

# Common Theology

Volume 2, number 2, Autumn 2006 — \$4

ISSN 1447-3615



## INSIDE:

- Judas Gospel appeals to the “in group”
- The Solomon Islands — a demo that got out of hand
- How to make scandal soap

A Quarterly Journal for Australians



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**Front Page: Tree of Life, British Museum, with detail insets.**

*The Tree of Life was created with dismantled pistols, AK-47s and grenade launchers from Mozambique. The arms were decommissioned by former child soldiers in the country and exchanged for building materials, bicycles and sewing machines.*

*The British Museum and Christian Aid commissioned the piece for the start of the arts festival, Africa 2005.*

“The whole point of (the Tree of Life) is that after a civil war people have forgotten how to hope – they couldn’t imagine that there might be such a thing as a world of peace. And the art says, “I will beat swords into ploughshares...nation shall not lift up sword against nation...”.

Tom Wright (See Page 5).

*Common Theology is an independent publication funded by its subscribers and sponsors. It aims to be a forum where public matters that affect Australian Christians’ daily life and decision-making can be aired in a theological context.*

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**Published by HelassInk**  
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ISSN 1447-3615

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## From the Editor

**R**ulers of the western world claim to have found religion (it is worth noting that leaders of the two-thirds world never lost it). Now it really has become a matter of urgency for mature Christians to discern what kind of religion our rulers have got. Religion is clearly no longer a private matter.

Today “Judaeo-Christian values” and “Enlightenment values” are indiscriminately peddled to our media-fatigued populations as if they are self-evidently good. But as Tom Wright points out in this edition, they are very slippery concepts indeed.

If we take our job as Christians seriously we will not accept at face value a world of distorted meanings, where if a politician says he will cut income tax we do not believe him but if he says he is a Christian we do. Martin Cullinan gives succinct reasons in *Home Truths* for critically evaluating every statement issuing from parliament.

Meanwhile, the unseemly rush to get religion in politics provokes equally unseemly hilarity in the churches – as public relations staff and politicians attempt to learn theological language overnight. But this time before religion-speak is appropriated by politicians is a window of opportunity for critical evaluation. Before the spin doctors learn to segue from politico-speak to church-speak.

George W Bush claims religion as a Theist; our own John Howard claims religion as a “good Christian” – which mature Christians know is a figment of the imagination; and Tony Blair seems to be perilously fallen between two stools trying to keep amicable company with Christians and politicians at the same time.

“Innocent victim” is another tendentious concept which is popular in public speech these days. Rene Girard’s influential theory of violence and the sacred throws a fascinating light upon the bloodbath of contemporary religious affairs. His theory is interpreted by Michael Kirwan in his book reviewed in these pages.

There was never a more crucial time for people of religion to be involved in politics.

**Maggie Helass**

# Uncovering “thin” places

**Tom Wright**, one of the world’s most influential Scripture scholars, made his first trip to Australia at the invitation of **Archbishop John Bathersby** to lead this year’s Brisbane Archdiocesan Mission. It was a truly ecumenical occasion on April 1<sup>st</sup>. Roman Catholics were almost outnumbered by Anglicans and in question time a Baptist pastor stood up to recommend the benefits of life in the Spirit. Here is a précis of some of the Anglican Bishop of Durham’s lectures on that day.

“It is as though, with Jesus, a great door in the cosmos, which had been locked forever until that point, had swung open — and we hear a voice inviting us to go through and discover the true meaning of being human, the true meaning of life as a whole, and the way to what we loosely call salvation.”

Billed as ‘Jesus’ Mission’ and ‘Christian Mission in a Post Modern World’ the two-day seminar tackled the Resurrection, postmodernism, and the problem of evil.

Resurrection was not, Tom Wright said, the most bizarre miracle within the old world, but the prototypical event within the new world, brought about through the mission of Jesus. Resurrection is all about the beginning of new creation.

“The Church finds itself poised between the resurrection of Jesus and God’s promise of ultimately renewing all things in Jesus and by the power of the Spirit.”

“We can only understand Christian mission in the world as a whole when we understand our task as framed between the launch of new creation in Jesus and the completion of new creation in the future.”

Resurrection is not life after death, it is life after life after death, he said.

Addressing the spectrum of churchmanship which focuses on salvation as other-worldly, Tom Wright said that the idea of rescuing human souls from this space, time and matter universe, to enjoy a disembodied state, was a rather thin and etiolated version of the doctrine of salvation.

Jesus is seen in Scripture healing people’s bodies, he is transforming their social and cultural situations.



*Archbishop John Bathersby and Bishop Tom Wright.*

On the other hand, the social activist lobby of the churches concentrates on doing justice and loving mercy here in the present. A great deal of good work had been done that way, Wright said. But that too misses the fullness of the promise which we have in Jesus — that the bodily resurrection is the beginning of the new creation. “Christian mission consists of implementing the resurrection of Jesus in the power of the Spirit and thereby anticipating the ultimate new creation.”

God’s new creation is not a case of souls going up to heaven but rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth so that the dwelling of

## Two world views had traditionally been available

God will be with humans, so that heaven and earth will be married at last.

Two world views had traditionally been available to western Christians. The utopian view and dualism.

There were huge problems with the utopian view — for instance, if Utopia arrived tomorrow what would that say to people who are being tortured to death today? This critique also applies to Marxism.

Many Christians assume some kind of cosmological dualism as the ultimate goal. The aim is to get out of this place, get away from this wicked world and go the pure eternal timeless non spacio-



temporal, non-material place called heaven. If the world is not our hope, if Armageddon is coming, who cares about acid rain?

But when God makes the new world it will be recognisably the offspring and product of the world we know at the moment.

We find it very difficult to think of human bodies and indeed the universe as anything other than decaying and dying.

But the promise of God in the New Testament is that what God has done for Jesus at Easter God is going to do for the whole cosmos. God is going to deal with precisely the problem of decay and death. New creation starts with Jesus' resurrection.

The Promised Land was the first instalment, now the whole world is God's holy land. It is the foundation of Christian mission in the world.

The material of the old world will be taken up, healed, transformed, immortalised in the new world.

The word "heaven" ought to be treated by us today as a question mark until we have thought through the cosmology of the Resurrection and the Ascension.

Heaven is God's space, God's sphere. God made the world to be bi-partite – heaven and earth are meant to overlap and interlock.

We are imbued with the Platonic idea. The idea of Jesus as an embodied human being going to heaven strikes us as deeply counter-intuitive because for us heaven is a place where bodies cannot be. We have to rethink our biblical cosmology.

The curtain between heaven and earth runs down between every room and every country and every continent. It is a thin curtain and there are some places and some times where you can see through it. That is why in the Celtic tradition they talk about "thin places" – where the curtain between heaven and earth is thin and the light can shine through.

Central to Christian political theology is that Jesus is the real emperor and Caesar is not ("though you'd never know it from the writings of many Christians over the last twenty years").

Jesus comes to heal the world, not to save people from it – of course, to rescue us from corruption and decay and death and all that dehumanises and despoils God's world and God's people.

The resurrection of the body is a very precise way of saying that when God renews heaven and earth and brings them together we will be given

new physical bodies to live in that new physical world. It will of course be a transformed physicality, because our present bodies – as we know – decay, things drop off, change colour, and finally we die. That is the way we currently are.

Our bodies are in a constant state of flux. It is not just hair and fingernails and so on that drop off. The entire atomic molecular kit that you have is slowly changing over a period of something like seven years.

We share our stuff around. And the stuff that we presently use for our bodies has been used by others before us and will be used after us, in many different life forms. The resurrection is therefore not entirely outside our experience.

What God did for Jesus at Easter he will do for us all at the last. That is the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body.

This has immediate and urgent ethical and

## "What on earth was that all about?"

missiological implications. Because if God is going to renew this world, and if God is going to renew our bodies, our whole selves, what you do here and now in that body matters. And what you do in the world matters. What you do with your physicality matters because God will reconstitute your physicality.

The projects that you give your life to can just crumble and decay and the next generation doesn't seem to appreciate them, and you are left scratching your head saying, "What on earth was that all about?"

Or just when you thought society was turning a corner and becoming more healthy as a result of the energetic work you and others had done, a new political party comes to power or something else happens in society and it all gets swept away.

Imagine all those poor people hammering away at Christian/Muslim dialogue, and then seeing September 11 come, seeing part of that work just crumble into ashes.

If we think we are building the kingdom of God by our own efforts we will be disappointed again and again.

Equally disappointed will be those who say there is nothing much we can do, so let's sit back and wait for God to do it all.

Because in the power of the Risen Jesus, God has given the Spirit, in the present. We have got to start work on it now.

Paul has given us in Romans 8 this amazing vision of a world renewed, of a cosmos rescued from decay and death and set free to enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God. How can we say that is fine for the future and go on treating the world as a cross between a gold mine and an ashtray in the present?

We need a more biblical way of looking at heaven and earth, at time, and at the material universe.

Heaven and earth are designed to overlap and interlock – as something that already exists and will one day be consummated. We get flashes of it, we get intimations of it, we get little bits of it. I believe that this is central for Christian sacramental theology.

Addressing the topic of postmodernism Tom Wright said that one of the things he struggled with in his own work was finding ways of reintegrating what had been kept apart.

With postmodernity, suddenly all the chess pieces are back on the table and we really don't know how to play the game any more...we don't know how to put together all the different aspects of our creative reality.

If we are followers of Jesus, our task is to learn afresh how to speak the truth with power in our generation.

We have a world in which war and violence are endemic because they are good for business. That has often been the case, it was so in the ancient world, it is so in the modern world.

To try to banish God discourse from the public sphere at this point of all points in our planet's history is not only impossible, it is ludicrous.

A primary moment of the Church's proclamation is the life of the Church itself – to generate and sustain communities living the Jesus way. Because that impacts societies in all kinds of ways that are unquantifiable.

St Francis said in sending out his missionaries, preach the Gospel by every means possible – and if it's really necessary you could even

It is not a matter of saving souls on one hand and ameliorating social problems on the other. It must be both.

### Tom Wright's summary of Modernism

Modernism is a west European and North American philosophical, cultural, social construct which appeared roughly in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century with the rise of science and technology.

The revolutionary philosophies of Voltaire and Rousseau, in particular, were a response to features of life from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the wars of religion following the Reformation. Europe had torn itself apart in a variety of ways, setting one version of Christianity against another. That had gone on for so long that people had started reacting by saying that religion is a private matter. It is nothing to do with public life.

This of course capitalises on the Deism of much western culture – God is indeed a long way away. We can doff our caps at him from time to time, but really the main thing is to get on and run the world our own way.

Reaction to one event has haunted the shape of the thinking of the Western world ever since. A lot of thinkers in that period really did believe that the world was actually quite a benign place, the work of a good Creator, and if you studied it you would eventually arrive at the main Christian beliefs.

And then came All Saints Day 1755 when a massive earthquake struck Lisbon just when everyone was in church, so that tens of thousands were killed by falling church buildings.

Those who escaped in the city rushed down to the harbour to get away from the falling buildings, and there they saw a second wonder, namely that the sea had fled. They did not know what we know – that means it is coming back and coming back fast.

So those who had escaped from the falling buildings were down by the harbour when the tsunami came back, and were drowned. The western world was shaken to its Christian core.

The Church is called to stand at the place where so much of our society is in desperate pain. People are so confused and bothered and battered about simply identity, never mind relationships.

With the Enlightenment, God became an absentee landlord and it was decided that we would banish evil by acts of Parliament.

The world had been in superstition and ignorance and blindness for centuries. At last, with the 18<sup>th</sup> Century western European and North American culture we have enlightenment. We are no longer in darkness and superstition. Now we have grasped the vision of the future and it is our task to implement it until we arrive at Utopia.

That story is an exact parody of the Christian story – world history reached its climax when Jesus died on the cross and rose again and it is the Christian task to implement that achievement and thereby anticipate the future. What the Enlightenment did was to borrow the clothes that many Christians had forgotten they owned.

## Evil has not been banished

So we have a story of progress – the world is getting better and better, Utopia is just round the corner, and if only we could have more western democracy, more western values, more science and technology, we will get there.

We have grown up, most of us, with that as the implicit story behind every other statement that our politicians make: “Now that we live in the modern age”, “Now that we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, “Now that we live in our contemporary world” – always with the implication that if you disagree you are going back to darkness and superstition, and medieval muddle.

It is the Enlightenment narrative which has been so determinative of how we have seen the world.

The joke is of course at the moment that most of our politicians still try to tell that story. Politicians are not going to say we do not believe in progress any more, there is no Utopia, we will just try to give you wise, just government as best we can.

Within that Enlightenment package empire was not only a possibility it was an obligation. We were the developed ones, we were at the leading edge of progress, we were in the vanguard and we had a responsibility to bring that enlightenment to the rest of the world.

The Achilles heel of this story of progress, of this claim to know all the facts, of this lonely Enlightenment ego, is the continuing fact of evil which has not been banished by progress and act of parliament.

What we have had in the last generation has been – under the very loose and complex title of postmodernity – a critique and a counter-proposal.

Spirituality within postmodernity is pick ‘n mix...you can construct new identities for yourself as you go along.

Now what has happened is that spirituality has burst out all over the place. Everybody knows they want spirituality and the joke is that nobody thinks they are going to find it in church.

Postmodernity looks at the world as a much more mysterious but now much more chaotic place – who is this lonely post-Enlightenment ego?

Facts don't seem so certain any more. We have learned that everybody's angle on truth is only one angle on truth. Nobody has a God's eye view of individual facts or of the universe. Everybody who has an angle on some subject precisely has an angle which is likely to be self-serving. So we deconstruct facts. “You only say that because...”

Postmodernity says there is no big story. The Enlightenment story is a lie. And we can see that it has caused untold misery, not least to the two-thirds world.

Tom Wright said that a Christian reappropriation of the arts was a vital and non-negotiable part of the mission of the Church within a postmodern world. Christian art could generate a hermeneutic space within which Christian faith can be reimagined in today's and tomorrow's culture.

So much human misery has been caused by a failure of imagination, he said, by people who simply cannot believe that there is a different way to do the human project other than the present world economic system, and the present system of global pollution, and so on.

Our culture has shrunk our imagination and it is the role of art to expand and open and think of new possibilities. (See cover picture)

Tom Wright is acclaimed as one of the foremost New Testament scholars in the world today and has more than fifty published titles. He has written extensively about the writings of St Paul.

[www.ntwrightpage.com](http://www.ntwrightpage.com)



# T.S.I.s first post-colonial act

In 1997 a significant section of the Anglican Church in the Torres Strait broke away and formed The Torres Strait Church, consecrating its own bishops in 1998.

An exhaustive account of how this schism occurred was published in May as part of a doctoral thesis by the last bishop of the Diocese of Carpentaria.

The ninety-six year history of that missionary diocese is covered in the work, which investigates fiduciary relationships in church leadership – an ancient concept which was accommodated by the parochial format of the church in England, but needed considerable development for the vast rural dioceses of Australia.

Unlike other dioceses, Carpentaria had no commercial centre after the decline of Cooktown. The Thursday Island-based diocesan office remained financially dependent upon the missionary agencies of the national church.

## Church and politics were intertwined in Torres Strait Islander culture

Former bishop, Dr Tony Hall-Matthews, defended the economic status of the now defunct Diocese of Carpentaria as a national mission outreach to Aboriginal people in the Top End, and to the Torres Strait which fell within its auspices.

In August 1994 ABC Radio National reported a *coup d'état* in the diocese following a motion of no confidence in the bishop. An attempt to subsume Carpentaria into a sister diocese had been hijacked by dissident elements within the bishop's own pastorate.

Because of the peculiar governance of the Anglican Church, only the bishop himself was party to all factions at work during this crisis – much of the corroborating evidence for his fantastic story only surfaced long after the event.

Added to this, Dr Hall-Matthews comes from a missionary family and his rather idealistic expectations of pastoral support from the church hierarchy failed to materialise during the



Dr Tony Hall-Matthews

process leading up to his resignation.

The model of management favoured during Archbishop Peter Hollingworth's tenure as Metropolitan in Queensland was focussed on the bigger picture of economic viability and did not take into consideration local problems and cultural diversity.

Dr Hall-Matthews' account of the plot and the subsequent demise of the diocese reads like a thriller. At times, his justifiable sense of grievance comes through in his account of the battle to rescue his own reputation and the integrity of the diocese.

He places the responsibility for the schism in the Torres Strait Church squarely with the fractured brotherhood of bishops, and the breakdown of trust in him as the custodian of local knowledge in the region.

It becomes clear in his research interview with the former Primate, Dr Keith Rayner, that his expectations of collegiality were unrealistic in the Australian Church, where diocesanism had promoted a fierce independence amongst bishops.

At the time, no-one in the national church leadership appreciated the impact of the Mabo Native Title legislation on the Torres Strait, or the fact that church and politics were inextricably intertwined in Torres Strait Islander culture.

The passion of islanders for their independence and autonomy is described by Gayai Hankin, bishop of The Torres Strait Church, in an illuminating research interview published as an appendix

Dr Hall-Matthews describes the schism of the Torres Strait Church as the first significant post-colonial action in the region.

This work is of immense value to the growing body of literature dealing with the nexus of colonial and indigenous culture in church mission. It is also a poignant account of how misunderstanding can lead to large historical consequences.

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# A small demo that got out of hand

A report from **Terry Brown**, Bishop of Malaita, following the riots in the Solomon Islands during April.



Virtually all shops at Point Cruz, Honiara, from the National Museum to the Central Market are closed, boarded up. Chinatown is out of the picture. The Central Market is opening and functioning as are the small locally leased shops there. Unless shops reopen, people will be hungry very soon. Already people are finding it hard to find food.

Rick Hou, Governor of the Central Bank, was on the radio this morning, outlining the economic effects of what has happened – inflation, a plunging Solomon Island dollar, unemployment, lack of investment, etc.

I have heard a certain amount of anger at the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) for just standing around doing nothing as the breaking into shops and looting went ahead at Point Cruz. Apparently no warning shots were ever fired. It seems amazing that rioting went on for days without RAMSI being able to contain it. Only RAMSI is armed; the local police have effectively been disarmed post-ethnic tension.

A city that contains only people but minimal economic activity cannot survive long, and I wonder if we are looking at a lot of people eventually returning to their home islands. However, for the moment, not even that is possible, as ships are not allowed to sail as the police look for instigators, looters and loot.

All the Chinese stores remain closed, although in Auki we are urging them to re-open as soon as possible.

Banks have finally re-opened and what little rice is still available has taken a big leap in price. Today's Saturday morning Auki market is going ahead full force as though nothing had happened. The only difference is that the two or three large ships that usually come from Honiara on Friday night have not arrived.

## EYE WITNESS

In Malaita, the Asian road workers on the Asian Development Bank-funded Kitano road-building project were also evacuated. It remains unclear to me why the ADB/Kitano has imported road workers from Cambodia and the Philippines to rebuild Malaita's roads, as though we don't have people in Malaita who can build roads. This is part of the feeling that everyone but Solomon Islanders is somehow making a profit out of our troubles – including, of course, all the NGOs, RAMSI advisors, consultants and volunteers.

As far as Honiara events are concerned, the spark that sent the rioters into central Honiara from Parliament – the use of tear gas by the Australian RAMSI contingent against the crowd who were becoming rowdy after the announcement of Snyder Rini's election – needs to be investigated.

### "Helpim fren" doesn't hold much water

The Speaker of Parliament, Sir Peter Kenilorea, and leaders of the parties were preparing to address the crowd and calm them down when, apparently unannounced and without warning, the RAMSI tear gas hit.

Sir Peter has complained about this in the Australian media. It is cited as an example of Australian RAMSI's over-reaction to events. All through the riots, the use of tear gas only inflamed and increased the crowds.

Rioting and looting crowds were made up of people from all provinces, including some women and children. While Robert Wale, the leader of the so-called People Power movement is from Malaita, participation was from all provinces and it would be wrong to see the rioting as some sort of continuation of a Malaita Eagle Force plot.

Honiara people have never liked the Australian RAMSI contingent. Most people distinguish between the Australian RAMSI (whom they don't like) and the New Zealand and Pacific Islands RAMSI (whom they do like). The general feeling

is that the RAMSI motto “*Helpim fren*” (pidjin for “Help your friend”) doesn’t hold much water when the Australian RAMSI are so sullen and hostile, won’t even say hello, speed up and down the streets without regard for the other traffic, won’t allow the use of RAMSI helicopters and planes for humanitarian purposes, hang out at all the expensive Chinese restaurants and won’t go near local eateries or the central market.

I have heard that in the riots fifteen RAMSI vehicles were destroyed, not to mention the Pacific Casino’s entire rent-a-car fleet, twenty RAMSI personnel injured with one sent back to Australia for serious jaw injuries.

There were some failures of RAMSI intelligence – half of Solomon Islanders are saltwater people and it is inconceivable that the seaward side of the Pacific Casino Hotel was left unprotected.

Commercial and residential properties of the Kemekeza/Rini government’s Chinese advisors and backers were particularly targeted for destruction. Many would say that it is this manipulation of local politicians by the wealthy Chinese business community that is the core cause of the riots.

None of what I have written above is intended to condone or support the rioting. It is tragic, both for the individuals involved and for the country. For the Solomons, claiming to be a Christian country, it is a travesty of the Easter message, as church leaders have pointed out in pastoral statements. But legitimate frustrations are there and people explode.

Alas, we are now producing refugees, with four hundred Chinese living at the Police Club at Rove under police/RAMSI security.

To RAMSI’s credit, there has been no firing on crowds. Had this been many other parts of the world, there would have been deaths. Unfortunately, the crowds also probably took advantage of the knowledge that RAMSI would not shoot at them. However, a core question remains why a multinational intervention force, and the local police force it is supposed to be training, led by a nation with high technology and unlimited financial resources was not able to anticipate and control a small demonstration that got out of hand, resulting eventually in a scale of damage, personal and material, immensely beyond anything that resulted from the “ethnic tension” crisis.

Of course, it is easy to criticise after the fact. Even veteran ABC reporter Sean Dorney had left

for Australia after covering the elections and did not anticipate such events. Nor can I say I anticipated them, though I have long thought and said that anti-Chinese riots were always a possibility.

I think the road ahead will continue to be rocky. Australia and RAMSI need independently to assess where they now are. Such a consultation and assessment should be done with real Solomon Islands organisations on the ground – such as churches and community groups, rather than by highly paid outside advisors.

The riots are a reassertion of Solomon Islands sovereignty, which has been significantly eroded in the past few years. Unfortunately, it apparently takes a common enemy to unite all Solomon Islanders.

On the other hand, the RAMSI presence is still needed – particularly if parliamentary government is to continue. But the future economic effects on the country of last week’s events, at least short term, are grave and it will take much effort to keep things on a steady keel.

## RAMSI requires the wisdom of Solomon

A month after the April 18-20 riots Bishop Terry Brown wrote:

**T**he above brief account barely scratches the surface of the complexity of events. The new Prime Minister, Snyder Rini, was forced to resign after former Prime Minister Sogavare and his group crossed back to the Opposition – who had promised him the Prime Ministership. Sogavare, who first became Prime Minister following the Malaita Eagle Force coup in 2000, and whom many people think colluded in the coup, is our new Prime Minister.

He went on to appoint two politicians being held in custody on charges relating to the Honiara riots, as ministers of Police and Tourism – in effect, thumbing his nose at RAMSI, but not without much local criticism. He has since backed down.

Investigation continues into those behind the Honiara riots. Australia, after having interfered a fair amount in the Solomon Islands parliamentary process over the past few years, is now in the awkward situation of having to relate to a less subservient government.

Many are saying that the new era of Solomon Islands government has still not arrived – still the same old leaders and the same old corruption. While the new government has some very fine members, with creative ideas, the ‘top’ is still unstable and marred by a record of corruption and power-mongering.

Some stores have re-opened in Honiara but the jockeying for control of the country’s resources,

Honiara business, Taiwanese foreign aid grants and government income continues. Australia and RAMSI require the proverbial wisdom of Solomon.

**Bishop Terry Brown is Bishop of Malaita, Auki, Malaita Province, The Solomon Islands.**

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# Common Theology

## A Journal for Australians

A Lay Ministry of the Australian Church committed to the demystification of theology — a forum for theological views in plain language on matters which affect the daily lives of Australians.

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*Fr Adrian Sharp  
Sunnybank Qld*

*Summer 06 issue was superb. I especially valued your review of Blair’s Britain and Peter Sellick’s lucid explanation of Intelligent Design’s goals and flaws and his “two objections”.*

*Mary Reddrop  
Surrey Hills Vic*

*Very much appreciated.  
Vernon Williams  
Armidale NSW*

*Glad to hear that Common Theology survived.  
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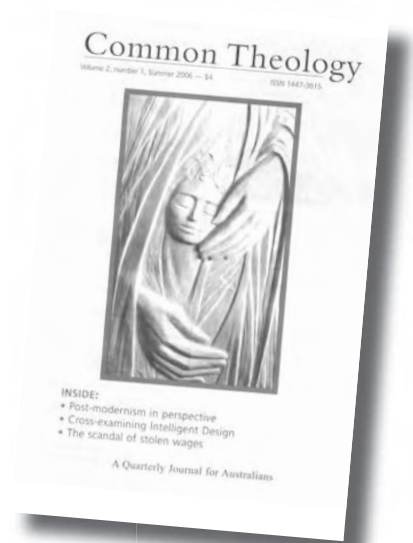
*I have today direct-debited the Common Theology account to continue my subscription to your wonderful publication.  
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Boyup Brook WA*

*Thank you for this interesting magazine. Please don’t stop sending it to me. It is a vital link with reality these days, as I approach 86 years and feel puzzled at the way the Church is leading, in some places.  
The Rev Anna Cullen  
Perth WA*

*Very interesting edition.  
Patricia Nommensen  
Woodside SA*

*Keep up the plain language theology.  
Mary Blackford  
Westfield WA*

*I was encouraged by the productive response to my last submission. It is always a surprise to learn who found it interesting and why.  
Dr Tom Frame  
Canberra ACT*



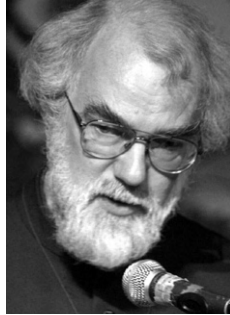
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# Judas Gospel serves “in-group”

By Rowan Williams

A few days ago, I finally got my copy of the Gospel of Judas that people have been talking about. And no, in case you're wondering, it didn't make me tear up the New Testament and start looking for a new job.



It's actually a fairly conventional book of its kind — and there were dozens like it around in the early centuries of the Church. People who weren't satisfied with the sort of thing the New Testament had to say spent quite a lot of energy trying to produce something which suited them better.

They wanted Christian teaching to be a matter of exotic and mystical information, shared only with an in-group. So a lot of these books imagine Jesus having long conversations with various people whose names are in the Bible but who we don't know much about. This, they claim is the real thing — not the boring stuff in the official books. Don't believe the official version, they say. The truth has been concealed from you by sinister conspiracies of bishops and suchlike villains, but now it can be told.

I suppose that explains why there's always such an interest in stories about 'lost' books coming to light. Think of the massive international industry around the Da Vinci Code: it's exciting to think of conspiracies and cover-ups when trust in traditional institutions is low. The same sort of thing seems to have happened with the history of the Church and its Bible.

But here's the problem. We're familiar with a world of cover up stories; we're on safer ground with their cynicism and worldly wisdom; they are less challenging and don't force us to confront difficult realities. And, like any kind of cynicism, it actually stops us hearing anything genuinely new or surprising. We need to stop and ask ourselves from time to time just why the cynical version is the one that appeals to us — is it just because we can cope much more easily with the picture of a world that always works by manipulation and deceit? Don't we want to see anything more challenging?

Are we just too lazy to recognise something really fresh, something that hints at a bigger and a better world?

The people who wrote the Gospel of Judas were trying to persuade their readers that everyone before them had got Jesus wrong, and that the folk who ran the churches were only in it for their own profit (never mind that these leaders and their followers regularly faced death for what they believed, just as some believers still do now, as we've been reminded in recent weeks). This story in itself was an easy option, something that couldn't ever be completely disproved but would create a climate of mistrust.

But why were those writers not satisfied with what the Bible says? It becomes a lot clearer when we compare the Jesus of the Bible with the Jesus of these other documents.

## He doesn't suffer fools - especially religious fools - gladly

In the new 'gospel', Jesus is made out to be a mystery man, a guru. He laughs mockingly when the disciples try to understand what he's about. He is said to reveal the mystic names of heavenly powers, and to explain how the universe was created by inferior angels. He claims that the soul is only a very temporary dweller in the body. And Judas is told repeatedly that only he understands Jesus, not the other, dimwitted, disciples. It's the standard kind of teaching you expect from gurus of a certain sort.

Now turn to the New Testament. Here is the real Jesus who actually has a recognisable human setting. His favourite method of teaching is to tell sharp and sometimes satirical stories of ordinary life, with a sting in the tail. He doesn't suffer fools (especially religious fools) gladly, but he has all the time in the world for those who are thought to be failures. He is a straightforward, not a cynical man. He likes being with children. He knows his disciples don't fully understand him and sometimes it makes him angry, but he goes on loving and trusting them. When he's faced with a horrible and

unavoidable death, he trembles and cries, but goes on with it.

When the Jesus of the Gospels comes back from the dead, he doesn't go and crow over his enemies, he meets his friends and tells them to get out there and talk about him — about what his life and death have made possible, about forgiveness, making peace, being honest about yourself, checking the temptation to judge and condemn, tackling your selfishness at the root, praying simply and trustingly.

This is flesh and blood. It's not about exotic mysteries. It is about how God makes it possible for us to live a life that isn't paralysed by guilt, aggression and pride. It asks us to come down to earth and face what's wrong with us. Is it surprising that some people found this too direct, too in-your-face to cope with? No wonder they preferred to go on about the names of angels and the secrets of how the world began.

## What if this character is not just another guru?

Let's ask ourselves why we're sometimes more comfortable with such stories about conspiracies and stories about mystical gurus. Is it perhaps because when we turn to what the Bible actually says, Jesus challenges us pretty seriously? What if this is a story we haven't really listened to before? And what if everything could be different because of this particular story?

That's the question we ought to be asking at Easter. What if this surprising character in the New Testament is not just another teacher, another guru, but someone who really could change the world? Everything truly can be different because of the real story of Jesus, the Son of God.

Well, that is the real front-page story, bigger than any story about the discovery of a lost document and ultimately more exciting than any number of conspiracy theories.

And that's perhaps why the Bible story is still being told two thousand years on, by people who have discovered that the world and their lives really have changed.

Rowan Williams is the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury. This article first appeared in the London *Mail on Sunday* newspaper on Easter Day.

## FORUM

By Kit Bunker

Science, as we now understand the term, is a comparatively modern invention. It arose in the Christian west because that is where the central and key idea of science was generally accepted.

That central idea is that the world operates at God's command, and since God is reliable and constant, so the rules God uses to make the world operate will be reliable and regular. It therefore makes perfect sense to examine the world and deduce the rules.

It is only within the last hundred and fifty years that science has become a profession, an activity which may be taken up as easily by an atheist as by a Christian. It is within this time too that the utility of science has become clear; it no longer needs a philosophical justification. Everyone knows that from scientific research will flow technology, and from the technology, wealth and health. Science still seems to attract Christians; you'll find plenty of them in any research laboratory.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the fundamental assumptions of science as an activity.

Firstly that the ultimate authority is always experiment; what happens is what happens, like it or not.

Secondly, what happened yesterday is what — if I do the same things — will happen tomorrow and on any subsequent occasion.

Thirdly, it is often possible to deduce the laws which determine what will happen, so that it is possible accurately to predict the outcome of new practical experiments.

Prediction is important. If what you predict happens when you do certain things you feel encouraged that your understanding may be good. If what you predict does not happen, you know your understanding must be faulty. That is critical. You need to know when you are wrong. To be science, an understanding (theory) must be falsifiable. If it not falsifiable you will never know if it is wrong.

A body of understanding is often called a theory. Physicists will speak of the 'kinetic theory of matter'



even though the understanding has become so much a part of the mental furniture of physics that it is simply accepted as being true by any practicing physicist.

The ‘theory of evolution’ is similarly fundamental to biology. With the unravelling of the mysteries of DNA, the theory of evolution is becoming more and more firmly understood to be true every day – particularly since prediction after prediction based on it has turned out to be what actually happens.

The fundamental problem with ‘creation science’ and with the ‘theory of intelligent design’ is that they are unfalsifiable, and so are not science. As soon as they say ‘God did it’, they have stepped outside science and into religion.

“God did not do it,” is also unfalsifiable, and similarly has no place in science. Science has nothing whatever to say about whether or not God did it. All it can comment on is what happens when certain things are done...even such things as predicting what the next fossil fish might look like.

All this preamble about what science is and what it is not is necessary if we are to be armed against

## Science is an activity – researchers *do* science.

two pernicious and totally unscientific ideas which are often promulgated as if they were science – ideas which often accompany discussions of the ‘scientific theory of evolution’. The ideas to which I refer may be called ‘evangelical Darwinism’ and ‘social Darwinism’.

Evangelical Darwinism has its apologists, people like Dawkins (*Climbing Mount Improbable*) and the late Stephen Jay Gould (*Wonderful Life*). What has struck the evangelical Darwinists is what they regard as the astonishing role of the contingent in the evolutionary process – random accident and ‘blind chance’.

It is important to understand that there is no experimental proof of the importance of random accident. You cannot re-run the evolutionary process a million times with different random accidents and see what happens. Any statement going beyond ‘it looks as though the contingent may be important’ is speculation – untestable, unscientific speculation. Not all evolutionary scientists would agree that the contingent is even important.

The eminent palaeontologist and professor of evolutionary theory at Cambridge University, Conway Morris, (*Life’s Solution*) offers intriguing evidence for an alternative hypothesis, that life on this earth would have evolved, (if it evolved at all) to produce much the same selection of creatures as in fact did evolve; regardless of accident. He suggests that there are only so many viable solutions to evolutionary problems, and that these solutions are re-invented time and again. That is testable, go to the fossil record and look.

The evangelical Darwinists however seize on the role of the contingent, and argue that we are the product of accident and blind chance, and could just as easily have been entirely different, or not here at all. This means, they say, that we are not made to any plan, we just happen to be – that is all. If we are not made, there is no maker. The evangelical Darwinists peddle the ‘good news’ that there is no maker, no god, and certainly no God.

Evangelical Darwinism is not science; it is religion, the religion of atheism. I have no doubt that the evangelical Darwinists believe what they are writing. They are as convinced of the truth of what they say as is any evangelist. Christians need to be ready to explain that the scientific theory of evolution does not say ‘god did not do it’ any more than it says ‘god did it’.

Social Darwinism is another matter. It is based on the idea that ‘survival of the fittest’ means more than the survival of the fittest to survive. Survival is seen as morally admirable. Survival, flourishing, being on top of the heap, becomes, to the social Darwinist, proof of being the best.

“Those who do not survive are failures, destined to die; those like us who survive are the best, for we survive, do we not?” Social Darwinism is the cousin of fascism, of eugenics, a driver of brutal capitalism, a wicked perversion. It is still ‘out there’, and Christians need to stand ready to refute it. Fortunately socio-biology has a lot to say on the subject of altruism; see for example *The Origins of Virtue* by Matt Ridley.

The ‘Creation Scientists’ are right, there *are* really nasty ideas associated with ‘the theory of evolution’. But they are wrong in thinking that what needs to be attacked is the science. What needs to be attacked is the non-science that pretends to be science – evangelical and social Darwinism.

The Revd Dr Kit Bunker is an Anglican priest who has been both a science educator and a research scientist.

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Discovering Girard** by Michael Kirwan, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2004  
ISBN 0 232 52526 9, pp 137, rrp \$34.95.

Reviewed by Maggie Helass

Thirty years ago the public media gloatingly reported that a well-known academic had published a thesis that religion was based on violence.<sup>1</sup>

Today, religion and violence are at home together in headlines around the world and Jesuit priest Michael Kirwan has written a brief, cogent introduction to the mimetic theory of the influential French American cultural critic René Girard.

“Put very simply, this is a theory which seeks to elucidate the relationships – one might say the complicity – between religion, culture and violence.” (p 5)

Girard’s theory of endemic rivalry, conflict and scapegoating in human culture brings a radical new perspective to theology.

Our contemporary record of genocide, ethnic conflict, religious persecution and violence in defence of the ‘sacred’ causes outrage in sitting rooms all over the world.

But what if our empathy for the sufferings of unknown people far away is a marvelous evolution in the history of human consciousness?

The three structural elements of mimetic theory are:

- that our desires are to a large degree imitated or derived through ‘mimesis’
- that societies have a tendency to channel the violence which arises as a result of mimetic interaction by means of a process of ‘scapegoating’, which underlies not just religious practices (such as sacrifice) but also secular institutions
- that the revelation which occurs in the Jewish and Christian scriptures is the primary force responsible for showing us the truth about this hidden violence, and for enabling alternative ways of structuring human living.

Girard began his academic work as a literary critic, and his ‘mimetic theory’ has its origin in a movement towards enlightenment which he discovered in the lives and work of five selected European novelists.

The five novelists deal with ‘the collapse of the autonomous self’ – as an implicitly or explicitly religious experience.

Girard works on the premise that it is the nature of the great novel to tell us the truth about human desire – in contrast to the romance which perpetuates untruth about the autonomy and stability of human desire.

Desire – distinguished from need or appetite – is a function of culture. For this reason people learn from one another what it is they should desire. Desire is mimetic.

“Any kind of market is nothing other than a mechanism for the harmonious mediation of desires.” (p 19)

“From an evolutionary perspective, the mimetic adoption of another’s desire has replaced instinctual behaviour as the prime determinant of human action. This is part of Girard’s explanation of why humans seem to be much more prone to deadly conflict than other life-forms.” (p 20)

### Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred

“In human relationships words like ‘sameness’ and ‘similarity’ evoke an image of harmony. If we have the same tastes and like the same things, surely we are bound to get along. But what will happen when we share the same desires? Only the major dramatists and novelists have partly understood and explored this form of rivalry.” (Girard 1977)

Where mimesis leads to a convergence of desires upon the same object the result will often be rivalry or outright conflict.

The breakdown of hierarchically stratified societies and their inhibitions has accelerated this potential for conflict. With globalisation, long-established differentiation is eroded in the face of equality and democracy. Mimesis therefore encounters fewer and fewer barriers. This world is characterised by

<sup>1</sup> Girard René *La Violence et le sacré*, Grasset, Paris, 1972.



intense competition, rivalry, envy and jealousy.

Girard's scapegoat theory presents us with an understanding of 'the sacred' as the means by which a society's mimetic rivalry and its consequent aggression is contained.

When the cultural order is dangerously destabilised by the escalation of mimetic desire (for instance in civil unrest) the crisis is resolved by a realignment of the aggression – 'all against one'.

Girard keeps returning to the paradox that the more the rivals in a conflict try to establish a difference between each other (by increasingly hostile gestures, for example), the more they in fact imitate one another (e.g. the Northern Ireland conflict).

At the cosmic level, the act of exiling or destroying a victim brings into being the most fundamental social and cultural distinctions of the sacred and profane.

Divisions at the foundation of political order are related to the channeling of violence, either inwards (upon a scapegoat) or outwards (upon a common enemy). Aeschylus and Shakespeare illustrate this theme.

This purely social process of expulsion or extermination appears to the perpetrators as if it is a holy action, because it brings, if only temporarily, the peace and harmony which the group desperately needs.

Precisely because the sacrifice seems to be efficacious, it must be 'of god'. Even the victim, being simultaneously good and evil, is accorded the status of a primitive deity. Hence Girard's formulation – 'violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred'. Taboos, sacrifices and myths all have the function of helping the community to 'contain' its mimetic violence.

In 1959, influenced by his studies, Girard converted to Roman Catholicism.



Girard speaks of an opposition of 'myth' and 'gospel'; the Gospel is the biblical spirit which exposes the truth of violent origins, takes the side of the victim, and works towards the overcoming of scapegoating as a viable means of social formation.

The third phase of Girard's mimetic theory concerns the role of the Gospel, and of the Bible in general, in disabling this machine and exposing the falsity of the claims to sacredness which are associated with it.

The four Servant Songs of Second Isaiah<sup>2</sup> reveal the scapegoat mechanism, and take the part of the victim.

The Gospel revelation is one which uncovers even more radically the truth which myth seeks to conceal – that is, the murderous interaction of human desires in order to preserve or protect a social order in time of crisis.

This revelation occurs gradually, throughout the Old and New Testaments, but finds its clearest expression in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the Christian doctrines which reflect upon him.

Jesus insists on the link between distorted desire and violent self-affirmation, and he is especially critical of a religious system which masks this connection and refuses to take responsibility for it.

He exhorts his followers to actions of renunciation which can break the cycle of retributive violence. Parables such as the Lost Sheep are a reversal of the scapegoat mentality – which is readier to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the majority.

The judgment passed upon Jesus in the crucifixion is a human deed, not a divine act. The Resurrection is the conclusive judgment of the heavenly Father.

The whole biblical drama, for Girard, is a struggle towards conversion and enlightenment. The content of the conversion is a radical change of perspective, which emerges when the subject is confronted with the reality of its own imitated desire, its ontological emptiness, and the violence which issues from it.

"The scientific spirit, like the spirit of enterprise in an economy, is a by-product of the profound action of the Gospel text. The modern Western world has forgotten the revelation in favour of its by-products, making them weapons and instruments of power; and now the process has turned against

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 42.1-9; 49.1-6; 50.4-11; 52.13-53.12.

it. Believing itself a liberator, it discovers its role as a persecutor.” ( Girard 1986)

Girard is a literary critic who has dared to propose a theory of religion on the basis of his criticism. His brashness as a theorist laying claim to explanatory power in anthropology, psychology, literary criticism biblical studies and theology has been roundly criticised.

But Girard believes it is a task of the critic to “expose the mechanism for what it is – namely the generative matrix of social existence”. (p 58)

Girard is in disagreement with many contemporary philosophical and aesthetic theorists, according to whom literary texts can only ever relate to other fictional texts and should not be read as if they have any bearing on genuine ethical or religious situations.

One of the central tenets of mimetic theory is precisely a liberating dissolution of the distinction between fiction and reality.

Girard gives this very readable book his own imprimatur: “An elegantly written initiation into the mimetic theory. I am lucky to have interpreters who understand what I want to say and who can write so well.”

***Fare Well in Christ***, by W H Vanstone, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2005  
ISBN 0 232 52601 X, pp 147, rrp \$31.95.

Reviewed by Robert Braun

Many will welcome the republication of this classic of Christian spirituality by Canon WH Vanstone.

The author deals with six themes, reflecting on our present anxieties and worries, and inviting us to embrace the mystery of life and to take comfort from it. His resort to etymologies in the chapter on grace may not be everyone’s cup of tea, but there is something in this book for all of us.

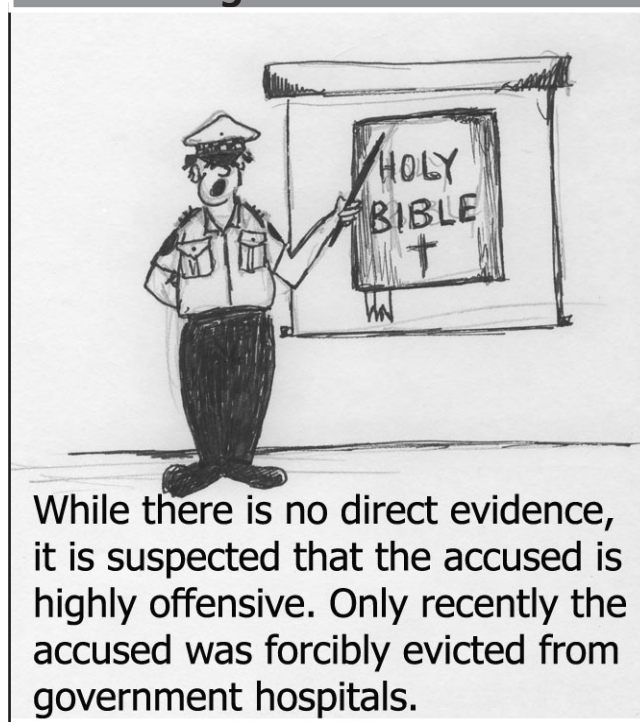
The place and power of ‘the Story’ in human life is dealt with in a most imaginative and interesting way; and the chapter on the cross, which begins with the Dream of the Rood, includes a number of modern stories about the power of the cross. This is a deeply moving chapter, and excellent material for a Good Friday sermon.

The author engages in a sensitive probing of the nature of forgiveness, informed by a lifetime of

pastoral experience. In a chapter on mystery, and a Christian approach to death, he reminds us that the word ‘mystery’ is derived from the Greek word *Muein*, which means ‘to keep one’s mouth shut’. He quotes from Donne and Spencer, and gives us the words of an epitaph on the island of Oronsay in the Hebrides: “Sleep after toyle, port after stormy seas, ease after warre, death after life doth greatly please”.

This is a writer who is eminently qualified to speak to the people of our time on some of the most sensitive issues of human life. His prose is a pleasure to read, even if his publisher has let a number of typographical mistakes slip through. In the words of the old collect, it will bring pardon, peace and a quiet mind in an anxious and doubting world

### Paget’s Parable



Note from Robert Paget:

There was a report recently that Gideons Bible had been removed from the bedside tables in Queensland public hospitals for fear of offending Muslims. They said that Bibles would be available if they were requested. From my conversations with Muslims is that they are puzzled by the way we treat our holy book with such little regard.

# BOOK REVIEWS

***The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church***, Edited by Paul Ballard and Stephen R Holmes, (from the *Using the Bible in Pastoral Practice* series), Darton Longman & Todd, London, 2005 ISBN 0 232 52611 7, pp 304, rrp \$57.95.

Reviewed by Rod Jensen

This book is the first of a three-volume series on using the bible in pastoral practice. It is directed primarily to those who are acting in some way as representatives of a Christian church in their caring work, where “care, advice, admonition or encouragement” is offered as part of the ministry of a Christian church.

The working assumption is that “the Bible pertains, or should pertain, directly and indirectly to all pastoral activities”. The editors argue that the New Testament letters and arguably even the Gospels were originally written to address issues in the emerging Christian communities which we would now think of as pastoral issues, such as guidance on how to live faithfully as Christians in the world.

The editors then identify what they variously term an estrangement, a chasm or a hiatus between those engaged in Biblical Studies, and those in Practical Theology whose function is the teaching of pastoral care. The former has been more dependent of historical methodologies and literary criticism and the latter draws more on the human sciences of psychology and sociology. This has led to the result that “the actual use of the Bible in spiritual development, pastoral discussion and even sermon is often too simplistic and naïve”, making it difficult to link the Bible into pastoral practice.

The Bible then becomes set aside or used inappropriately, weakening the creative potential of the Bible in pastoral practice.

The book is intended as a venture into this neglected area. It is a series of eighteen chapters from experts (mainly academics) in various fields and from various faiths and backgrounds, organised into three sections. This review lists only the broad topics covered by the contributors, and does not attempt to cover their main arguments in any detail.

Part one is titled *Listening to the Tradition*, where the editors have asked the six contributors to examine particular periods or traditions on the question of the use of the Bible by pastors in pastoral work.

Trevett writes on the use of Scripture in the ‘pre-Bible, pre canon’ early church, when Christians “were a tiny minority in the Graeco-Roman world”.

Ayres writes also on the early church, but in the Patristic tradition (the time of the fathers of the Christian church) in the fourth and fifth centuries, where Scripture was interpreted primarily on the basis of its ‘clear meaning’ rather than its literal meaning.

Bathrellos takes us into the world of Eastern Orthodoxy, providing extensive insights into the ways in which the Bible has been, and is, interpreted and experienced in this tradition – an unfamiliar context to most western minds.

## There is an embarrassing silence about the Bible in pastoral care

Ellis takes us to the medieval west, concentrating in the main on two small periods of time – the adult life of the pious Norfolk townswoman Margery Kempe (1390-1440), and the aftermath of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) – suggesting that the Middle Ages had such different understandings of the Bible and pastoral practice that it is difficult to apply their understandings to our own time.

Trueman surveys the three centuries (1500-1800) of the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation and later, arguably the traumatic period in the western church, when the Bible began to be placed in lay hands and a new emphasis on the individual developed, with its different emphases on both the Bible and pastoral work.

Finally, Finlay writes on meeting the more recent challenge of critical biblical scholarship, focusing on a short overview of the theories of interpretation of three very different scholars Schleiermacher, Newman and Barth.

Part two is titled *The Problems Posed by Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. It presents a

series of four essays beginning in different current traditions of biblical scholarship, asking in each case how the insights of that form of scholarship might profitably be applied to the use of the Bible in pastoral practice. The context is established by the editors thus: "(I)f the use of the Bible in pastoral care is to be considered faithful or professional, it needs to be responsible to biblical scholarship ... honest enough to accept that those who study the Bible professionally have insights and knowledge that must be integrated into pastoral practice, and that intellectual honesty demands a serious wrestling with the interpretations and discoveries of current scholarship".

In this context, Rogerson writes on the gifts and challenges of historical and literary criticism, addressing such issues as who wrote the Bible and whether the Bible is 'true' or otherwise. He concludes "if biblical scholarship has been a problem to pastoral practice, this is because of the failure of the churches to provide continuing instructions that would lead to informed congregations with an adult, articulate faith".

Bartholomew considers the issue of hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) and the ways Scripture is used in pastoral care – basically addressing the question of why "there is an almost embarrassing silence about the Bible in pastoral care".

Brueggemann writes on the immense changes which have occurred in the "way the Bible is read in the academy and the way the Bible is heard in the Church", with the movement in recent decades which he characterises as a move from 'liberal' to 'post-liberal' interpretation. The post-liberal era began with the tumultuous events of the late 1960s and 1970s, as part of the enormous social changes of the time.

Bennett and Rowland focus on contextual readings of Scripture, such as liberation and feminist theologies, establishing that such contextual readings have long been part of church history and that the scriptures can be used equally to oppress or liberate when used pastorally. This raises the question of the 'right' and 'wrong' use of the Bible.

Part three is a disparate collection of eight essays, each addressing a particular aspect of pastoral care and asking how the Bible has, or should be, used with integrity within that context.

Anderson provides an account of how pastoral theologians have used the Bible in pastoral work,

particularly from his background of working in "the most unchurched region in the United States".

Colwell describes the church as an ethical community and asks how ethical precepts should be developed from biblical texts, rejecting the use of the Bible as a 'book of rules', but embracing the Bible as scripture telling the story that guides the life of the church, and the 'indwelling' of scripture within the church.

Lyall and Quicke in separate essays address the relationships between the public rituals of the church (e.g. worship) and the exercise of pastoral care. Lyall is concerned more with the occasional offices of the church (baptisms, weddings and funerals), while Quicke stresses the pastoral centrality of preaching.

Tidball and Endean address the place of the Bible in two quite different strands of Christian spirituality, namely the evangelical and contemporary Catholic spirituality, each taking a different view of the centrality of the Bible for spiritual growth.

Couture and Ricciuti, in separate essays, write on the artistic interpretation of the Bible; Couture is concerned primarily with the way in which music functions in a pastoral context, and Ricciuti is concerned with ideas of how the Bible and art can intersect to provide pastoral help.

## Couture and Ricciuti, in separate essays, write on the artistic interpretation of the Bible

Overall, although the book is clearly written by 'experts' for those involved in pastoral practice at the professional level, lay people generally will be quite comfortable with most essays. In fact those seeking insights into Bible interpretation and relevance will learn a great deal more from this book than from many long hours sitting in the pews.

Paul Ballard is formerly Professor and Head of Department in the School of Religious and Theological Studies, Cardiff University. Stephen Holmes is Lecturer in Theology, Faculty of Divinity, St Mary's College, St Andrews's University, Scotland and consultant to the Bible Society, UK.

Dr Rod Jensen is Emeritus Professor, University of Queensland.



# BOOK REVIEWS

***Vulnerable to the Holy: in Faith Morality & Art***, by Enda McDonagh, Columba Press, 2004, ISBN 1856074609, pp 218, rrp \$29.95.

Reviewed by Alan Dwight

This book reveals much of the life and thoughts of a man reflecting back over many years of active involvement in the Church. One of his great emphases is that the Church consists of *all* baptised members.

Enda McDonagh describes his public identity as “Irish and Catholic, academic and priest”, but makes it clear that this “influences but does not determine his full personal identity”. He is Professor Emeritus of Moral Theology at St Patrick’s College at Maynooth, near Dublin.

The book is a series of exploratory probes into areas in which he has been engaged intellectually, emotionally and practically since his retirement. He writes as an Irishman and we can profit by illustrations from Irish poetry, painting and sculpture. Many readers will cope with his untranslated Greek and Latin but may fail to understand his occasional Erse - Irish Gaelic. Much of his criticism is applicable outside Ireland.

His church in Ireland today is shown in its “strange richness and poverty”, but there appears more emphasis on the latter. Clearly like others, notably Hans Kung in his recent autobiography, he sees the great promise of Vatican II smudged by leaders such as Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict).

He praises Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism which permitted members to enter and pray in other Christians’ churches, and dislikes the word “conversion” as applied to the movement from one Christian denomination to his own. “One baptism”, he thinks, makes “conditional baptism” erroneous as well as offensive.

Bishops are criticised for failure to accept advice from priests and other baptised members, even when any have expertise on serious problems as on sex abuse, abortion and contraception. He thinks bishops “need to come much closer to the victims of church structures and bureaucracy if they are to learn the depth of their suffering”.

As far as HIV/AIDS in Africa is concerned, he sees “the older wisdom of theology” in choosing the lesser evil – the use of condoms to reduce the risk of infection.

He sympathises with the “pain” experienced by women in the Church, leading some to leave the Church they love and rely on. Reasons include their exclusion from decision-making as well as “the masculine resonance” which emphasises God as Father. McDonagh points out God is “beyond gender and human specifics”, and the Bible also expresses the tender love of a Mother-God.

He commends the poetry of Jesuit poet G M Hopkins, praising the Creator-God and arguing for our stewardship – useful as the Church is increasingly becoming overtly “green”. He also recommends Hopkins for devotional reading.

At seventy years of age McDonagh argues that the Church must not stifle the fresh energy and fresh ideas of youth. He urges older people to look forward to death as rising with Christ, “the fulfilment of the baptismal process”.

***Consuming Passion – Why the killing of Jesus really matters***, edited by Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005, ISBN 0 232 52607 9, pp 136, rrp \$34.95

Reviewed by Arthur J Grimshaw

This refreshing collection of contemporary essays on the subject of the atonement is a timely reminder of the importance of theological perspectives in shaping our attitude to, and involvement with, the world in which we live.

In their individual ways the twelve contributors to this helpful digest bring a cohesive clarity to our study of the significance of the way we understand the Passion of Christ.

No doubt, in part, these essays were triggered by reactions to Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion* – but there is a wider canvas. Our twenty-first-century world has been catapulted into consideration of such big issues not only by the catastrophe of warfare and political instability in central Asia and elsewhere, but also by the breathtaking enormity

of natural disasters and the suffering inflicted on humanity across a broad spectrum of racial and ethnic groups, and acts of terrorism seemingly derived from deep-seated hatreds.

In the interaction between Christian and Muslim cultures, it is important in these times to have a clear understanding of the Atonement and its impact on our thinking and behaviour. The compact nature of the book indicates the beginning of a journey rather than its conclusion, and the extensive select bibliography may be a useful guide to those who wish to pursue the journey in a more dedicated way.

It is an amazingly distilled collection of contemporary writings which make theology central to our understanding of mission in today's world. Contributors include the West Australian David Wood, together with a range of British and American theologians from various traditions (Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Mennonite, and writers with a concern for political theology, and contemporary Mission Theology). The overall effect of these is both challenging and stimulating – even for people with a limited background in theology.

Steve Chalke argues very persuasively that what we believe shapes the way we behave. He supports Derek Tidball's statement: "Love is not a quality that God possesses, but the essence of God himself. It is not a minor attribute that characterises God on occasions, but the very heart of God, his essential being. It is not a component part of God, but his very nature. Before God is anything else, he is love." (page 21-2).

Chalke rejects the penal substitution theory of the Atonement as being not only inadequate, but totally contrary to the Gospel record of Jesus' teaching and example. In an earlier book Chalke attracted a measure of criticism by claiming that penal substitution is tantamount to 'child abuse', and he pulls no punches here.

Editor Simon Barrow's account of one person's reaction to the presence of a large crucifix in the venue of a gathering of people of many faiths and none, is very arresting – and he uses this to introduce his understanding of the Pauline teaching on the Cross (foolishness to the Greeks, and a stumbling-block to the Jews, but to those who are being saved, the power of God).

Stuart Murray highlights significant criticism of established mind-sets derived from the triumphalist

"Christendom" era, and reminds us "that the biblical tradition suggests that we need to listen attentively to their perspectives if we are to discover the heart of God. ... We need to discover an interpretation of the atonement that communicates hope and liberation to the abused, the victims and the sinned-against" (page 33).

Personally I am grateful for the specific expositions by Steve Chalke, and J Denny Weaver, who open up (for me) new avenues of thought in relation to the unsatisfactory nature of traditional theologies of the Atonement.

This collection of contemporary thinking gives strong encouragement and direction to our understanding of mission to a jaded world in the new millennium.

## HOME TRUTHS

By Martin Callinan

There are two ways governments can avoid scandal. The first is to govern in a moral and responsible way. The second is to govern as you please and to deftly manage any scandalous consequences.

The "handle the scandal" option has become increasingly viable as governments gain greater control of information and become better handlers of public perception.

The key to managing a scandal is to understand the importance of 'relevance'. For a political scandal, it is the 'relevance' of a scandalous act to swing voters, in marginal seats, which matters most. And thus every effort to dodge a scandal is orientated around this idea, and is directed toward this audience.

Swing and non-swing voters alike instinctively suppose that a crime is a crime; that negligence is negligence; and that, therefore, relevance must surely depend upon the truth.

This is the ideal case in a court of law, but the impact of a scandal depends strictly on the perception of the court of public opinion.

This 'perceived' relevance is a grey area in which governments now employ unprecedented public relations powers to wash their hands.

So what exactly is the grey area and how do governments make scandal soap?

# How to make scandal soap

Let us take the example of a puppy sitting next to a pile of poo. He is guilty. But he is also a puppy, so we won't hold it against him.

But if you happened to step in that poo, then the puppy has a serious case to answer.

Conversely, what if that puppy let you know he wanted to go outside? Well, we would then be 'understanding' of his circumstances.

Now what if that puppy let you know that he wanted to go outside after he pooped but before your bare foot discovered that poo?

Scandal soap is a dishonesty-based product, but if there is no hard evidence about when that puppy pooped or when he wanted to go outside, the cunning puppy gets the benefit of your doubt.

The point being that what matters most is the 'understanding' of the 'relevance' of the facts – not the facts themselves.

At the first whiff of an impending scandal, governments act to insulate themselves from the issue and, if the issue cannot be made to go away, they then buy as much time as is needed to develop, or 'soap', public perceptions in their favour.

Governments can insulate themselves by –

- severing evidentiary links with the scandalous act;
- tidying up paper trails;
- avoiding any further contact with certain people or certain issues.

Although, by turning their back on a nascent scandal governments do run the risk that the problem, unsupervised, will worsen.

Governments seek to control an unfolding saga as much as possible in order to inoculate swing voters against adverse political interpretations of the available facts.

Control is usually secured by directing public focus toward a third party, such as an enemy, a scapegoat, a patsy, an ongoing police investigation or a politically benign public enquiry.

The subliminal and elementary intent of all comments and actions is to reduce the relevance of the scandal.

Of fundamental importance is the need to keep each day's news anywhere below the radar of swing voters. Oddly, this is more important than the need to have a consistent story, as long as contradicting

yourself or being proved wrong on technical issues also occurs below the radar of swing voters.

Stretching the issue out over time dilutes the message, so that the people that matter are not troubled by it. The scandal can thus trot along harmlessly until boredom begins to work in the scandalous government's favour.

Notions of sympathy and empathy are crucial. So, from the outset, 'innocent puppy' impersonations are a must.

Further options include painting yourself as the victim, demonising your accusers, chaining yourself to your subordinates to obligate their ongoing support, and arguing that the scandalous act 'doesn't make any sense' which, on one hand is true, and on the other, is exactly why it is a scandal.

By dissembling, deferring, arguing sub-point by sub-point, creating wiggle-room, and employing linguistic subtleties governments effectively undermine 'relevance' by confusing, dulling and obfuscating the issue.

## ...dissembling, deferring, creating wiggle room

And should truly threatening facts emerge, then explicitly downplaying their relevance is the final option. By popularising the idea that 'no-one cares', that the public is 'not interested', governments openly push the most basic idea that will keep them in power.

Whether you've had sexual relations with someone you shouldn't have, or you've been reckless as to whether 290 million Australian dollars was provided to a regime known to support terrorism and in doing so violated your own criminal code, undermined the work of your own navy, and the honest work of your allies, scandal soap works – and it works by dissolving relevance.

Martin Callinan is a writer and Advisor to Kelvin Thomson, the Federal Shadow Minister for Public Accountability. This talk was broadcast on Radio National on Perspectives, 11/04/06. Producer: Susan Clark.

[www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective)

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