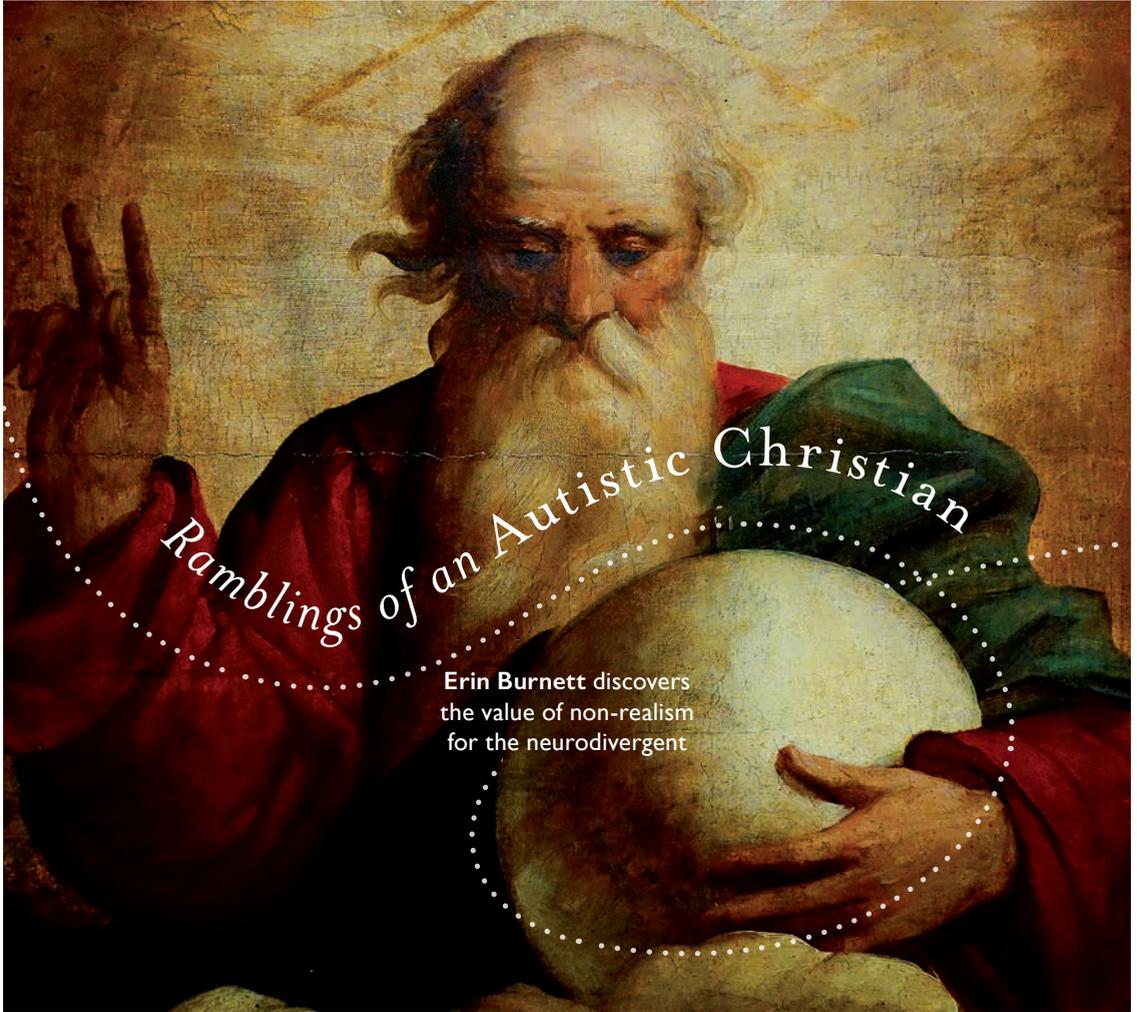


WINTER 2020

# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FEATURES, COMMENTARY AND REVIEWS FROM MODERN CHURCH



## *Ramblings of an Autistic Christian*

Erin Burnett discovers the value of non-realism for the neurodivergent

In Memoriam:  
David Simon  
Jane Finn and Alan Race

Talking  
About God  
John Saxbee

Book Reviews  
James Francis, Michael Sadgrove  
and Linda Birch

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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

# PASSING ON THE BATON

**This edition mourns a great member of Modern Church – David Simon, our Treasurer, whose death was briefly announced in our last edition. I leave it to our Chair below, with David’s former colleague at Halifax Minster who gave the eulogy, to celebrate all that he contributed to Modern Church, and to the Church more generally.**

His death coincided, almost to the day, with the submission of an article by a new voice, Erin Burnett, a young theology graduate from Northern Ireland, which picked up directly on

his magisterial analysis of “non-realist” theology in the spring edition of 2019. Thus the baton is handed on from generation to generation. Many of our members are products of the theological ferment of the 1960s, and some of our diverse thinking (even our continued existence) may seem dated and irrelevant to newer generations. It is easy to become depressed and despairing – which David never was. Erin’s article below gives a massive boost to the case that our witness is still needed: a witness to a Gospel and a Church which are *continued* >

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Signs of the Times is published in February, May, August 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 28th December, 28th March, 28th June or 28th 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 IMAGE: BENEDICTION OF GOD THE FATHER BY LUCA CAMBIASO (C.1565)



Erin’s article below gives a massive boost to the case that our witness is still needed: a witness to a Gospel and a Church which are generous enough to include many different understandings of the Christian Mystery and the Christian story.

generous enough to include many different understandings of the Christian Mystery and the Christian story.

There are far more such new voices, particularly but not only amongst the young, who have little or no contact with Modern Church. They, too, are needed. Consideration of the pandemic’s implications for the Church has so far focused largely on its financial problems and on the pros and cons of greater digital presence; but both of these have implications for its theology. When we combine all that with the wider social and political questions which have painfully come to the fore over the past year – not to speak of the ever more urgent climate crisis – we could be seeing an intensification of the “new Dark Age” of which I have written before; or an opportunity for a new start for humanity; or both. In any event, Modern Church’s witness is crucial.

As regards the passing on of David’s

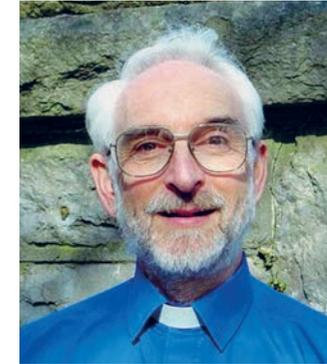
principal Modern Church baton – the role of Treasurer – his predecessor Rosalind Lund stepped back into the breach on an interim basis. But she does much else for us, as Secretary to the Trustees and joint Membership Secretary to name but two roles. At the time of writing, therefore, we are still seeking a longer-term successor. I can testify, as a Trustee and cheque signatory, that the accounts are very much simpler and far less busy than those of a major parish church, such as I mastered for many years, or indeed those of many other small to medium charities. They have their peculiarities and points of interest, but there is much expertise amongst the rest of us to advise any newcomer on those.

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*If we have not filled this vacancy by the time of publication, any reader who would consider it should please e-mail: [rmulund@gmail.com](mailto:rmulund@gmail.com)*

## IN MEMORIAM

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# David Simon (1949-2020)

MC Treasurer (2018-2020)

*By The Revd Jane Finn, Curate Halifax Minster, with Revd Dr Alan Race, Chair MC Trustees*

*Jane Finn writes:*

**D**avid Simon was greatly respected and cherished by many people, and rightly so. He was born and died in Yorkshire, grew up in Bradford with his parents and his brother James and attended Bradford Grammar School. He studied Economics, Business and Finance at the University of Aberystwyth. It was there that he cemented his love of learning and of academia. He began his career with Post Office Telecoms,

but before long his old professor had him returning to Aberystwyth as a lecturer, before later moving to the University of Hull, again following his professor. Subsequently, he took a job at Rydal Hall retreat house in the Lakes, combining two of his great loves – his finance skills and his faith. He was ordained Deacon in 1987, and Priest in 1988, ministering for many years at Cartmel Priory. Some five years ago, he and his wife *continued >*

Many of us struggle to work out who we are, and what is important to us, and even then, living that out, is even more difficult still. But David did know who he was, what was important to him, and he did live it out; it is called integrity.

**Marjorie finally came home to Yorkshire and David to work at Halifax Minster. He once said: “You never know why you’re doing things at the time, and now it’s all clear to me.”**

Among his many interests, he was a Companion member of the monastic Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, a member of the Philosophy Group, the Novel Appreciation group, the Manchester Philosophy Group (joined just during lockdown!), a Trustee and Treasurer of Modern Church. He loved academia, he loved the water and the sea, he loved walking, reading, learning, talking, and he loved his family.

The sudden diagnosis, only three weeks before his passing, was an enormous shock to both the family and his friends, but his very last days were mercifully pain-free and peaceful. He was able, one by one, to lay down the things of this world and ready himself for the next. The immediate family were fortunate in being able to spend time with him during his last days in the hospice. I anointed him, and we chatted and laughed about

life, and death, and any concerns he needed to lay down and leave behind.

Eleanor Roosevelt once spoke about learning who we really are, and then living with that decision. Many of us struggle to work out who we are, and what is important to us, and even then, living that out, is even more difficult still. But David did know who he was, what was important to him, and he did live it out; it is called integrity. He did not waste time or words doing or saying unnecessary things – he was a noticer, a great thinker, an academic, an observer, a consoler, an acceptor of others... he had an incredibly sharp brain (with a wit as sharp), a mischievous sense of humour, a healthy disregard for unreasonable authority, a sense of place and a sense of peace, because he wasn’t controlled by should-do’s, but by what he knew to be right and worthy. An inclusive, crazy, loving, and lovable, humble liberal, with smiling eyes and a smiling heart.

True to form, David chose the service of Compline for his parting, and with *continued >*

its straightforward, beautiful yet concise words, it seems a perfect choice. At the Community of the Resurrection (a place which held a special place in David’s heart), it is customary to leave in silence after the service, and the Greater Silence, as it was known, was entered into until the dawning of the next day... the very message of resurrection hope.

The words of Compline and the words of David’s life, spoken and unspoken, call us to quietness, to reflection, to better living, to being our better selves, and they continue to do so. Our lives are enriched and all the better for having known him, for having worked alongside him, for having learnt alongside him, for having walked with him in death. Our lives are changed because of his counsel, and will continue to be so because, in him, we saw, heard and experienced the very love of God.

David, go forth from this world, rest in peace, and rise in glory. Amen.

*Alan Race adds:*

**F**or all of us in Modern Church, David will be remembered as a dear friend, a committed liberal thinker, someone of steady wisdom and, as Jane has said, integrity. We knew him as a trustee and treasurer but his contribution to the organization was

We knew him as a trustee and treasurer but his contribution to the organization was far-reaching.

**far-reaching. That said, we valued his management of our finances through two challenging years, during which we have seen significant legacies coincide with falling revenues from other sources, with consequent major restructuring of our “business plan” and the financially intelligent and safe development of new initiatives. Not only did David add much insight and wisdom to all the Trustees’ discussions on matters financial and non-financial, his understanding of charity law and accounting proved invaluable on many occasions. His mantra was always ‘you can spend money so long as it reflects the objects of MC’s purpose’.**

But David also contributed to our theological thinking, notably through the pages of *Signs* – and most presciently and poignantly with his article in the summer 2020 edition on *Losing Loved Ones Before Their Time* in the context of the pandemic. David maintained a winning composure at all times and was a personal support to those who sought his wise counsel. He will be greatly missed.

COVER FEATURE

# RAMBLINGS of a n

I have always struggled with the supernatural aspects of the faith; I could never grasp the concept of communicating with a God 'up there' while humans were 'down here'.

## AUTISTIC CHRISTIAN

Erin Burnett discovers the value of non-realism for the neurodivergent

**L**ast year's issues of *Signs* included a fascinating discussion on "non-realist" Christian theology. In response, I wish to contend that non-realism is a perhaps rare but valid way to interpret the Christian faith. Indeed, there is a subsection of people for whom non-realism may be the only viable option: autistic people.

If I had to encapsulate my religious outlook in one sentence, I would invert the oft-cited phrase 'spiritual, but not religious' and instead say I am 'religious, but not spiritual'. I have always had a deep-seated interest in religion, and I love the traditions, community and way of life which Christianity provides. Yet I have always struggled with the supernatural aspects of the faith; I could never grasp the concept of communicating with a God 'up there' while humans were 'down here'. I bounced from church to church, all over the theological spectrum, hoping to finally achieve the 'personal relationship with Jesus' everyone else seemed to enjoy. My search eventually led me to attend theological

college, where faith tends to either strengthen or die.

For my final year dissertation, I chose to research the experience of autistic adults within the Christian church; I received my autism diagnosis at the age of 18, yet I had never considered how that could influence my theology. Too often, theology regarding marginalised groups focuses on how to pull these groups into the ecclesiastical fold, enforcing conformity to theological norms. The liberation theologians of the twentieth century had a different understanding: theology should come from the margins, by listening to diverse perspectives and receiving new theological understandings beyond the established norm.

My research revealed that I am not a hopeless heretic in a state of wilful rebellion. Instead, there are neurobiological reasons which explain why some autistic people struggle to give intellectual assent to supernatural doctrines. Multiple research papers have demonstrated a connection *continued* >

IMAGE: BENEDICTION OF GOD THE FATHER BY LUCA CAMBIASO (C.1565)

“I’d rather be an ‘unbelieving Christian’ living by love than an ‘unbelieving Christian’ living by beliefs”

between autism and lack of belief in a supernatural deity, in order to properly relate to a personal deity, one must be able to empathise with God’s personality traits, thoughts, moods, and ways of communicating. Autistic people have a hard enough time doing this with someone who is standing in front of them, let alone with an entity we cannot see. To quote John Shelby Spong, “What the mind cannot accept, the heart can never adore”.

Society is ordered around ideas of normativity, whereby those who do not meet the norm are viewed as defective. Churches can subconsciously buy into these ideas if the goal is to make autistic people more neurotypical in behaviour and belief. How, then, can an autistic person remain part of a faith community without having to force themselves into a way of thinking that is fundamentally incompatible with the way they experience the world?

Towards the end of my time at theological college I came to the realisation that such radical theology would not be welcomed in the world of Northern Irish evangelicalism, yet to leave the church would have been akin to losing a core part of my identity. It was then that a maverick Church of Ireland priest suggested I join Modern Church, not because they would necessarily agree with me, but because they would be

willing to facilitate discussions that others may consider to be beyond the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. I’ll always remember a particular saying of his: “I’d rather be an ‘unbelieving Christian’ living by love than an ‘unbelieving Christian’ living by beliefs”.

As an autistic Christian, I have a deep desire to be part of something beyond myself, to follow the teachings of Jesus and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. In issue 75 of *Signs*, Lorraine Cavanagh rightly points out that “Nobody can be made to believe something in a way which conveys meaning unless they have in some way encountered who or what it is they are being asked to believe in”. I may not be able to have a supernatural encounter with an anthropomorphised God, but this I

I may not be able to have a supernatural encounter with an anthropomorphised God, but this I know: God is love, and autistic people are just as capable at giving and receiving love as anyone else. Many autistic adults face a life of isolation and misunderstanding; churches can offer a community of inclusive love for such individuals

know: God is love, and autistic people are just as capable at giving and receiving love as anyone else. Many autistic adults face a life of isolation and misunderstanding; churches can offer a community of inclusive love for such individuals.

What, then, does a non-realist faith look like in real life? To quote Don Cupitt, “to believe in the Resurrection of Christ is to start living ‘a risen life’, and to believe in the Ascension is to say ‘Jesus is Lord’ and live by his teaching”. A non-realist faith is inherently practical and empirical, a James 1:27 kind of faith. Paul Tillich proposed that God can be understood as the ground of all being, a level of being above and beyond personal existence, one that enfolds all human beings (Colossians 3:11; Acts 17:28). Personally, I experience this level of being by volunteering for the Mission to Seafarers, an organisation that offers me the privilege of being able to show practical love for fellow divine image bearers. When I talk to seafarers about their lives, struggles, hopes and dreams, that is when I catch a glimpse of the divine.

*By way of a disclaimer, it must be noted that I do not speak on behalf of all autistic Christians. Autism is heterogeneous, meaning every autistic person presents differently, and therefore the extent to which they struggle to conceptualise a personal deity will vary.*

Erin Burnett is a theology graduate from Northern Ireland, currently undertaking postgraduate study in Scotland. This is an extended version of an article previously published in *Progressive Voices*, the newsletter of the Progressive Christianity Network.

## QUIZ

# Contemporary Theology

Devised by Rebekah Hanson and Chris Savage

- 1 Who said, ‘If God is male, then the male is God’?
- 2 When was *Honest to God* first published?
- 3 Which famous theologian said that the beginning and essence of faith was to “simply accept the fact that you are accepted”?
- 4 Apart from Mary, who else was referred to as ‘Mother’ by Julian of Norwich in *Revelations of Divine Love*?
- 5 Who allegedly stated that the Christian has a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other?
- 6 What is the 2015 encyclical by Pope Francis concerning climate change called?
- 7 Which Bible passage does Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reference with the title of her book, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*?
- 8 Who shouted at a meeting of General Synod in the 1980’s when a motion accepting the ordination of women as priests was rejected, “We asked for bread and you gave us stones”?
- 9 What are the five categories of Christian approaches to culture in *Christ and Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr?
- 10 Who proclaimed the death of Christianity at the hands of white evangelical nationalists in the 2019 book, *Burying White Privilege*?
- 11 Who pioneered Industrial Mission in Sheffield in the late 1940’s and wrote *Church and People in an Industrial City*?
- 12 What is the name of Jürgen Moltmann’s first book?

Answers on the back page >



PHOTO: DESI MAXWELL

## Talking About God

John Saxbee on the non-binary key that might unlock Humanist-Christian dialogue

**A**s a member of the Religion and Atheism Project, involving a dozen or so representatives of Humanist and Christian points of view, I was asked to submit an article to get the discussion under way in May 2020 via Zoom.

This project is predicated on dialogue

as an alternative to conflict and confrontation. The latest exchanges focussed on the kind of language and processes of reasoning we are using when we talk about God.

When we describe God as ‘good’ or ‘wise’ are we using these words in the same sense as when we apply them to

Following Feuerbach and Durkheim, atheists tend to reverse the roles of creature and Creator – God is the creature made in the image of humanity, the Creator

human beings? If so, then we are using them univocally. But if we take seriously what Kierkegaard called ‘the infinite qualitative difference’ between God and God’s human creatures, then we may well apply different senses to such words. For example, we may be ‘good’ but God’s goodness is different in kind and not just degree from ours. Such differentiated meanings we call equivocal.

However, does this have to be a binary choice? Thanks to Thomas Aquinas, a non-binary option is on offer. He developed the ancient Greek notion of analogy which traces a middle way between uni- and equivocal usage.

His understanding of analogy implies a derivative relationship between an original usage, and its adopted use. Gordon Banks’ ‘miraculous’ save in the 1970 World Cup has an analogical and, therefore, derivative relationship to turning water into wine! The meaning of miracle in relation to the latter rubs off on the meaning of the word as it applies to the former.

Likewise, God is goodness itself, but in such a way as to allow the meaning of ‘good’ as applied to God to rub off on its attribution to human beings made in God’s image.

There are a host of words in a typical Dictionary of Theology which both

theists and atheists can use positively and appropriately. For example: mystery, spirit, grace, sacrifice, soul, redemption, transcendence. Dialogue between religion and atheism is hampered by a binary choice between uni- and equivocal language. But the non-binary option allows analogy to help move us beyond the divide.

Following Feuerbach and Durkheim, atheists tend to reverse the roles of creature and Creator – God is the creature made in the image of humanity, the Creator. But the analogical dynamic is the same. What is typically attributed to God as Creator is being projected on to humankind analogically. Such instances of shared vocabulary, used analogically, can enable theists to help humanists comprehend humanity, and enable humanists to help theists comprehend God. Herein are the ingredients for a fruitful dialogue.

Now we have got a taste for non-binary accounts of religious language, abduction comes to the fore. It is the non-binary option challenging the binary choice between deductive and inductive ways of arguing to a conclusion. Deduction is a form of logical argument whereby the conclusion is the only possible one given the stated premises:

All Anglicans are baptised;  
Judith is an Anglican;  
therefore Judith is baptised.

Such deductive arguments are true or false – there’s no other option.

Induction is a form of argument from past and present experiential knowledge e.g. the sun has risen *continued >*

every day, to a conclusion as to what will happen hereafter – the sun will rise tomorrow. Just as deductive arguments are logically true or false, so inductive arguments are demonstrably true or false – the sun either rises tomorrow or doesn't. There is no middle way. So both modes of argument are binary.

But again, there is a non-binary option. This is abduction which, put simply, is to argue for the most plausible inference from the available evidence. This mode of argument was much favoured by C.S. Lewis who, perhaps for that reason, was one of the most influential religious apologists of the 20th Century. He majored on probability as key to the way we must reason our way to the truth-claims of religion. He forswore the binary of true or false to propose and promote non-binary probability.

Arguments for the existence of God, whether deductive (e.g. ontological arguments) or inductive (e.g. the argument from design) have been found wanting principally because they fall foul of the binary true/false dichotomy. And, of course, arguments for the non-existence of God suffer the same fate. But abduction offers both theists and atheists a lifeline, and as with the deployment of analogical language, extends the scope for creative and mutually enlightening dialogue.

Just as Humanists declared on the side of a bus that there probably isn't a God, so I would want to say that the human self is probably not the ultimate mystery which Humanism must affirm and celebrate, and that this human self is probably transcended by an

'What is truth?' asked Pilate. Well, when it comes to theology, it is seldom, if ever, binary, and with the assistance of analogy and abduction as non-binary options, religion and atheism can dialogue their way towards plausible, if not necessarily identical, inferences from such evidence as is available this side of the veil

antecedent and superior divine being. Those repeated 'probablys' point to the use of abduction i.e. arguing for the most plausible inference from the available evidence, be that evidence logical, empirical, experiential or revealed.

Abductive reasoning does not entail agnosticism. 'Probably' is a step beyond 'don't know', but it stops short of submission to the tyranny of binary reasoning.

'What is truth?' asked Pilate. Well, when it comes to theology, it is seldom, if ever, binary, and with the assistance of analogy and abduction as non-binary options, religion and atheism can dialogue their way towards plausible, if not necessarily identical, inferences from such evidence as is available this side of the veil.

**John Saxbee** is a former Bishop of Lincoln and President of the Modern Churchpeople's Union (predecessor of Modern Church).

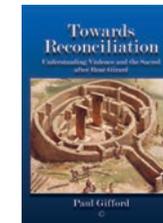
## REVIEWS



# The Relationship Between Human Violence and the Sacred

**This book is an appreciation of reconciliation from a Girardian perspective. It consists of six chapters, with an Introduction and an Appendix (a transcript of Conversations with René Girard – From Animal to Religion and On Religion – held in April 2009).**

The first sentence states the author's purpose "that we will become better reconcilers if we manage to gain a sharper and more joined-up understanding of how human violence is linked to the sacred." (page 1). The book takes us on a journey that explains and explores the scope and shape



**Paul Gifford**  
*Towards Reconciliation. Understanding Violence and the Sacred after René Girard*  
James Clarke & Co, 2020

of Girard's theory, with creative reflection on its significance for today. What better guide than the author, who worked with Girard.

The first chapter, *What is Sacred Violence?*, outlines the fundamentals of Girardian thought in drawing anthropology and religion together. Chapter two, *Violent Origins, Origins of Violence* examines mimetic theory informing an understanding of conflict in "an unsuspected runaway dynamic at work in human affairs" (page 27). The author explores this with reference to William Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies*. "Still today, human violence is sacralised in at least *continued* >

two important senses. First of all, negatively it demonises its Other but then it is also “self-sacralising” (positively speaking it divinises itself). Always, it is sacrificial, requiring a victim; and originally and in principle, that sacrifice is bloody” (page 33).

Chapter three, entitled *Founding Murder* (the “archaic sacred”), focuses on the idea of the ritual slaughter of a surrogate victim. “The sacred emerges in the practice of sacrifice in which the scapegoat is sacralised, divinised. He (the scapegoat) will henceforth carry the vocation of preserving the reconciled community... This Violence and this Sacred are, for René Girard, the origin of culture.” (pages 16, 42, 49-51).

Chapter four, *Violence, the Archaic Sacred and Judaeo-Christian Revelation* is a hinge; primitive religion (the “archaic sacred”), through a kind of evolution, brings us to the emergent Abrahamic faiths in the Biblical Judaeo-Christian tradition (page 59). This chapter begins to sketch out the change process for a new understanding of reconciliation that, far from expressing the way to reconciliation through the “archaic sacred”, undermines it. This is explored in the revisionist narrative of Genesis 1-3 and the Hebrew texts set against the “Founding Murder” practices

of the surrounding cults of Israel’s context. In the Gospels, Jesus’ passion also signals the ultimate revision of the cultic sacred. (As a note in passing, this reviewer is especially grateful for how this chapter offers a fresh way of reading the story of the Fall (so called) in Genesis 2-3, and also the identity of the “Judaisers” in John’s Gospel in a way that frees us from anti-Semitism).

Chapter five, *Passion, Resurrection – and How We Come by Reconciliation*, continues this theme in exploring further how Jesus’ fate as sacred violence is called in question. Through his death and resurrection a new way of reconciliation that is not based on sacred violence is opened up. Chapter 6 (“Taking Thought for Reconciliation”) sketches creative possibilities for society today in putting this Girardian vision to work existentially in our world and in our own conduct.

This is a book that no student of Biblical studies, theology or pastoral concern can afford to miss.

—James Francis

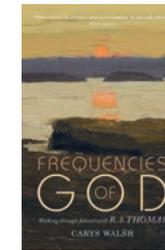
**The Revd Canon James Francis** is a former Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Sunderland.



## Walsh’s R.S. Thomas Advent Collection is to be Enjoyed All Year Round

**I discovered R. S. Thomas at theological college – not as ordinand but lecturer. One of my students who wrote beautiful essays on the Hebrew Bible asked if I’d read his poetry. I hadn’t. Later, as a young incumbent with everything to learn about parish ministry, I went back to his poems. He seemed to inhabit a landscape that was familiar, of bafflement and desolation as well as consolation and trust. Here was faith unafraid of questions, seeking understanding in places of shadow as well as light. Here was a poet who understood.**

Thomas is a difficult poet because of the complexity of his writing and the elusiveness of his mind. But Carys Walsh shows in this rich, intelligent and rewarding book that she ‘gets’ the poet. A vade mecum subtitled *Walking through*



Carys Walsh  
*Frequencies of God: Walking through Advent with R.S. Thomas*  
Canterbury Press, 2020

Advent with R. S. Thomas could have consisted merely of devotional thoughts on favourites like ‘The Bright Field’ and ‘Pilgrimages’. Instead, Walsh shares insights that are finely attuned to Thomas’ subtle, shifting ‘frequencies’ (the book’s title is an allusion to his 1978 collection of poems). She shows to good effect how the ideas of absence and longing, so persistent in Thomas’ poetry, shed light on Advent’s focus on coming and presence.

Walsh invites us on a five-week journey through the season into the first week of Christmas. Her lens is the Carmelite pattern of waiting, accepting, journeying, birthing and seeing. I wondered how well this structure would map on to the spirited, characterful writing of a poet of such independence of mind. However, Walsh treads lightly and doesn’t impose *continued >*

Walsh writes about being ‘confronted by the God who compels us to move ever closer to the centre, yet remains ungraspable’, the immanent God whom we glimpse in the world, yet ‘who nevertheless eludes us’. ‘Unsayings’, she says, calls us ‘never to rest in any definition of God but always to travel onwards, full of yearning, to further meanings’

her structure on the poetry but follows where it leads. Her choice of poems is as much driven by the wish to do justice to Thomas’ reach and diversity as to the season itself. We can value this book at any time of year.

For example, the poem ‘I know him’ (Week 3, Day 5) has as its central idea how we both know and don’t know the mysterious being for whom we search. Thomas likens ‘him’ to a shape dissolving in the mist, or a black hole into which everything disappears. We presume he means God, though ‘God’ remains carefully unnamed. Walsh writes about being ‘confronted by the God who compels us to move ever closer to the centre, yet remains ungraspable’, the immanent God whom we glimpse in the world, yet ‘who nevertheless eludes us’. ‘Unsayings’, she says, calls us ‘never to rest in any definition of God but always to travel onwards, full of yearning, to further meanings’.

This puts a very different spin on our relationship with God from most popular spiritual writing. The via negativa is a

tough path to follow. And this raises a question for me about Walsh’s approach. She makes life a bit easier for us in her final paragraph on this poem by saying that ‘this God draws us on in His (sic) slipstream, just as He was drawn into life at Christmas; just as the shepherds, the Magi and countless others were drawn and are still drawn’. I think that goes beyond the poem’s studied reticence where its absence that draws us on as much as presence, where we are granted no more than hints as to what disclosure could mean. I noticed this tendency to soften hard edges at the end of some of her other reflections too, as if readers might not welcome too much Thomasian astringency.

Nevertheless, this is a stimulating and enjoyable book. For anyone yet to discover Thomas-land, this could be the ideal introduction.

**The Very Revd Michael Sadgrove**  
is a former Dean of Durham.



## Harries’ Quick Tour Through the Greatest Painters and Sculptors of Religious Art

**This is a little jewel of a book, reasonably priced, making it a thoughtful Christmas gift for a friend or oneself. The author invites the reader to accompany him through a tour of the world’s greatest painters and sculptors of religious art. As a practising artist and Franciscan with a strong interest in the history of art, I much enjoyed the combination of the choices, commentary and reflections offered by Richard Harries.**

The book provides a rich selection of work by masters, some known to me and others new discoveries, including mosaics, icons, sculpture and paintings, each with its commentary and personal significance to the author.

Harries describes and then reflects on each work, allowing



**Richard Harries**  
*Seeing God in Art*  
– the Christian Faith  
in 30 images  
SPCK, 2020

the reader to see how the art reflects back to us the images of God seen through others’ eyes in a range of different historical and cultural contexts.

As Christianity developed historically from East to West, art forms followed different paths. Eastern images were produced for veneration and contemplation beyond the

image by means of recognisable symbols. Western art concentrated on educating viewers by setting the divine into narratives. Leonardo’s *Last Supper* depicts who was there and what they were doing.

This mix of old and new, eastern and western, is a real treasure house for reflection. Like the Wallace Collection, the Bowes Museum, County Durham and the Frick in New York, this is a personal collection and the *continued >*

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author's choices are all the more interesting for it. The majesty of the Creation story in mosaic in Monreale cathedral at Palermo, for example, contrasts with the homely, slightly portly Christ in the wilderness cradling a scorpion by Stanley Spencer. Chagall is there along with Rembrandt, but so too is Albert Herbert's mysterious and quirky painting of a small balding Elijah under a huge black cloud being fed by a raven. The choices range right through the history of religious art. Sculpture is also represented by David Wynne's *Noli me tangere*.

The contrasting ways in which artists have portrayed the Christian story over time also show how our views of God have changed. Whose God are we looking at? Most art was ordered and paid for by donors to the church, all of which had their doctrinal agendas. And what of the artists they employed? In essence all artists were jobbing craftsmen, but it is clear that

they used the world around them and often put themselves into their work, so to a degree all these works are personal to their creators – and then also to their viewers.

Culture plays a large part in all art and I was interested to see the work of Solomon Raj, an Indian painter depicting Christ in majesty sitting behind a lotus plant combining western Christian art with Buddhist symbols. Although variously described as an etching and a lithograph I think it is actually a woodcut or lino cut, judging by the vigour of the marks that give so much energy to it.

I much appreciated the author's personal selections, but the global scope of the works, the breadth of history and the range of media, make this a rich and elegant mosaic of a beautifully produced book.

— *Linda Birch*

Linda Birch is an artist and teacher.

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*Answers to the Contemporary Theology Quiz on Page 9:*  
1.) Mary Daly; 2.) 1963 by SCM Press; 3.) Paul Tillich, from a sermon  
*You Are Accepted*; 4.) Jesus/God; 5.) Karl Barth; 6.) Laudato Si;  
7.) Mark 14:9; 8.) Una Kroll; 9.) Christ against culture; Christ of  
culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture in paradox; Christ  
the transformer of culture; 10.) Miguel de la Torre; 11.) Bishop Ted  
Wickham; 12.) *A Theology of Hope*