

Towards Third Millennium Christianity Activism, Nonviolence and the Mystical Imperative

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Introduction (after a short opening silence)

Good morning friends, and may I start by thanking especially the Unitarians, the Quakers and the Progressive Christianity Network, as well as an anonymous sponsor of this event, for inviting me here today. I must begin by declaring false credentials. You see, I must consider myself to be a fake theologian. On two accounts.

Firstly, on the Biblical basis that God's "greatness is unsearchable."¹ "Will you plead the case for God?" says Job to his critics. "Will it be well with you when he searches you out?"² Indeed, will it be well for me later today, when this audience searches me out?

Secondly, I am a Quaker, and with some notable exceptions including in present company, most of us are not systematic in our approaches to theology. As the German liberation theologian Dorothee Söelle remarked, "To this day it is difficult for many Friends (that is to say, Quakers) to speak of 'Quaker theology' [because they] believe that the Spirit transcends Scripture and that the inner light is experienced by all human beings without human mediation."³

I therefore think of us more as *unsystematic theologians*. For myself, when looking at and feeling my way through theology, I ask only second, "Is it rational?" – important though that question is to protect from cultic thinking. First I ask, "Is it beautiful?" Is it of the *mystery*, the poetic Mythos, that weaves the web of meaning to the warp of Logos?

And that's what brings me here today. My theme is Christianity, whether it has anything distinctly beautiful to set upon the table of world faiths, a table that befits our being children of cultural diversity but of

One World? I ask, because there are many who would answer that Buddhism, Taoism, Islam or perhaps a shamanic version of neo-Pagan nature spirituality are the higher paths. These are less contaminated (they would usually like to think) by two millennia of violence and power play such as has beset the Christian faith.

I am most certainly not seeking to trump other faiths with Christianity. Christ himself acknowledged “other sheep that are not of this fold.”⁴ I often have a chuckle that the very oil - the nard (or spikenard) with which he was anointed – came from a plant that was in those days endemic to the Himalayas, imported to the Holy Land through Persia. So get this – that Jesus oil was Hindu-Buddhist oil – and I love that, because I am concerned with beauty, and not least intercultural and interfaith aspects thereof.

Another reason why I ask what Christianity brings today to the table of world faiths, is that there are many who in good faith argue that, after two millennia, it has passed its sell-by date. They might be right, but when I engage especially with “nontheists” amongst Quakers, I invariably find myself wondering whether they understand just what they might be bulldozing into the landfill site? Perhaps before so doing too fast, pay heed to the Psalmist: “The stone that the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone.”⁵

Yet another reason why I ask whether Christianity might be more than just flogging a dead horse, is because for much of my adult life I’ve lived and worked amongst people suffering from poverties of body and/or soul. The beatitudes (or blessings) of Jesus minister to both of these. “Blessed are the poor,” says Luke’s gospel, simply, and the Greek translated there as “poor” means, quite straightforwardly, the economically destitute. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” specifies Matthew’s gospel, speaking variously, we might imagine, to poverty and/or humility of soul. Between these two beatitudes, we see poverty addressed, both in the outer and the inner lives. Personally, and as Gandhi also recognised from his Hindu standpoint, and as many Muslims will testify, I think the acid test of any faith that claims to be grounded in love, is how it treats the poor.

So there’s three reasons for giving Christianity just one more look before we chuck it in the bin. a) Its actual and potential contribution to the table of world faiths, which Unitarian transcendentalists have done so much to advance since at least the time of Emerson. b) It’s largely unawakened potential to open realms of spiritual depth that, as a whole, we have hardly yet started to explore. c) And then for me the trump card: that which liberation theologians call “the preferential option for the poor”.

Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, the so-called “father” of liberation theology (I say so-called, not to derogate that status but to remind that there have long been many holy mothers) reminds us that: “To liberate = to give life.”⁶ It gives outer life at the material level, such as in the feeding the multitudes. And it gives inner life at levels of our being where bread fails to reach the parts that other beers ... sorry ... I was about to mix my metaphors, but I think you’ll get the point. As Mother Teresa said when she came to Britain, It is with the latter poverty, spiritual poverty, that our need in this country today is the greatest. We see this, more and more expressed, I believe, as Britain lies upon the couch of Brexit. We find testimony to it if we listen to poets, to our minstrels, and the words of the prophets that “are written on the subway walls/ and tenement halls.”

Verily, sometimes those who outwardly appear most to deny the spiritual life, express the hunger for it with the greatest rawness in their art.

*All day long I think of things but nothing seems to satisfy
Think I'll lose my mind if I don't find something to pacify*

Bide with me ... as I unpack a little that 1970 lyric, “Paranoid”, from Black Sabbath.⁷ The lyricist yearns for someone – he seeks a living real presence – who can show him “*the things in life that I can't find*”.⁸

I can't see the things that make true happiness, I must be blind

In the absence of that which gives life, of “life abundant”,⁹ and beset with the false satisfiers of a consumerist society not to mention its attendant ills today, such as climate change, the lyricist slides relentlessly into a suicidal nihilism. We hear him telling how he sighs at jokes, and he cries at laughter, because:

Happiness I cannot feel and love to me is so unreal

And notice the parallel there with Jesus’ words:

We played the flute ... and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.¹⁰

The lyricist can see no prospect of redemption. His last line:

I tell you to enjoy life I wish I could but it's too late

In contrast, for Jesus, no matter how shot the situation (such as the emotional deadness that he’s just described), life is held within a greater

hand. His last line, a little cryptic but determined, reads: “Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.”¹¹ The Greek word translated here as “wisdom” is *sophia*, the *feminine* perspicacity (or sharp-sightedness) of God. It is with this – sometimes known as Woman Wisdom – that Jesus self-identifies in implying his own vindication. As Woman Wisdom concludes her speech in Proverbs chapter 8, “whoever finds me finds life ... but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.”¹²

But forgive me. I could get carried away in drinking from such wellsprings of the wine of life. Let me now draw this introduction to a focus, because what I want to do in this lecture is ask what in Scotland we call, a “daft-laddie” question. One that seems too obvious, or too insignificant, to be sensible asking. If a child who might be seeking wisdom – or the “true happiness” of Black Sabbath’s lyric – were to enter the average church and noticed a crucifix, the fundamental symbol of the Christian faith. And if they popped the question: “What is the meaning of the cross?” How might you answer? Do we still have a credible answer, by which I mean one that carries credibility as *credo*, which is to say, faith: and faith not as blind belief, but as a journey, an opening of the way of God, an unblocking of deep wellsprings long neglected?

Some people say to me, “Why do you bother with such questions?” They say, “You’d be so much more effective if you left that God and Jesus stuff aside. It might play out OK up in the Outer Hebrides, but not here.” Well, our critics bring our greatest gifts. So let’s just catch that ball. Let me put it to you like this to give traction to my question and the criticism of it.

Donald John Trump was elected thanks to an 81% vote from the evangelical constituency, a constituency that makes up a quarter of the American electorate. And he claims to have got his faith from his mother, Mary Anne Macleod, who emigrated in 1930 from the Hebridean village of Tong, eight miles from the village of Leurbost where I grew up. It is my analysis that the President carries within him insights and ways of relating to his core constituency that give him the traction that he retains amongst conservative evangelicals of the American type.

Now, eight days ago, somebody who admires Donald Trump – a person who describes himself as “a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose”¹³ – massacred fifty Muslims who were at prayer in Christchurch. He did so live on video, to a soundtrack he’d created with a Serb nationalist song that called for Muslims to be killed. “The British Grenadiers” that celebrates the warmongering of imperial power,

and a song called “Fire”. Charting at No. 1 in August 1968, “Fire” had the English rock band, *The Crazy World of Arthur Brown*, celebrate the Devil’s triumph with the opening lines:¹⁴

I am the god of hell fire, and I bring you!
Fire, I’ll take you to burn.
Fire, I’ll take you to learn.
I’ll see you burn!

The Christchurch gunman’s manifesto contains two sections on Christianity. In the first, he addresses the question: “Were/are you a christian?” (spelt in the lower case). He answers: “That is complicated. When I know, I will tell you.”

The second section is headed, “To Christians”, and comprises a quotation from Pope Urban II in the early Second Millennium, as he rallied the faithful to the First Crusade. Urban describes non-Muslims, his would-be recruits, as “the race of the elect.” The “elect” mean those who are elected, or chosen, by God. He summons them “to fight against the enemies of the Christian people.”

The notion of the elect is based on an authoritarian religious psychology that is also found in other faiths, but our responsibility here today is towards Christianity. Versions of Christianity that create a binary worldview of Heaven or Hell, of Saved or Reprobate, and of Elect or Damned, feed upon ontological insecurity. They drive what readily finds expression as an in-group versus out-group cult mentality. They run counter to the teachings of the apostle John, that: “perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” because “God is love.”¹⁵

In my book *Poacher’s Pilgrimage* – and specifically through Brian D. McLaren’s *Foreword* to the US edition (which can be read independently)¹⁶ – I have put the case that Donald Trump’s obsession with his wall with Mexico expresses this binary divide, that runs through his own mind and that of many of his constituency. It has come about, because during its first millennium Christianity, which started out as a largely pacifist movement, became progressively infected by violence after its adoption by the emperor, Constantine, in the fourth century.

If we are to tackle that; if we are to have any hope of redeeming Christianity from the fear-driven dynamics of violence and domination that John was addressing in his epistle; if we are to show a different way from that which has been appropriated by the alt-right who claim Christianity even as a badge of fascism, then we have to reappraise the

faith's relationship to violence. That means, centrally, addressing the ostensible divine violence of theories of the cross, of soteriology. Only then can we open up what I would see as a credible Christian theology for this the Third Millennium, that can stand proud upon the table of world faiths. Hence the importance my hypothetical child's question, "What is the meaning of the cross?"

In the next three sections and following the structure of my subtitle, I want, firstly, to establish the relevance of Jesus' patterns and examples to practical concerns in our world today, those of activism for social, environmental and religious change that comes from a spiritually informed base. Secondly, to sketch out the predominant First and Second Millennium theories of the atonement – of why Jesus had to die – to demonstrate the grip of violence on so much of theological thought in the Western Church – that is to say, the Catholic and Protestant traditions, but leaving aside the Eastern Orthodox ones. Finally, through the lens of mystical insight and a quick nod to the Orthodox, I shall suggest pointers to a faith that rests on Christ's nonviolence, arguably, a credible and fit-for-purpose Third Millennium Christianity.

Christianity as Spiritual Activism

When activists say to me as they sometimes do – "Why Jesus? Wouldn't we be better with another faith, or none?" – and often because they have been repulsed by authoritarian forms of religion that tend to be suspicious of spirituality – I answer, "For starters, he was one of us." We need his style of activism today.

Consider. The Buddha was a prince who went and sat beneath a tree, found enlightenment, and went off to form the Noble Sangha, the spiritual community.

Krishna was a god who spent his mischievous youth pinching butter from, and later, chasing after the cowherd Gopi girls, with little sign of being exercised by the woes of life, unlike his tormented mentee, Arjuna.

I love the teachings both of Buddhist sutras and the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna lucidly reveals a depth of metaphysics that first enabled me to grasp the mysticism of Saint John's gospel.

But Jesus ... there is a visceral rather than an otherworldly reality about Jesus. He had little cause or call to have to check his privilege. A dodgy genealogy, a seemingly "illegitimate" birth, no room at the inn, witnessed by low-status shepherds, fleeing as a refugee to Egypt, and

then three years of persecution by the religious and, eventually, the imperial authorities, ending in death by torture. He identified with the marginalised, for example, “I was a stranger, and you took me in” - and note that the Greek used there for “stranger” is *xenos*, from which we get our word, “xenophobia”.¹⁷ In privileging such marginalised people as Samaritans – a despised sect of heretical Jews – he exercised a preferential option for the poor in prototypical liberationist mode, “from the underside”.

That is why I say to my more secular activist colleagues and to some of my fellow Quakers who feel the Christian cringe: “Not so fast. Are you going to abandon one of ‘the least of these’ among us?”¹⁸ “Are you going to hang out one of us to dry? Well, ‘First they came for... And I did not speak out.’” As for those who see spirituality as a private pursuit, Jesus’ ministry was indeed concerned with personal salvation – the word means healing, as in “to salve”. But it was not a singular obsession. His theology was both individual and collective, set in contexts of the whole community. He prayed for “our” daily bread, not just “my” daily bread, because the big picture’s not about the “me” and “my soul”, topped up with a dash of the prosperity gospel. The way of God is not for those who’ve given their lives for an excess of material security in this world and to crown it all, want heavenly fire insurance as well, purchased on the cosmic futures market.

No. The way of Heaven is a metanoia, an utter transformation of being, both of individuals and of this world. Integration of the outer and the inner life is an imperative. “Thy kingdom come ... on Earth as it is in Heaven.” Here is a spirituality that, to borrow from bell hooks, is “all about love”¹⁹ – all about the individual and cosmic self-realisation or profound interconnectedness through what Audre Lorde calls “the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.”²⁰ No spirituality of love can be a purely private affair. It has to be about relationships with others and Creation.

So what about sin, sin, sin, and banging on about sin, especially if it’s caught between the bedsheets, less so between the ledgers of the bank balance? After all, John the Baptist paved the way for Jesus, preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”²¹

For sure, when Jesus healed folks’ ailments, he’d often tell them that their sins were forgiven. But the cultural and psychological context of his era is important. The religious mainstream were obsessed with sin. They’d commodified sin and made an industry out of forgiveness. That was why the Baptist’s bypass of the high priest’s function was such a subversive thing. Like usurers, the priesthood had ratcheted up sin to

torture people with their misery, and it still goes on in some faith groups today.

Jesus dealt elegantly with such burdens of guilt. “Rise, take up thy bed and walk,”²² he said. Off you go! Get on with it! Now find yourself a life worth living. As the late Fr Raimon Panikkar put it from his Hindu-Catholic standpoint: “Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma.”²³ Jesus’ forgiveness of sins was literally a breaking of the chains that bind us, chains the weight of which had made folks literally or metaphorically deaf, blind, lame and mentally deranged. You see, activism is about action to relieve the sufferings of the world. It deepens to these levels.

In overturning the wheeler-dealers’ tables at the temple, he overturned the priesthood’s sacrificial system that abused spiritual power by exploiting the psychology of guilt. And note, that he fashioned a whip, not to flense human beings as is sometimes assumed from the translation in the King James Authorised Bible, but to drive out and thereby liberate the animals lined up for sacrifice. As the NRSV and other modern translations render John 2:15, “Making a whip of chords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.” Tell that to those who use this passage to justify “just war”.

That said, our spiritual activism must not be all do, do, do. Jesus, like other great spiritual teachers, didn’t just do his stuff among the multitudes of the marketplace. He kept a life-work balance where he frequently went off to nature to pray, connecting to the ground of being of the inner life, resting down into the hand of God. That is not to cut off from the world. As my late friend and inspiration, Walter Wink has written:²⁴

We are not easily reduced to prayer.... Prayer is ... the interior battlefield where the decisive victory is first won, before engagement in the outer world is even attempted.... Unprotected by prayer, our social activism runs the danger of becoming self-justifying good works, as our inner resources atrophy, the wells of love run dry, and we are slowly changed into the likeness of the Beast.

From such a grounding in the Godspace, or Buddha nature, or the Spirit or whatever you want to call it – our deepest traction can be derived. Such spiritual activism, far from being dilettante or woo-woo, enjoys this leverage. Both Quakers and Jesuits have made a speciality of understanding these approaches to activism, including nourishing each other’s traditions, as “discernment”. I would draw attention in

particular to the Jesuit scholar Michael Sheeran's work, that was sparked off by doing his PhD on the Quakers in the wake of Vatican II when the Jesuits sought to recover some lost roots by coming to the Quakers.²⁵ Now the Quakers go to Jesuits.

Also, to the contemporary Quaker scholarship coming out of Woodbrooke, and especially the monumental volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, of which one of the editors, Ben Pink Dandelion, is here today. In the chapter there on "leadings and discernment", I especially appreciated how Michael Birkel describes our methodology as an interplay of action and reflection, by which "the first test looks to the results of a leading, while the second test lies in the evaluation by the group."²⁶ A leading is that which comes from outwith, from beyond our ego selves. It implies spiritual calling and not, primarily, a reasoned act of individual will.

Many of the deeper or "process" aspects of spiritual activism that are found in handbooks today have their roots in methodologies, like clearness meetings and spiritual direction, that are being propagated by figures like the American Quaker, Parker Palmer, or the late Jesuits Gerard Hughes in Scotland and Anthony de Mello in India.²⁷ But such methodologies, such technologies of the sacred, are not to be confined to Quakers and Jesuits. These are precious gifts for all to draw upon. They stand, well tested, in lines of long tradition, in clouds of witnesses, and I am sure that Unitarians have many of their own insights to share too, but I regret that I am less familiar with that tradition.

The Violence or Nonviolence of the Cross

I turn now to that child's question: "What is the meaning of the cross?" Put another way, "Why did Jesus have to die?" To answer this, it helps to see the violence of his times as a microcosm of the wider violence of the world.

In 2005 I had the gift of visiting Walter Wink at his home with June in upper New York State. He told me of the time he visited Jerusalem.²⁸ "For three nights I couldn't sleep," he said. "All night long I was kept awake by wrestling with the Angel of Jerusalem."

I wondered what he meant by "wrestling" with an Angel, in this case, the inner spirit of that place. "I mean wrestling, just like I might wrestle with you," he replied. "Because Jerusalem has been the most violent city the world has ever known." In other words, Walter experienced violence as a dynamic inner force, as a brute interiority of abused power.

These days, when I hear the word “sin”, I subvert the cringe associated with its uses and abuses. I substitute it in my mind, with “violence”. Violence is that which violates. In French, *le viol* is rape. Gutiérrez outlines three dimensions of liberation from sin, in which the links to both the personal and the structural violence of the world are plain.²⁹

- 1 **The Social Level:** which he describes as “liberation from social situations of oppression and marginalization.”
- 2 **The Psychological Level:** as “a personal transformation by which we live with profound inner freedom in the face of every kind of servitude.”
- 3 **The Spiritual Level:** as “liberation from sin, which attacks the deepest root of all servitude; for sin is the breaking of friendship with God and with other human beings”

We can see here that whereas love is *that which gives life*, violence rips it apart, thus my synonymy of sin and violence. I think that Jesus made this synonymy too, where he said, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”³⁰ Note that he said, “until now”. Change was and remains in the air.

Sometimes it takes a little context to see how deeply Jesus challenged the domination systems of his time. His most frequent miracle, the feeding of the multitudes, is attested to six times across all four gospels. When he asks in John 6:5, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”, at least two things are happening. He assumes a responsibility for the hungry. And he challenges Philip to think about the economics of the way of Heaven. He’s asking: Is the way of Heaven about the cash economy, or the love economy?

As such, we can treat the feeding of the five thousand literally, as a miracle of magic. Or we can treat it as a miracle of love, the multiplication of the daft laddie’s bread and fishes by the miracle of sharing. Either way, whether we want to read the texts in a manner that is literal, or metaphorical, or both, commentators have pointed out that such actions usurped one of the Roman empire’s key ways of holding order. It overturned the scarcity economy, where power was retained through such distractions as *panem et circenses*, bread and circuses, a.k.a. reality TV.

Jesus’ simple act of asking how the people could be fed thereby subverted the dominant paradigm. It exposed the structural violence by which a colonised people, their land to varying degrees expropriated,

had become wage slaves to the Roman war economy.³¹ In a similar way, in Britain today, food banks unmask the blasphemy of austerity in a nation that has idolised consumerism, leaving an underclass to be the wage and rent “slaves” of those who have cornered a disproportionate share of capital, especially in the property markets.

Jesus’ whole life exemplified nonviolence. The question of the meaning of the cross, of why he had to die, goes to the heart of Christian soteriology, the theory of salvation. His own answer is in Mark 10:45 – “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many.” Or, as a version attributed to Paul had it, “as a ransom for all”.³² Known as “the Ransom Saying”, this answered a prophesy in Isaiah that the Messiah would become “an offering for sin”.³³

The million dollar question in Christian history has accordingly been this. If human souls are the *ransomed* – who might be the Ransomer of Souls? And here I shall lean upon the work of the Mennonite theologian, J. Denny Weaver.³⁴ As a generalisation, the answer of First Millennium Christianity, and still the prevailing position of the Eastern Church, was what’s known as the ‘Classic’ or *Christus Victor* theory. In this, the Devil is the Ransomer of Souls. Christ is the ransom price on the cross. Gregory the Great said that it was as if the Devil was a great sea monster, gobbling up the human souls as they fell into his realm. God dropped Christ like a bait into the depths. Along comes the Devil – chomp, chomp, chomp – another tasty human morsel – only to be impaled upon the hook of God, his wicked power thereafter held in check pending the final showdown.³⁵

Come the second millennium, *Christus Victor* (or Christ the Victor) theory as it later became known, was facing two criticisms. To God, it attributed deception. To the Devil, too much power.

Where might be found an alternative theory of ‘the atonement’ - the idea that Christ, in offering himself as the ransom payment, had ‘atoned’ or vicariously paid the price for human sin? Enter Anselm, a monk from a noble family from feudal Lombardy, who in 1093 was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by William II, the brutal son of William the Conqueror.

If the Devil was no longer to be the Ransomer of Souls, who else was qualified to take the vacancy? There could be only one other candidate in town. If it wasn’t to be he who lived Downstairs, it had to be, yours faithfully, him Upstairs. Anselm reasoned that human sin, starting with Adam’s apple, had robbed God of due honour. Without the honour code of fealty in place, the feudal system and, in this instance,

the cosmic order, collapses. Punishment therefore had to be inflicted to sustain the very structure of reality. However, God took this on God's own chin, saying in effect to humankind, "Receive my only Son, and offer him for yourselves." In this way, humankind was spared eternal torment. God's honour was thereby duly 'satisfied', leading to it being known as the *Satisfaction Theory* of the atonement.

Anselm's ideas were further ramped up to their logical conclusion in the sixteenth century by the legal mind of Geneva's John Calvin. "We are all," he said, "offensive to God, guilty in his sight, and by nature the children of Hell." Not one of us can examine ourselves "without feeling that God is angry and at enmity with him." As a result of human sin, our disobedience, God is "armed for vengeance". Christ, however, was sent to "the bar of God as a criminal in our stead". He "interposed, took the punishment upon himself and bore what by the just judgment of God was impending over sinners." This, concluded the turbulent reformer, is "what is meant and implied by ransoming us from the justice of God."

In this way, Christ's sacrifice "satisfied and duly propitiated God the Father . . . appeased his anger . . . and by this tie secured the Divine benevolence."³⁶ At least, it did so for the Christian Elect. In the Calvinist schema, the doctrine of "limited atonement" teaches that the Damned remain the Godforsaken. As the American "Godmother of Punk" Patti Smith has it in her lyric, *Gloria*: "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine."

Anselm's Satisfaction Theory given turbo boosters by Calvin's Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory has dominated Christian theology in the Western church throughout the Second Millennium. As Denny Weaver in 2001 told a World Council of Churches' conference of the Historic Peace Churches, with which it launched its *Decade to Overcome Violence*:³⁷

The conclusion from these observations about classic atonement doctrine is that they portray an image of God as either divine avenger or punisher and/or as a child abuser, one who arranges the death of one child for the benefit of others. This is hardly the image of God that supports nonviolence, nor of the God who is revealed in the nonviolent story of Jesus.

Drawing heavily on black and feminist-womanist theologians such as James Cone and Kelly Brown Douglas, Weaver concluded that it is small wonder that those who champion such a god might justify their own and society's violence "under a variety of divinely anchored claims and images." Having been present with him as a Quaker speaker at that

event, I vividly recall a huddle of us, crammed into his room at the end of a day's proceedings, all enthralled as he unpacked the violence of atonement theories, developed after the Church had been appropriated by the Roman empire under Constantine. As he has since pointed out in later writing, this shift has been paralleled by a visible shift in the "art and iconography of [a] resurrected Jesus to images of a dead Jesus"³⁸ – as has been documented by Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker in their book, *Saving Paradise*.³⁹

I only heard the mainly-gentle Mennonites use one swear word during that week with the WCC at Bienenberg in Switzerland. It was – *Constantinianism!*

The Mystical Imperative

Since William James gave his Gifford Lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* at the turn of the 20th century, researchers have gathered more than a century's worth of social science and religious data on spiritual experience, including its apogee, the mystical experience of God. These studies explore radical shifts in consciousness where transcendence is directly experienced. The Mandukya Upanishad of Hinduism puts the case for God plainly: "In the union with Him is the supreme proof of His reality. He is peace and love."

As our Friend Derek Guiton discusses in a provocative book with the subtitle, *Standing up for God in the Religious Society of Friends*, George Fox's test of spiritual reality, was: "This I know experimentally." God, argues Guiton, following the leadings of the mystics, is not a "human construct" or a "human projection".⁴⁰ Rather, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."⁴¹ Experience, and that means, experience in *consciousness*, while not infallible has huge persuasive validity.

First thing in the morning three weeks ago at the Malvern Ideas Festival, it was not God that I saw – though he looked a bit like him – but the atheist philosopher, A.C. Grayling, with whom I serendipitously shared a lift to the speaking venue. "So you are the great atheist," I said, outrageously, "and I am here to speak about ... spirituality!"

"I just don't believe in that for which there is no evidence," he answered, quickening to the occasion, like he'd had a shot of whisky to his porridge.

Bantering jovially, I asked what he thought about the wealth of studies of transcendent experience, ones like those reported in the

literature reviews in the American Psychological Association's *The Varieties of Anomalous Experience*, a major volume published to mark the centenary of William James' Gifford Lectures.⁴²

"The brain will do anything to manufacture a sense of meaning," he said. "Why should I believe in something for which there is no proof?"

"I have no proof of your existence," said I. "The whole edifice of reality hinges on what we experience through consciousness, and you could be just a dream in my greater mind. Indeed, the Hindus would say precisely that."

"Well, I believe that I exist!" said he; and as taxi drew up at the venue, we parted, both perked up by the shot of whisky to our greater minds.

But if that is so, I thought, as he gave the morning's opening talk.... If highly structured and purposeful experiences in consciousness, often at times of crisis such as near-death and even apparent brain death, are just the last hurrah of a dying brain.... And if different people's experiences have characteristics in common, such as a sense of undifferentiated unity, blissful love, ineffability, the transcendence of paradox, the slipping away of space and time, and lasting life changes....⁴³ If all of that, why does the brain bother? Wither that strength and quality of drive for meaning? What is the meaning that gives meaning to meaning?

I won't try and answer that now. I'm just going to close by jumping on the back of that mystical meaning, and riding it as hard as I can across the sky into the sunset of its own expanding glory.

"What is the meaning of the cross?"

As I watched the setting sun drop down into a golden sea across a bay at the ancient ruined Temple of Saint John the Baptist, back home on the Isle of Lewis.... As I later read Pope Francis' epistle of the 50th World Day of Peace, 2017, calling for *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*....⁴⁴ As so many things melded in my mind with Walter Wink's and Denny Weaver's calls and pointers to a nonviolent theory of the atonement....

As all of that, and more, I thought to myself, as I rode that transiently dying ball of fire into the shortened midnight of a Hebridean summer's eve ... *the cross absorbs the violence of the world*.

Ask only secondly, "is it rational?" Ask firstly, "is it beautiful?"

That's the power of love from depths beyond this world, transfixed by wood and nails. He came to give his life, "a ransom for many."

A "ransom", *lytron* in the Greek, from which we get our word "to loosen"; a freeing, a liberation from the chains in which our karma, unforgiven, has kept us bound.

He came to give his life, *a liberation for all*.

Because Jesus never taught "just war" theory. Jesus taught full-on nonviolence. "Put away your sword," he told Peter. "We shall have no more of this."⁴⁵ And to Pilate at his trial: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it was, my followers would fight to save me."⁴⁶

Why not so? Because he taught us when we pray to say, "*Thine kingdom come...*". The realm of mercy, love and justice come, not "*Caesar's kingdom come,*" the realm of cruelty, war and slavery.

"He descended into Hell," says the Apostles' Creed – Hell, again, that darker realm of consciousness, where:

Happiness I cannot feel and love to me is so unreal

And yet, and yet, as Livvy, a street theologian in Govan, once put it to me: "Hell cannot hold such love as this."

And as Paul Evdokimov, a Russian Orthodox theologian said:⁴⁷

The only message which could reach atheism today is that of Christ descending into hell. As deep as the hell in which we find ourselves, it is even more profound to find Christ already there waiting for us.

All his life, Abbé Pierre of France had struggled with the Ransom Saying. He wrote:⁴⁸

It has been while living for a long time amongst drug addicts that another explanation came to me. The addict is, in effect, at the same time his own executioner and the victim. He is both the ransomer and the hostage. Based on this observation, I realised that it is the same with all human beings. Because we are disconnected from our authentic divine source, we have become our own executioners. We are slaves to our disordered desires, to our egotism.

And there we perhaps have it.⁴⁹

- **First millennium** – Christus Victor Theory – ransomed to the Devil.
- **Second millennium** – Satisfaction-cum-Penal Substitutionary Theory – ransomed to God.
- **Third millennium** – Liberation Theory – ransomed to ourselves.

What kind of love is this, that absorbs all the violence of all the world, even that of the Christchurch gunman whose name, consistent with the practice of the New Zealand prime minister, I have not uttered; but which we should utter when we pray for him (*pause for silence*), Brenton Tarrant.

This is a love that, on a green hill far away, shows up violence – for what it is and all that it is.

This is a love that shifts the very axis of reality, “that moves the sun and other stars”.⁵⁰

This is a love incarnate, both born in space and time and, since “the beginning”, standing with Saint John’s prologue outwith all bounds of space and time.

“Which wert, and art, and evermore shall be.”⁵¹

In terms of spiritual theology, we are talking here of *apocatastasis*,⁵² of the metaphysics of eternity, of a realised eschatology of “the times of restitution of all things”, the times held in eternity when all is found again, restored again to its original perfection, again.

For the Holy Spirit is *diachronic*. Love cuts through time. And time, as Plato said, is but “a moving image of eternity.”⁵³ And death, therefore, a trick with mirrors; the greater part of who we are never having been born in the first place.

And so, a love that cannot die. To which resurrection – *the* Resurrection, all resurrection – is intrinsic. A realm of being where “I and the Father are one”, indeed, all self-realise as “partakers of the divine nature”.⁵⁴

There lies the meaning that the child who asked our hypothetical question sought after: a path, perhaps, to walk in this, the Third Millennium.

A path to where *the cross absorbs the violence of the world*.

Rejoice.

- 1 Psalms 145:3, KJV.
- 2 Job 13:8-9, NRSV.
- 3 Dorothee Söelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Fortress Press, Mn, 2001.
- 4 John 10:16 ESV.
- 5 Psalms 118:22, own rendition.
- 6 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, SCM, London, (*Introduction to the 1988 New Edition*), p. xxxvii. This rests on the foundation of John 10:10.
- 7 As in various matters, I am grateful to my friend John Sturrock QC (who is I think a member of the PCN) for an email conversation about such music, that sparked off this line of thought.
- 8 *Black Sabbath*, “Paranoid”, 1970,
<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/blacksabbath/paranoid.html>.
I have italicised these lyrics throughout to make clear their source without having to endnote each instance.
- 9 John 10:10.
- 10 Luke 7:32, NRSV, cf. Matthew 11:17.
- 11 Luke 7:35, NRSV.
- 12 Proverbs 8:36, NRSV. Claudia V. Camp’s and Carole R. Fontaine’s excellent commentary in the *HarperCollins Study Bible* draws out the meanings of *sophia* as “Woman Wisdom”.
- 13 The Christchurch gunman, *The Great Replacement*, manifesto of the New Zealand mosque shooter, 2019 (as widely reported, and downloaded from a transient internet site.)
- 14 *The Crazy World of Arthur Brown*, “Fire”, 1968,
<https://genius.com/Arthur-brown-fire-lyrics>
- 15 I John 4:16-18, NIV.
- 16 I provided Brian with the local research material to inform his *Foreword* about Donald Trump’s maternal background. This can be read in the Wipf & Stock edition of *Poacher’s Pilgrimage* or online at
<http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/poacherspilgrimage/Trump.htm>.
- 17 Matthew 18:15.
- 18 Matthew 25:40.
- 19 bell hooks, *All About Love*, William Morrow, NY, 2016.
- 20 Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, CA, 1984.
- 21 Mark 1:4, NIV.
- 22 John 5:8, KJV.
- 23 Raimon Panikkar, “Nine Sutras on Peace”, *Interculture*, XXIV:1, 1991, pp. 49-56, quoted here in the condensed form used in pers. com..
- 24 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Fortress Press, Mn, 1992, p. 297-8.
- 25 Michael J. Sheeran SJ, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983. Sheeran describes how the Jesuits went to learn from the Quakers after Vatican II. Ever since, the Quakers have learned from the Jesuits.
- 26 Michael Birkel, “Leadings and Discernment” in Stephen W. Angell & Pink Dandelion (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford 2013, pp. 245-259.

- 27 For example, the extensive writings of Parker Palmer, and in books like Tova Green & Peter Woodrow, *Insight and Action: How to discover and support a life of integrity and commitment to change*, New Society, Gabriola Island, 1994.
- 28 Pers. com. 11 June 2005, with James Cashen and Christopher Reed of Friends of Hudson.
- 29 Gutiérrez, op. cit., p. xxxviii. The labellings as social, psychology and spiritual are mine.
- 30 Matthew 11:12, NRSV.
- 31 See wider discussion of the subversion of such imperial mores Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, SPCK, 2008.
- 32 Also Matthew 10:28, and Paul's (as attributed to him, but more likely, of one of his schools) is 1 Timothy 2:6.
- 33 Isaiah 53:10.
- 34 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001.
- 35 References for this section to the end, and deeper treatment, are in Alastair McIntosh, *Poacher's Pilgrimage: an Island Journey*, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2016 and Wipf and Stock, Oregon, 2018 with a *Foreword to the US Edition* by Brian D. McLaren.
- 36 Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, again, references to this material in *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, especially Chapter 16, "The Great Cosmic Poacher".
- 37 J. Denny Weaver, "Atonement and the Gospel of Peace" in *Seeking Cultures of Peace: A Peace Church Conversation*, eds. Fernando Enns, Scott Holland & Ann K. Riggs, Cascadia & World Council of Churches, Pennsylvania & Geneva, 2004, pp. 109-123.
- 38 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, 2013, p. 81.
- 39 Rita Nakashima Brock & Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2008.
- 40 Derek Guiton, *A Man that Looks on Glass: Standing up for God in the Religious Society of Friends*, FeedaRead Publishing, 2015, Pp. 49 & 236.
- 41 Matthew 5:8.
- 42 Etzel Cardeña, Steven J. Lynn & Stanley Krippner, *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, American Psychological Association, Washington, 2000.
- 43 See discussion of W.T. Stace's seven criteria of core mystical experience in David M. Wulff's chapter, "Mystical Experience" in Cardeña et al., op. cit., pp. 397-440.
- 44 Pope Francis, *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*, The Vatican, <https://goo.gl/Gwify9>.
- 45 John 18:11; Luke 22:51.
- 46 John 18:36-37.
- 47 Paul Evdokimov, *In the World, Of the Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, NY, 2001, p. 191.
- 48 Abbé Pierre, *Mon Dieu ... Pourquoi ? Plon*, Paris, pp. 69-70, own translation.
- 49 Chapters 20 & 21 of *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, "The Temple of Crò Naomh" and "The Heart of the Sun", also for discussion of time and eternity, Chapter 15, "The Baptism of the Gods".

- 50 Dante, *Paradiso*.
- 51 “Holy, Holy, Holy” (an old hymn by Bishop Reginald Heber), <http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/hymns/heber4.html>
- 52 Acts 3:21, “the time of restitution of all things”.
- 53 Plato, *Timaeus*, 37 c-4, Jowett.
- 54 John 10:30, NIV; 2 Peter 1:4 KJV. Such mystical eschatology is known as theōsis, divinisation or deification in the Orthodox traditions of Eastern Christianity. See, for example, Stephen Finland & Vladimir Kharlamov, *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 2006. Also, Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, New City Press, London, 1993.

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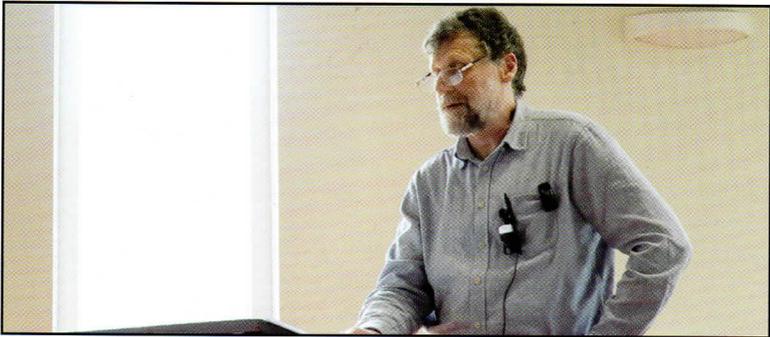
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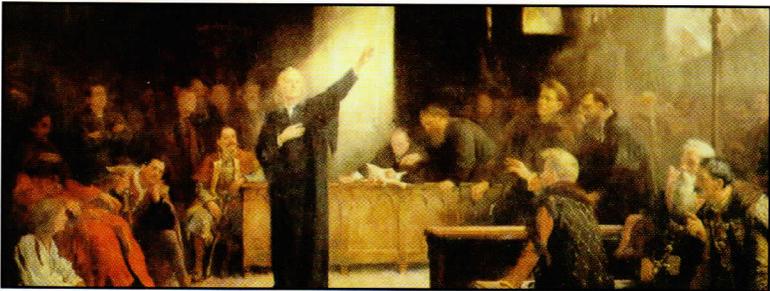
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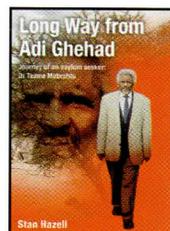
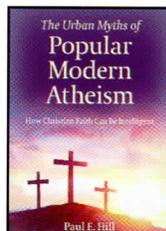
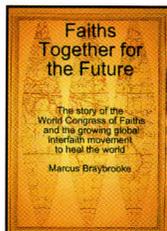
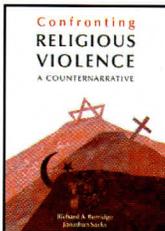
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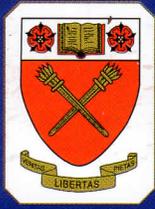


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