between religious discomfort with sexuality and the consumption of porn. 'Viewing sexually explicit images doesn't have to be harmful, just like eating cake doesn't have to be harmful. But there is potential harm in both...' (143). The cost of porn, she suggests, is a 'loss of pleasure' in our own lives when we compare our own imperfect bodies with those of 'impossibly perfect, hairless, willing, youthful actors' (141-2). She diagnoses 'that many

of us need a space where we can grieve lost or twisted sexuality... Let us grieve that we were not taught to love and respect the inherent dignity of our own human bodies. Grieve the decades we avoided sex when we could have been enjoying sex...' (158). Drawing on the image of Satan, the Accuser, in the Hebrew Bible, she identifies the Accuser with 'the crippling messages on repeat in our heads' (180), that is, religiously induced shame.

This is a highly unusual theological book, using street language instead of theological jargon, boldly and shamelessly. No sexual subject is off limits. It is full of theological insight, and a deep sense of God's love for all of us, as we are. It has been honed out of a decade of faithful ministry to people the churches have harmed. I would add only that there are evangelical Christians who do not conform to the standard types whose toxic teaching is responsible for the unhappiness detailed in the book. They deserve our admiration and our prayers.

—Adrian Thatcher

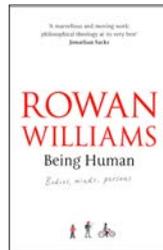
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To Know and be Known

This short but important book from Rowan Williams helps us to think through what it is to be a human being both in the context of Christian theology and in the context of living in 21st Century Western society. Although the first chapter entitled ‘What is Consciousness’ is quite hard going, it repays re-reading with a thorough grounding in the concepts that underlie the rest of the book and provides a firm basis for Christians to enter the contemporary dialogue about the nature of humanity and the place of human rights in society.

In this first chapter Williams argues that it is a mistake to consider human consciousness as being ‘machine like’ processing. He distinguishes consciousness from machine logic in that machines process in order to solve problems but consciousness is much more than that because it is bound up with personhood



Rowan Williams
*Being Human: bodies,
minds, persons*
SPCK London, 2018

- an organism coming into being, developing, and being sustained in a changing environment. In brief, Williams shows that consciousness is located in a point of view, entails the recognition of other

points of view, depends upon some continuity of being and it needs communication hence requires the use of language. Beyond this,

Williams suggests that consciousness and humanity are in some complex but profound way bound together, and that to lose sight of this may be to lose sight of what it is to be human. He states that this understanding of consciousness has ethical consequences and, for Williams also theological ones.

In his second chapter, ‘What is a Person?’, Williams demonstrates his proposition that a person is an individual in relationship but not in control. This lack of total control – frequently expected to be implicit in the concept of individual autonomy – stems from

personhood being the point at which relationships intersect. The primary relationship for Williams is that with the creator (God), and from this follows the corollary of being in relation with every other person and potentially everything in creation.

‘Bodies are involved in knowledge as much as is the brain’

By Chapter 3, ‘Bodies, Minds and Thoughts’, the ‘heavy lifting’ of the argument has been completed and Williams uses the alliterative trio of Attention, Attunement and Atonement to indicate the elements in true human knowing. In short this is about acquiring a habit as much as (or even more than) undertaking detailed logical analysis. Thus bodies are involved in knowledge as much as is the brain. Williams’ vital pointer to 21st Century society is the need for patience: his argument is that it is important to allow time in order properly to come to know what there is to be known (and he even argues that difficulty can be an advantage in forcing people to take time to understand before jumping to judgement and action).

In Chapter 4, ‘Faith and Human Flourishing’, Williams explores dependency/autonomy, human passion, attitudes to time, and

awareness of the implications of our autonomy. Through harnessing his previous thinking and addressing human flourishing, he develops a model of what a mature flourishing Christian might (strive to) be.

Williams suggests in Chapter 5, ‘Silence and Human Maturity’, that silence happens when we are confronted with something we can’t control. Thus, silence is the right response to being in the presence of God. Williams further argues that silence might itself be an evangelistic tool, citing the gospel accounts that Jesus’ silence made his interlocutors aware of the presence of God and suggesting that our might do likewise.

Chapter 6 ‘Humanity Transfigured’, the transcript of a sermon Williams preached on the Feast of the Ascension of Christ, forms a fitting conclusion to explorations of the book.

I can thoroughly recommend this reasonably priced book to people of faith, who inevitably find themselves called to witness by participating in discussion of current thinking about consciousness, humanity and society.

— David Simon

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