CROSS Purposes

a forum for theological dialogue

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CROSS Purposes

The new year is hardly new any more, but *Cross Purposes* returns with our first issue for 2011, brimming with theological discussion and debate.

Clive W. Ayre responds to Michael Champion on creation (*CP* 20), disputing whether the doctrine of creation from nothing can really "bear the weight" that was claimed for it, and also addressing questions of ecotheology and imagery for God. Michael Champion replies briefly.

Garry Deverell's sermon on the "widow's mite" turns this familiar story upon its head and sees in it a parable of God's boundless and self-sacrificing grace, in contrast to the dominant system of religion or karma. God in Christ makes possible a "revolution", turning from the very worst possible to the very best.

The *credo* series continues with a contribution from Christiaan Mostert. In a change of plans from our original advertising, he addresses the statement "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church"; the descent into hell will be tackled in a later issue. Christiaan argues that the question of what the church *is* (as distinct from how it should be shaped) has been neglected. He suggests that some constructive answers to this question can be found in models from ancient Israel of God's chosen people as an "intensely textual community".

Finally, we are delighted to reprint an interview with Marilynne Robinson, author of *Gilead* and *Home*. She is a writer of deep theological sensitivity whose work has been warmly received among Christians and non-Christians alike. This reflective conversation touches on her view of theology, the "Protestant imagination", poetry, hymnody and the public consciousness of our generation, among many other things.

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op. cit.

Clive W. Ayre

God, Creation and Care

Michael Champion's article "Creator of Heaven and Earth" (*CP* 20) raises a number of questions and I believe calls for a response. At the outset I have to say that I agree with his conclusion that the doctrine of creation is important in helping us to value the whole creation and to unmask its unjust practices and exploitative structures; I have a few difficulties in the route he has taken to get there.

At the outset I need to express two notes of caution relating to the use of the Apostles' Creed. I recall Dr. Ian Grimmett in the 1960s insisting that a creed is an expression of the faith of the church and not necessarily of the personal beliefs of all worshippers. I found that wider context to be helpful. For me, the need to "affirm every other article in the creed" raised a number of questions that had nothing to do with creation, and was therefore a distraction. The other cautionary note is that while the historic creeds are important, the ultimate authority in establishing the faith of the church resides elsewhere.

While I probably cannot cover all the issues raised or implied in the paper, I propose to deal with three main issues: the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo,* elements of ecotheology, and finally our understanding of God.

Creatio ex Nihilo

The Bible begins with the grand affirmation that "In the beginning God created…", and in many ways it is at that point we begin. Creation represents an affirmation about the world and us. In all its finitude and limitation, creation is good. This is in sharp contrast with a Neoplatonic dualism that still tends to prevail in some circles—the belief that spirit is good and matter is evil, that "earth" equates with "dirty" and from "the world" we move quickly to "the flesh and the devil!" But two brief observations may be in order. First, when John 3:16 speaks about God loving the world, the Greek word is *kosmos;* so also in 2 Corinthians when Paul speaks of God reconciling the world, where *kosmos* introduces a wider dimension. Second, if the incarnation says nothing else, it says that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth".

Creation introduces a broader and deeper dimension to our understanding, and includes not only what we understand as ecology or nature, but also the universe itself. The key is the faith or belief that God created matter and is the source of life, and that this is God's world. Traditionally that relates to the concept of *creatio* *ex nihilo,* the belief that God created everything from nothing. This approach has long been dominant, although it is important to note that it is a construct of the early church, and is certainly not unassailable in modern theology. As Schwarz rightly asserts,[1] it is by no means self-evident from the Genesis text. It may well be argued that the alternative of *creatio ex materia*, or creation from existing matter, is closer to the Genesis text and the Hebrew word *bara*. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep…" (Gen. 1:1-2a). It is worth noting Macquarrie's argument that the distinction between *nihilo* and *materia* is not very clear, and "a matter that is formless and completely without any determinate characteristics would be indistinguishable from nothing…".[2] Further, it introduces some very difficult and complex ideas and arguments, some of which owe far more to Greek philosophy than they do to Hebrew thought, such as the gap between Being and non-Being, or the question of how or when time began.

Thus, my argument is not that a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is wrong, but rather that it is open to challenge and I am not sure that it can carry the weight that Champion wants it to bear. But that said, it offers the important affirmation that, as Migliore puts it, "God alone is the source of all that exists",[3] that creation is based on the divine initiative alone. Consequently, creator and creature are by no means on an equal footing.

Champion argues that "the creative command entails an obedient response" (27), and goes on to relate that to the Exodus and the call of the disciples. Another way of looking at that is in terms of *kenosis,* or in other words that creation takes place through a divine withdrawal that leaves space for matter. Brunner, for example, argues that "The kenosis, which reaches its paradoxical climax in the cross of Christ, began with the creation of the world".[4] But these are difficult ideas, and there is a speculative element involved. Thus, the important point behind *creatio ex nihilo* is not merely the belief that God "made everything", but also that God alone is the basis of meaning and value in all things.

Ecotheology

I take issue with Champion's reference to "a flagship book for so-called 'eco[logical] theology'" on three counts. First, there is nothing "so-called" about ecotheology; ecotheology is now a well established branch of theology, and it is served by an enormous and expanding volume of literature. At the present time, under the oversight of Prof. Ernst Conradie of South Africa, scholars from around the world (including me) are involved in preparation for a World Symposium on "Christian Faith and the Earth" in 2012, designed to assess the current state of the debate around ecotheology. Second, while the book edited by Hessel and Ruether is one of the volumes that abound, it is by no means a "flagship" book; and Keller, who receives particular attention from Champion, is not (in my view) a major ecotheologian. That category is reserved for scholars like Moltmann, Deane-Drummond, and others. Third, perhaps the fact that "the doctrine of creation from nothing hardly rates a mention in 614 pages" is saying no more than that there are many theologians who do not put anything like the same weight on the doctrine as does Champion.

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[1] *Genesis.*

[2] *Principles of Christian Theology*, 15

[3] *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 100.

[4] Cited in Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 160.

Ecofeminist philosophy is certainly implicated in Champion's paper; this is a term that covers a wide range of views, and those views are not necessarily Christian or even compatible with each other. However, in general terms most ecofeminists would agree with the assertion that a hierarchical view of the world, with its assumed superiority and inferiority, is the main cause of the oppression of both women and nature. Ruether's Christian ecofeminism, for example, brings together elements of ecology and feminism "in their full, or deep forms, and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures".[5] This is a complex matter, and one that can readily be argued.

The other difficulty here is that process theology, together with the easily distorted views of McFague and Ruether, cannot be dismissed in the space of a few sentences. But that leads me to reflect on images of God.

Images of God

Again there are many aspects to consider, such as God and gender and the important matter of the triunity of God. But I want to refer in particular to two other elements of the image we have of God. McFague is undoubtedly correct in her observation that "the monarchical model, the relation of God and the world in which the divine, all-powerful king controls his subjects and they in turn offer him loyal obedience, is the oldest and still the most prevalent one",[6] and that this model has political implications. I am sure that many would agree with that perception of God as the monarchical male ruler of people. Marcus Borg joins McFague and others in rejecting this model,[7] and in doing so points to a number of implications of this approach. It implies a "radical separation" of God from nature, and that separation of the world from the sacred results in a downgrading of nature. Further, it reinforces notions of dominion and anthropocentrism, leading to the conclusion that "nature has instrumental value, not intrinsic value".[8] Borg goes on to assert that such a monarchical concept of God goes hand in hand with an oppressive political system to which it gives legitimacy. Such a correlation of a monarchical view of God and societal structures has inevitable implications for gender issues in a male dominated society.

After considering a monarchical view, Borg helpfully proposes what he calls a "Spirit model" of God,[9] which gives a radically different and more holistic meaning to some traditional concepts. In this understanding, primacy is given to "relationship, intimacy and belonging".[10] Drawing on the Bible itself, Borg projects images of God as Mother, Intimate Father, Lover, and Journey Companion, in addition to a number of non-anthropomorphic metaphors.

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[5] *Gaia and God*, 2.

[6] *The Body of God*, 138.

[7] *The God We Never Knew.*

[8] Ibid., 68.

There is broad (but not universal) agreement in the literature that the biblical God is panentheistic, a word that literally means "everything in God". The traditional view of God as radically transcendent, in which God is pictured as "wholly other", totally beyond humankind and the mundane, is only part of the story. As Borg suggests, panentheism also perceives God as "*the encompassing Spirit* in whom everything that is, is. The universe is not separate from God, but *in* God".[11] McFague projects a very similar image, which she believes "makes sense" in terms of an incarnational understanding of Christianity and an organic interpretation of modern science.[12] Moreover, she develops that approach in terms of "the body of God", which of course is not intended in a literal sense. In *Models of God*, for example, McFague tries to re-conceptualize God as Lover, Friend, and Mother, in ways that may transform Christian assumptions and prejudices. Ecological implications are evident in her view of "the world as God's body, which God—and we—mother, love, and befriend. God is incarnated or embodied in our world, in both cosmological and anthropological ways".[13]

Thus, the biblical God is both transcendent and immanent; or as Borg puts it, the terms reflect the "moreness" and the "presence" of God.[14] Similarly, McFague talks of "thinking of God's transcendence in an immanental way".[15] A biblical example would be Isaiah 6:1, in which the prophet begins to describe his call. In his vision, he sees the Lord "sitting on a throne, high and lofty", yet "the hem of his robe filled the temple". The wonder of the natural world and our sense of God are closely linked.

Care of Creation

I am not as confident as Champion that "environmental issues hold centre stage in contemporary politics"; they *ought* to, but that is another matter. There are two imperatives if we believe in a creator God and value the natural world as creation. The first imperative is that we understand deeply what we as humans are doing to our only home—the planet Earth. Even if some minor points of the eco crisis may be disputed, more than enough has been written to establish conclusively that we are putting our own and indeed all life at grave risk by our recklessness and greed.

The second imperative is that we take to heart an understanding of a biblical doctrine of creation, whether or not we are able to agree on all the finer details of such a doctrine. After all, it is not just a matter of what we believe in an academic sense, but rather something that leads us at all levels of life to participate actively in the care of creation. Ecotheology relates directly with a theology of Earth Mission, and therefore must be regarded as part of the mainstream mission of the church; but that opens up a whole new area!

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[9] Ibid., 71-9.

[10] Ibid., 71.

[11] *The Heart of Christianity*, 66.

[12] *The Body of God*, 150.

[13] *Models of God*, 184.

[14] *The Heart of Christianity*, 66.

[15] *The Body of God*, vii.

Deane-Drummond was right to propose that we should learn to love creation as a gift of God's grace, and creation care leads on directly from that point. Conradie adds a note of urgency to the need to recover a viable theology of creation, and that "what is required is a fundamental change of direction, a *metanoia*". The need could also be expressed in terms of an awakening to what the Christian faith means when it talks about creation.

Clive W. Ayre is Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the University of the Sunshine Coast and Green Church Advocate for the Qld Synod.

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Michael Champion Replies…

Creation from nothing claims that created reality is other than God who really is different from his creation. My argument might be restated in the claim that creation from nothing is a way of speaking about creaturely limitation and the love of real difference. Creation from nothing guarantees that creaturely limitation is not the sheer exertion of divine power by the strong over the weak.

It grounds creaturely freedom, and free and joyful creaturely response to God. It has direct and compelling implications for our participation in God's mission for the renewal of created reality, both in care for nature and in the transformation of unjust social structures.

Clive Ayre seems to disagree that creation from nothing has such implications. He agrees that creation from nothing is about the finitude of creatures, that it is the ground of the claim that creation is good and that God's act of creation applies to all created reality. But Ayre's response largely restates some arguments I sought to show lacked coherence. In doing so, he seems to propose models of creaturely existence which I think minimize the good limitation of creation, a key part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. I reply in brief, grateful for Ayre's engagement with my original piece.

Creation from nothing: Ayre is certainly right that creation from nothing cannot be read directly from Genesis; doctrine should not rely on biblical literalism. No less a thinker than Thomas Aquinas in fact believed that something closer to *creatio ex materia* could be made compatible with Christianity, although Christian exegesis (drawing on Jewish thought, New Testament texts, Greek philosophy and rebuttals of it and Gnosticism) has argued for creation from nothing (May outlines the early development of the doctrine). My original piece argued that creation from nothing can bear the weight the tradition has placed upon it. I can see nothing in Ayre's piece which constructs an argument to the contrary.

Ecotheology: I would agree with Ayre that much ecofeminism is neither Christian nor mutually coherent. The relation of ecofeminism like that of Ruether's (which Ayre identifies as Christian) to creation from nothing was central to my original article. Where Ruether reads creation from nothing as an instantiation of relations of domination, I argued that creation from nothing is emphatically not a divine act of power over a pre-existing substrate, since there is no such thing. Thus Ruether and ecofeminists like her have no argument with creation from nothing. Difference need not imply domination and patriarchy: God as Trinity is the instantiation of "transcendental difference as peace" (Milbank). Creation from nothing, as an act of such a God, is similarly the ground for love of difference. (Ayre criticizes me for using Keller (Professor of Constructive Theology at Drew). I should have noted that she approaches the question from process theology. Her article, and her book *Face of the Deep*, to my mind distil creatively and thoughtfully many of the themes of less careful ecotheology and process theology.)

Images for God: The tradition is certainly enriched by multiple images for God which are appropriate in different contexts. As my original argument makes clear, along with those who have held to creation from nothing, I share Ayre's rejection of aspects of the monarchical model. The so-called "broad agreement" that the biblical God is panentheistic would come as a surprise, I think, to most theologians over the centuries. A key objection is that seeing creation as in a perpetual and largely undifferentiated relation to God is difficult to reconcile with creaturely limitation, something Ayre affirms and which is central to Christian accounts of the goodness of creation. Images like those Ayre discusses have their place in Christian experience but in the context of the doctrine of creation, many impose conceptual strains which seem to me to hinder exposition of key Christian claims.

Finally, I agree that in the exposition of doctrine, as in other areas of Christian life, *metanoia* is always needed. I'm convinced that such conversion of mind will lead the church further into the riches of the doctrine of creation from nothing.

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continued from page 27

Do you read any contemporary theology? Has there been anyone since Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr who you think has advanced theological thinking? Is it all just about the theological past and retrieving what has been forgotten?

A lot of it seems to be written with that project in mind. That perhaps is the characteristic posture—that theology is written as retrieval. In many cases, this is the impetus behind the Reformation, after all, to try to reach back to a more authentic Christianity and so on. Over and over again, this is done. I can't really keep abreast of things well enough. I read over too wide an area as far as time is concerned to be up on many contemporary things, but my favourite theologian of the relatively recent period is Karl Barth, who died in the late '50s, who was a very honourable figure relative to the rise of Hitler and so on—he and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was another great theologian. They were both very serious people. I have a feeling that there has been a pressure away from seriousness in much modern thought, as if we could sort of scale reality down to a size that we are more comfortable dealing with. That might be a prejudice, but I feel that we have not come up to the standards of seriousness that others have reached at earlier moments.

The loss of seriousness seems to me to be, in effect, a loss of hope. I think that the thing that made people rise to real ambition, real gravity was the sense of posterity, for example—a word that I can remember hearing quite often when I was a child and I never hear anymore. People actually wanted to make the world good for people in generations that they would never see. It makes people think in very large terms to try to liberate women, for example, or to try to eliminate slavery. Of course, we have recrudescence of slavery all over the world now. It's sort of, "Well, we won't think about that. It's too bad." I'm really disturbed by the degree to which I don't hear people saying, "Are we leaving the world better than we found it?". I think we are a generation that perhaps could not answer in the affirmative, and it is the evasion of the larger responsibility of being only one generation in what one hopes will be an infinite series of fruitful generations. There is a selfishness in refusing to understand that we are passing through; others will come, and they deserve certain courtesies and certain considerations from us.

through a glass darkly

Garry Deverell

God's Revolution

a sermon on Hebrews 9:24-28 and Mark 12:38-44

In the *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot wrote this:

> *…In order to arrive there,*
> *to arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,*
> *You need to go by a way in which there is no ecstasy.*
> *In order to arrive at what you do not know*
> *You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.*
> *In order to possess what you do not possess*
> *You must go by the way of dispossession.*
> *In order to arrive at what you are not*
> *You must go through the way in which you are not.*
> *And what you do not know is the only thing you know*
> *And what you own is what you do not own*
> *And where you are is where you are not.*

There is a revolution from God, an impossible turning in which the very worst that may visit us in life is able to reconfigure itself as the very best. It is a revolution that resists explanation or representation. It happens in our experience. We know that it happens, and we can recognize it when it happens to others. But we struggle to understand or tell it, to name its dark contours even for ourselves. To my mind, the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus is our best telling of this revolution. "Best" because here the story unfolds from our lips, from the lips of the church, and yet it does not come from us. We hear it, first of all, from God. What we confess with our lips and know in our hearts begins not with our own hearts, but with an event that happens in the heart of God.

The gospel story of the widow who gave all she had, all she had to live on, is a version of that telling. Although we have it here, in Mark, as a story about discipleship, an allegory and example for us of what a disciple of Jesus would do, an earlier form of the story (possibly that found in the Gospel of Thomas) would probably have cast the woman as a symbol not of the disciple, first of all, but of God. On the lips of Jesus, the woman's willingness to part with everything that she has to live on would then have had a pre-eminently theological meaning: that it is God who sacrifices everything in God's encounter with human beings. Even here in Mark's version, the traces of that shocking truth are visible.

Consider, if you will, what has happened in the story so far. In chapter 1 we read that Jesus had come to inaugurate a kingdom, the kingdom of God. In chapters 2 through 7 we read stories about the signs of that kingdom's arrival: the preaching of good news, healings, exorcisms, and (not least) the shattering of human traditions about what is right and what is wrong. In chapters 8 & 10, Jesus tells his disciples that salvation comes only for the one who is willing to die, to be baptized into death, to become the slave of all. Also in chapter 10, in what I believe to be the key utterance of the gospel, Jesus declares that salvation, while impossible for human beings, is indeed possible for God. Can you see where Mark is leading us with that story-line? To suffering and to crucifixion, as a direct and necessary consequence of God's encounter with human beings. But also to the revolution revealed there, that strange turning in which death becomes life, poverty becomes riches, and the loss of self the key to a newly made identity that God gives freely. So what Mark is trying to tell us in this stark story about a widow who gives away even the little she has, is nothing other than what he is telling us in the gospel as a whole. That one can never be saved from life's cruelties unless one is willing to confess and acknowledge one's own involvement in the system that perpetuates those cruelties, giving oneself over, instead, to a different logic, the logic of God which is called by the beautiful name of grace.

> "There are two powers in the world: the power of religion or karma, and the power of gospel or grace."

What I mean is this. For Mark—and, indeed, for the Letter to the Hebrews before him—there are two powers or logics in the world: the power of religion or karma, and the power of the gospel or of grace. In Mark's world, as in ours, it was the power of karma that appeared to reign supreme. Karma is the power of necessity, you know, the compulsion we feel to "get ahead" by paying our dues, working hard, and keeping our patrons happy. Of course, we would not feel such compulsion unless we believed in karma ourselves, if we did not want to get ahead, if we were not already invested in the very system that enslaves us because we believe it will reward us. Yet this is where most of us are. Compelled, entranced, invested. Yet, the karmic system can only ever lead us to despair, for it condemns us to reap only what we sow. It is like capitalism, which delivers to us only what we produce ourselves—images of the real, but not the real itself. The real eludes us, for we are not God. We cannot create even ourselves, let alone what we need for happiness or peace! This widow of Israel, for example, was probably caught in a double-bind, a circle of despair with no exit. Like all good Jews, she longed to be part of the people of the redeemed, those who were acceptable to God because they obeyed the priestly law. Yet, she wanted to survive as well, to live. When her male patrons died or put her aside, she had to turn to activities condemned by the law in order to feed herself and her children—to prostitution or stealing or slavery in the houses of idolators. The only way to achieve both ends, to stay alive and ritually clean at the same time, was to accept a form of moral blackmail, to pay the priestly caste a large portion of her ill-gotten earnings in return for their acceptance and protection. Unfortunately, her willingness to do so almost certainly kept her in a state of perpetual want and need. It also perpetuated and repeated the very system that oppressed her, so that nothing was able to change. She reaped what she sowed, her poverty and need creating nothing but more poverty and more need.

Thank God there is another power in the world, the power of grace! Grace, as I have been telling you for some time now, is the opposite of karma or religion or myth. It is like the blessing of children of which the Psalmist speaks. Children cannot be produced by the machinations of our human longings, needs or planning. They are not a reward for our labour or a right to be possessed. Children come, as many of you know very well, as a sheer gift from God, without reason or foretelling. Children are therefore signs to us of grace, that condition of blessedness and peace which comes not from ourselves but from somewhere other, from God. Grace is that which comes to question, to interrupt, to displace and even destroy the cycle of despair which is karma. With the gift of grace, we reap what we have not sown, and live in the power of that which we have not produced or made for ourselves. In grace we experience the love of God shown in Christ's self-sacrifice. In Christ, God is totally for us, even to the point of so identifying with us in our karmic cycle of despair that he suffered the full consequence of what that cycle produces: nothingness, and only nothingness.

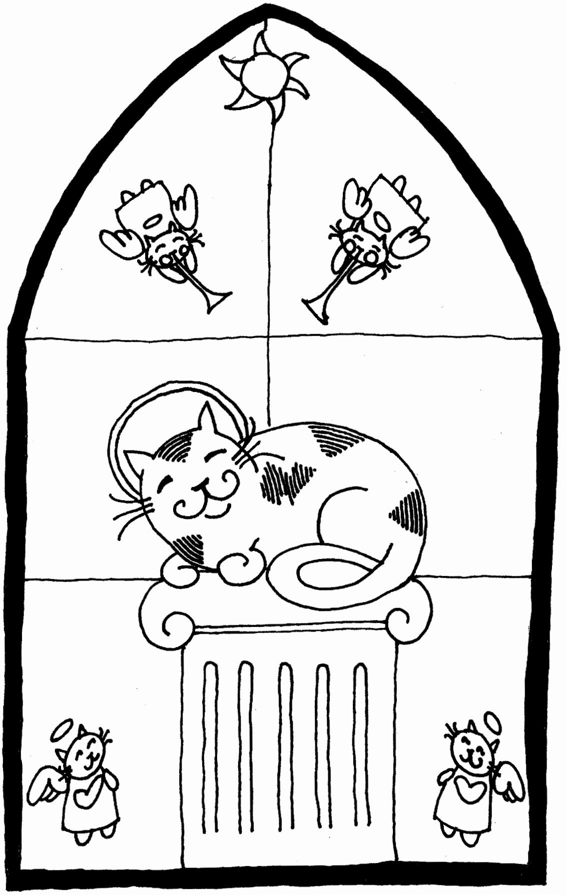
Of course, having given itself over to nothingness and to death, grace is not exhausted. It rises, phoenix-like, from the ashes of its own destruction, and proceeds to infect the karmic system like a virus which cannot be quashed. In the gospel story, this power or property is called resurrection. It is the perseverance of love in the face of death and despair, the never-depleted surplus of possibility over necessity. In Mark's world, the widows of Israel were forever caught in a web of karmic despair. In trying to escape its demands they succeeded only in fulfilling its demands. Not so, we are told, with the widow who gave her all, all she had to live on. In the context of the gospel as a whole, we must understand this act evangelically, that is, as a picture or metaphor of salvation. As for Christ himself, and for all who follow his way of the cross, it is only by finally allowing the karmic system to have what it seeks—our very lives—that we shall find ourselves free of its determinations. For while she, and we who are Christ's, indeed give our lives daily to the system we inhabit, that system need not possess us thereby. For we are Christ's, and our truest selves are hidden with Christ in God, as the apostle says. Therefore we are being freed from the desire to get ahead, to succeed in terms determined by the law of karma. We are people who know a love which is stronger even than death, and the gift of a life and future we have not produced. Therefore we choose, over and over again, in all the minutiae of life, to serve our neighbour without thought of cost or ego. For the price is already paid. What can karma take from us that Christ has not already given?

The Matrix movie called *Revolutions* is, in many ways, the third volume in a three-fold re-telling of the gospel as I have proclaimed it today. In that story, it is at the precise moment when the new Son of Man, Neo Anderson, gives himself over to the power of karmic inevitability, that the revolution begins. As he lies crucified upon the power of the machines, absorbed, it seems, into the power of the same old thing, a miracle begins to happen. What was absorbed begins to absorb. What was dead now begins to infect the whole system with life. What had been given away now returns more powerfully to inhabit all the world, bringing light and life and peace where once there was only darkness, death and enmity. So it can be for us. Jesus promises that if we will face our deepest fear—the loss of our very souls—and if we will trust in his love, then we shall live, even though we die. "In my end is my beginning," wrote T. S. Eliot. Let us give thanks that it is so.

Garry Deverell is an editor of *Cross Purposes*.

double take

Hilary Howes



THE ADVENTURES OF
MAGNIFICAT
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"For behold, from hence forth
all generations shall call me
blessed"

Christiaan Mostert

Towards a Theology of the Church

Introduction

If the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation are the central doctrines of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the church stands arguably in the next rank. The church's teaching about God and about Jesus Christ differentiates Christians from all others in their core beliefs, even if they share many other social, moral, cultural and political commitments with people of other religions and of none. For those who believe in God, the world is understood differently. Belief in God is like the sign before the brackets which changes everything inside the brackets.

To understand God as holy Trinity, the three-personed God, depends on how we understand the person of Jesus Christ. The doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation were inseparably intertwined in their development in the first four or five Christian centuries. In systematic terms too, they cannot be disconnected except at serious cost. Jesus Christ cannot be understood apart from his intimate relationship with God, which begs ontological questions, and after the resurrection the God of Israel can no longer be understood in isolation from Jesus of Nazareth.[1]

But why speak so soon of this strange community which confesses itself (in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed's phrase) as the "one holy catholic and apostolic church"? It is because of the church's understanding of God, the God known in and through Jesus Christ. This God desires the salvation of the world (1 Tim. 2:4), something that can only be achieved in worldly events. For this the *logos*, who was with God and who *was* God, became flesh (John 1:1, 14), living among us and renewing and transforming human life through his presence. Gerhard Lohfink writes, "It can only be that God begins in a small way, at one single place in the world. There must be a place, visible, tangible, where the salvation of the world can begin."[2] Not only is this to speak of the incarnation; it also requires a theology of the church.

A Theological View of the Church

In particular, it requires a *theological* account of the church. Largely, when

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[1] Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1.44, argues plausibly that the New Testament's answer to the question, "Who is God?", can only be the new descriptively identifying answer, "Whoever raised Jesus from the dead".

[2] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?*, 27.

people discuss or read about the church, their story is anything but theological. What is typically described is the empirical church, the church that can be observed in all its painful ambiguity. Many people, not excluding ministers of the church, think of the church mostly along the lines of a voluntary society, a social club or a community service organization. We think in sociological, psychological, administrative or corporate terms.[3] (It is more than a small irony that a Synod that has adopted risk-taking as one of its four "On the Way Together" priorities should invest so heavily in risk management.) What is needed is a *theological* view of the church, the church in its relation to God, the church as the People of God or, more confrontingly, as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27, Eph. 4:12), or as the anticipatory sign of the reign (kingdom) of God. It is undeniably a human community: it has an institutional life, it owns property, it has laws and regulations and it has an organizational structure. These things, however, do not constitute the church's essence.

The church did not bring itself into being; it is not the result of the collective decision of a few followers of Jesus to form a society for his remembrance. There were, as a matter of fact, those who, shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, had an experience of him as present to them, not relegated to the realm of the dead, who came together to worship God, to pray together, to reflect on what had happened to them and to await Jesus' appearance (*parousia*). In the process they began to form a kind of *common life*.

But this is not to say nearly enough. According to the NT, the church is called into being by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This can hardly be taken to mean that Jesus directly established a community, notwithstanding the controversial passage in which the Matthean Christ declares that he will build his church on Peter, the rock (Matt. 16:18), which is almost certainly a post-Easter conviction. Unlike the leaders of other contemporary movements, Jesus "did not found a fellowship of followers separate from the rest of the people but proclaimed to the whole people the nearness of his God to whom they were committed as the covenant people".[4] He called people to live under the reign of God. It is the rejection of this summons by the majority that was instrumental in causing the post-Easter church to come into being as a community separate from, though never unrelated to, Israel.

The sixteenth century Reformers spoke of the church as *creatura Verbi,* the creation of the Word. In this context the "Word" is to be understood both as Jesus Christ and as the gospel; the church owes its foundation to both. The story of Pentecost (Acts 2) gives expression to the fact that the Spirit is not merely the transforming and enabling power of individual believers, but brings the church to life and empowers and renews it in its ongoing life. The WCC convergence document, *The Nature and Mission*

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[3] "Corporate" here meaning "business" or "company", not "communal".

[4] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3.29.

of the Church states at the outset that the Church is “the creature of God’s Word and of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to God, is God’s gift and cannot exist by and for itself.”[5]

The Church as a Chosen People

If it is correct to say that the church is *called* into being, we have entered the delicate and controversial area of the doctrine of election. Because it is mostly understood in an individual sense and therefore associated with the idea of predestination, this doctrine is widely rejected. However, it should not be considered only (nor primarily) under the heading of “salvation”, particularly in relation to the question of its limited or universal scope. This doctrine makes a profound contribution to the doctrine of the church, enabling us to see it as an extension of the *election* of Israel.[6] Israel understood itself theologically as God’s chosen people, chosen out of all the nations (Deut. 7:6-8, 10:15).

The church is also a people, a community, a nation, called out from Israel and the nations, for the purpose of declaring God’s salvific mission in and to the world. The chosenness of Israel as a “holy people” (Exod. 19:6) has its parallel in the New Testament: “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). The sense that the church is “called out” from the nations for a particular purpose, not simply as a matter of privilege, is reflected in the name by which the earliest Christians called themselves, the *ekklesia tou Theou,* the “called-out” people of God (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1, Gal. 1:13, Acts 20:28).

Understanding the church as part of divine election is as important as it is uncommon in contemporary ecclesiological discussion. It has always played a significant role in the Reformed understanding of the church. Migliore sees the goal of divine election as “the creation of a people of God and not simply the salvation of solitary individuals or the privileging of particular nations or ethnic groups”.[7] More magisterially, Barth says, “The election of grace, as the election of Jesus Christ, is simultaneously the eternal election of the one community of God by the existence of which Jesus Christ is to be attested to the whole world and the whole world summoned to faith in Jesus Christ.”[8]

> “Everywhere the church is obsessive about being ‘relevant’ to the world; it appears to find the question of what the church *is* an irrelevance.”

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[5] *The Nature and Mission of the Church* §9.

[6] For the best discussion of this known to me see Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, ch. 14.

[7] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 89.

[8] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 195.

The church does not then begin simply with the commissioning of the disciples after the resurrection of Jesus but has a place in the divine intentionality from eternity. One of the great passages about election, Ephesians 3:7-12, includes the church. The plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, the wisdom of God, the news of the boundless riches of Christ, is to be made known to everyone *through the church*, "in accordance with the eternal purpose that God has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord". This warrants a robust theological claim for the church: it is a chosen instrument in the *economy* of God. Its existence is not merely the outcome of human decisions but a matter of divine election.

The church is the setting in which faith is awakened and nurtured; it is the sphere in which salvation is received and "worked out" (Phil. 2:12). The church is activated by the Spirit to be an anticipatory sign and an instrument of the reign of God. It is a sign of the human society at which God's eternal election and salvific "economy" aim. The church is, of course, a lamentably imperfect sign of this reconciled people. As the *Basis of Union* states, the Uniting Church "belongs to the people of God *on the way* to the promised end" (§18). We are "a pilgrim people, always *on the way* towards a promised goal" (§3). The fulness of a reconciled humankind in a new creation is an eschatological reality, not attainable until the kingdom of God comes in its fulness.

The prophet known as Second Isaiah (while Israel/Judah was in exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC) urged the exiles not to regard their election as a possession to be jealously guarded. As a light to the nations, Israel has a wider mission (Is. 42:6; 49:6). This is true also of the church. It must never forget that its election is for a universal mission, something national (and local) churches do not unfailingly remember. Its election is indeed a great privilege, but it places the church under a heavy imperative of mission to the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth. (This is the reason why mission and *ecumenism* are integrally connected and why the division of the church into separate churches is a scandal and a hindrance to the church's mission.)

A theologically informed view of the church is essential if the church is to be faithful to its calling and its mission. The church is easily tempted to live by inertia, though there is no long-term future in that. Unless it is theologically aware, it is also an easy victim to ideology of one kind or another or one fashion after another. It is easy to see where the church's blind-spots have been in the past; much harder to see our own. Every generation of Christians needs to be formed by a substantial doctrine of the church, just as it needs for its own faithfulness and wellbeing a Christian doctrine of God and rich doctrine of the person and salvific work of Jesus Christ.

A Textual Community

As suggested above, there are important continuities between Israel—understood in theological terms rather than contemporary national and political terms—as well as a decisive discontinuity. The break between Israel and the church, which will not be overcome this side of the eschaton, should not blind us to the fact that together Israel and the church constitute the one people of God.[9] Neither has the right to "disenfranchise" the other. Israel's election stands no less than the church's, and for both as gift and challenge.

The church has more to learn from Israel, however, than the meaning of its election. With Israel, the church is a textual community. The three great monotheistic faiths of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all lay claim to the description, "People of the Book". To be a textual community is to have sacred writings with an authoritative status, though the ways in which this status is understood varies widely across these religions and within them.

To be a textual community implies being a hermeneutical community, intensively concerned with the task of interpreting these "authoritative" texts. What does interpretation mean? What are the limits of hermeneutical freedom? With whom does the responsibility of interpretation mainly lie? The texts, always interpreted—there is no interpretation-free reading of texts—offer a narrative by which to understand and shape our lives. They offer a counter-narrative to the prevailing narratives that shape our culture. To the extent that the church knows itself to be fundamentally a counter-cultural movement, it will commit itself to a continual and rigorous engagement with its sacred texts, its "holy writ", characterized by obedient listening and relentless questioning.

These texts are not monolithic, one-dimensional or seamless. While they are undoubtedly for those of simple faith as well as those of greater learning—wisdom, of course, not confined to the latter—these texts are not susceptible to facile harmonization. They invite and reward sustained and rigorous reflection, both for the purpose of spirituality and discipleship and for deepening theological understanding of God's being and God's economy of salvation.

That part of the church's sacred text which it has received from Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures, is sometimes surprisingly instructive for the church. Two decades ago Walter Brueggemann, a perspicacious interpreter of these scriptures and a prolific writer on their theology, published an article entitled, "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture".[10] In a time of great tension in the church about styles of worship, it is important to say that models of the church are not synonymous with styles of worship. Any model of the church must have worship at its centre; otherwise it would not be the church. But styles of worship are plotted on a different map.

Brueggemann is clear that there is no "single or normative model" of church life.[11] Particular models gain their power in different cultural contexts or circumstances, which is not to say that they are "dictated by cultural reality". Yet they must "take careful account of the particular time and circumstance into which God's people are called". Brueggemann's explorations into the Old Testament have led him to suggest "larger lines of reflection" for thinking about the shape of the church in our own time. He identifies three different models of the religious, cultural and socio-political life of Israel, each of them perceptible at a particular time in its history. He suggests that the church stands to learn something from this experience of its elder sibling.

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[9] For a superb treatment of this see Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, §34, 195-205. See also Mostert, "Reconciliation and the Church", esp. 199-208.

[10] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture", 128-38.

Models Drawn from Ancient Israel

The three models proposed by Brueggemann are the model of monarchy, the model of detachment from power structures and established patterns, and the exilic model. These descriptions need some further content.

1. At the centre of the Old Testament is the Jerusalem establishment, with its *monarchy*. This model, better described as "the temple-royal-prophetic model of the people of God",[12] is largely determinative of "our interpretative imagination".[13] It characterizes the period from 1000 BC to the disappearance of Israel as a political entity in 587 BC, a period of stable religious structures, centred on the temple and the priesthood. There was also a wisdom tradition, which had a certain freedom, and a tradition of prophetic witness, which "regularly voice[d] a more passionate, more radical, and more 'pure' vision of Israelite faith".[14] This model of religious life, with stable religious institutions, sympathetic civic leadership and passionate prophecy, was for a very long period the dominant model of established Christianity in the West.

2. There is, however, an earlier model of life in Israel, namely a model of *detachment from power structures* and established patterns, lasting from the time of Moses (ca. 1250 BC) to the time of David (1000 BC). There was a strong awareness of the theme of exodus and the determination to be an alternative community. There was a process of reinterpreting the Torah and rethinking Israel's faith and community life. Lacking stable institutional structures, Israel had to improvise. Brueggemann says that this period saw, on the one hand, "a practice of enormous borrowing from the culture around [Israel]" and, on the other hand, "a process of deep transformation of what was borrowed, transformed according to its central passion for liberation and covenant".[15] The central metaphor was either that of wilderness or the occupation of land that was not wanted by other nations.

3. Another model followed the monarchy-temple model, beginning with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (587) and continuing into the post-exilic period: the *exilic* and *post-exilic* model.

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[11] Ibid., 129.

[12] Ibid., 131.

[13] Ibid., 129.

[14] Ibid., 130.

[15] Ibid., 132.

The Jewish community in exile had little power and thus little influence in public policy. As happens when the sense of identity is weakened, there was a strong temptation to theological and religious pluralism. At risk of losing the particularity of the faith and "running after other gods", the faith-community developed strategies for the survival of the people's identity. Among these were "the recovery of memory and rootage and connectedness", "the intense practice of hope", and the development of "an intensely textual community".[16]

There is something for the church to learn from each of these models. However, the situation of the church early in the 21st century has most in common with the third of these models. The relative stability many of us knew thirty to forty years ago has gone. We are in a time of great religious and theological pluralism, in which the value of the established ecclesiastical, theological and liturgical traditions is questioned, even discounted altogether. We struggle with the problem of identity, with what it is actually to *be* the church. Disagreement about what the church should *do* stems from uncertainty about what the church essentially *is*. Everywhere the church is obsessive about being "relevant" to the world; it appears to find the question of what the church *is* in theological terms an irrelevance. Colin Gunton lamented the fact that the question of the *being* of the church was "one of the most neglected topics of theology".[17]

As noted above, Israel survived religiously by becoming "an intensely *textual* community". It determined the sacred texts and sought to discern their meaning for its own time and circumstances. At this time the synagogue emerged; also the *Beth Midrah,* the "house of study"; and finally the rabbis, the "teachers of the tradition".[18] The point was to engage with a tradition of speech, reflection and discernment that would help a people to prevail over a hostile culture and power, more hostile than Western Christianity has experienced in recent centuries. Israel knew at that time—modern Jewry may deny it—that "a textless Jew is no Jew at all, sure to be co-opted and sure to disappear into the woodwork".[19]

This judgment about a textless Jew has immediate pertinence to the church of our own time. It is still within the memory of some in today's church that people knew their texts and lived in and from them. An alternative to a new slogan every year might well be the recovery of the sense of being a *storied* people, a *textual* community. This does not require great learning, but it does entail turning again and again to the biblical stories and the biblical reflections on these, and wrestling with their meaning. For there we find the resources to engage with the challenges our macro- and micro-cultures put to us. These stories and the praxis they generate—living reflectively, prayerfully, sacramentally, communally and hopefully—are the vehicle of the gospel.

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[16] Ibid., 134-35.

[17] Gunton, "The Church on Earth", 48.

[18] Brueggemann, 135.

[19] Ibid., 135.

There is no single way in which to become again "an intensely *textual* community". Simply having a bible study group or two is no automatic "fix"; it would depend on the questions that are put to the text and on how we understand the God who uses these texts to address us. It certainly means making our weekly "assembly", whatever its style of worship, a gathering around Word and Sacrament, for only there do we find the nourishment to sustain us in today's world and to form our Christian identity. It will require the church to want to make the gospel so central in its life that it gives the highest priority to engagement with the biblical texts, certainly in its preaching.

It can surely not be doubted that there are many who take their preaching, including the engagement with the biblical text which it requires, with great seriousness; many who believe that their reflection on holy scripture and their articulation of the Word based on it becomes the vehicle of a divine Word to the community of faith. But it is also necessary to understand the culture in which we live, to read novels or poetry, to see good films, to engage in conversation with people of faith and people of no faith. All this helps us in our reading and hearing of the texts which the church has received, through which the crucified risen one "work[s] and bear[s] witness to himself" and "reaches out to command attention and awaken faith".[20]

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[20] *Basis of Union*, §3 and §4 respectively.

what are you reading?

An Interview with Marilynne Robinson, Novelist and Theologian

Religion & Ethics Newsweekly editor Missy Daniel spoke in Washington, DC on March 11, 2005 with author Marilynne Robinson. Her novel *Gilead* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004) is about the Reverend John Ames, a Congregational minister in Iowa who in 1956 begins writing a letter to his young son, an account of himself and his forebears.

There is such deep empathy in Gilead *for the pastor and the preacher. What attracts you to pastors? What do you appreciate about them?*

There are several sources for my appreciation of pastors and the way they are described in this book. One of them is reading history and realizing that they had a profound creative impact on the Middle West and the settlement of the Middle West. I was very interested in that. They established many wonderful little colleges, like Oberlin and Grinnell and so on, which were explicitly religious establishments in the first instance and were established in order to promote women's rights, antislavery, universal literacy—many excellent things. Then, of course, there is the fact that I am interested in scripture and theology. This is an interest that I can assume I would share with a pastor, so that makes me a little bit prone to use that kind of character, perhaps, just at the moment. Then there is also the fact that, having been a church member for many years, I am very aware of how much pastors enrich people's experience, people for whom they are significant. I know that it's a kind of custom of American literature and culture to slang them. I don't think there is any reason why that needs to be persisted in.

John Ames, the Congregational minister in the book, is a very theological thinker, and you have mentioned your own interest in theology. If you had to explain it to someone, what is theology and what does it mean to think theologically?

It's a difficult thing to describe theology, what it means and how it disciplines thinking. Certainly, theology is the level at which the highest inquiry into meaning and ethics and beauty coincides with the largest-scale imagination of the nature of reality itself. Often, when I want to read something that is satisfying to me as theology, what I actually read is string theory, or something like that—popularizations, inevitably, of scientific cosmologies—because their description of the scale of things and the intrinsic, astonishing character of

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reality coincides very beautifully with the most ambitious theology. It is thinking at that scale, and it is thinking that is invested with meaning in a humanly evocative form. That's theology.

Is there a connection to poetry, too? John Ames is also steeped in the religious poets, and he mentions John Donne and George Herbert throughout the novel.

I think the connection between poetry and theology, which is profound in Western tradition—there is a great deal of wonderful religious poetry—both poetry and theology push conventional definitions and explore perceptions that might be ignored or passed off as conventional, but when they are pressed yield much larger meanings, seem to be part of a much larger system of reality. The assumption behind any theology that I've ever been familiar with is that there is a profound beauty in being, simply in itself. Poetry, at least traditionally, has been an educing of the beauty of language, the beauty of experience, the beauty of the working of the mind, and so on. The pastor does, indeed, appreciate it. One of the things that is nice about these old pastors—they were young at the time—who went into the Middle West is that they were real humanists. They were often linguists, for example, and the schools that they established were then, as they are now, real liberal arts colleges where people studied the humanities in a very broad sense. I think that should be reflected in his mind; appropriately, it is.

You write that a good sermon is "one side of a passionate conversation". Could you say more about what you meant by that and why you value the sermon as a form of discourse, especially in this pretty inconsolable and demythologized age of ours?

I think we have demythologized prematurely, that we've actually lost the vocabulary for discussing reality at its largest scales. The idea that myth is the opposite of knowledge, or the opposite of truth, is simply to disallow it. It is like saying poetry is the opposite of truth. A sermon is a form that yields a certain kind of meaning in the same way that, say, a sonnet is a form that deals with a certain kind of meaning that has to do with putting things in relation to each other, allowing for the fact of complexity reversal, such things. Sermons are, at their best, excursions into difficulty that are addressed to people who come there in order to hear that. The attention of the congregation is a major part of the attention that the pastor gives to his or her utterance. It's very exceptional. I don't know anyone who doesn't enjoy a good sermon. People who are completely nonreligious know a good sermon when they hear one.

One of the reasons that I think that a sermon is a valuable thing now and so impressive when you do hear a good one—and there is a lot of failure in the attempt; it's a difficult form—is because it's so seldom true now that you hear people speak under circumstances where they assume they are obliged to speak seriously and in good faith, and the people who hear them are assumed to be listening seriously and in good faith. This is a kind of standard of discourse that is not characteristic of the present moment. I think that it makes a sermon, when it is a good sermon, stand out in anyone's experience.

John Ames knows his hymns, too; he knows his Isaac Watts, and so do you. What do you think about Protestant hymnody, and what role does it play in the language of Gilead*?*

One of the things that is wonderful about hymns is that they are a sort of universally shared poetry, at least among certain populations. There isn't much of that anymore either. There are very few poems people can recite, but there are quite a few hymns that, if you hum a few bars, people can at least come up with two verses. Many of the older hymns are very beautiful. Isaac Watts, of course, is a hymn writer in the tradition of Congregationalism who lived in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. He is very interesting and important because he was also a metaphysician. He knew a great deal about what was, for him, contemporary science. He was very much influenced by Isaac Newton, for example. There are planets and meteors and so on showing up in his hymns very often. But, again, the scale of his religious imagination corresponds to a very generously scaled scientific imagination. It makes his hymns continue to have a spaciousness and resonance that locates, for me, the religious imagination in a very beautiful way.

Catholics speak about "the Catholic imagination". Is there such a thing as the Protestant imagination?

Oh, I think there is. Protestantism, of course, is much more explicitly divided into different traditions—the Pentecostals, the Anglicans. But there is the main tradition of Protestantism that comes out of the Reformation and that produced people like Kant and Hegel and so on, who are not normally thought of as being people writing in a theological tradition, although Hegel, of course, wrote theology his whole life. I think, frankly, that his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is theology, too.

When the Reformation became established, one of the things that was a question between Catholicism and the Reformation traditions was whether there was a hierarchy of being. If you look at Thomas Aquinas, for example, you have hierarchies of angels and all the rest of it, and hierarchies even of saints and then subsaints—people who aren't quite there, that sort of thing. The Reformation rejected all of that and created a new metaphysics, in effect, that is not hierarchical. The idea that the universe itself is physically structured around hierarchy was sort of an integration of earlier science and theology that was made by people like Thomas Aquinas, that was assumed doctrinally in that tradition. The Reformation rejected that model of reality and created a highly individualistic metaphysics in the sense that it located everything normative that can be said about reality in human perception, there being, of course, no other avenue of knowing. There is scripture, there is conscience, there is perception itself. If you read Calvin, for example, he says, How do we know that we are godlike, in the image of God? Well, look at how brilliant we are. Look how we can solve problems even dreaming, which I think is true, which I've done myself. So instead of having an externalized model of reality with an objective structure, it has a model of reality that is basically continuously renegotiated in human perception. I think that view of things is pretty pervasively influential in Protestant thought.

Is Gilead *on some level a novel about "being Christian", about what it might mean to live a Christian life?*

I think I can guardedly say yes. The fact is, being who I am, my definition of human life is perhaps not readily universalized. But I hope that it is not a narrow view of human life itself. I don't have the feeling that people need to be Christian in order to understand what the novel is and what it means and so on, to recognize it's about father-son relations, or parent-child relations. In the New Testament, of course, that's the major metaphor for the situation of a human being in the world relative to God. I think that, in using that metaphor, the New Testament is appealing to something that people profoundly and universally know: what it is to love a child and what it is to love a parent. So that's a big subject in the book.

You've written some about mysticism and mystery and an attraction to the mystical. What might mysticism have to do with your writing and your own religious life?

I find the whole question of mysticism, piety, religious life, and so on very mysterious. I know that's an evasion. I go to church every Sunday, unless I'm away or something. I am profoundly influenced in my thinking by religious concepts. I know this. I don't know what piety means, in a sense. I feel as if I would be presumptuous claiming it. I feel that way often when people ask me about religion. Of course, mysticism is very hard to isolate because, given the kind of consciousness that I was sort of instructed in as religious consciousness; that borders on mysticism so closely that it's hard to know whether you qualify or not, or whether mysticism is artificially isolated when it is treated as a separate thing from experience. Obviously, mysticism can be a form of madness, but then consciousness can be a form of madness.

It sounds like something John Ames might say. How much distance is there between him and you?

I think quite a lot, actually. That's another thing. What do you know about yourself? One of the things about writing fiction is that you create people that you feel, more or less, as though you know. By contrast, you realize that you really don't know yourself terribly well at all. I've put him in a very particular situation—leaving his life, leaving a child, and so on. These things aren't my experience yet, God forbid! In any case, his situation is exceptional—from my point of view, invented. Then his thinking is generated out of his situation. It's perfectly possible that if I can imagine myself in his place, I would think in that way, but it's never been my circumstance to do that.

What has been your own experience of pastors—their influence on you, relationships you have had with ministers like John Ames or others?

I really can't claim ever to have had an exceptionally close relationship with a minister. I'm always there. I pay my pledge. I listen and observe with interest. I'm very sympathetic with the rigor and the aesthetic quality of what they do. Aside from that, I don't have a kind of personal experience with any of them that I could consider privileged, so to speak.

A long time ago, when I was a little girl, I went to church with my grandfather on Easter Sunday, and I heard a sermon that I have thought about for years and years. I don't know why it was so impressive to me, although the church was beautiful, with the emphasis that Easter gives. I think that probably that sermon and the memory of it was more important for crystallizing my sense of pastors and church and all the rest of it than any other single experience.

You wrote about that in one of your essays in The Death of Adam *(Houghton Mifflin, 1998). At the time that collection was published, you said you wanted to "change the conversation" about modern American culture and society. Has that happened? Has the public conversation changed at all to your satisfaction?*

It has changed to my dissatisfaction, as a matter of fact. The public conversation has changed in ways that I am not at all pleased by. Perhaps I had the slightest impact in keeping it from changing more radically in ways that I don't approve of, but at present I can't claim to be pleased.

You know, at one time we did some fairly unique things in this country for very interesting reasons. One of the things that we did was create bankruptcy laws that made it so that people who fell into bankruptcy were not ground into the earth for the rest of their lives. Isaiah calls it "grinding the faces of the poor". The reforms were about simultaneous with the Second Great Awakening. We inherited British law, which is like the new "reforms" that are being made now, in the sense that people are permanently entrapped in debt, if they once fall into bankruptcy. The reason that the law was changed in American history—the whole early period of the formation of the country was moving away from British law into a law that is generated here and that conforms to the sense of what is appropriate here. The model for our early bankruptcy laws was Deuteronomy, the idea that, under certain circumstances—in Deuteronomy, it is simply the passage of seven years' time—people are released from debt, simply because they are released from debt. No more debt. You start over again. This has been a very powerful model in this country. It's being destroyed now. People talk about how much new employment, new wealth, and so on are continuously generated in this country. One of the reasons for that is because people can afford a risk. And the reason for that is because bankruptcy laws were written which prevented people from being permanently entrapped in poverty. If we knew what we had done, and we knew why it was done, there could be some conversation about these changes that are being made today. But there is no conversation, because nobody knows the history behind what we are giving up.

One writer has said that perhaps our sacred scripture is the novel. I wonder what you think about that, and what fiction writing and the novel might have to do with the life of faith.

The novel has more to do with the life of faith in some cases than in others, shall we say. I sometimes am discouraged by what seems to be a sort of conventional disparagement of humankind. I think often people feel that they are doing something moral when they are doing that, but that's not how I understand morality. I much prefer the "everyone is sacred, and everybody errs" model of reality. I am delighted if people find that kind of sustenance in novels, but perhaps it's because they don't read the scripture that they are comparing it to, which would perhaps provide deeper sustenance than many contemporary novels.

The bible for me is holy writ. It's a very straightforward thing, although I am not a literalist. Literalism is a very bizarre phenomenon. Many people are literalists about, for example, the King James Version, which was published in 1611. Anybody who has ever translated anything knows that there is no reason to be literalistic about a translation. Anybody who has read any biblical scholarship knows that every scholar struggles over completely intractable problems with the original texts, or what they have to work from. It's one of the great, powerful, mysterious objects that have come down through history. This does not translate into literal interpretation for me.

How does the bible inform the plainness and stateliness of the language in Gilead?

I have taught Bible at the Iowa Writer's Workshop several times. It's something that writers feel that they need to know, no matter what their religious evaluation of it is, or the traditions they have come from. It's always fun to read anything together with writers, because they are very sensitive to things that you might otherwise overlook. One of the narratives that is extremely beautiful and efficient and powerful is the narrative of David and Absalom in Second Samuel. I think that had a lot of influence on my thinking in this book—Absalom, of course, being the son of King David who betrays him and so on. There is an indubitable emotional power in many of the narratives in the Bible that return one to extremely basic emotions—about fathers and sons in that particular case. I think that often scriptural language is used almost ornamentally. I think that its effect is greater if its accomplishment as narrative is taken more seriously—how complex these things actually are and how straightforward at the same time they are: "Absalom! Absalom!". I hope that, in some degree, I have been influenced by that. The bible is so pervasive in English-language literature that I think that people actually allude to it, or feel the resonance of it, without having any idea what it is that they are feeling.

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credo — I believe in the Holy Spirit

Anita Monro
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on current proposals about
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Kim Groot
in service

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what are you reading?