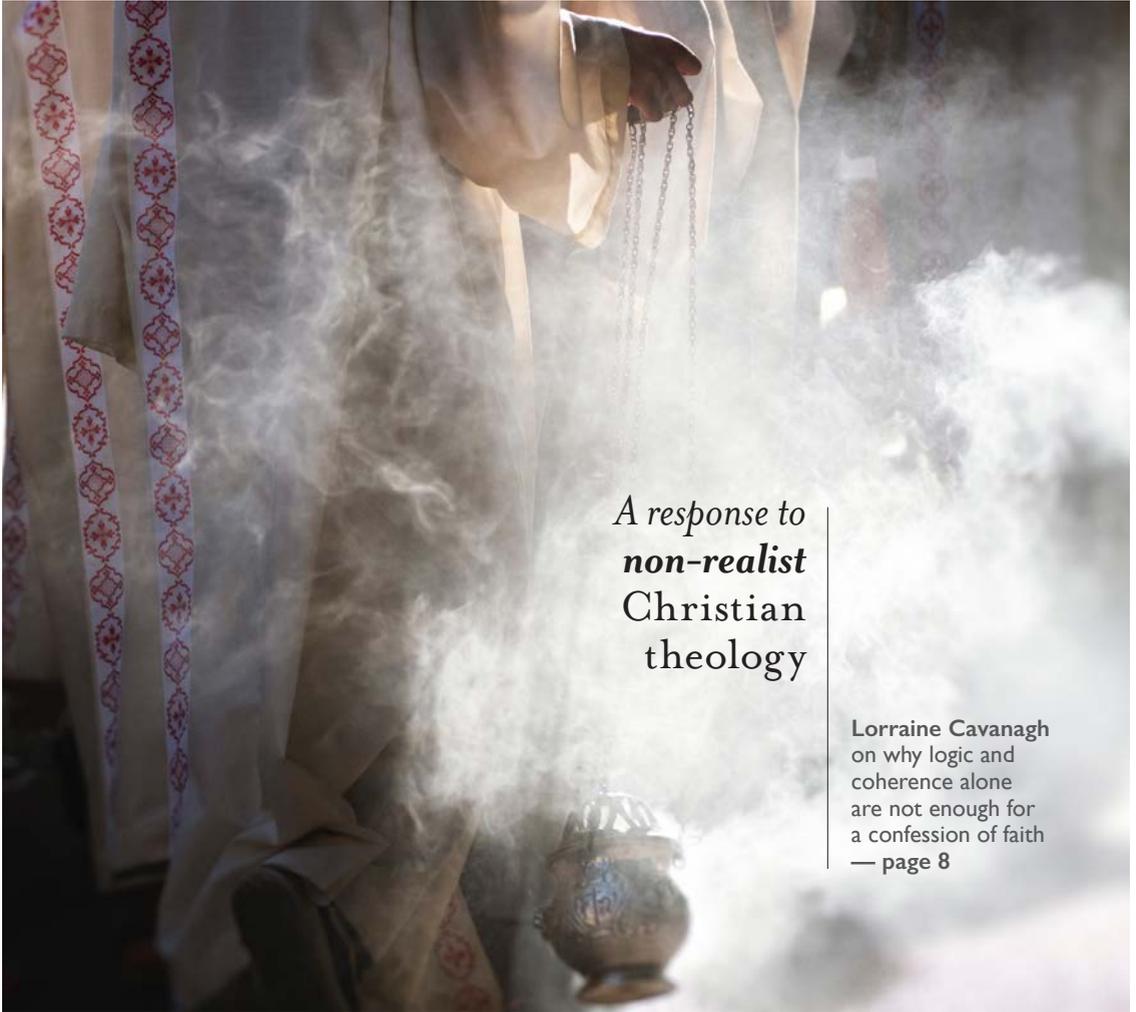


AUTUMN 2019

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FEATURES, COMMENTARY AND REVIEWS FROM MODERN CHURCH



A response to
non-realist
Christian
theology

Lorraine Cavanagh
on why logic and
coherence alone
are not enough for
a confession of faith
— page 8

Theology
Richly Imagined
F. Gerald Downing

Bible Stories:
Myth, History or Teaching Aid?
Rosalind Lund

Reorientating
Christianity
Jonathan Clatworthy

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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.

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EDITORIAL



Anthony Woollard
Editor

THE NUMBERS GAME

Our July 2019 Annual Conference on faith in the public square was smaller (around 80 participants) than in some recent years – but the quality of discussion was certainly no lower. The conference proceedings will appear in our sister journal Modern Believing in January. However, any reader reactions, for the next edition of Signs, would be welcomed.

The Conference took place against a background of the latest figures from the British Social Attitudes Survey, showing that allegiance to religious

organisations had once again, in general, declined, so that “faith in the public square” was looking more and more marginal in society. Others, not least our outgoing President Linda Woodhead, will surely have much more to say on this. But I was intrigued to come home to read, in our local paper, a rather different story. It had chosen to write of how churches (at least in south Warwickshire) can remain at the centre of their communities, giving people “space to be” and to meet, especially where they offer informal social events with such aims in *continued >*

Signs of the Times is published in January, April, July and November. 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 photo by Marco Ceschi

mind. The great majority, even in areas like this, do not regularly attend or support their churches – yet they still, it seems, value them.

Faith, then, may still have a role in community life, whether or not that impacts directly on the “public square” of politics and economics. But it needs what Malcolm Brown, a Conference speaker, called “a cohort” to keep the flame alive. That is why we cannot be indifferent to the size and viability of our Church – or, within that, of Modern Church as a liberal voice. Not for institutional survival, though that is a severe temptation for religious leaders, as it is (we have noticed) for political parties. But purely as an instrument – the idea summed up, for most Christians, in language about the Body of Christ. Numbers don’t matter ultimately and we should not be obsessed by them. But they do matter somewhat in the here and now.

More about this anon. In the meantime, several articles and book reviews

had to be held back from the summer edition of Signs. Most of these are included below, and it is hoped that they will be of interest to new as well as established readers. The articles by Lorraine Cavanagh and Gerald Downing refer back to one in the April 2019 edition by David Simon which may be found on our website (www.modernchurch.org.uk/publications) and new readers may wish to look back at that as an introduction to an important and continuing debate within (and beyond) Modern Church. Here too is an article by Rosalind Lund on how to read the Bible. The Trustees would like to apologise to all those, including book reviewers, who have been disappointed by delays in publishing their contributions.

To report briefly, then, from our AGM. Membership is tending downwards a little – but student numbers, though small, are rising significantly. We are rather too dependent on a recent legacy to finance our own

kind of “outreach”. But we are in good heart, and there have been few changes amongst Trustees or the wider Council, apart from the most welcome return of Ruth Fitter and Tim Laundon. And we were profoundly encouraged that Elaine Graham, the superb chair of this Conference as of that in 2006, has stepped into Linda Woodhead’s shoes as our President.

The numbers don’t always add up. But something does – and gives us reason to exercise that “imagination” to which Gerald Downing calls us.

And we need that imagination if we are to keep alive the flame of a liberal faith as the stormclouds gather in the wider world. At the time of writing, the uncertainties in the public square, about Brexit and whatever may follow it, appear as great as ever – but the far greater threat of climate change becomes clearer almost by the week. Keeping the flame alive, as we perhaps enter a new Dark Age, depends on us all.

Bible Stories: Myth, History or Teaching Aid?



By Rosalind Lund

The Bible is a collection of stories telling the salvation history, first of the Jews, and then of Christians who added a collection of stories about the life and mission of Jesus and his disciples plus a mixture of letters of advice and teaching for the early Church.

Most Christians, including members of Modern Church, will see some of the earliest stories as pure myths, probably collected together at the time of the Babylonian exile to provide a narrative history of the Jews and the development of their relationship with God. *continued >*

Storytelling was Jesus' preferred teaching method and his parables need interpretation.

We move from Adam and Eve and the expulsion from Eden, through the story of Noah and the Ark with God's covenantal promise, Abraham and Isaac, the flight from Egypt and the foundation of the Judaic kingdoms with tales of their kings. Through these stories we can see God change from a powerful god among many gods, from a very human god who loses his temper with his people and punishes them before forgiving them, to an Almighty God who is God of all.

By the time of Jesus, Israel was once again in a perilous state and there was much disagreement as to what God wanted his people to do in the face of occupation by the Romans. For Jesus the scriptures (Old Testament) were the bedrock of his understanding of God and of the way God worked in the world. Storytelling was Jesus' preferred teaching method and his parables need interpretation. In some cases the Gospel writers have provided this, but even then the meaning may be obscure – the social context of Jesus' time 2000 years ago becomes further confused by different translations of the texts over time. We need to do some work to discover the main point

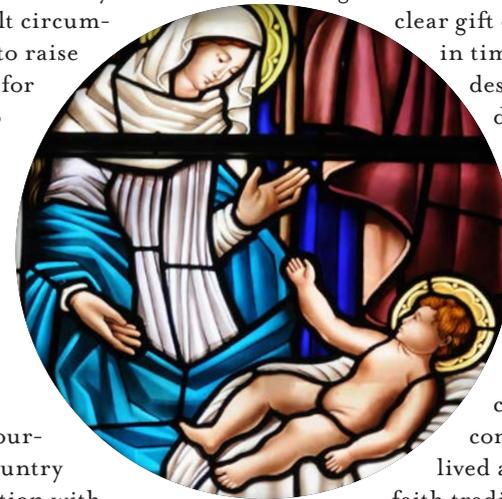
Jesus was getting at in each case – but at least we can all agree that these were stories (not history) and were for teaching.

Less clear perhaps, are the stories about Jesus and his disciples which are embedded within the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. Are we to understand these as history in the same way that we might understand a history of the Second World War? Or should we understand them more like the salvation history of the Jews in the OT – not perhaps to be taken literally, but to lead our minds into seeing Jesus as the incarnate Son of God which the Gospel writers describe? By the time the Early Fathers of the Church had got their hands on the Bible, they read almost everything in the Gospels as being in some way the fulfilment of the Old Testament – a process started by Paul himself and the other Letter writers of the NT. Many books have been written in the modern age as to whether this is justified or not, but it certainly helps to create a sense of God having a plan from the beginnings of time. One of the dangers of this approach is that as well as misunderstanding the context of the original story, we miss the real

...where do the birth stories of Jesus fit in? This is a powerful narrative with huge resonance – as much today as ever. Does it matter if any of it is literally true?

message of Jesus whose own interpretation of his scriptures (the OT) would have been very different.

And where do the birth stories of Jesus fit in? This is a powerful narrative with huge resonance – as much today as ever. Does it matter if any of it is literally true? I don't think so (they are not included in Mark which is the earliest Gospel). The idea of a young woman having an illegitimate baby under extremely difficult circumstances is bound to raise all sorts of issues for today's listener to do with morality, with love, and with care and respect for the weak. Nor can one avoid the parallel of Mary and Joseph and the Christ-child going on a long journey to another country to escape persecution with the situation of contemporary refugees and asylum seekers. All these make for a story of huge relevance to



...we need to make use of all the scholarship we have available so we can understand the context in which Jesus lived and taught and his own faith tradition. Then we may better be able to get to the heart of Jesus' teaching.

today's audiences. We may not find the idea of God speaking to us through an angel at all likely, but that doesn't mean we can't hear God's voice in our hearts and through prayer have a strong sense of what God calls us to do.

Even the Resurrection stories cannot be taken literally. This was an experience beyond the comprehension of the disciples and which they only gradually began to understand. They received the clear gift of the Holy Spirit and in time found words to describe Jesus' life and death as an expression of the love of God through the incarnation in Jesus Christ. To speak the Good News in today's world, we need to make use of all the scholarship we have available so we can understand the context in which Jesus lived and taught and his own faith tradition. Then we may better be able to get to the heart of Jesus' teaching. And of course we must also relate the Gospel experience to our lives today and use the stories in new ways to make sense of the difficult quandaries we face, ask questions and cut through the temptation to become complacent.

Rosalind Lund is a Trustee of Modern Church, former Treasurer and Vice-Chair, and currently Secretary to the Trustees and Council.

A RESPONSE TO

NON-REALIST CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY



COVER FEATURE

Lorraine Cavanagh on why logic and coherence alone are not enough for a confession of faith

It would be easy for a new reader of *Signs* to assume that Modern Church is a haven for agnostics and those disenchanted with the Church and the Christian faith. I feel that it is important to respond to David Simon's lucid essay 'Non-Realist Christian Theology: An Introduction' (*Signs* April, 2019) because I do not think that the view I have just depicted of Modern Church is true, or fair to David's essay. I also think that such a view obscures the liberal character of Modern Church and distorts the idea of liberalism itself.

I take the word liberal to be synonymous with the idea of freedom, but not of anarchy. David's essay witnesses to that disciplined freedom as he advocates the validity of two concepts of truth, those of correspondence and coherence which, if accepted, provide the individual with a base on which to build 'beneficially, satisfyingly and logically a confession of Christian faith.'

However, I feel that the essay gives us only a partial view of what a

confession of Christian faith entails. To confess is not simply a matter of agreeing with the line of an argument. It is about acknowledging its truth in a way which changes how we think and feel, and how we live out our lives. Correspondence and coherence, in relation to truth, do not take us quite far enough along that road.

Such an argument also reduces faith and all that faith entails, including the contemplation of God, to a matter of language. Here, David appeals to Don Cupitt's argument that the word 'God' is a linguistic construct reflecting humanity's need to believe in some form of salvation and afterlife. It therefore embraces all those imponderables which fall under the headings of 'cosmic' and 'individual existence', and with 'satisfying experiences'. Some pertain to the realm of science and empiricism, calling for a mainly propositional understanding of truth, while others come under the categories of psychology and spirituality. *continued >*

PHOTO BY TYLER NIX

“Spirituality” is where a different and essential understanding of truth resides, the truth that enlivens the human spirit.

“Spirituality” is where a different and essential understanding of truth resides, the truth that enlivens the human spirit. The conviction of faith, so often misrepresented as aligned with dogma and fundamentalism, has to do with the knowledge of a living God (as opposed to an arbitrary linguistic construct) that invites a response from both intellect and heart. It is what St. Anselm called ‘faith seeking understanding’. Half a millennium earlier, Saint Augustine had insisted that a person must believe in order that they may understand. Paradoxically, this has given rise to considerable misunderstanding about the nature of religious belief itself. Belief is not faith, but authentic mature belief does require faith, a tautology which only begins to be resolved through an encounter with the living God and a capitulation of the heart. The apostle Thomas would have experienced something like this.

Without encounter belief is not only impossible, but a wholly unrealistic expectation. Belief needs to be substantiated both intellectually and spiritually. The mediaeval Scholastic movement grew out of a recognized need to develop a comprehensive consistent view of truth, which would open the way to belief and thence to faith. But it continued to look at truth objectively, from the outside. It did not satisfy the need for the kind of understanding which speaks

truth in the heart of the individual. The prophet Job declares his understanding of truth with the words ‘I know that my redeemer liveth’. He knows instinctively, rather than simply believing a propositional truth concerning the existence of God. His knowing is acquired in adversity rather than through logical deduction. The truth of faith lies in the instinctive knowing which comes with having wrestled with a living God, not simply with an idea.

Nobody can be made to believe something in a way which conveys meaning unless they have in some way encountered what or who it is they are being asked to believe in. They need to encounter such a truth from the inside and allow it to ‘make a claim upon [them]’, as Job did. The philosopher John Caputo argues that a truth so encountered challenges the assumed supremacy of the rational over all things meaningful.

Such an encounter is more than a ‘satisfying experience’. In fact, I would take issue with David Simon in his grouping of a range of satisfying experiences, from sexual intercourse to art, as both ‘contributing to the sustenance of the existing life-form’ and ‘entering a state of knowing that seems to be outside time (or)...eternal.’ This is to define both truth and genuine spiritual experience in utilitarian terms. Saints and Christian thinkers through the



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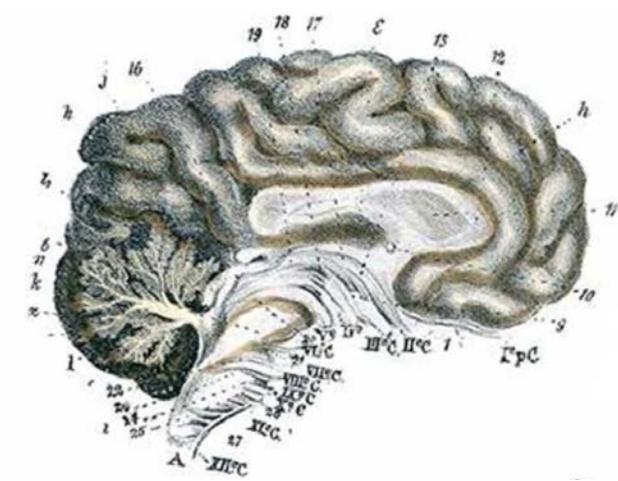
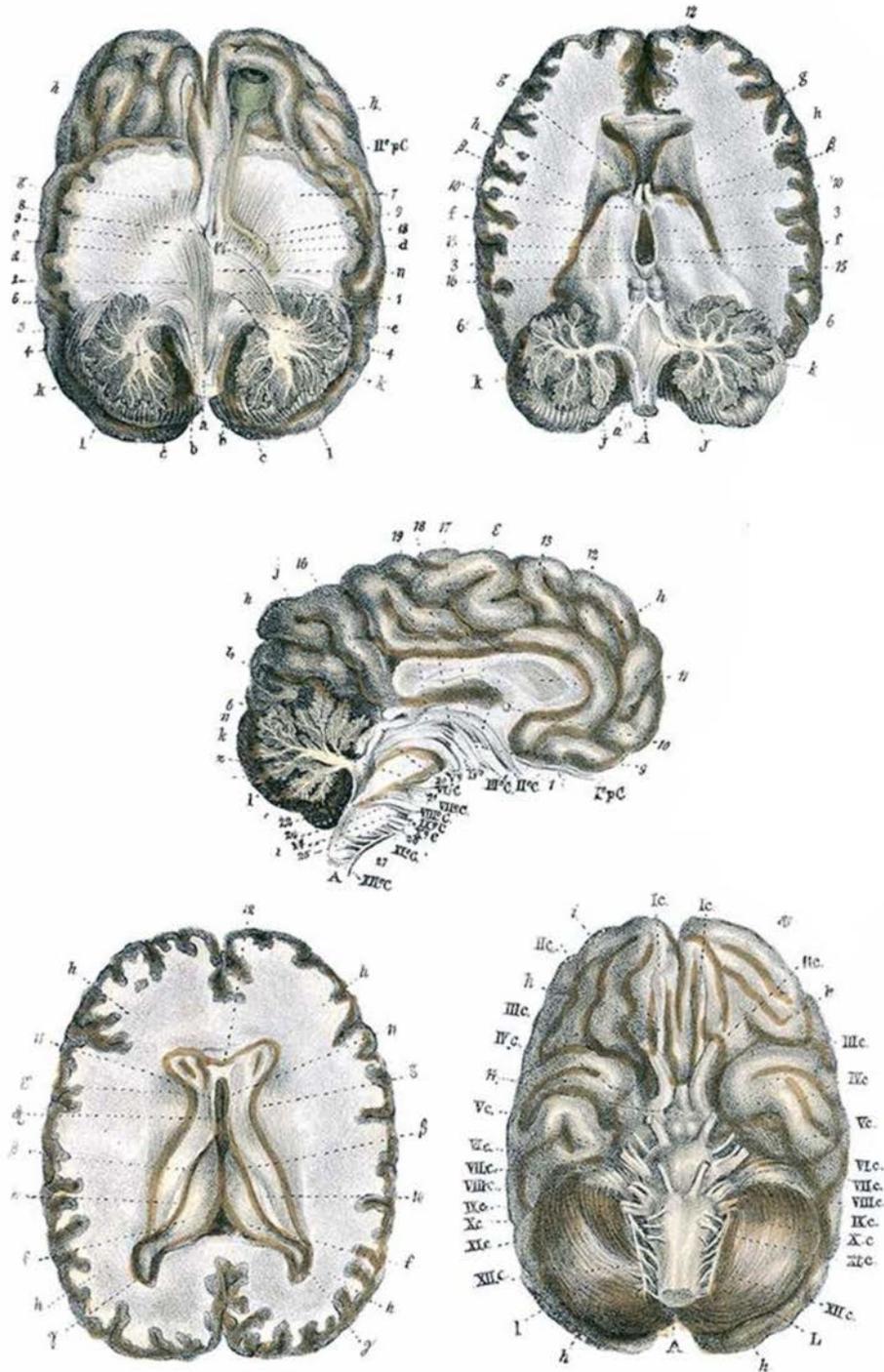
Without encounter belief is not only impossible, but a wholly unrealistic expectation. Belief needs to be substantiated both intellectually and spiritually.

centuries have demonstrated that genuine spiritual experience is not a matter of personal choice. Rather, it comes about when a person is first chosen, when they are known, or taken by surprise, by the living God, as opposed to by a pre-formed idea or sensory effect.

It follows that encounter with a living

God will invariably involve elements of both heart and intellect, though not necessarily in equal measure, or at the same time. It is about dialogue, and the reciprocity of giving and receiving which occurs in genuine relationships. The truth of the encounter, its genuineness or validity, will be recognized and understood by others as truth, in the ‘fruits’ that a person bears in their life.

Lorraine Cavanagh is an author, blogger, Anglican priest in the Church in Wales, and Trustee of Modern Church.



Non-Realism & Theology *Richly Imagined*

By F. Gerald Downing

David Simon, in the April 2019 edition of *Signs of the Times*, recalls us to critical consideration of ‘non-realist’ approaches to theology. In response, I would urge that theology as such still consistently be engaged in as a richly imaginative exercise, happily aware of the fundamental role of imagination in Judaeo-Christian tradition. Only a few English thinkers, such as Coleridge and Newman (one might add Blake), have been explicit about such a role for the imagination. But in practice imagination in theological reflection is there in the canon of scriptures and in scriptural interpretation from the start.

There are, of course, strong negative reasons for refusing any literal assertion of a *continued* >



Christian believers, I trust, can and may live out their various versions of Christian story, puzzlingly imagining the triune loving God as real, while hoping to be enlightened, trusting ultimately to have the truth, the reality, 'revealed' to them (1 Cor 13.12).

lovingly providential omnipotent deity. Cunning accounts of how such a deity might be conceived to work behind the scenes fall in the face of devastating storms, shattering earthquakes, insatiable capitalism, environmental disaster, hunger and war. Yet even these leave us free to imagine, and richly, 'God as he is in Jesus' (David Jenkins). In light of our available resources I find Simon's 'imaginary' (a single authoritative creator deity, self-revealing in a human) unnecessarily austere, and prefer to offer just below a richer 'imaginary' (treasury of imagination) – allowing that a bleaker one may/could nonetheless be existentially more effective.

But must God – for me, God motherly-fatherly, with Jesus as God incarnate, and Holy Spirit indwelling and pervasive in a perichoretic Trinity; and with the sacraments, and with prayer as address... must such a God then be held, even by believers, to be merely imaginary? At first sight, 'imagination' in our English translations of our scriptures seems always to be malign: that is, in AV, RV, RSV, not welcome in any way. I cannot find 'imagination' used at all in

more recent English versions (REB, NRSV). And yet, in practice, when, for instance, Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels tells parables, he is inviting hearers to imagine, before deploying his own imagination to nudge theirs. And what is recounted then prompts the evangelists, as it did their predecessors, and then their successors, to further imagination.

Yet that is still to imagine what is clearly taken to refer to what is real, as well as to prompt appropriate practical responses in real life. The Hebrew prophets and psalmists imaginatively deployed multiple metaphors to indicate the elusive deity they certainly treated as real. Ezekiel actually writes of being challenged on the issue (Ezek 20:49). And Paul? 'You must consider [logizesthai] yourself as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus,' he insists (Rom 6.11), leaving his hearers to imagine what it might mean to do that in practice, perhaps hoping he's dropped enough hints, with more explanation to follow. But even trying to consider myself dead and newly alive prompts a lot of imagining. And Paul himself,

widely, if less vividly than did Jesus, uses his own picture language to evoke further real-life enacted responses to imagined divine reality. Already, earlier in Romans, God, too, is taken to, imagined to have 'considered' Abraham and now us, 'imagined' (same verb) us as set right with himself, and actually treats us in the light of that imagining (Rom 4).

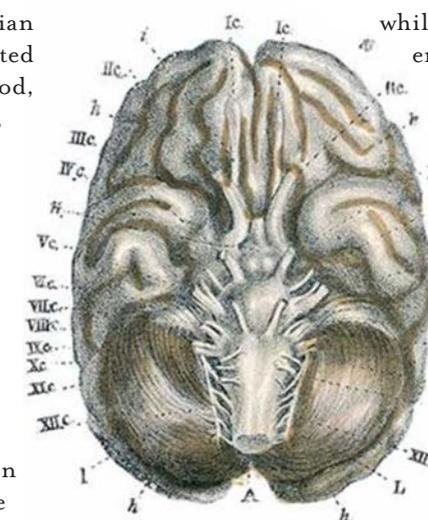
Subsequent Christian reflection then accepted the insistence that God, if worth considering, imagining at all, is 'incomprehensible', 'unseizable' (akataléptos), beyond the grasp of our little minds, and, even more obviously, beyond the range of our (matter of checkable fact) language. We can only imagine, but are drawn to an endless exploration in action and reflection of the transcendent reality of divine love.

But must imagining always be 'mere' imagination? What I propose here (and at length elsewhere) is a choice of ways in which to deploy our imagination. In many published stories characters clearly imagine things—dangerous tigers, a burglar downstairs, an act of unfaithfulness—things we know or later find out are, in the narrative, 'in fact' purely imaginary.

Other things, beings, happenings, places, of which the characters imagine and wonder as to their reality, turn out, 'in fact', to be real—real, in the story—and the characters involved may end convinced of this, never disillusioned.

Christian believers, I trust, can and may live out their various versions of Christian story, puzzlingly imagining the triune loving God as real,

while hoping to be enlightened, trusting ultimately to have the truth, the reality, 'revealed' to them (1 Cor 13.12). Perhaps they allow that they may well be disillusioned about themselves and fellow believers, while still imagining never ultimate disillusion, only a



...must God be held, even by believers, to be merely imaginary?

resolution better than the best imaginable: a hope to be corrected, enlightened, but far from finally disappointed: imagined as real. I see no a priori reason why one should not entertain some such credal 'imaginary', richly fed from millennia of Christian tradition, allowing it to enchant and shape one's shared life in today's world.

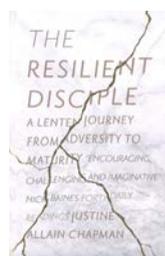
F. Gerald Downing is an author, theologian and parish priest.



Vulnerability and Adversity Meet Love and Compassion

Where are the most challenging places of discovery, encounter or even confrontation for you? Knowing how and where we might face up to ourselves in our unique boundedness and fragility is part of the opportunity that Lent offers us. In this carefully written book you will find insight, guidance and challenge in equal measure. It is grounded in, though not limited by, the authors own experience of desert. We are taken on a journey of invitation that asks us to be honest about those things that drain us of life.

There are six weeks of



Justine Allain Chapman
The Resilient Disciple: A Lenten Journey from Adversity to Maturity
SPCK, 2018

reflections which include Holy Week. The themes of each week are - Follow, Flourish, Falling, Faithful, Fruitful and (for Holy Week) Fulfil. There is careful attention to

both Scripture and prayer as the theme of resilience is opened in a process of reflection that invites the reader to think, pray and live. The book also offers advice for its use with groups as well as in preaching and worship. In this sense it is a volume of practical spiritual theology with a clear motivation to facilitate change for its reader. The reflections are honest and demand a readiness in the reader about the

Perhaps post-Christendom churches should abolish the clergy. Monologue sermons should be out. We need to read the Bible differently and put Jesus back at the centre.

vulnerabilities and adversities that we live with in our lives. Meeting these with love and compassion (like the art of Kintsugi – repairing with Gold) can not only repair broken things but make them more beautiful than before.

The quality of this engagement is informed by research undertaken in the area of resilience where the findings were that three key areas need to be strengthened in us and others if we are to grow through adversity on a path towards altruism or compassion. They are struggle, self and relationship. In this sense this book is properly a deeply challenging read as the reader is invited into different spaces of encounter. It will require honesty and a readiness to open (perhaps) closed areas of our lives. The work of integration is tough!

This is no ‘airport’ self-help book. What it promises in the introduction is delivered with consummate and well-organized skill. It has stimulated significant further (and deeper) reflection

especially as here at Sarum we explore how best to engage in formation for a new generation of disciples and ministers of the Gospel in challenging and unchartered seas.

Two final thoughts. I remain (oddly) unconvinced by the concept of resilience! I wonder if there is a better word? Some of our most formative experiences of human flourishing happen when we are at our most fragile, vulnerable and hurting. Sometimes those who are most resilient are least able to listen and more prepared to instruct, control and manipulate. This relates to a wider and more complex question: Is religion good for you? How far are we enabling into a deeper self-worth, a profounder apprehension of our being cherished and beloved of God by religion? What are we to do with the legacy of our religion (of which we are a part) which has deepened abuse of power, inequality, shame and guilt – to name but a handful of contradictions?

However, none of these musings should detract from a book which is beautifully and imaginatively written.

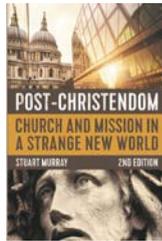
—James Woodward

James Woodward is an author, blogger, theologian and Principal of Sarum College, Salisbury.



Reorientating Christianity for the Post-Christendom Era

This book is about the rise and decline of Christendom. We are introduced to its history, its main features, and how churches can and should engage in mission in the post-Christendom era.



Stuart Murray
Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World (2nd Edition)
SCM, 2018

Jesus was marginalized. A clerical caste developed. Churches became larger and more hierarchical. Services were clergy-led, with little engagement by the laity. Mission was about transforming the

whole culture, not just individuals, and was coercive. In the story of Christian reactions against it we are first introduced to the Lollards and

Waldensians. Here we see Murray's commitment to Anabaptism, with his disapproval of not only war but also oaths. He believes the New Testament should take precedence over the Old, and the Sermon on the Mount over the rest of the New Testament.

The description of the Reformation debates reinforces the Anabaptist claims. As Christendom divided, new movements like Anabaptism challenged its top-down coercive nature; but Luther and Calvin re-established

There are helpful introductions to major characters like Constantine and Augustine, who established the framework. From then on mission often consisted of converting royalty, who would oblige their subjects to get baptised. Defeated enemies were often baptised by force. From the late fourth century church leaders approved of violence against pagans. Inevitably most converts knew very little about Christianity.

In effect Christendom replaced one imperial religion with another. Heretics came to be treated as political subversives. The cross became a sign of military victory.

In Christendom the historical

hierarchical power structures and persecuted opponents.

Murray then turns to the causes of Christendom's decline. Nineteenth-century liberals produced anaemic religion. The Keep Sunday Special campaign of the 1980s is cited as an example of Christendom trying to retain its social power.

What should evangelism be like in post-Christendom? Murray notes the common antipathy to it in churches, and suggests that it should be a lifestyle, not a specialist activity. Its style should be low profile, speaking from the margins, anticipating longer journeys towards Christ, engaging in conversation rather than confrontation, social action, creation care and peace and justice advocacy. Perhaps post-Christendom churches should abolish the clergy. Monologue sermons should be out. We need to read the Bible differently and put Jesus back at the centre.

Overall the book provides a good introduction to the relationship between Christianity and Christendom, clarifies the issues facing religious believers in our present age, and points to features of the Christian tradition which need to be abandoned. Readers of Signs of the Times will not agree with everything, but there is plenty of food for thought.

There is an odd statement on page 45. Explaining the rise of Christendom after the fall of the western Roman empire, we are

told about "the inherent power of the gospel and its attractiveness to those for whom paganism was losing its appeal, healings and exorcisms (though miracles were waning), the churches' compassionate service and practical aid..." What miracles? I fantasized about statistical research into the declining incidence of walking on water. Did he mean to classify healings and exorcisms as miracles? Only in modern times were they understood this way. I'd love to know what he meant.

Most writers on Christian mission and evangelism don't address the question of what is being evangelized. It is as though their version of Christianity is the only one. Murray shares this weakness. Throughout the book we are given glimpses of the kind of Christianity he believes in, and I warmed to much of it; but in addition to describing the Christendom he doesn't believe in, it would have been helpful if he had directly described the kind of Christianity he does believe in.

Still, one can't get everything from one book. People of faith who feel uncertain about the role of churches in our present culture will find it a helpful introduction to the issues.

—Jonathan Clatworthy

Jonathan Clatworthy is an author, blogger, theologian, Research Fellow at Liverpool University and Trustee of Modern Church



**LIVING
IN LOVE
& FAITH**

**THEOLOGICAL
TRANSFORMATIONS**

MODERN CHURCH ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2020

Monday 13th to Wednesday 15th July 2020
High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Herts

Living in Love and Faith is the Church of England's latest project on sexuality, due to report during the same month as this conference. Modern Church is devoting this conference to a range of theological presentations which demonstrate how the Christian Gospel affirms, accepts and welcomes everyone, whatever their identity, gender or sexuality, and without reservation or ambiguity.

Chair: Professor Adrian Thatcher; **Chaplain:** The Revd Dr Tina Beardsley, SMMS

Speakers:*

The Revd. Dr. Tina Beardsley / Kieran Bohan / **The Revd. Prof. Chris Cook** /
Dr. Susannah Cornwall / **The Revd Canon Dr Julie Gittos** / The Revd Jide Macaulays /
Jayne Ozanne / Prof. Adrian Thatcher / **Alison Webster**

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