

Common Theology

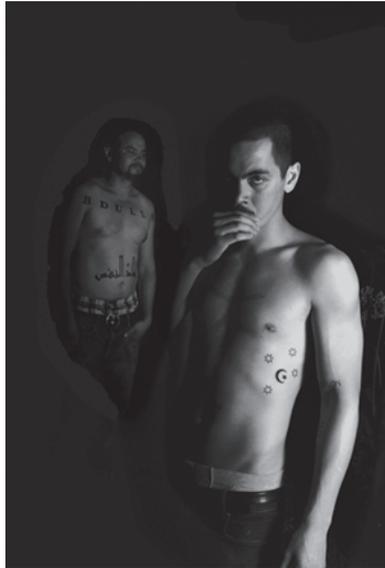
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INSIDE:

- How the church lost the world
- The wound beneath the skin – inner healing

A Periodical Journal for Australians



Common Theology is a periodical journal serving a community interested in emergent Christianity worldwide, and based in Australia. This publication is not a commercial venture but is funded by its sponsors and subscribers. It is intended to help build a participatory community sharing information about a new world order from a theological perspective.

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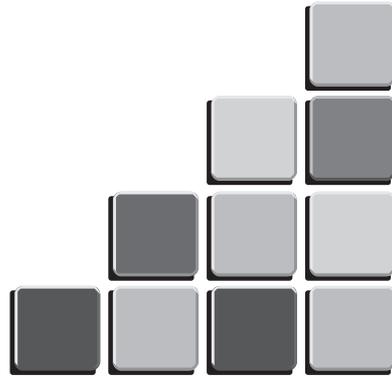
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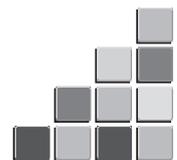
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From the Editor

In the fifty years since Vatican II Christian theology has travelled light years from the proposition that the Mystery of God was a theorem to be proved. But it may not seem so for Australian Roman Catholics who still wait in the trenches for the dawn of the Council's understanding that the Mystery of God is an experience to be lived – by every human being.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II we publish in this edition part of a lecture by Professor Sandra Schneiders which takes in the grand sweep of church history leading up to the Council, and outlines the tectonic shifts in theology which it foreshadowed, and which are being painfully worked out today.

The history of Settlement in Australia is much shorter, but a national identity also matures over generations, and may not be visible to those of us in the crucible of change. Professor Joseph Camilleri addresses the consequences of our dangerous memories – those places where our forebears have broken taboos and left unquiet spirits. He also gives us a prescription for healing those memories.

The disturbing story of a torturer turned priest is brought to us by Michael Kelly from an encounter he had in the USA. This Australian writer's own profound experience of the spiritual path is brought to bear on the place of redemption – where our securities are undermined and our illusions shattered.

In each edition of *Common Theology* a unifying message seems to emerge and this Lenten/Easter edition is no exception.

An eminent churchman, now retired, said to me this Eastertide that all he does these days is have conversations. I remembered Margaret Wheatley's belief (Vol 2 no.11) that conversations are the most potent agent of change in the world today – just at a time when sound bites and slogans dominate our public life.

Conversations are the salt and yeast which imperceptibly season and transform our understanding; kneading, growing, rising through the world wide web of human consciousness.

This edition is a small contribution, and a tribute, to the power of conversation.

Maggie Helass

The wound beneath the skin

Professor Joseph

Camilleri spoke at the Indigenous Theology Symposium in Brisbane addressing the subject of Healing Australia's Fragmented Culture, one of a series of papers which will be published later this year under the title of *Dreaming a New Earth*. We publish by way of preview some excerpts from his lecture addressing the wound that bedevils the national conscience.



The great conundrum in Australia at the moment is the large percentage of people who oppose the arrival of so-called uninvited boat people on our shores.

It is bewildering when one considers the way our country has developed, with waves of immigrants since our indigenous origin. The early settlers, gold rush immigrants, the arrival of European immigrants after the war, Vietnamese boat people, students from Asia, refugees from Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan, others from Africa. Why such hostility toward further refugees?

While the world is consolidating its global community culture, many Australians are preoccupied with preserving what we have for ourselves. This attitude is arguably the legacy of Australia's western history.

White settlers came with considerable aggression and found Australia relatively easy to occupy. The expansive unguarded coastline and the immigrants' superior weaponry made it impossible to defend by the then indigenous population.

The sense of superiority of the settlers led to atrocities that have on the one hand placed an entire culture in jeopardy, while on the other hand created a distorted new culture, indicated by its guardedness against outsiders and its self concern for its own standard of living.

The explanation for such distortion is that by inflicting such a wound upon others the white European perpetrators have similarly inflicted a

wound upon themselves. They carry the guilt of aggression and remain fixated in their own consequent insecurity. Insecurity perpetuates fragmentation, and ultimately locks in isolation. This insecurity is symbolised by the virtually unprotectable coastline.

In his book *Transcendence and Violence*, John D'Arcy May has examined some of the complex questions that surround the first conflict between white Europeans and the indigenous people of Australia.

This issue has been dealt with in the context of his broader interest in the way transcendent religions, like Christianity and Buddhism, stirred violence when their faith traditions came into conflict with various local cultures scattered across Asia and the Pacific region, including Australia. Such cultures themselves were often built upon more primal faith concepts.

Why is it that faith traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, each of which embrace the transcendence experience as the foundation of their religious story, resort to violence in their meeting with other cultures?

the story of religion forms the culture which shapes the people

The transcendent experience of religions' significant leaders usually provide the potency for its message, but preservation of this potency is an extraordinarily difficult task. The mystical character of such experience is not easily captured in either cognitive or ritual form. Nevertheless it is the human practice to try.

As the story of a religion progresses, it forms the culture which shapes the people. Adherence to the message may remain central. People may just adhere to the story as necessary for the formation of society. The nature of the new society then has more to do with rules and structures to preserve security and order, rather than being a community that respects and encourages the experience of transcendence.

When a new culture is encountered in a foreign society – as in the example of British colonisation – rather than acting out of the transformative experience of their religion, the majority act out of the story which has shaped their society.

The degree to which a society has come to align its transcendent stories with its society will determine the degree of protectiveness and aggression it employs. It becomes more important to preserve the story, and external marks of the faith story, than to represent the transcendent experience.

This understanding is consistent with the arrival of European settlers in Australia. The aggressive behaviour of early settlers certainly did not represent the transcendent experience of love and faithfulness to Jesus, yet it was justified in his name. People were defending the culture of their faith but not the experience of its transcendence message.

Interior healing can threaten one's personal security

The experiences of revelation can be perceived as conveying ultimate truth. Unfortunately in the process of inculturating such truth it can be distorted to foster a sense of superiority. May attests to this as being the case in the arrival of Christian Europe in Australia – which certainly perceived the local primal religion as inferior.

“Religious traditions, however, pose special problems of their own. Those such as Buddhism and Christianity, which implicitly or explicitly make universal claims based on a central enlightenment, have a tendency to consider themselves in possession of definitive truth, on which the well being of all and the salvation of the world depend. This intrinsic certainty of salvific truth is therefore projected onto others as a relationship with inferiors.”¹

As a result the violence of the clash of these two cultures left its mark on both the victims and the perpetrators. Victims have seen the significant destruction of their culture. While perpetrators continually repeat the initial behaviour – witnessed in its meeting with people from other cultures, as they arrive or attempt to arrive in Australia.

Can the cycle be broken? Can a new vision be formed? Not without significant healing within

¹May, John D'Arcy. *Transcendence and Violence*, p 126

the original perpetrators. I reiterate the belief that white colonisers were simultaneously inflicting a wound upon themselves and the resulting mental scar continues to shape the external attitude of each succeeding generation of our population. This is what must be addressed.

Various personality theories have their way of indicating we are not just isolated individuals but communal creatures. Jung's model has naturally helped many understand this reality. His description of the Collective Unconscious draws our attention to the reality that the external communal is also to be accessed within, and it is here that we must attend to the corresponding wound we have inflicted upon ourselves.

Without this interior healing we are not free to explore the range of psychic dynamics that constitute our involvement in society.

Interior healing is not an easy experience as it can threaten one's personal security. We reflect cautiously and often reluctantly lest the inner truths unsettle our personal equilibrium. But reconciliation can only be truly accomplished when treated both internally as well as externally.

Such healing is not accomplished by a singular event or a momentary reflection. It develops out of a way of life. I propose that a new dialogue must become the way we live in multi-cultural societies.

Love of self, neighbour and God is the fulfilment of a comprehensive form of dialogue

I see an appropriate dialogue modelled in the call by Jesus to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself (Lk 10.22-28).

This approach calls one to an inter-relational model for dialogue – dialogue with neighbour, dialogue with self and dialogue with God. I refer to this model as Relational Spirituality.

It is a comprehensive dialogue that leads one to work both externally and internally simultaneously.

In fact there is no such thing as an experience of love that sees neighbour, self or God independently from the other. One cannot grow in love for oneself without being engaged in life with one's neighbour; this enables a deeper discovery of the

nature of God's love in his creatures. Love of self, neighbour and God is the fulfilment of a comprehensive form of dialogue.

Out of our very wounded and fractured past – one in which we still struggle with the tensions of difference – we continue to ask the question whether it is possible for Australians to establish a way forward that will bring healing and a new vision for a vibrant multi-cultured nation?

By the time that the British colony was crossing new horizons to colonise much of the newly discovered world, the transcendent nature of its Christian faith was little more than a story of origin, which, rather than liberating its society, was

locking it into a pattern of behaviour that made it prone to non-transcendence values.

Now, once again, a new horizon presents itself to Australians as the nation becomes overwhelmingly multi-cultured. In this new era we are far more aware of the dynamics of such a society.

The challenge is to embrace the fullness of transcendent values and build a respectful society. Patterns of dialogue such as those presented by Relational Spirituality are fundamental to the accomplishment of a new vision of a healthy nation.

Professor Joseph Camilleri is Director, of the Centre for Dialogue at LaTrobe, University Melbourne.

Three Steps to Healing

John D'Arcy May's model offers a plan of healing in three steps to recapture the transcendent:

Acknowledging the Other

Acknowledgement of the autonomous existence of the religious other, owing nothing to us yet not threatening us, is the first and fundamental step towards an ethic of non-violence.¹

Welcoming the Stranger

Common to the ethics of all religions is the injunction of offering hospitality to the Stranger. ...'Dialogue' therefore becomes an intrinsically religious act of opening one's mind and heart to what is unfamiliar, and therefore seems threatening, in the religious identity of the Other.²

Reconciling the Enemy

Though the religions... are all too often associated with the justification and motivation of violence, they are also involved in peace processes which try to translate repentance and forgiveness into the practical politics of redemption and liberation.³

To rise to this threefold challenge, in Christian terms is to celebrate the sacrament of the Stranger; to fail this test, is to remain sub-Christian... and ultimately irreligious.

Yet if overcoming dualism, not in the sense of abolishing difference but of learning to live with it, is the irreplaceable contribution of the religions, whether 'universal' or 'primal', to the creation of a non-violent global way of life, then the traditions we have studied, despite their many failings and inadequacies, will inevitably form an integral part of the 'global ethos' which slowly but surely is emerging.⁴

to fail this test is to remain
sub-Christian

Such effective external healing work is simultaneously accompanied by the equivalent interior healing.

¹ May, John D'Arcy. *Transcendence and Violence*, 2003, New York, Continuum

² Ibid. p153

³ Ibid. p153

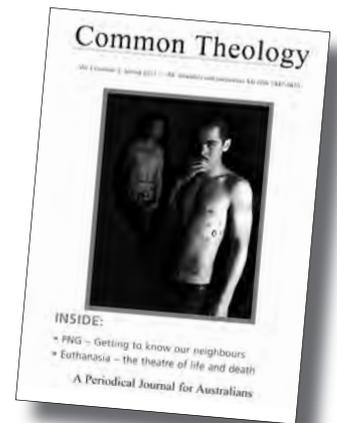
⁴ Ibid. p154

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Readers' view

It is important to acknowledge that because anger is one of God's gifts intentionally based on our humanity, it does serve an important purpose in life. (Vol 3 no.1)

Once we are able to normalise angry feelings and discern the subjective narratives that explain why we get angry, and cognitively restructure those that are counter productive, we are free to use our anger in ways that can vitalise and revitalise our lives and explore what loving, compassionate anger can achieve.

To quote Carol Tavris: "I have watched people use anger, in the name of emotional libera-

tion, to erode affection and trust, whittle away their spirits in bitterness and revenge, diminish their dignity in years of spiteful hatred.

"And I have watched with admiration those who use anger to probe for truth, who challenge and change the complacent injustices of life, who take an unpopular position centre stage while others say "shhh" from the wings."

Humans must become masters and not servants of their anger.

What about a *Common Theology* blog?

Malcolm Oliver

"*Common Theology* is food for God's 'little people'. I enjoy it very much."

**Archbishop Desmond Tutu
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate**

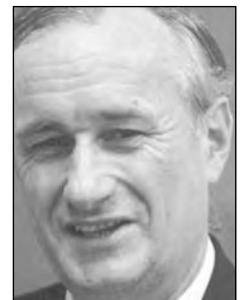


"*Common Theology* is ecumenical with an Australasian focus and embraces current affairs –

light years away from the 'god spots' of religious journalism in the past."

**Kay McLennan
Veteran Religious Affairs
Journalist**

"*Common Theology* is significant to the Christian community and beyond because it avoids the twin dangers facing theology today – that of being populist, trivial and even sectarian; or of being too academic, remote and specialised."



**The Revd Prof James Haire
Professor of Theology Charles Sturt University;
Exec Dir Australian Centre for Christianity and
Culture; Director Public & Contextual Theology
Strategic Research Centre.**

The Harrowing of Hell

By Michael B Kelly

“I need to know. What do you teach about redemption?”

The question came as a shock to me. The man voicing it had sat quietly all evening, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair, his hands clasped in front of his mouth.

“I did three terms of service in Vietnam. I volunteered for them. I was a trained torturer and an assassin.” His voice began to break, his knuckles whitening. “I’ve watched the life draining from the eyes of men as I tortured them to death. I’ve seen how precious life is. I’ve held it in my hands.”

He wept silently, tensely. “Somehow – *God* – somehow I made it back. So I need to know what do you teach about redemption?”

Like the other men gathered in this retreat house in Northern California, this man was both a Vietnam veteran and a priest.

Some were chaplains during the war, but most had been ordinary young soldiers whose experiences had later led them to faith, then into the ministry.

Every year, like so many other vets, they would gather from all over the United States to share memories and support, but they also gathered to pray and to ask, again and again, what life and faith could mean after what they had seen and done in Vietnam.

This year they had decided to invite some theologians to search with them.

Northern California is awash with theological institutes of all kinds, yet only one professor had agreed to come.

Reaching further afield, they invited the chaplains from a local Catholic university – and the call came to me. It was in invitation I could not pass up.

As I drove to meet them, I reflected that so much theology is about theology itself – religious talk about religious talk. Life becomes a footnote. This evening, I sensed, would be about life and raw faith, but nothing prepared me for what was to come.

As the priest asked the question, the room was still and silent. I sat stunned. Another man spoke,

forum



shyly, looking at the floor. “I was one of the fifty soldiers at My Lai.”

For just a moment he looked up, straight into my eyes, then down. As he told his story of suicide attempts, alcoholism and drug abuse, I strained to hear it through my own memories.

In the ‘70s I had taught my students about My Lai, how the soldiers had entered this peaceful village and battered, raped, mutilated and murdered hundreds of villagers at the order of their commander, who suspected that these farming people were Vietcong sympathisers.

so much theology is about
theology itself – religious talk
about religious talk

Old people, children, pregnant women – all unarmed, all “wasted” and left to rot.

“What would you have done,” I asked my boys, “if you’d been a soldier at My Lai? Would you have followed orders?” Here was a man who had.

As I surfaced from my own whirl of emotions, he was surfacing too.

“Finally, when I couldn’t get any lower, Christ found me. Now I set up halfway houses for homeless people hooked on substance abuse. I train some of the people and when they’re ready I hand the house over and start another one.” He paused, then quietly added. “So far I’ve started fifteen.”

I looked at these men as they waited for me to say something. I looked at them in horror and in awe. They did not want easy absolutions or cheap grace. These men knew who they were, and they spoke out of guilt and a brokenness so deep that only love could fathom it. And love had.

All at once I realised they were sharing their amazement as much as their shame, inviting me into their wonder as well as their anguish and asking, from their hearts and souls and guts, “How do we speak of this?”

I hardly dared respond. What gave me permission, I told them, was my belief that the heart of darkness is found in the human heart – mine no less than theirs. They had gone beyond the edge of evil, but they went at the behest of other human beings like them and like me, and now they carried the agony and the stigma and the lesson of that evil.

God is found in life, where our securities are undermined and our illusions shattered

The miracle was that they had become servants of love. Somehow the crucible of evil held the fire of grace.

So much of what passes for religion, I suggested then and I know now, is about “being nice”, about self-justification, about reciting doctrinal formulas and following rules that make us feel safe, righteous and good.

Perhaps there is a place for all this, but it has little to do with God. God is found in life, where our securities are undermined and our illusions shattered; where we are forced to face reality, with its terror, beauty and infinite possibility, where we are stripped down to the naked truth of who we are.

As the witch Starhawk, condemned by the Vatican, puts it: all that we truly are but believe we should not be – angry, cruel, vengeful, lusty, rebellious, sadistic, sensual, brutal, proud, lazy – and also beautiful, creative and good – squats in our spiritual doorway, refusing to let us pass until we face our essential humanness.

Most of us, of course, will never be torturers or murderers, but all of us have the capacity for great good and great evil, and all of us have depths in ourselves that we fear to face.

St Cyril addresses this fear simply and sharply. “We go to the Father of our souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.”

The dragon is the truth of who we are. It is only in facing that truth that we discover how absolutely we are loved.

It is in that part of ourselves that we most fear, the place of our deepest shame, that the eyes of divine love open and gaze into our own. It is there that God waits for us.

These men have entered that place and they carried in themselves the grace. I had to tell them that.

“All my life I have heard words about love and forgiveness, about Christ saving us from our sins, about life coming out of death – but tonight the reality of redemption has finally touched me. I am shaken, humbled by the extremes of human experience where you men have walked; extremes where God has met you; extremes where love and truth have set you free. Do you realise the treasure you carry? You speak of what you know.”

I turned to the man who had asked the question. “You ask me about redemption. You ask, and you strike me dumb. You are a torturer, assassin, servant and priest, and it is you, father, who must tell me about redemption. It is you who must teach.”

Michael B Kelly has lectured, led retreats and run spirituality courses throughout Australia, the USA and Britain. This article first appeared in *The Age* newspaper.



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How the church lost the world — Vatican II fifty years on

Professor Sandra Schneiders is a Professor emerita at the Jesuit School of Theology in Santa Clara, at the University of Berkeley, California. She spoke at the Centenary of the Melbourne College of Divinity. These are excerpts from her lecture addressing the subject of the Word in the World.



The topic, the Word in the World, suffers from a double ambiguity. Does ‘Word’ refer to the second person of the Trinity – the Word who entered our world incarnate in Jesus Christ? Or, does the ‘Word’ refer to the gospel that Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach in his name to the whole creation? And does ‘world’ refer to the enemy Jesus spoke of as the world which will hate his disciples as it has hated him, or to the world which God so loved as to give the only Son?

I want to suggest that it does not seem that the New Testament understanding of world has been particularly influential or even functional throughout most of the Church’s history of dealing with the world.

Rather, it seems that the meaning of the term world has fluctuated depending on how the Christian community in any given period of history was experiencing itself in its context.

I’ll restrict myself to a period in which most of us, if we’re over 60, participated in at least briefly, namely the period from the Reformation up to the eve of the Second Vatican Council; that is the period from 1500 to 1950, which is usually called the Modern Period.

Although I’m looking at this period from the standpoint of the Roman Catholic experience, because that’s the one I know the best, I think, most of what I say will be readily recognisable to all of us. The Catholic experience might have been the most extreme but it was certainly not unique.

The process that would eventually end the medieval church’s imperial reign over most of the known world, namely the Protestant Reformation, was underway even before the high point of the Middle Ages.

The church had already lost half of its religious empire in the east/west schism which began well before its conventional date of 1054.

In the 1400s the eventually worldwide cultural tsunami that was later called the Renaissance began to undermine the unquestioned grip of the church – in the name of faith – on the intellectual life of Europe. God was undoubtedly still in his heaven where orthodox faith was firmly rooted in divine revelation, but on earth there was a growing consensus that man is the measure of all things. And that reason, not blind faith in authority, is the arbiter of truth.

While the world became
universally Christian, the church
was becoming profoundly secular.

My point, however, is that the meaning of world as it emerged in the Middle Ages, was determined less by the gospel material on this subject than by the relation of the institutional church to its context.

Unlike the relation between the church and its context in the first centuries after the Resurrection, when it was a persecuted minority, the relation of church to world in the 5th Century and throughout the medieval period was one of increasing dominance. The church gradually subsumed its context.

If it is true that we transform into ourselves what we consume – and the Medieval church certainly took over the Western world – it is also true that we become what we eat. While the world became, at least culturally universally Christian, the church was becoming profoundly secular.

> continued on page 14

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Snippets from the on-line media



Web democracy under threat from three sides

Principles of openness and universal access that underpinned the creation of the internet three decades ago are under greater threat than ever, Google co-founder Sergey Brin said in an interview with *The Guardian* in April.

The threat to the freedom of the internet comes, he claims, from a combination of governments increasingly trying to control access and communication by their citizens; the entertainment industry's attempts to crack down on piracy; and the rise of "restrictive" walled gardens such as Facebook and Apple, which tightly control what software can be released on their platforms.

The 38-year-old billionaire, whose family fled antisemitism in the Soviet Union, was widely regarded as having been the driving force behind Google's partial pullout from China in 2010 over concerns about censorship and cyber-attacks.

He said five years ago he did not believe China or any country could effectively restrict the internet for long, but now says he has been proven wrong. "I thought there was no way to put the genie back in the bottle, but now it seems in certain areas the genie has been put back in the bottle," he said.

He said he was most concerned by the efforts of countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and Iran to censor and restrict use of the internet, but warned that the rise of Facebook and Apple,

which have their own proprietary platforms and control access to their users, risked stifling innovation and balkanising the web.

From the attempts made by Hollywood to push through legislation allowing pirate websites to be shut down, to the British government's plans to monitor social media and web use, the ethos of openness championed by the pioneers of the internet and worldwide web is being challenged on a number of fronts.

In China, which now has more internet users than any other country, the government recently introduced new "real identity" rules in a bid to tame the boisterous microblogging scene.



In Russia, there are powerful calls to rein in a blogosphere blamed for fomenting a wave of anti-Vladimir Putin protests.

It has been reported that Iran is planning to introduce a sealed "national internet" from this summer.

Brin acknowledged that some people were anxious about the amount of their data that was now in the reach of US authorities because it sits on Google's servers. He said the company was periodically forced to hand over data and sometimes prevented by legal restrictions from even notifying users that it had done so.

Diplomat's angst for Assange

By Tony Kevin

Last year's Walkley Awards included a surprising 'Most Outstanding Contribution to Journalism', to Julian Assange's website WikiLeaks. According to the citation, "by designing and constructing a means to encourage whistleblowers, WikiLeaks and its editor-in-chief Julian Assange

took a brave, determined and independent stand for freedom of speech and transparency that has empowered people all over the world."

In June, Assange also won in Britain the Martha Gellhorn Prize for "journalism at the cutting edge ... that challenges secrecy and mendacity in public affairs ... and raises 'forgotten' issues of public importance, without fear or favour, working against the grain of government spin."

Since 2010 the US Justice Department has conducted an active and vigorous inquiry into whether Assange can be charged under US law, most likely the 1917 Espionage Act. This investigation is unprecedented both in its scale and nature.

The embassy notes that the US Justice Department was investigating alleged technical assistance provided by WikiLeaks to Private Bradley Manning, who is under arrest and facing treason charges. Evidence of such a conspiracy could assist prosecutors rebut claims that WikiLeaks was acting merely as a media organisation in accepting for publication secret cables from Manning.

Assange thus faces risks of a long prison sentence if sent to the US.

Tony Kevin retired from the Australian Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1998, after a 30-year public service career in DFAT and the Prime Minister's Dept. (ES 14/12/11)



War in the abstract

By Justin Glyn

Many people have commented that 'war on terror' is a nebulous term. Terry Jones, of Monty Python fame, asked, in 'Terry Jones' War on the War

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on Terror’: “How do you wage war on an abstract noun? ... It’s well known, in philological circles, that it’s very hard for abstract nouns to surrender.”

Richard Jackson notes that the phrase was used to build up a good-evil duality and to desensitise us to the human rights violations which the new ‘war footing’ would involve.

Even if one accepts the dubious premise that there is a war on, however, war has not been law-free for a very long time.

Ever since St Augustine proposed requirements for a ‘just war’, international law has set limits on how one may conduct hostilities.

It is true that there are fewer laws governing conflicts which do not have countries as belligerents on both sides, than there are for those that do. The bulk of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 only apply to the former. Nevertheless, other conflicts are not ‘law free’.

Even if hostilities involve non-state actors, Common Article 3 of the Conventions and customary law mandate certain minimum standards.

Recent developments, especially the authorisation of extra-judicial killings and detentions of US citizens by American forces, suggest that states need a reminder of international law obligations owed to people found in a ‘war’ zone.

Indefinite detention without trial is not permitted under international law.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (which the international community has tasked with acting as the ‘guardian’ of the Geneva Conventions) has recently reiterated the illegality of targeted assassinations where the victim is not a combatant or is outside the area of military operations.

Dr Justin Glyn is a Jesuit scholastic who has practised law in South Africa and New Zealand.
(ES 20/12/11)



A mythologised God

Guy Rundle writes that he really enjoyed the Richard Dawkins-Cardinal George Pell Q&A smackdown on the ABC on Easter Monday.

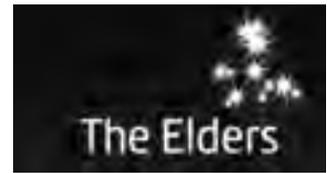
For many of us who class ourselves as existential atheists – meaning that the possibility of something called God being a real entity can never be ruled out, but one never has the faintest day-to-day belief in it as a meaningful way to view the world – the show was to be approached with trepidation.

People who have genuinely wrestled with what a non-mythological God might be

Dawkins’ problem in debate has always been that he can’t credit versions of theism that are more sophisticated than old-man-in-the-sky type stuff, so when he meets people who have genuinely wrestled with the idea of what a non-mythical God might be, and thus have a pretty thought-out account of it, he is quickly at sea.

However, to his credit, he has over past years, toned down his act, and learnt from early defeats, and presents a more circumspect account. Luckily for us.

Lucky too, that in George Pell he was up against someone still willing to spruik a mythologised God – a sophisticated version of such – but still a mythologised account nevertheless, and one that, as it becomes elaborated, reveals itself as essentially childish and absurd.



Women are key to India’s economic future

Desmond Tutu writes following an Elders’ visit to India in March:

I am a man of God, as you know, and I believe that every son and every daughter is created equal in His eyes. Yet I am sad to say that in India, it is still the girls who are at the bottom of the heap.

If India is to eradicate poverty and fulfil its destiny as a developed nation, it must make the most of its fantastic human resources. Girls and women make up almost half of the population, yet currently almost half of them are married off before they turn 18.

In Bihar, one of the poorest states in India, I met young girls and boys who desperately want to contribute to their country’s emerging prosperity. They have formed a movement called Jagriti (‘awakening’) whose primary goal is to say ‘no’ to child marriage.

The Chief Minister of Bihar, whom we spoke to about the Jagriti campaign, has already contacted the young volunteers and offered to work with them!

I am not naive – I do not think that ending child marriage will solve all of India’s problems once and for all. And in India, like elsewhere in the world, change will not take place overnight.

But India is poised to become a very significant player on the world stage – as a moral leader, not just an economic powerhouse. I believe this moral leadership depends on finally giving girls and women their proper place – at the centre of India’s development.

www.theelders.org

> from page 11

By the end of the Middle Ages the church was functioning not in opposition to the secular order but as the dominant actor in that order.

A very different era was brewing however, as the Renaissance permeated Italy in the 1400s and spread rapidly across the continent and into the British Isles.

The Reformation was hot on its heels. The Council of Trent in the mid 1500s was the Catholic Church's response to the Protestant Reformation, which was, of course, a political as well as a spiritual movement. But it was primarily a challenge to the hegemony of the Roman Church in Europe – a sovereignty that was political, economic, cultural, social and military as well as religious.

The Renaissance and the Reformation in the 15th and 16th centuries undermined the church's control of the intellectual spheres – both humanistic and theological. The scientific revolution in the 17th Century inaugurated the conflict between science and religion – with which we are still dealing.

The 18th Century launched the Enlightenment in which reason undertook not only to challenge but also to defeat the church's claim, on the basis of authority, to be the sole or even primary source and arbiter of truth.

Not only was the church between the 1500s and the 1900s dethroned in the religious and intellectual spheres, but the two great revolutions of the 18th Century – the French and the American – called into question the very principles of political organization on which the church's divine right government rested.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries the church dug in, not only in the political sphere against democracy and freedom of conscience on the one hand and socialism and Communism on the other, but also against the rapid developments in the physical and social sciences; physics, biology, psychology, anthropology and sociology; against new movements in philosophy and theology; and in the social sphere against the rising consciousness of women and other so-called natural inferiors, whose expanding and rising expectations threatened the hierarchical aristocracy in society and church.

In short, in the 400 years between the Protestant Reformation and the middle of the 20th Century the relation between the church and the world had become one of nearly total mutual estrangement.

From being the most powerful secular agency in the world in the Middle Ages, the church was now defining itself as non-participant in the world, except as a moral checkmate to secular developments in almost every sphere; intellectual, political, economic, social, scientific and moral.

The extensive self-alienation of the institutional church from the mainstream of life in the modern world was reciprocated by the increasing secularisation of western culture.

It must be recognised that the Roman Catholic Church during this Modern period made significant contributions that reached well beyond its own borders, such as the development of a theory of social justice based on the rights of humans as made in the image and likeness of God, that is still one of the best developed in the world.

the church was now defining itself as non-participant in the world

It created educational and health care systems for the non-elites of society, which not only cared for its own but also stimulated the development of such systems in society at large.

Catholic contributions to the world of letters and learning within the intellectually respectable, if restricted, framework of Thomism philosophy and theology, and the institutional context of its system of higher education, remain significant.

The meaning of 'world' was constructed in largely objectivistic terms. It was a something, distinct from the church or the community of faith and 'out there'; a place, a group of people, a regime, a religious institution, even an ideology or political party, or the entire historical process itself. The world has been understood, especially over the past 500 years, as something that begins where the church ends. And to the extent that the world has an impact on the church, it makes the church worldly – the way a noxious virus makes a person sick.

I want to suggest that it is this way of conceiving of the world and the relation of the church to the world that is at least partially responsible for the sense many Christians have, that in two thousand

years Christianity has made virtually no progress in bringing the Word into the world; that we are still, more or less, where we started on Pentecost, confronting a stubbornly resistant and unbelieving world with a message that it cannot hear and seems quite willing and able to do without.

Against this historical background we can appreciate that something truly amazing happened at the Second Vatican Council, which affected not only the Roman Catholic Church but the whole Christian world.

Pope John XXIII, with extraordinary prophetic insight, realised that the progressive alienation of the church from the modern world was a ruinous path that was blocking the fulfilment of Christ's commission to go into the world and preach the gospel to every nation. The Church, he declared, had to change.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World entitled *Gaudium et Spes*, the first conciliar document ever addressed not solely to the Roman Catholic Church but to all humanity, was a document not foreseen or prepared for before the Council, but born in the Pentecostal energy on the Council floor, passed overwhelmingly by over 2000 bishops and greeted enthusiastically by non-Roman Catholics worldwide.

The Crucial Document

Gaudium et Spes represented, in a sense, a 180-degree turn in the relation of the Church to the world.

- It declared the Church's solidarity with the very world it had rejected for 400 years.
- It affirmed the legitimate autonomy of the secular order, on which it had sat in negative judgement since the dawn of modernity.
- It declared that the Church desired not only to abandon its negative stance toward the modern world – of isolation, condemnation, and animosity – but indeed to share intimately in its concerns and destiny.
- In its now famous prologue it recognised that the Church and the world were not two separate realities in endless contention, but one reality struggling forward in history under the salvific energy of the Spirit of God.

I think it is important to realise that this dramatic reversal was not simply a change of policy, some kind of marketing merger dictated by the church's falling sales in the religious marketplace, it was not even primarily a change in theological position. It was a gospel-inspired imaginative conversion; a new way of seeing; a reorientation of being life in action, that had radical and profound implications for the church.

World is a term like 'God' or 'self'. It is an image, which cannot be fully articulated thematically but is constantly developing and changing, kaleidoscopically, affected by virtually every experience we undergo.

the kind of dualism that pits spirit against flesh is not healthy

Just as we cannot answer comprehensively, even at any given moment, the question 'who are you', we cannot answer the question 'what is the world?'

I would suggest that part of the problem of the Word in the world today is that we have not realised that there is no 'world' for us that is other than our own reality.

I think that what the Church at Vatican II did in *Gaudium et Spes* was to recognise, perhaps for the first time, that the believing community is not a subject relating to an object – the church trying to bring a salvific word to an unreceptive world.

Rather we are trying to comprehend ourselves *as* world – as a single reality – the way we understand our self as one reality. In both cases that one reality is complex, simultaneously good and evil, with much of ourselves and much of our world in ongoing tension.

But the kind of dualism that pits spirit against flesh, soul against body, intellect against emotions, and so on, as if we were two persons – a good self whose job is to dominate or even obliterate the bad self – is not healthy because it is not realistic.

Like the realisation that my self is not a transcendent spiritual soul inhabiting a rebellious material body, but an inspirited body/person, the Council was proclaiming that the church is not a good spiritual entity trying to deal with the sinful material one, but that the world is that inspirited

reality which God so loved as to give the only Son.

The question is, how is the church to understand itself as integral to the world and at the same time, in some sense, not of the world but of God?

Professor Schneiders here gave a lengthy biblical exegesis of her theme, culminating with the parable of the weeds and the wheat in Matthew 13.24-30, which Jesus himself interprets allegorically in 13.36-42.

You remember the story of the owner of the field, who sowed good seed in his field, but his servants bring him word that the field is laced with weeds. They want to pull up the weeds but the owner forbids this saying that there is danger that in pulling up the weeds they will uproot the wheat. Rather both must grow together until the harvest when the definitive separation will take place.

Notice it is not the world which is evil (the field), rather the world is the kingdom of the Son of man. It was always God's, at the beginning, during the divine sowing, while the season of growth unfolds, and at the harvest. The devil is at work as an interloper, an evil agent in the world, but the world is never Satan's.

The point of the parable is that it is not possible in the context of history to simply pull up the weeds. Good and evil are not two separate realities, two realms, two groups of people or even two human projects distinct enough to allow the neat delineation and clean eradication of the negative.

This world is one reality in which good and evil are pervasively and intimately intertwined. Every person, every institution, every system – whether intellectual, political, economic, educational or even religious – is a complex reality in which good and evil struggle for dominance, and that struggle goes on from the time of planting to the time of harvesting, throughout the whole of history.

There is no place we can go, no social system we can create, no group with which we can affiliate which will once and for all put us on the side of the angels. That is the point of the baptismal dialogue, do you renounce Satan and all his works and align yourself with Christ in the dynamics of his reign?

Jesus went before us into the desert of temptation where he had to discern between God's word and the perverse interpretation of that word by Satan.

But Jesus did not obliterate Satan. Satan will return at an opportune time again and again. The follower of Christ is not called out of this world into a field for the elect where there is only wheat – or to simply pull up the weeds and be done with it.

We are called to live in a world, the world in which we humans are, which is always God's and all God's, but which until the harvest will struggle with the Kingdom-destroying power to generate evil that is somehow intrinsic to that world.

As the New Testament scholar, Walter Wink, has so well described in his trilogy on 'The Powers', it is Paul who supplies a kind of mythological language for talking about this reality of one world in contention, rather than two separate worlds at war.

Paul talks about the principalities and powers, which are not to be imagined as some army of separate extra-terrestrial beings buzzing around in the atmosphere, but rather as the principals and dynamics which animate, or interfere with the animation, of systems – familial, social, intellectual, economic, political, educational, religious and so on – which are the world in operation.

The world is one reality in which good and evil are intertwined

"We experience this evil," says Wink, "as the inside of systems, the way family spirit is the inside of the group of relatives, or the corporate culture is in the inside of an operation or project."

The world, which is God's good creation and remains God's, is one world, and we are participants in it, not strangers or adversaries of it. There is no way to leave it or defeat it or suppress it, rather as Wink puts it, "We must engage the powers, the destructive dynamics that are at work in God's good world."

This is the fundamental insight of all those who choose non-violent resistance as the only effective strategy for overcoming the principalities and powers without becoming one of them.

It is why they are convinced that waging war to end war, killing criminals to stop crime, and so on, are self-defeating approaches to the task Jesus assigned his followers, namely to preach the Gospel to every creature.

This brings us to the more important topic – which must be treated much more briefly because of time – namely what is the Word then, which Christians must address to this world?

The Word of God sent into the world is not in the first instance a message. It is Jesus, the Word of God incarnate and risen – and this is the lynchpin of the particular Christian take on mission.

The world's other great religious traditions emphasise other aspects and modes of salvation, but the Christian tradition has something specific, unique and indispensable, and life-giving to contribute to the human quest for meaning, that offers a realistic hope that goodness and truth will ultimately prevail.

First, the mystery of the Incarnation reveals that divinity is not something exclusively transcendent, utterly different, outside creation. Divinity is both one with us and indeed one of us.

The Word is not in the world like some divine content in the human container, but as the transformation of the world itself.

Second, as a consequence, our humanity – personal and corporate – divinised in Christ, is the locus, the instrument and the focus of God's salvific liberating work in this world.

A third implication of the revelation of the humanity of God in Jesus, and the affect most important for our present question, is that particularity is infinitely precious.

In the Christian worldview the particular is not an illusion or even a mirror instance of the universal. Christians do not seek God by abstracting from the concrete and the particular.

Every pebble, every butterfly, every individual person with her or his absolutely unique fingerprint, every ethnic group and race, every religious tradition in all its specificity and distinctiveness is, like the particular individual Jesus of Nazareth, a locus of revelation. "Differentiation neither divides nor fuses," said de Chardin, "it unites."

This scandal of particularity has taken on a heightened importance in the context of post-Newtonian science. The new cosmology understands the earth and its denizens – human beings and other beings

– within the context of an expanding universe whose history originated in the Big Bang, which predated by billions of years the emergence of our galaxy, solar system and planet, to say nothing of humans and other religious traditions.

This understanding of the universe has significantly broadened our horizons. For many people, the Jesus story which centres history in the person of a unique, individual, particular human being, suddenly appears too small, too narrow, too anthropocentric in the face of this awesome and immense universe story – which seems to provide a much more comprehensive framework for our self-understanding.

The suspicion that the Christian story is too limited to be ultimately meaningful in the light of contemporary science is exacerbated by the evidence of religious pluralism.

Jesus unites specific form to divinity

The implications of the new cosmology and religious pluralism for Christology and the theology of religions are serious and are beyond the scope of our considerations here.

But I would like to suggest that there are essentially two ways, relevant to our concerns, of understanding the particularity of Jesus.

One way, which leads inexorably to the conclusion that the Jesus story is substantively irrelevant for the scientifically and inter-religiously enlightened contemporary person, is to reduce Jesus to his particularity as a first century Jewish male who lived a short life in one small country, was executed and is now a figure of history whom we admire and even imitate, but with whom we cannot relate personally and whom we must not universalise.

If this is our vision of Jesus – one unaffected by the role of the Incarnation and the Resurrection in Christian revelation – then Jesus, the particular human being, is plainly too limited to be the object of genuine religious faith. He differs in no ontological way from other moral paragons and charismatic religious leaders in human history.

But a second way of understanding the particularity of Jesus is to take utterly seriously the faith of the Church that Jesus is the wisdom of God incarnate. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament

presents holy wisdom as the immanence of the transcendent God present – hidden or manifest – and active in all creation.

God, as holy wisdom, is she who reaches from end to end mightily and governs all things well – in her we live and move and have our being.

Jesus gives specific form to divinity. The Christian experiences in Jesus not just the theoretical possibility that God could be present and active in the whole universe, but the reality of divine wisdom at work in the world. Jesus in his Resurrection is the Word still in the world.

Christian faith in the Incarnation and the Resurrection does not necessarily make Christians do different things from non-Christians, but it makes everything they do different because they live not as mere human individuals, but Christ lives in them. They are the ongoing presence of the Word in the world.

Christians are the ongoing presence of the Word in the world

In conclusion then, we are not delegated agents trying to make a strange message comprehensible in an alien and unreceptive milieu.

Our mission is not, first of all to deliver a message, but to be the Word of God sounding in our world; to be the living organism of the risen Jesus in the particularity of our historical time and place.

As we are ourselves transformed by ‘the reality that we are’ by baptism, and as we progressively inhabit and become that reality by our participation in the Pascal mystery, we are infusing the world with the transforming power of ‘the word that we are’.

This is no guarantee that evil will have no purchase on us. The field of this world is still laced with weeds. It is only if we die with Christ that we will live with him. But it is a guarantee that no matter how meagre the results of our ministerial efforts might appear, the salvific success of the Word in the world is already assured. In the end the sower will claim his field and it will finally be all wheat.

book review

The Experience of God – an invitation to do theology, by Dermot A Lane, 2003, Paulist Press, 0809143798, pp112

Reviewed by Maggie Helass

This classic was first published in 1981, as theologians chewed the cud after Vatican II. A seismic shift had occurred which brought personal experience of God in from the cold and placed it front and central to revelation.

The mystery of God was no longer some kind of theorem to be proved, but rather an experience to be lived.

This text addresses itself to the experience of God; what is involved in such experience and its peculiar character; and criteria for evaluating an experience of God.

The revised edition touches on trends over the past fifty years which have pursued the consequences of a theology which had suddenly become experiential, inductivist and historically-conscious.

For example, it is language that gives rise to thought, empowers praxis and weaves a narrative, therefore it is language that houses experience.

Lane sums up theology as being about the critical unpacking of the revelation of God that takes place in human experience through faith.

“Theology, in truth, is about life, the experience of life in all its spiritual implications, especially those that point toward the presence of God at the centre of existence itself.”

Theology is about keeping the divine-human dialogue active and alive from the side of humanity.

Lane points out that excessive concern about the defence of a verbal orthodoxy in the church will be at the expense of a living, active faith among the people of God, especially in a world that is sensitive to language-changes and immersed in a

Theology is about keeping the
divine-human dialogue active and
alive from the side of humanity

new and recent books

communications revolution, where the medium expresses the message.

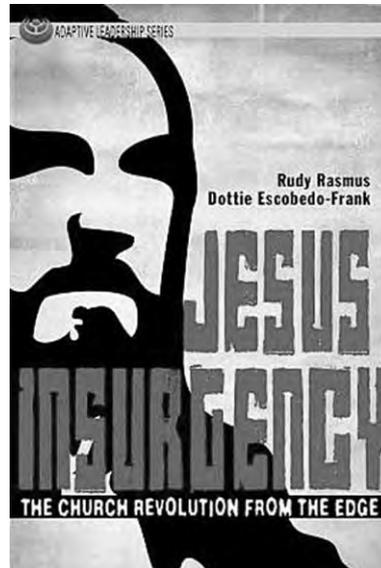
The old order has been replaced, but such tectonic shifts have consequences for generations, and perhaps it is only now that a new order is becoming visible to us ordinary people.

I found much that affirmed my vague aspirations and timid insights about a new world order as I read this book.

Questions for discussion are included at the end of each chapter as well as recommended reading lists.

criticism, spirituality, theology, ethics and philosophy; and are held together by a specific theological construal both of Christian language and of the Church's founding event.

Jesus Insurgency – the church revolution from the edge, by Rasmus Rudy and Dottie Escobedo-Frank, Abingdon, 9781426740411



Crunching more data may be helpful but will not revolutionise, let alone save, a declining church. We need creative thinking done by people who are not afraid to face the institutional church. Here two creative pastors with different but successful ministries, suggest how the church can live out its mission and ignite a movement.

Hugh's books

by Hugh McGinlay



Here are some new and recent titles in theology – keeping you informed about new releases in the various theological disciplines.

Night of the Confessor – Christian faith in an age of uncertainty, by Tomas Halik, Random House, 9780385524520

As the challenges of cultural secularisation and dwindling congregation size confront religious communities across North America and Europe, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, Tomáš Halík is a prophetic voice of hope. He has lived through the political oppression and intolerance of religion that defined Communist Czechoslovakia, and he draws from this experience to remind readers that not only does crisis lead to deeper understanding but also that any living religion is a changing religion.

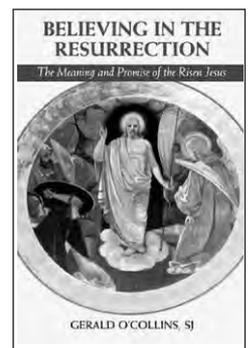
Christ the Stranger – the theology of Rowan Williams, Benjamin Myers, T & T Clarke, 9780567599711

An Australian author introduces the thought of one of the most fascinating theologians and most controversial church leaders of our time, whose writings span the genres of poetry, history, literary

Believing in the Resurrection – the meaning and promise of the risen Jesus, by Gerald O'Collins, Paulist, 9780809147571

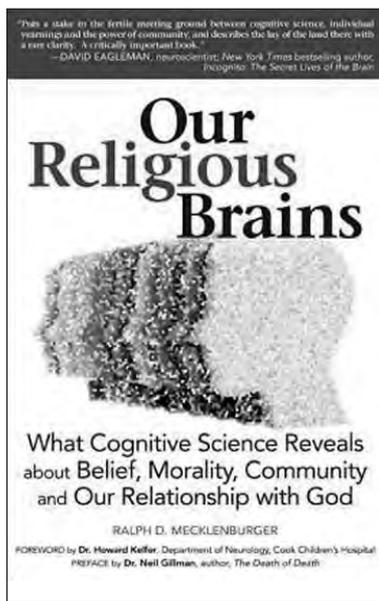
The resurrection of Jesus is the central belief of the Christian faith tradition, but what does it really mean? Why do Christians believe in Jesus as risen from the dead? And what promise does his resurrection hold out for our world?

This book, by a prominent Australian Roman Catholic theologian, surveys current writings and debates in the area of resurrection studies, including the sacramental and moral implications of believing in Jesus' resurrection and hoping for our own.



new and recent books

Our Religious Brains – What cognitive science reveals about belief, morality, community and our relationship with God, by Ralph Mecklenburger, Jewish Lights, 9781580235082



This groundbreaking, accessible book looks at the implications of cognitive science for religion and theology. Avoiding neurological jargon and respectful to all faiths, it examines current theory on how our brains construct our world in order to guide us safely through life, creating and appreciating meaning as we

go. Also considers how modern science challenges historic ideas about free will and undermines the religious concept of the soul as a meta-physical entity separable from the body.

Darwin on Trial – 20th anniversary edition, by Phillip Johnson, IVP, 97808308383

Is evolution fact or fancy? Is natural selection an unsupported hypothesis or a confirmed mechanism of evolutionary change? These were the courageous questions that professor of law Phillip Johnson originally took up in 1991. In this edition Johnson responds to critics of the first edition and maintains that scientists have put the cart before the horse, regarding as scientific fact what really should be regarded as a yet unproved hypothesis.

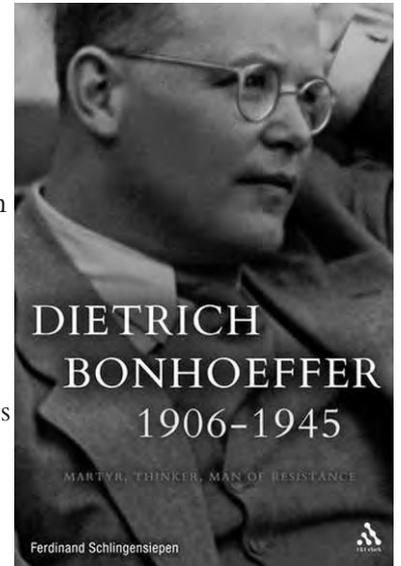
Healing Agony – Re-imagining forgiveness, by Stephen Cherry, Continuum, 9781441119384

“This fascinating book holds together a Christian hope in the ultimate possibility of forgiveness, even when faced with the deepest

wounds, combined with an honest and realistic understanding of the complexity of the venture, as one tries to become, slowly, a forgiving person.”
Timothy Radcliffe

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945 – Martyr, thinker, man of resistance, by Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, Continuum, 9780567034007

Bonhoeffer has gained a position as one of the most prominent Christian martyrs of the last century. This new book is a definitive biography for a new generation of readers, from sources that have only been made accessible during the last few years.



Living with Other Creatures – Green exegesis and theology, by Richard Bauckham, Baylor University Press, 9781602584112

Offers fresh, innovative approaches to a wide range of the issues that arise in relating the Bible and Christian theology to the ecological concerns of our contemporary world. While focusing especially on biblical material, it also engages Francis of Assisi, modern nature poetry, Matthew Fox and the history of interpretation.

Luther and Calvin – Religious revolutionaries, by Charlotte Methuen, Lion, 9780745953403

Explores why it is important to know what Luther and Calvin thought – primarily because the sixteenth-century Reformation began a process of political and intellectual change that not only shapes Europe and western thought as we know it today, but that spread to the New World and has deeply influenced America’s culture as well.

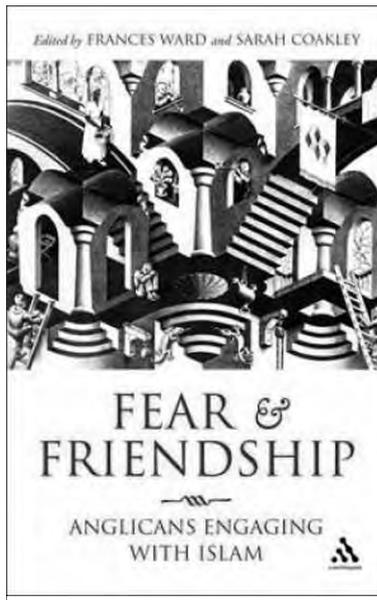
new and recent books

Quest for the Historical Satan, by Miguel de la Torre and Albert Hernandez, Augsburg, 9780800663247

Probes the murky origins of the satanic legends and beliefs back to their pre-Christian roots in the Middle East, unearthing Satan's roots in Egyptian and Babylonian understandings of evil and presenting Satan as 'the trickster'. The authors argue that seeing Satan as trickster is historically accurate and valuable for Christian rethinking in "theology, philosophy, and practice of evil", helping us reframe basic elements of our worldview of good and evil.

Fear and Friendship – Anglicans engaging with Islam, Frances Ward and Sarah Coakley (eds), Continuum, 9781441101495

Offers insights arising from a new depth of theological thinking in Anglican/Muslim engagement, founded in stories of real encounters in parish and cathedral life in contemporary Britain; and explores the significance and reality of fear, incompetence, ignorance, ulterior motives, friendship, trust, respect and courage.



Reading the Early Church Fathers – From the Didache to Nicaea, by James Papandrea, Paulist, 9780809147519

Introduces us to the primary sources of church history, with commentary to help us make sense of the theological/Christological trajectory that led the church from the New Testament era, through the Apologists, to the development of the major doctrines of the church. This unique

treatment situates the discussion within the social and cultural context of the Roman Empire and its relationship to the church – including the persecutions.

The Sacrifice of Jesus – understanding atonement biblically, by Christina Ebehart, Augsburg, 9780800697389

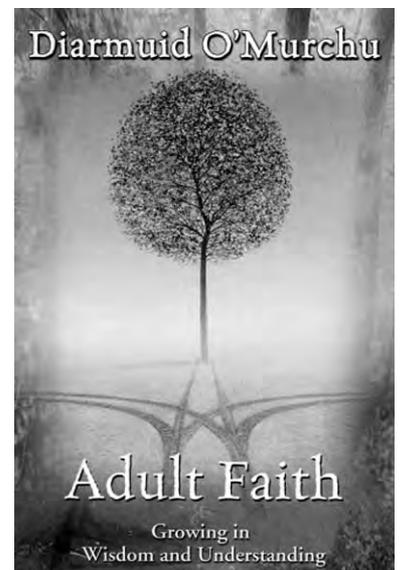
Carefully and clearly examines how biblical metaphors of sacrifice and atonement were taken over by early Christians to speak of the significance of Christ; and suggests that these appropriations have been misunderstood as requiring a logic of necessary violence; rather they speak to larger Christological themes concerning the whole mission and life of Jesus.

Theology of Food – Eating and the Eucharist, by Angel F Mendez Montoya, Wiley/Blackwell, 9780470674987

Draws on literature, politics and philosophy as well as theology to unlock the role food has played within religious traditions including the significance of the apple in the Christian Bible and the eating of bread as the Body of Christ; the eating and fasting around Ramadan for Muslims; and how the dietary laws of Judaism are designed to create an awareness of living in the time and space of the Torah.

Adult Faith – Growing in wisdom and understanding, by Diarmuid O'Murchu, Orbis, 9781570758867

Adults today seek spiritual meaning in ways very different to previous times, looking for adult answers to adult questions, and wishing to be part of the dialogical process that helps unearth deeper truth. O'Murchu's book will help churches use their resources



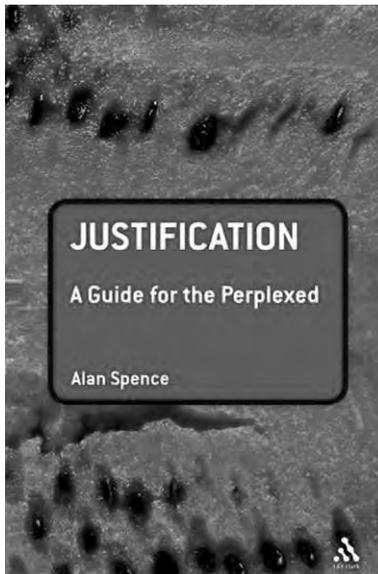
new and recent books

to strengthen the faith of their people at a time of great change in how people think about institutionalised religion

Justification
– a guide for the perplexed,
by Alan Spence,
T & T Clarke,
9780567077516

Offers an historical survey of the doctrine of justification as it has developed within the Western church – a somewhat simplified version of McGrath's *Justitia Dei*, but with a more

outspoken assessment of the various moves that are taken at various stages in the discussion. The conclusion considers what part a doctrine of



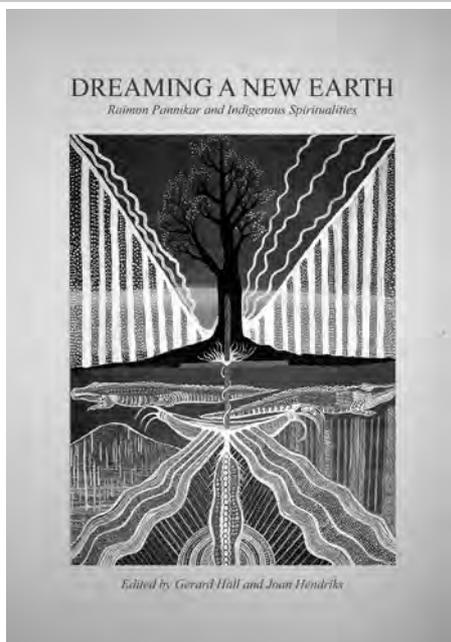
justification can have within a modern worldview in which the concept of divine judgment has generally been marginalised.

The Triune Creator – a historical and systematic study series: **New Studies in Constructive Theology**, by Colin Gunton, Eerdmans, 9780802845757

Provides a theological history of the Christian doctrine of creation and explores the implications of the doctrine for our modern scientific age. Considers the origins of the doctrine of creation in the Bible and relates the biblical view to Greek cosmology, then examines the history of the doctrine, from Irenaeus to Barth, and argues that early in the development of the doctrine serious mistakes were made that have led to highly problematic outcomes – such as the divorce of theology from science.

Hugh McGinlay is Theological Publisher for Mosaic Books

coming soon



Paget's Parable



Atheism and other religions

By Michael Mullins

While the second Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne was a high-light for some, it disappointed others. Some would-be attendees stayed away because they could see that the dominance of comedy and derision would exclude any serious or productive exploration of the issues.

Others went along prepared to live with the frustration, or perhaps enjoy the event as if it was part of Melbourne's Comedy Festival.

April's ABC TV Q&A debate between Richard Dawkins and Cardinal George Pell represented a different kind of trivialisation in that it was promoted as a fight rather than comedy.

In a sense this is much closer to the contest of ideas that we would hope to see in an exchange between a believer and an unbeliever. But it lacked the mutual respect that any form of dialogue requires.

“We always think of you with affection and gratitude”

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Leesha McKenny referred to the “barely concealed mutual disdain between Dawkins and Pell”, implying that hostility was the defining characteristic of the event.

Neil Ormerod also made this point in Eureka Street in April when he contrasted the Q&A ‘match-up’ with the ‘gentlemanly affair’ that was February's Oxford debate between Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and Dawkins – “on his best behaviour”.

In the shadow of the blockbuster Q&A and Global Atheist Convention was a much more poignant encounter earlier that month between broadcaster Philip Adams and the Jesuit Fr Gerald O'Collins. Adams is the longtime (but arguably fallen) doyen of Australia's atheist movement, while O'Collins is one of the English-speaking world's most published and respected Catholic theologians.

Home Truths



Left to right: Richard Dawkins and Cardinal George Pell on 'Q&A'; Philip Adams on 'Late Night Live'.

The conversation took place on Adams' *Late Night Live* program on ABC Radio National, and there was not merely a degree of respect, but positive affection. In the opening moments of the interview, Adams referred to ‘the bridge between us’, and O'Collins said to Adams: “We always think of you with affection and gratitude.”

Such an instant bond need not soften the positions held. And it didn't.

Adams attempted to chisel away at O'Collins' belief in the Resurrection as an actual event. O'Collins stood firm in declaring the physical Resurrection “central and obvious” to him in his life. Adams countered by admitting that while he does live in a universe that is ultimately meaningless, he's very happy, and life as an unbeliever ‘is not too bad’.

But there was far more agreement than disagreement, especially with their common distaste for religious and atheist fundamentalism.

“I find fanaticism hard to take,” said O'Collins. Adams mentioned with a degree of pride: “I've fallen out of favour with many Australian atheists because I'm not sufficiently Dawkinsonian.”

In view of the natural bond between Adams and O'Collins, it seems there could also be an affinity between the one-eyed Dawkinsonians at the Global Atheist Convention and fundamentalist believers of all religious faiths. It's a pity that they are more likely to engage in fistfights than dialogue. Or maybe not.

Michael Mullins is editor of Eureka Street (ES 15/4/12)

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