

ST MARK'S LIBRARY GAZETTE

ISSUE NUMBER THREE



GERRARD WINSTANLEY

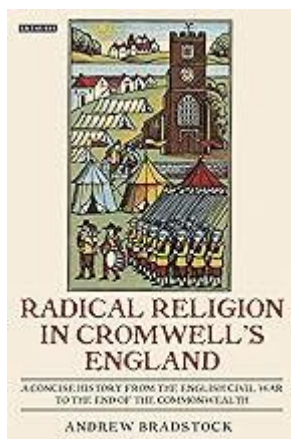
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St Mark's Library Gazette

Editor's Introduction and Library Update

The Library Group is pleased to publish our third edition of St Mark's Library Gazette in the year that celebrates the 350th anniversary of the passing of Gerrard Winstanley. Winstanley was the English, Protestant Reformer and founder of the Diggers (True Levellers) movement in England in 1649. He was a pioneering figure in the development of what has since come to be called 'agrarian communism' and 'echo socialism'. His influence has been considerable, including on the shaping of thinkers as diverse as Tony Benn, Dorothy Day and Christopher Hill. We are delighted that Professor Andrew Bradstock, an expert on Winstanley and author of *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England: A Concise History from the English Civil War to the End of the Commonwealth*, has written a specially commissioned essay on Winstanley, for this edition.



We are also delighted that Professor Elaine Graham, a former congregant of St Mark's, has also written a specially commissioned essay of the life and work of Don Cupitt, based on archival studies that she has been undertaking at Gladstone's Library. Revd Adrian Alker, a former rector of St Mark's, has also contributed an essay on his new book, 'The Rites of Passage' (a copy of which is in the Church Library). We also have an essay from Erica Dunmow, Chair of the Urban Theology Union, Sheffield, on the interesting topic, 'Can liberationist Christians feel comfortable with crosses?'. David Price, author of 'Sheffield Troublemakers', and a long-standing member of St Mark's congregation, has also written an essay on: 'The Kingdom of God'. Additionally, there is a selection of book reviews that we hope will be of interest to readers.

The Library Group's hope is that *St Mark's Library Gazette*, published on a *bi-annual* basis, will produce some articles that can be considered for inclusion in the online theology library, although this will not be a requirement for all submissions. The focus of the online library is theological, though the articles do not have to be written by professional theologians. They do have to be accessible to the non-specialist, however, and that will continue to be a requirement as we move forwards. The scope of the *Gazette* is deliberately broad, reflecting the diversity of theological opinion within St Mark's church. This is already reflected in the wide range of material available in the Church library. Submissions can be in areas such as Biblical Studies, Church History, Systematic Theology, Contextual Theology, Ethics and a range of topics in Public Theology, including in Political Theology. They can be written from pre-modern, modern or post-modern perspectives (or a combination of these) befitting of St Mark's commitment to being a radical, living, *thinking*, inclusive and loving church; a church with an approach to faith that welcomes dialectical engagement with other Christian and non-Christian faith traditions. However, inclusion of submissions in the *Gazette* will require that they do not infringe on the church's commitment to being an inclusive church.

Should you wish to submit an article for consideration, please send it to me at joe.forde@tiscali.co.uk. It can be up to 2000 words in length (and occasionally more than that) and references should be done in the Chicago number style and, ideally, be presented as 'Endnotes'. Book reviews are also welcome. Submissions should include a brief biography of yourself (up to 150 words) and, for longer articles, a brief abstract would also be appreciated. Articles should be formatted using the Times New Roman (14) font. Submission of an article or book review does not guarantee inclusion in the *Gazette*, which will remain at the discretion of St Mark's Church. All issues of *St Mark's Library Gazette* are subject to church ministerial oversight and final approval.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this issue of *St Mark's Library Gazette* are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Library Group, the clergy or the Parochial Church Council of St Mark's Church.

Library Update

We continue to add to the library catalogue and a list of books that have recently been included is contained at the end of this publication. The library is being used, with an average of 45 books out on loan at any given time. Library Group

members welcome any suggestions for purchasing new books; however, owing to budgetary constraints, we can't guarantee that all of them will be acquired.

Joe Forde

Gazette Editor and Church Librarian (job share with Carole Forde)

Andrew Bradstock is an emeritus professor of the University of Winchester and a former Secretary for Church and Society with the United Reformed Church. From 2009-13 he was inaugural Howard Paterson Professor of Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago, where he established New Zealand's first Centre for Theology and Public Issues. He has written widely on the relationship between faith and politics, including *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England: A Concise History from the English Civil War to the End of the Commonwealth* (London: I B Tauris, 2011). His most recent book is *David Sheppard – Batting for the Poor: the authorised biography of the celebrated cricketer and bishop* (London: SPCK, 2019), and he also contributed to *Celebrating Forty Years of Faith in the City*, edited by Terry Drummond and Joseph Forde (Durham: Sacristy, 2025). Andrew was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 2013.

GERRARD WINSTANLEY @ 350: A BRIEF REFLECTION

Andrew Bradstock

September 2026 marks the 350th anniversary of the death of Gerrard Winstanley, one of the most remarkable, if enigmatic, figures of the English Civil War period. While many details of his life remain unknown, and he was in the public eye for barely a year before disappearing as unspectacularly as he appeared, his contribution to political and theological thought, as the leader and main theorist of the Digger movement, continues to exercise his enthusiasts and detractors alike. Not without reason did the editors of his OUP 'Complete Works', published in 2009, describe him as 'the most obscure Englishman currently assigned any reasonable degree of historical significance throughout the entire post-medieval period.' [1]

What distinguishes Winstanley from most of his contemporaries is the originality and far-sightedness of his ideas. Writing in the late 1640s, when groups such as the Levellers were arguing that the outcome of the civil war, and the execution of the king, paved the way for an extension of the franchise, Winstanley contended that a far more radical approach was needed. The root of the misery and suffering endured by ‘the poor oppressed people of England’ lay not in their being excluded from the political process, he maintained, but in the system that allowed the rich and powerful to enclose the land and keep them from its benefits.

With the monarchy abolished, he argued, Parliament must seize the opportunity to dismantle the whole inequitable system of private land-ownership over which the king had presided, and restore the land to its rightful owners, the common people. And for Winstanley this was not just theory, for the name ‘Digger’ references the method he adopted to set off this process himself – the gathering together of a community on common land to break the soil, plant grain and vegetables, and share the results. This he initiated on St George’s Hill near Weybridge in Surrey on 1st April 1649, having received a ‘command of the Spirit’ to ‘*Worke together. Eat bread together; declare this all abroad.*’ [2]

Winstanley’s critique of the system of private land-ownership begins with the premise that the earth was originally created for all to share: ‘In the beginning of time, the great Creator Reason, made the Earth to be a common Treasury’, he writes in *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*. [3] The concept of individual ownership of the land was not written into the Creation narrative in Genesis, and originally the earth was common to all, with the more physically able helping the weaker by working harder. However, this arrangement became corrupted once the stronger began to argue their right to a larger share of the earth than the weaker – Winstanley’s understanding of ‘the Fall’ – and began appropriating land for themselves.

In believing that the earth must be restored to communal ownership, Winstanley again went further than most of his contemporaries. Conventional wisdom of the time was that, while a golden, property-less age may once have existed, something innate in human nature made its realization again impossible: ‘fallen’ humankind had lost the innocence it once enjoyed in Eden, and was now so subject to impulses of greed, fear, envy and lust that for society to exist in any organized form, accommodation had to be made to the need to own and protect private property. Hence the concern of political philosophers was to construct the most workable social structures permitted by humanity’s limitations and weaknesses – in the case of Winstanley’s contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, one where anarchy, the inevitable consequence of unbridled competitiveness, was held at bay by a strong authoritative sovereign figure.

Winstanley, however, not only rejected the position Hobbes was to articulate in *Leviathan*, but in a passage that remarkably anticipated much later thinking, suggested that human nature is largely shaped by the prevailing social conditions.

I am assured that if it be rightly searched into, the inward bondages of the minde, as covetousness, pride, hypocrisie, envy, sorrow, fears, desperation, and madness, are all occasioned by the outward bondage, that one sort of people lay upon another,

he wrote.[4] For Winstanley, there would be no need of laws or punishments once people had put an end to the practice of buying and selling.

The prelapsarian community will be attainable once private property is abolished and Reason – his preferred name for God – reigns once more in the human heart, Winstanley thought. His understanding of the Fall as the introduction of private property, and not a separate state which gave rise to it, lead him to envisage a situation in which, as Reason once again held sway, people would embrace the idea of communitarian living as the only rational and just way to co-exist. The breakdown of the system of private ownership would then become unstoppable, and the practice of hiring labour, the only way that the rich could manage their own huge estates, would begin to disintegrate. It was a vision with the potential to transform English society in the most radical way imaginable.

As with many other radicals, theology was woven into Winstanley's thinking, and underpinning his hopes for the restoration of society to its original communitarian state was a belief that such a restoration constituted the second coming of Christ. Winstanley believed that Christ would not appear in some sudden or dramatic way, or even as an individual person, but would 'rise up' in men and women and enlighten them to the fact that having the land in common was the only rational way to live. The Second Coming, in other words, would take place gradually, effecting a change at the level both of the individual and society.

Some commentators have seen the act of digging as largely symbolic, a 'signal' that the new age was dawning, or that the Diggers were ready for God to transform society in some supernatural way, not an attempt to realize that transformation themselves. There *is* a sense in which Winstanley must have understood the fulfilment of his vision of England becoming a common treasury to be dependent upon some kind of divine intervention, because in purely *economic* terms it was unworkable: it would have required a large section of the population to be fed from land which had hitherto not been arable.

Yet believing that his programme coincided with the divine purpose did not preclude the necessity of working to bring that purpose about. In fact, quite the reverse, as his reflection in *A Watch-word to the City of London* that ‘action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing’ makes clear.[5] Further, while the Diggers’ action was inspired by their conviction that this was a propitious time to begin remaking the earth as a common treasury, they were also driven by their hunger and the simple need to feed themselves and their dependents.

Winstanley’s theology, like that of all the ‘radicals’ of his day, was very different from that of the Established Church. Whereas the priests, Winstanley argued, held God and Christ ‘at-a-distance’ so that only they could mediate them to the people, he stressed the immanence of God and how everybody has their creator dwelling within them (hence his use of the term ‘Reason’ rather than ‘God’, which helped remove the ‘otherness’ the clergy invested in the latter term.)

Winstanley thought that doctrines like Heaven and Hell were invoked by the clergy to keep the people in subjection to them. Indeed, the Church’s whole interpretation of the faith was designed to instil in its hearers what he termed ‘Imagination’, a feeling of incompleteness, fear and uncertainty which ensured their subjection to the authorities. But people need not be bowed down by such teaching, Winstanley argued, since all have God or Reason within them, and can judge the meaning of Scripture for themselves.

Like many in his day, Winstanley had no time for the established clergy, dismissing them, with landlords and lawyers, as an ‘unholy trinity’ upholding the present iniquitous system. But whereas many were content to attack these groups individually, Winstanley developed a coherent analysis of their interconnectedness, what later political theorists might want to term their shared ‘class interest’.

The strongest hint of this is to be found in his concept of ‘kingly power’, a collective term he employs for those institutions which together maintained the economic system burdening the poor of his day. The word ‘kingly’ acknowledged, not only that it was the monarch himself who was the ‘figurehead’ of the established order, but the role of William the Conqueror in originally uniting under him its chief components: the lawyer – whose sole concern is ‘the disposing of the earth’ – and the clergy, whose duty was to persuade the people to accept the king’s right to call the land his (their reward for this being the tithe system).[6]

The concept of ‘kingly power’ played a vital role in shaping Winstanley’s response to the crisis of the 1640s. While he welcomed the removal of the

monarchy and the Lords, he recognized that in themselves these developments would not be sufficient to lift the people's burden: kingly power was not in the hands of the king alone, but in those of the landlords, the lawyers, and the 'tithing-priests'. With Charles' execution, the

top-bow is lopped off the tree of Tyrannie, and Kingly power in that one particular is cast out; but alas oppression is a great tree still, and keeps off the sun of freedom from the poor Commons still,

he wrote.[7] His solution was again more radical than most: in addition to taking away the king and the Lords, the new government should remove the power of landlords, priests, and judges, and then people would be free.

Unsurprisingly, the Diggers met with opposition from those most threatened by their actions, including local landowners. By August they decided to move from St George's Hill to Little Heath at nearby Cobham, although their reception there was no friendlier. So ferocious were the attacks upon Winstanley's community that it lasted barely twelve months, and was eventually wound up after the destruction of their crops and houses, and their indictment at the Surrey Assizes for disorder and unlawful assembly. Although other Digger communities sprang up across the country, the best-known being at Wellingborough in Northants and Iwer in Buckinghamshire, none was able to survive, and one may only speculate how far the Diggers' call to the 'poor, oppressed people of England' to join them in remaking the earth as a 'common treasury' might have transformed the pattern of land ownership in England and beyond.

Despite the ferocity of the attacks on his community, Winstanley never advocated the use of violence: he was clear that true freedom could not be obtained by means which actually ended up enslaving people, and that the use of the sword would merely result in one section of society lording it over the other, as was the case at present. And even in defeat he continued to picture the new society that might emerge from the ashes of the old, setting out in his final work, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652), his vision of a new order, in which land was communally tilled, and food and commodities available for collection from storehouses without the need for money. In some respects his new society reflected More's *Utopia*, though he never admitted using any source for his ideas other than Scripture.

After his death in 1676 not much was heard of Winstanley until the end of the nineteenth century, but the publication of his collected works in the USA in 1941, and the writings of the British historian Christopher Hill, did much to foster

academic and popular interest in him in the following century. His writings have generated many commentaries, and he has inspired films, songs, plays, and even fiction. Importantly, the questions which preoccupied him remain relevant, not least in an age of widespread concern about the environment and future well-being of the planet.

Even leaving aside the wider question of whether ‘the earth’ should *in principle* be ‘owned’ and traded by individuals or corporations or nation states – which Winstanley, of course, was not afraid to ask – issues as diverse as the right to roam, the building of motorways, land tax, the selling-off of school playing-fields, and squatting, are all manifestations of his concern that the earth should once more give sustenance to all her children. Perhaps the renewed popularity of ‘allotmenting’ and local food production – a response to concerns about food miles, food security and food price inflation – is a sign that we still see digging as critical for our survival.

Endnotes

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2. Winstanley, G, *The New Law of Righteousnes* (1648), in Corns, Hughes, Loewenstein 2009, I, 513.
3. Corns, Hughes, Loewenstein 2009: II, 4.
4. Winstanley, G, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652), in Corns, Hughes, Loewenstein 2009: II, 296.
5. Corns, Hughes, Loewenstein 2009: II, 80
6. Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom*, in Corns, Hughes, Loewenstein 2009: II, 297-8.
7. Winstanley, G, *A New-years Gift for the Parliament and Armie* (1650), in Corns, Hughes, Loewenstein 2009: II, 112.

Elaine Graham is Professor Emerita of Practical Theology at the University of Chester and a Fellow of the British Academy. She is the author of many books, including *Transforming Practice* (1996), *Between a Rock and Hard Place* (2013), *Apologetics without Apology* (2017) and (with Heather Walton and Frances Ward), *Theological Reflection: Methods* (2nd Edition, 2018). She was Principal Investigator between 2021 and 2024 on a British

Academy/Leverhulme funded research project based on the *Sea of Faith* archives at Gladstone's Library. See www.doncupitt.com.

The Enduring Legacy of Don Cupitt

Elaine Graham

The Cambridge philosopher and theologian Don Cupitt died in January 2025, aged 90. For many he will be best known for his 1984 BBC Television series *The Sea of Faith* which catapulted him from University don to 'Telly Don',¹ a national celebrity and public intellectual. His broadcast work was but one element of a prolific career in which he produced over forty books, countless articles, reviews and other broadcast appearances.² Yet his views also generated considerable controversy, most notably for his advocacy of 'non-realist' theology, a concept that signifies the collapse of metaphysical theism and the rise of human-centred spirituality. Cupitt's death last year invites us to reconsider and reappraise his project anew, reflecting on what it might offer today. What might we learn from his philosophy and his vision of the religious life? I will argue that despite being portrayed as one who sought to undermine the Church, he was deeply invested in the future of Christian spirituality, and that this personal concern underpinned his search for a faith which was intelligible and credible to the world *beyond* the Church.

Born in 1934, Cupitt originally went to Cambridge to read Natural Sciences, before deciding to pursue ordination in the Church of England. After serving his curacy in Salford, he moved into academic theology, and was appointed Dean of Emmanuel College Cambridge in 1965, taking up an additional post as lecturer in philosophy of religion three years later. In the succeeding thirty years until his formal retirement in 1996, and throughout an active post-retirement career of writing and public speaking, he relentlessly pursued his intellectual and spiritual quest to rethink Christian belief and practice for modern times, advancing a radical revision (or re-vision) of religion as a wholly human creation.

¹ Angela Tilby, 'The Post-Christian Pilgrims', *Church Times* 29 April 1994: 16.

² All Cupitt's books and papers are now housed in the *Sea of Faith Archive* at Gladstone's Library, Hawarden, North Wales.

What has Cupitt's work and legacy to offer progressive Christians trying to rethink Christianity for today's world? My suggestions would be as follows:

1. He takes secular modernity seriously

This is essentially the starting-point for all Cupitt's work. He is often misunderstood by his many critics as seeking to destroy Christianity in the face of the challenges of modern science, Biblical criticism, secularisation and religious pluralism. Instead, he is asking his readers to confront these challenges honestly and unremittingly, but nevertheless to find new approaches to faith.

The impact of modern thinking on traditional religion was explored most fully in his magisterial TV series, *The Sea of Faith* (BBC, 1984) and its accompanying book. In six episodes, focusing on a pantheon of intellectual figures, Cupitt traced how the certainties of medieval Christendom had gradually been dismantled. First, he demonstrated how the rise of early modern science exposed the vastness of the universe and brought about a shift to a heliocentric world-view, something which diminished any sense of human uniqueness. Once religion defined and delineated our understandings of time and space as either secular or sacred; but the rise of empiricism and rationalism, together with the new discipline of Biblical Criticism, displaced Scripture and tradition as authoritative sources of knowledge. This signalled the erosion of the 'world of gods and spirits' in favour of a 'man-made world of ceaseless change and movement.'

Second, the emergence of natural history, especially Charles Darwin's theories of evolution in the nineteenth century, called the literal truth of Genesis' account of creation into question. A third revolution within modern thought for Cupitt was its claim that human agency, rather than divine will, was the source of moral integrity and determined the course of history. The scientific and democratic revolutions of eighteenth-century Europe confirmed a belief in the virtues of human self-determination in the face of (religious) authority. Societies were fashioned according to new laws of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' and the conviction that society could operate on the basis of reason and enlightenment rather than superstition or tradition. Such a focus on radical immanence and human experience as constituting the nature of reality should, he argued, disabuse us of fantasies of a world beyond this one.

Cupitt was concerned that such profound paradigm shifts (at least in the West) demanded that the Christian Church needed to adapt accordingly, or else face a painful loss of credibility followed by an inevitable decline into irrelevance.

2. Cupitt invited his audience to embrace a 'non-realist' theology and ethics

Essentially, then, Cupitt was asking himself and his readers: *What might faith look like if we fully accept that we live in a post-metaphysical age?* In the final episode of *The Sea of Faith* and in subsequent books, Cupitt argued that in place of a belief in an objective, all-powerful and supernatural reality who intervenes in human history (something that a modern world-view had entirely discredited), we should embrace a ‘non-realist’ theology. This is the idea that God isn’t an external supernatural being ‘out there,’ but a symbolic or imaginative focus of human spiritual life.

Cupitt was therefore increasingly viewing religion as an entirely human creation, emphasizing the symbolic and linguistic nature of religious beliefs. Works such as *The Long-Legged Fly* (1987) reflected the influence of the Austrian philosopher and mathematician Ludwig Wittgenstein, who led Cupitt to focus on the importance of language. Religions, including Christianity, are human constructs and the way in which they are become meaningful is through the words we speak.

The word ‘God’ has value and meaning not because it refers to a transcendent being found somewhere in the ‘heavens’ but because it is a name or a word we use, thereby attaining ultimate meaning and force. In other words, non-realists are not seeking to describe a being who is other to the world of immanence but instead focusing on the way language about ‘God’ functions as a kind of regulative ideal, rather than a description of an objective or transcendent being.³

This, argued Cupitt, enables a greater rapprochement between science and religion, since theology is no longer a question of empirical or historical truth, or even a set of literal and propositional beliefs, but can be reinterpreted as a form of *practical wisdom*: that which informs a particular ethical outlook, or way of life.

3. Religion is a creative, ethical practice

So rather than grounding religion in fixed doctrines, Cupitt emphasises the significance of the human search for meaning⁴; language, story, and ritual as world-building and constructive activities;⁵ and the imperative of ethical living in the present.⁶

³ See, for example, Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (SCM, 1980).

⁴ Don Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy* (SCM Press, 1995)

⁵ Cupitt, *What is a Story?* (SCM Press, 1991).

⁶ Cupitt, *The Time Being* (SCM Press, 1992).

In *Solar Ethics* (1995), Cupitt advocates for ‘solar living,’ which involves living generously, expressively, and without fear or inhibition. It is a life of self-expendng creativity and love, akin to the sun's constant outpouring of energy. Cupitt redefines spirituality as a lifestyle and practical philosophy of life, emphasizing autonomy, creativity, and the pursuit of happiness. This is a form of ethics that does not rely on the metaphysics of a powerful deity who dispenses eternal reward or punishment, but focuses on the vitality of the present moment, as lived out in a spirit of generosity and human solidarity. In the face of radical doubt, one must embrace the uncertainties of one’s existence and choose life. This does, admittedly, require a measure of moral and existential courage to choose one’s own path through life, unencumbered by metaphysics or absolutes, and to allow personal integrity alone to serve as one’s moral compass. ‘We must choose what to be, what to value, and what world to constitute about ourselves, and that fearsome responsibility is absolutely primal.’⁷ Cupitt therefore proposes a shift from worshipping a transcendent God to sanctifying life through artistic creation, moral practice and aesthetic celebration. This resonates with progressive Christianity’s focus on justice, compassion, and creative spirituality over dogma.⁸

4. Cupitt was offering a constructive future for Christianity

From the opening episode of *The Sea of Faith* in October 1984 Cupitt attracted virulent criticism and robust support in equal measure.⁹ Many correspondents accused him of attempting to destroy the simple belief of ordinary Christians and undermining what they regarded as the Bible’s literal truths. Others, however, welcomed Cupitt’s attempts to offer a credible alternative to a traditional, realist faith, often recognising that Cupitt’s own intellectual and spiritual journey mirrored that of their own. This aspect of Cupitt himself, as a seeker after truth as well as authoritative, disinterested academic philosopher, was surely one aspect of his appeal to his viewers.

It is now generally held that Cupitt’s radical views prevented him from achieving greater preferment, either at Cambridge or within the Church of England. For the rest of his career he was pilloried as ‘an Atheist Priest’¹⁰ or ‘a household word for extreme theological liberalism’.¹¹ Many others considered his position on doctrine to be incompatible with his remaining in holy orders.¹² Yet Cupitt was not seeking to destroy the Church or promote a secular atheist agenda.

⁷ Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*: 20.

⁸ Cupitt, *After God* (SCM, 1997).

⁹ Correspondence arising from the BBC series forms a major part of the *Sea of Faith Archive* at Gladstone’s Library.

¹⁰ Scott Cowdell, *Atheist Priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity*, (SCM Press, 1988).

¹¹ Walter Schwarz, ‘Our Father Who Art on Earth,’ *The Guardian* 21 September 1987: 21.

¹² Elaine Graham and Graeme Smith, ‘Prophet without Honour: The Marginalisation of Don Cupitt.’ *Theology* Volume 126 Issue 1 (January-February 2023): 20-27.

Rather, his mission throughout his career was to rework religious faith as a credible prospect in the face of modern and secular world-views. Cupitt was concerned that unless the Church could speak to every new generation, accepting the intellectual premises of the wider world, then it would become increasingly irrelevant. He continued to believe that despite the onslaughts of scepticism and atheism, a new kind of Christianity was still capable of offering a life-affirming, robust and efficacious path through life.¹³

5. ... and he may still have something to say to us today

Over forty years on from *The Sea of Faith* and more than a year after his death, we might consider what Cupitt's lasting legacy and influence might be. Much of his writing was framed as a response to over two hundred years of modern thinking during which science, individualism, technology and secular humanism had come to predominate. He embraced postmodern thinking in some of his work on non-realism and the fluidity of language and meaning; and (as I have been explaining) his mission was essentially to chart a new course for religion *after* theism and realism. Yet today, many of the shibboleths of modernity have themselves come into question, not least the inevitability of secularisation and the 'death of God'. Modernity has been revealed to be a primarily Western preoccupation. Much of the Global Majority world is not secular but deeply religious. Populist politicians – albeit controversially -- evoke Christian identity and symbolism as fundamental to their visions of nationhood and community. In addition, some recent evidence suggests a growing interest in religion and spirituality on the part of younger generations: something unlikely to contribute to the wholesale revival of the institutional Church's fortunes, but symptomatic of new spaces in which questions of belief may be explored.¹⁴ Does this mean there might be a new audience for Cupitt's approach? How and through what means might people encounter his ideas today?

If there is a renewed appetite for many of the same questions Cupitt was asking throughout his career, and while this might not necessarily involve a process of 'taking leave' of God and orthodox belief in order to embrace radical doubt, many of his concerns still resonate. These include the compatibility or otherwise of scientific and theological world-views, the relationship between belief and doubt, faith and science, and whether it is possible in his own words, to combine 'religious seriousness and critical faith'.¹⁵ Above all, Cupitt's own unstinting commitment to intellectual honesty and religious authenticity should still resonate with those today who look for opportunities to engage in open,

¹³ Graham and Smith, 'Prophet without Honour', 2023.

¹⁴ Rhiannon McAleer and Rob Barward-Symmons, *The Quiet Revival* (London: Bible Society, 2025).

¹⁵ Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (BBC TV, 1984, Episode 1, 'The Mechanical Universe).

critical and honest discussion about the existence of God, the nature of faith and the future of the Church.

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Religious Rites and Human Needs

Revd Adrain Alker

Religious faiths, by their very nature, ask their adherents to accept, believe, and conform to the tenets of the faith which binds them both as individuals and

collectively. The Christendom emerging after the conversion of Constantine may have splintered as the Reformation and the Enlightenment brought challenges to the hegemony of Rome. Yet the new denominations and national churches had prescriptions of their own to define membership. The Society of Friends was the most obvious group of religious minded folk to reject such enforcement of beliefs. The Church of England saw its conformity in the Book of Common Prayer, the formularies of doctrine and creedal statements.

The rise of critical biblical scholarship linked to scientific, societal and technological discovery began the long process of re-examining the claims of orthodoxy in a rapidly changing world. These are complex and multi-layered movements within churches and communities, as the honest search for truth and meaning ploughs on. At its heart there is a tension between the claims of orthodox belief, ‘revealed truth’, and the experiences and searchings of members of the church. “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so” may not have quite the pulling power in an era when the Bible seems to say many things which seem unacceptable today to many people.

I suppose for most of my ministry in the Church of England I have grappled with the ‘truths’ of orthodoxy, not only in some central affirmations such as the Virgin Birth but in the very nature of how we read the Bible and the fall-out from literal interpretations in matters such as sexuality. I recognise that is why my twenty years at St Mark’s Broomhill were clearly and enjoyably spent in the company of many such questioning followers of Christ.

In retirement and away from the coal face of church life, other thoughts and concerns crowd in. I began to think again about what really matters to us and the priorities in our lives. For people at all stages in life many concerns will be uppermost— work, finances, the state of the world, our health and, perhaps most importantly of all, our family, however we define ‘family’. After retiring from full time ministry in the Church of England, one of my concerns (and that of my wife Christine) was in looking after my old mother who had come to live with us in her nineties. Caring for older people is constantly in the news and on political agendas. Nellie lived to the ripe old age of 104, by which time her body was just very tired, as we were in the necessary and privileged work of caring for her.

I began to think about Nellie’s long life and how the world and the Church (she was a faithful churchgoer) had changed from 1917 when she was born, to the year of her death in 2021. That led me to consider how families and churches had not only changed over the century but also how they interacted, how they impacted on each other. And the most obvious ways were the times in our lives when families celebrate or face challenges, sickness or death. The outcome of my

musings on these matters is a short book which I hope you might enjoy, which I have entitled ‘Religious Rites and Human Needs’.

The rites of baptism, marriage and funeral have rather irreverently been known as ‘hatched, matched and dispatched’ but until about the 1960’s, the vast majority of the population in these islands took their babies to be baptised, saw their children walk up the church aisle to be married and looked to the church to bury their dead. There were exceptions of course – members of the Society of Friends who do not accept sacraments, non-believers and others. But until recent times such important occasions in our lives, new birth, new love, sorrow at loss, have involved some kind of religious ritual – different of course across denominations and faiths.

Today in this country and across much of the western world, churches are in decline and so are such rites of passage. No longer do parents in the main feel obliged to have their children baptised. A beach in Bali might be the setting for a wedding, and the likelihood is that a humanist celebrant will conduct your uncle’s funeral. Have the churches given up on rites of passage or could they possibly be a key to the revival and reinvigoration of the local church? If the established Church of England still has faith in the parish system and all that that meant ecclesiologically, what does the current state of such rites of passage have to tell us?

Church buildings matter. They hold memories for families; they often are the places where we still bury our loved ones. Yet so many of us no longer attend the rituals which they offer, either Sunday by Sunday or on these special occasions because we have moved on in our thinking and convictions. We desire to hear fresh words and to be part of fresh ways of celebrating new life, new relationships and endings. Might the churches and their ministers listen to us? Or are they governed and trapped by the dead weight of tradition and outdated theology? This is where that tension between the enforcing beliefs of the institution and the instincts and searchings of its members can be brought into sharp focus.

In the rites of baptism there lingers the shadow of the Augustinian belief in original sin. In marriage the Church of England cannot fully extricate itself from a Pauline view of sex between those of same gender. And in the funeral rites, the ambiguity of New Testament views on life after death are there for all to see.

Could things be different? Could such rites at crucial moments on people’s lives be truly enlivening, authentic to the needs and hopes of those who come to their parish church in joy or sorrow?

These are questions I wanted to explore, and in the short book I have penned I hope to prompt such questions for personal reflection or for wider discussion. I shall always be grateful to the community at St Mark's for their walking the way less travelled and of course to Nellie through whose long life I was able to make such reflections.

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'Can liberationist Christians feel comfortable with crosses?'

Erica Dunmow

Abstract

This short paper, adapted from a paper given at the UTU Urban Theology Seminar in November 2025, picks up some of the threads of John Schofield's article in Issue 1 of the *Gazette* – 'Understanding the Cross of Jesus as identification and solidarity'. It looks at two reasons, and some historical background about why, for me, the Cross is currently a very difficult symbol for a Christian who hold to a liberationist theology. The first is politicised flags, the second is whether a liberation theology tied to resurrectional forgiveness, is comfortable with an instrument of death as its main symbol. The paper looks

briefly at both issues, the way the cross has been used in the early church and then explores some alternatives.

Politicised flags

The use of the cruciform English and UK flags in autumn 2025 has come to imply that incomers are not welcome (maybe unless they are white and skilled medics or building tradespeople) and some people at the right-wing *Unite the Kingdom* rally in London in September 2025 were carrying wooden crosses.

This has got so sharp, that in early October 2025, the five Presidents of Churches Together in England issued a joint statement on *God's overwhelming and unconditional love for every single human being* in which they feel called to say:

‘...The Cross and the Gospel of Christ must never be co-opted to support the messages that breed hostility towards others. Its message never legitimises rejection, hatred or superiority towards people of other cultures...’[1]

When I mentioned this Statement at a recent gathering of leaders of mosques and churches in Darnall, a Muslim leader said that Muslims understand that - it's the other white people you need to tell it to.

At an October 2025 meeting of some Anglican clergy, one spoke of a Union Flag being pasted to the pavement outside their church grounds, and how that sits alongside the St George's Flag that many CofE churches fly on their patronal festival, Remembrance Day, the Monarch's birthday etc.. Could they continue to fly the flag from the church and still try to distance themselves from being implicated in the divisive use of the former ?

In early 2026 it came to light that UKIP (yes, it still exists) was trying to register a new logo with the Electoral Commission. The symbol, which can be seen in various on-line articles in black and white with a cross (very similar to the Nazi iron cross) with a small circle around the centre of the arms and a lance diagonally across the it. When the Electoral Commission rejected it on the grounds that it was too resonant [2] of a Nazi symbol, UKIP tried to defend it on the grounds that it was Christian – the cross obviously so, the circle the Eucharist and the lance the one that pierced Christ. It was still rejected.

So, the cross is becoming questionable as a public symbol of the inclusive love of God.

Salvation, Resurrection and liberation theology

Meanwhile, in terms of more academic theology, there have been long-standing questions about how well the theologies of the Cross reflect liberationist understandings of our faith. There are liberation theologians who retain a salvation theory based solely on the atonement of the crucifixion event, drawing parallels with the primary Jewish liberation of the escape from Egypt. The dying Christ is equated with the Passover Lamb and his blood is a symbol of, and the means of, freedom and redemption. People must be freed as the death of Christ frees us from sin. But there are an increasing number of theologians, and John Schofield's article explains this clearly, who prefer to see the Cross as an act of solidarity. Brock & Parker in the 1990s, wrote that 'most ... atonement theory ... supports violence, victimisation and underserved suffering.' [3] Psychologically, it is harmful and unnecessary to see a painful death as a good. It plays into the idea that suffering must be borne, not challenged, which has oppressed many victims through the ages. It seems to be at odds with the ideas of liberation and overcoming oppression.

Research I undertook for my MA in the early 2000s, showed a clear correlation between the States in the USA, which predominantly follow the Southern Baptist Evangelical tradition in which penal substitution is embedded, and those which retain the death penalty. If the most consequential death in Christianity is seen as a good, it becomes harder to argue against death in any circumstances. The theory also gives permission to revenge and the cycle of violence, with its related habit, that has come into this country from the US, of more and more litigious cases which are such a drain on our public services – compensation and associated legal fees for the NHS in 2023/24 amounted to £ 2.8 billion – nearly 2% of the total budget. Steve Chalke as part of his journey to a more liberationist faith, rather dramatically refers to penal substitution as depending upon a notion of 'cosmic child abuse'. [4] This atonement theory can therefore be said to be described as a situation where the Father deliberately sends the Son to a predetermined, awful death, to buy off the Father's anger otherwise to be directed at humanity. This is despite it having been shown through the Old Testament account of Abraham and Isaac, and some of the prophetic teachings, [5] that child sacrifice is no longer to be part of the divine economy.

For some Black theologians, if the Cross is seen as the necessary salvation event, then the suffering Christ is distanced from the suffering oppressed person,

because, as Lee Butler says: ‘We have been wounded by the transgressions of others, not for the transgressions of others.’ [6]

For those who don’t hold with penal substitution, the Cross event is the regrettable but still perhaps inevitable consequence of humanity’s sinful actions. Jesus is then the suffering servant who is variously betrayed, denied, denounced and fixed up at a rigged trial, and finally crucified, in place of the release of a convicted murderer, although declared innocent by the Roman Governor. Those who have found themselves at the wrong end of prejudice and injustice, or simply been let down by those nearest to them can see in Christ the Man of Sorrows who knows what that feels like. This can be a powerful tool in sharing faith.

If the cross-event is not the key element of the Easter story – what is ? One element is that Jesus walked the pacific path voluntarily, kept true to his self-hood to the end, and very powerfully in Luke’s Gospel, forgave his persecutors as he was dying. But there are many undeserved deaths. The key transformational event is the Resurrection and how Jesus treats the disciples when he first encounters them. Jesus’ own victory over death and rising from the dead is that which effects our release from the power of death and sin. We are no longer to be imprisoned by our sin, but reconciled with God and risen with Christ to life eternal. Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances where he declares peace and forgiveness, to those same disciples who have abandoned and denied him, are the reassurances that such forgiveness is available to all, even if we, in some sense, kill God. This is the good news of freedom from shame and the eternal consequence of wrongdoing and is the way that a cycle of violence and retribution is broken.[7] We no longer have to go through odd emotional hoops, making the extremely painful, underserved death itself anything else but a tragedy.

If we accept that understanding of the primary efficacy of resurrection in the salvific element of Christ’s mission, then the cross stays what it is, a symbol of a very, very unpleasant death at the hands of a corrupt regime. As such, it feels very uncomfortable to spiritualise it as a symbol of hope. But what shall we replace it with?

Historic variations

The early Christians didn’t use the cross for themselves – it was occasionally used as a symbol of derision by those not of the faith – cartoons are found of crude crosses with a human figure, or sometimes a donkey as the victim. Occasionally Christians did use the R-shaped Greek letter *rho*, imposed over the saltire cross (Greek letter *chi*) which is how some execution crosses were shaped, but not the

one Jesus was crucified on. Together these form the first two letters of *Christus* – Greek for Christ.

Christians only began to use the more familiar cruciform shape as a decorative item in their churches and elsewhere, around the time of the building of basilica-style churches in the 4th century CE, after the conversion of Constantine, and the transformation of Christianity to the official religion of the Roman Empire. This shift to using the upright cross as a Christian symbol was largely because Constantine came to faith after he had a vision of a flaming sword hanging in the sky, blade down, which he equated with the cross, which he felt was God's promise of his actual victory. This has scary echoes of the Klu Klux Klan and burning crosses.

In medieval times by contrast, the cross was often stylised into a much more organic form which moved it away from its stark, killing-device, shape. This is because it was morphed from an instrument of torture to become the tree of life, with leaves and sometimes flowers growing out of the top three arms, and roots from the bottom. St Helen's Church, Darley Dale in Derbyshire has some fascinating examples of organic crosses on medieval stone coffin lids. Most of these organic forms and the idea of the Tree of Life pre-date the formation of atonement theories.[8]

The squarer and much embellished Orthodox crosses also have echoes of this more organic form. The Nicene Cross has four equal arms decorated with three beads representing the Trinity. Interestingly, given the UK Methodist logo of an orb with a cross on it, the equal arm cross on a circle is found in Ireland pre-dating Christianity. The four arms in a circle represent the four directions and the circle the eternal spiritual force of life. The Celtic Church uniquely transposed this circle onto the upright long-stemmed Christian cross over the part where the arms meet– both patterned with organic celtic knotwork designs. The Coptic Church uses the cross with a circle above.

All of these are less stark and move the imagery away from the simple two lines found in the Union Jack and St George's Cross. So, one option to distance Christianity from the militaristic cross is to shift back to these softer forms.

What alternatives are there?

Early Christians used the fish symbol. This was sometimes acted out as a secret way of identifying each other: the first person would make a cup-shape with their hand or draw it in the dirt, (maybe echoing the eucharistic cup) and the second would place their hand or draw another arc the other way up over the top (perhaps echoing the Old Testament rainbow of forgiveness) and the two hands or lines

together made the fish. The Greek word for fish, ICHTHUS, was an acrostic for a simple faith statement about Jesus - *Iesus Christus Theo (H) Uios Soter* (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour). The Fish could also symbolise those who had swum in the water of baptism. This symbol was revived in the 1960s in the US, and is used relatively widely today especially by more evangelical Christians echoing the idea of being 'fishers of men'[9] but on an individual basis. As far as I know the only church that uses the fish at all is the United Reformed Church in Britain, where the fish is superimposed over the stand of the upright cross.

The other alternative being used by many individuals who are finding the cross problematic, is the Celtic knot or triquetra. Again, this symbol pre-dates Christianity. It was used to represent the earth- force – mother daughter sister – and understandably became used to represent the three persons of the Trinity. Given that it wasn't used by the earliest Christians some find it less acceptable than the fish as an alternative to the cross.

To conclude, I am less and less enamoured of the cross being used as the main symbol of our faith, especially by liberationist Christians. For me, even the empty cross, needs too much explaining away to be helpful. I do not want my God and my belief in the Gospel of hope and freedom from the power of death to be represented by an instrument of torture and killing.

I am aware changing centuries of practise is no easy task and its replacement no less difficult, but we now need to try to adopt some alternative to reclaim our theology and assert our values.

References

[1] See: <https://cte.org.uk/unconditional-love-cte-presidents-statement/> (accessed 24.11.25).

[2] Such as: [New proposed Ukip logo compared to iron cross used by Nazi regime | UK Independence party \(Ukip\) | The Guardian](#) (accessed on 3.2.2026).

[3] Brock and Parker cited in Williams, Delores S., *Sisters in the wilderness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993) p.199

[4] Originally coined by Brock and Tanner, the term was brought into more common awareness by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann's *The Lost Message of Jesus* Oasis: London 2003.

[5] E.g. Isaiah 1 v 11 and Hosea 6 v 6.

[6] See Lee Butler, *A Loving Home: Spirituality, Sexuality and Healing Black Life* (Minneapolis, 2000) p.125, quoted in Delroy Hall: 'Eucharistic Violence and the Sam Sharpe Revolt', *American Baptist Quarterly*, Vol XXXIV Spring 2015 No.1, p127,8.

[7] An idea put forward by Weaver, Denny J: *The non-violent atonement* (Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans 2001)

[8] The early history of the cross as tree of life is explored in: *Construing the Cross: Type, Sign, Symbol, Word, Action (Didsbury Lectures)* by Frances M Young (accessed on 20 Oct 2015)

[9] Matthew 4: 19

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- *Office of Hope*: A historical look at the UK's Job Centres.
- *Sheffield Troublemakers* (2008/2011): His best-known book, exploring the city's radical and left-wing heritage.
- *Welcome to Sheffield: A Migration History* (2018): Written following his active community work helping local asylum seekers.

He is a playwright, an adult education tutor, and frequently conducts guided radical history walks around Sheffield

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

David Price

‘The heart of the teaching of Jesus Christ is the Kingdom of God.’ Rudolf Bultmannⁱ

‘Jesus announced the Kingdom of God: what came to be was the Church’
Alfred de Loisyⁱⁱ

What place does ‘the Kingdom of God’ have in the Christian faith? In this article I explore the meaning of the ‘Kingdom of God’ and its implications for us now. This ground has of course been well trodden by New Testament scholars. I cannot claim to be such a scholar but offer this essay as the reflections of a Christian layman.

As the de Loisy quotation above suggests, there is some ambiguity about the status of the ‘Kingdom of God’ in Christian doctrine. On the one hand, the synoptic Gospels make it clear that the Kingdom was central in Jesus’ teaching. Moreover, the centrality of the Kingdom is preserved today in that, every time we say the Lord’s Prayer, we say ‘Thy Kingdom come’. On the other hand, the ‘Kingdom of God’ scarcely features in the writings of St John and St Paul. The ‘Kingdom’ has not become one of the great doctrines of the church like the incarnation or the atonement.

In today’s world, the word ‘kingdom’ may seem out of place. Countries like the USA, France, Germany. Italy and Ireland are republics. Even in the United Kingdom, the monarchy is no longer all powerful and is the subject of endless gossip and innuendo. Perhaps with that in mind, John Schofield recently suggested a change to the ‘Kinship of God’, with a focus on our links with creation and the natural world. ⁱⁱⁱ Another solution would be to speak of ‘the rule of God’, rather than the ‘Kingdom of God.’

But if we look back to Jesus’ world, it is clear why he spoke about ‘the Kingdom of God’. He was speaking to country folk in Galilee. The word ‘kingdom’ was all too familiar to them. It was associated with political power, wielded by Kings like Herod and Emperors like Tiberius. It was something that they feared. Jesus spoke about poverty and debt. Some peasants struggled in Galilee at that time. There were taxes; the Gospels make clear how unpopular tax collectors were. Some peasants were in debt and risked losing their land to rich

landowners who wanted to expand their estates. Moreover, if there was unrest, soldiers would come, often living off the land, and use violence to enforce the King's or the Emperor's will.

Jesus' references to the 'Kingdom of God' were potentially subversive. Jesus was suggesting that, in his new Kingdom, power would be wielded not by a great king or emperor but by God.

As the Lord's Prayer suggests, in the Kingdom God's will is done. But what is God's will? Surely by this Jesus meant his own radical teaching about justice and peace—blessed are the poor, turn the other cheek, do not covet, do not bear false witness, forgive your enemies and so on. Some of this teaching was truly revolutionary like Mark 10: 25:

'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'

Sayings like this would have surprised most people and greatly upset the rich and powerful.

What is the Kingdom like? There are some 50 references to the Kingdom in the synoptic Gospels, and they are difficult to summarise. The references are varied. Some are about our day-to-day behaviour, while others are about what might happen at the end of time with the sheep being separated from the goats... For me, certain messages stand out. The Kingdom is a place for children and those with the innocence of children. It is like a treasure buried in a field or a pearl of great price. It is like a tiny mustard seed that can grow massive. It includes many who are poor or in need. The rich will find it hard to enter. Other texts are more inclusive (eg Luke 16.16: 'There is good news of the kingdom of God and everyone forces his way in.')

When will the Kingdom of God come into being? I recall discussing this with Bishop Pete at the last Parish Weekend in 2018. I understood him to be saying that the Kingdom would happen in the future, linked with 'the day of the Lord' when we would all be 'raised up.' By contrast, I felt that the Kingdom was something that we should be working on here and now. The Bishop and I concluded with a compromise view: it might be both.

Since then, I have carried out a somewhat crude survey of the New Testament references to the Kingdom. This confirms the compromise view reached by the Bishop and myself. Around 30 of the references could refer to here and now, like Matthew 4. 17: where Jesus says: 'Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is upon you.' Around 17 were set in the future, like the problematic text Mark 9: 1: 'There are some of those standing here who will not taste death before

they have seen the Kingdom of God already come in power.’ There were also a few that could be both.

Marcus Borg insists that ‘the Kingdom of God for Jesus was something *for the earth*’. He thinks that Christians often miss this point because Matthew tends to refer to the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’. But Matthew may have avoided referring to ‘God’ for reverential reasons. At that time, many Jews avoided pronouncing or writing the word.^{iv}

The phrase ‘Kingdom of God’ is used in the New Testament in a flexible way. Marcus Borg identifies five uses:

- When Jesus exercises the power of God as a healer or exorcist;
- When God is present or life is lived under the lordship of God;
- Where God’s justice prevails, the poor are fortunate and the hungry filled;
- Where there is a community living under God’s kingship; and
- The final or eternal kingdom in which people from east and west banquet with long-dead figures from the past.^v

I am particularly interested in the third of these – God’s justice - where Kingdom values are recognised and where action is taken to improve the lot of the poor, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to contribute to peace-making and so on. All these things could be seen as ‘work for the Kingdom’.

Ted Wickham, founder of Industrial Mission in Sheffield, wrote most interestingly about the Kingdom of God in an unpublished book called ‘Understanding and communicating Christianity in a Secular Age.’ For him, the Kingdom of God, Jesus’ central theme,

‘comes unnoticed, quietly, imperceptibly but for those with eyes to see the smallest incident, word or attitude can reveal its presence the presence of the Kingdom of God is not therefore dependent upon faith or credal subscription, one can serve it without subscribing to it or it is by the Grace of God which is not bound. But we need vision to perceive it and we need understanding...’

I like Wickham’s concept that the Kingdom of God may come unnoticed but may nonetheless be present when people are doing God’s will – whether in small ways or in big ways. It seems to me that in recent years the Church, alarmed by the big decline in its membership, has become too internally focussed and has not given enough attention to Kingdom values and actions. I am encouraged by signs of change. For example, the Diocese of Sheffield is now recruiting a Social Justice Officer. This could contribute to a wider recognition of the need for

Kingdom values and actions in the churches and in wider society in South Yorkshire.

To conclude, I think that we should give greater attention to Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. Jesus was offering an alternative way of life to that which was prevalent in the world then – and in the world now. His way was humble, caring, self-sacrificing, reaching out to those in need, listening to those whose voices were seldom heard, while issuing warnings to the rich and powerful. He was no enthusiast for oppressive Roman rule over Israel, but he advised people to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. Presumably, this meant among other things that people should pay their taxes. He did not endorse violent uprisings, which later in AD 70 proved to be disastrous.

ⁱ Rudolf Bultmann: Jesus Christ and Mythology. SCM Press. 1958. Page 11.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Gonzales: The Gospel of Faith and Justice. P 148.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark's Messenger. June 2026.

^{iv} Marcus Borg: The Heart of Christianity. Harper. 2003. P 133.

^v Marcus Borg: in NR Wright and Marcus Borg. The Meaning of Jesus. SPCK 1999. p 74-5.

Book Review

The Age of Hitler and How We Will Survive It: By Alec Ryrie:

Reaktion Books (2025)



Part one of this book is an attempt to capture the shared values that have defined the Western world in the twentieth century. Its core thesis is that the Second

World War was a turning point in the value system that had come to define Western civilisation. From Ryrie's perspective, up until that point it had been Christianity which had (at least primarily) shaped the West; specifically, its moral sense of itself and its forms of social and political organisation. As he puts it: 'Before the war, attempts by secular-minded thinkers to find value systems distinct from Christianity, systems which they sometimes attempted to deduce rather dubiously from science at large or very dubiously from Darwinian evolution, were running into serious problems and were also failing to make much headway in the Western democracies. The Second World War, however, transformed the situation' (p. 63).

What he means by 'transformed the situation' can be summarised as follows. Ryrie is of the view that the horrors of the Second World War and, specifically, the extent of the evil that Nazism embodied, were so profound and disturbing to those living in the West, that they came to define its political and moral landscape in the post-war period; something that had previously been the preserve of Christianity. As he puts it: 'it came to seem that it was the war for the world, rather than the life of Jesus Christ, that was the greatest story ever told.' (p. 64). It is why he calls the period of history that we have all been living through as 'the age of Hitler' (p. 64). It is an age when, 'victory made it feel not only necessary but self-evident that all individual human beings must be seen as having rights on equal terms.' (p. 64). Consequently, for Ryrie, since 1945 the question for the West has been, 'what would Hitler do? – and then to march in the opposite direction, not 'what would Jesus do'?

Part two then sets out how the new global order emerged: the setting up of the United Nations; the universal declaration of human rights (in ethics, what he describes as reaching the 'End of History' — an obvious play on the writings of Francis Fukuyama). But, for Ryrie, this is too optimistic a picture. From his perspective, the claim that human rights are universal is 'obviously untrue', being an ideal but not a reality in the world that we have come to know (p. 66). Yes, the Second World War taught us about the evils of racism, militarism and authoritarianism, and the need for the West to combat them. But, from Ryrie's perspective, the entrenchment of economic inequality in our societies is also an evil in the way it hinders human flourishing; the climate emergency and its consequences is an evil in the way that they can destroy people's lives unless they are tackled head-on; the scourge of global pandemics remains an unsolved reality for millions of people, as do food shortages for many in developing nations. These are challenges that, from Ryrie's perspective, cannot be handled or resolved by staying entirely within the moral and political paradigm of the post-

war ‘age of Hitler’ mentality; that is, by being based on a values system centred around the rejection of Nazism’ (p. 117). Importantly, however, Ryrie is not suggesting that these values should be abandoned; rather, he is arguing that they should be combined with what he calls ‘deeper ethical and spiritual roots’ (p. 118).

In essence, Ryrie is arguing that whether one is a traditionalist or progressive by instinct, it is a time to bring an end to the ‘culture wars’ that are plaguing our present age, and that he sees as being a consequence of the fading of the collective memory of the Second World War in the West, and the cultural and political anti-Nazi legacy that followed. Rather, it is a time to forge a new values-based consensus, by drawing on our religious traditions in ways that synthesise the best of the post-war moral and political legacy, while also being capable of meeting the challenges that it is no longer equipped to handle.

I found this book to be an interesting and well written volume. However, I am of the view that its central thesis is far too reductionist an interpretation of post-war history and applied ethics, for me to have found it convincing in some of its arguments.

Joe Forde

Book Review

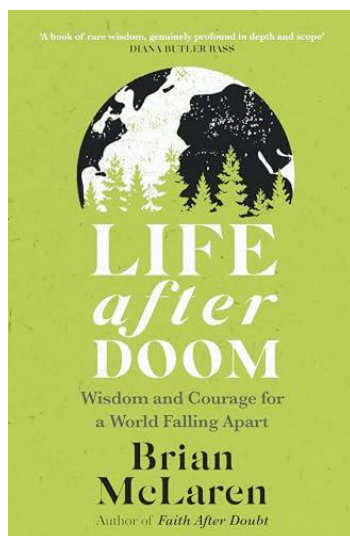
Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart

Brian McLaren (2024) Hodder& Stoughton

Brian McLaren is an American author, activist and theologian and a faculty member of Richard Rohr’s Centre for Action and Contemplation (CAC). He describes himself as a ‘passionate advocate for a ‘new kind of Christianity’ – just, generous and working with people of all faiths for the common good’.

In this book, McLaren addresses the problem: how do you keep going, particularly as an activist for social justice, without giving into feelings of doom and despair, but also without refusing to pretend everything is OK? The book mainly concentrates on climate change and ecological collapse, but can be applied whatever the issue.

I was reading this book with a CAC-based group in the online Meditation chapel, consisting mainly of Americans, who often appeared shell-shocked as the horrors of the Trump administration unfolded. Some were working to defend immigrants, some were joining protests against the government policies; some were involved in prayer, but all felt the need to deal with feelings of pessimism. Reading it together gave added value to the book.



In ‘Welcome to Reality’, he outlines what complex societies like ours face when key institutions can no longer solve its problems, as with past collapses such as the end of the Roman empire. Our global society on its current trajectory is unstable and unsustainable. As we destroy our ecological resources, our financial system is too complex and dependent upon continual growth, and politically this can lead to social unrest and conflict.

We can be optimistic and assume we will avoid or recover from collapse, or we can assess that our social structures are not wise or strong enough to act fast enough to avoid catastrophe. McLaren’s view of the evidence is not optimistic. He says we need to face facts rather than hide from them, and deal with the emotions that arise from this.

McLaren says that both over optimism and despair lead to inactivity and complacency. What we need is to live as if we have hope and to recognise the unknowns as the future unfolds, as well as the knowns. Circles of trust, being with people who energise us is important; hope is active, communal and needs

fun. We also need to recognise and enjoy the beauty around us, whether nature or art or friendship and love.

We also need to disengage from anxiety through prayer and contemplation: letting go (step off the train), letting be (dwell in the stillness), letting come (serenity, integration) and setting free (let creativity arise).

McLaren also asks where we find spiritual support when religions so often seem to be living in another world? He spends some time looking at indigenous people versus capitalism and colonialism and sees Jesus as an indigenous prophet and contemplative activist. He asks us to call on their wisdom, though some see his views of indigenous people perhaps rather romanticised.

Howard Zinn said, ‘to resist, to defy, to refuse to comply is itself a victory’. We do what we do because we must, and it is a commitment to love. We need to detach from the outcome – if it’s the right thing to do, we do it whatever the chance of success. For some that will be physical activism, for others it will be continuing to pray; all need the courage and hope to keep going, and this book shows us ways to find them.

Margaret Stone

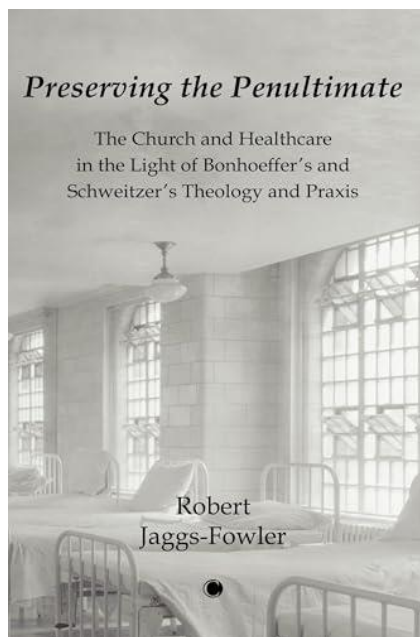
Book Review

Preserving the Penultimate: The Church and Healthcare in the Light of Bonhoeffer’s and Schweitzer’s Theology and Practice, by Robert Jaggs-Fowler, James Clarke & Co., 2026, 356 pp., pbk., £25.00.

Did the Church of England cede too much ground to the political sphere in its endorsement of the Attlee government’s creation of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948? Is it time for the Church of England to reclaim some of that lost territory, by increasing its contribution to the provision of healthcare? Robert Jaggs-Fowler thinks that it is, and his latest book mounts a series of original, penetrating and skilfully presented theologically-based arguments in support of that position. It’s a perspective that chimes with other work that has been done by writers such as Phillip Blond and James Noyes, *Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England* (London: Respublica, 2013).

From the outset, it is worth reminding ourselves that the Church of England’s contribution to the NHS has been, and remains, significant. Many of its hospital chaplains are from the Church of England; there are a number of

Church of England representatives on its ethics committees; and some of its non-executive directors are Church of England ministers. However, Jaggs-Fowler, a qualified General Practitioner and Anglican Priest, believes that the Church of England should go further and become a healthcare provider, albeit within specific areas of physical and mental health: ‘Drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, care of the elderly, dementia care and hospice care are a few example areas for consideration’ (4).



To this end, he suggests, ‘the successful operation of Church of England schools provides a useful comparator and precedent as a possible model to emulate’ (4). Some might find this comparator as less than adequate, arguably understating the differences between the delivery of education in schools, and the provision of healthcare. For example, I have a daughter who is a senior Mental Health Nurse in the NHS working in the field of dementia care, and there are no less than 12 professions directly involved in providing care to patients in her unit. This is just one of several, key, HR differences between the delivery of healthcare and the delivery of educational provision in schools. There are others – e.g. clinical, legal, technological, ethical, financial, managerial, cultural and practical – that I suggest would need to be explored as part of a comprehensive feasibility study, if the Church of England were ever to become a provider of dementia care. However, in fairness to Jaggs-Fowler, providing a feasibility study of this kind is not his stated purpose; rather, it is to provide a theological ‘line of reasoning for why the worldwide Christian Church should seek to have an active, substantial role in the provision of healthcare within the twenty-first century’ (3), and, in this regard, his book excels.

Jaggs-Fowler sets his theological perspective on healthcare in context, showing how, since its inception, the Christian Church has played a part in responding to poverty and the healthcare challenges stemming from it. He adduces how, in medieval times, ‘the Christian Church led the field in terms of developing hospitals and nursing care for the poor’ (55). He points to how, in modern times, there are examples in Europe of church-run hospitals in Germany and, to a lesser extent, in France (65). Drawing on the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Albert Schweitzer, including their different but overlapping perspectives on Christology, he argues that they both believed in the incarnational reality of God in the modern world. Indeed, it was this thinking that had led Schweitzer ‘to his work as a medical missionary’ (204). It is this thinking that Jaggs-Fowler argues, provides ‘the solid foundation on which today’s institutional church should be rebuilding its importance and relevance in the modern world; the platform from which it can demonstrate the spiritual force of the life of Jesus through its emulation of his work within the Church’s involvement in twenty-first century healthcare’ (224).

Jaggs-Fowler also draws on the emphasis that Bonhoeffer placed on the need for the Church, ‘to be active in its purpose and not simply the focus of a passive faith’ (304), in support of his view that the Church of England should become more *practical* in its role in the provision of healthcare. Indeed, from Jaggs-Fowler’s perspective, this would be one way of redressing the decline in its status that it has witnessed in the post-war period. He points to how Schweitzer recognised the need in the modern age for primacy to be placed, not on ‘preaching the religion of love, but practicing it’ (304). This meant engaging actively with suffering in the world through the active provision of healthcare.

I recommend Jaggs-Fowler’s book for being an original, authoritative and stimulating study in the theology of healthcare, which should become essential reading for anyone who professes an interest in the role of the Church in the provision of healthcare in the twenty-first century. However, if the Church of England were to seek to acquire a more *practical* role in the delivery of healthcare, beyond that which it currently provides to the NHS, I suggest it would need more than a theological justification on which to base its case. Contrary to Jaggs-Fowler’s contention, it is my view that its well established role in the provision of education does not demonstrate that, ‘there is no reason why the Church of England cannot do the same within healthcare’ (304). A much wider-ranging study would be required for that premise to be explored in the depth that would be needed.

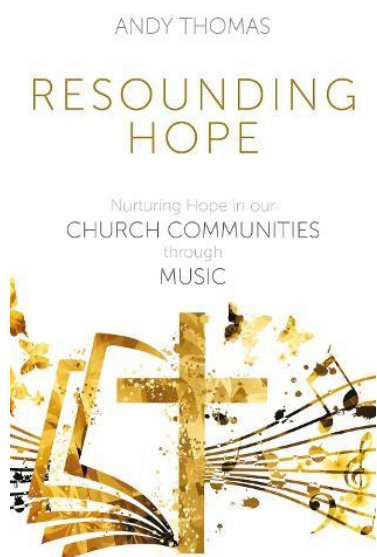
The above book review first appeared in the July edition of *Crucible: The Journal of Christian Social Ethics* and has been reproduced with the kind permission of the journal's Reviews Editor.

Joe Forde

Book Review

Resounding Hope: Nurturing Hope in our Church Communities through Music

By Andy Thomas (Sacristy Press) 2026



Some of our congregation will remember a former Musical Director at St Mark's, Andy Thomas, the author of this book. In this book of just over 100 pages, Andy argues that music can make an integral contribution to worship, in ways that ground us in God's presence and strengthen our church communities. Hence, music in church settings is not *just* a pleasurable experience of the heart and mind but is also a way of exploring Christian hope 'and how music can nurture it in its fullest sense' (p. 5). Church music can also ground us in a sense of place, a sense of history, a sense of our faith tradition's culture and its intellectual lineage. Think of how Renaissance choral music can export us back in time, to places that were so essential to the Christian journey. For Andy, church music can (and should) inspire us, encourage us to reflect on our lives and our spirituality, and contribute

to a sense of communal endeavour. This enables, or at least offers the potential, for transformation of the heart, mind and soul (by soul, I mean our sense of the erotic, that enables us to exhibit passion, depth, and vibrant energy in all that we do). Music in church, when intelligentially selected and ably performed, can also assist us in our efforts to understand religious concepts, histories and beliefs, by dovetailing with the themes of church services in ways that help to ‘bring them alive’.

I found this book to be an enjoyable and rewarding read; one that I agreed with as regards its central messages, and one that I would recommend to all who enjoy music in a church setting. A copy of the book is in the Church Library.

Joe Forde

New acquisitions into the library since 1st February, 2026

1. Grant Patrick - *Less K*
2. Duffield, Hock-Yidokodilona – *Radical Disciple, the Influence and Significance of John J Vincent* N
3. Page Trevor – *As It Was* N
4. Wells Janet – *Memories of Papua New Guinea* F
5. Armstrong Karen – *The Spiral Staircase* N
6. Brother Andrew - *God's Smuggler* N
7. Caroe Kate – *Out of the Box* F
8. Ward Hannah and Wild Jennifer – *Rhythms of Remembering* Q
9. Wiles Maurice – *Explorations in Theology* 4
10. O'Donohue John – *Benedictus* F
11. Harries Richard – *Questioning Belief* E
12. James Eric – *God's Truth* E
13. Thatcher Adrian – *Liberating Sex* E
14. Volf Miroslav – *Do We Worship the same God?* E
15. Alker Adrian – *Religious Rites and Human Needs* E
16. Rohr Richard – *The Tears of Things* J
17. Keith Beth – *The Pieces Join* J
18. Rutherford Tony – *Face to Earth* E
19. Rutherford Tony – *Meeting Christianity Again for the First Time* E
20. Reynolds Jade and John – *Able to Laugh* J