Touchstone

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The Experience of Faith

Reviews

Editorial

The theme of this issue of *Touchstone* is "The Experience of Faith." All of our contributors explore some aspect of faith *experienced,* faith appropriated personally.

Foster Freed looks at the importance of the testimony of others' religious experiences in shaping our own. He argues for a "hermeneutic of solidarity" with those whose experiences, different from our own, can deepen and enrich ours.

Britt Aerhart considers the work of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke as a modern attempt to find language that will "express the inexpressible." I found particularly fascinating Rilke's transformative experience of Easter liturgy in a Russian Orthodox Church, that moved him beyond the restrictive conventionality of his own Roman Catholic upbringing.

David Deane asks the provocative question whether AI (Artificial Intelligence) will one day be able to "know God." Will AI one day have the capacity to replicate the experience of Christian faith which is fundamentally an experience of persons in relation? And the answer is . . . you'll have to read David's article to find out.

Connie denBok describes her own evolving experience of faith and reminds us of the rich diversity of experience that is appropriately named "United Church."

Sue Campbell shares personal examples of the everyday experience of faith, in contexts we might not think of as "religious."

David Hughes profiles long-time United Church minister, church leader and former Moderator Rev. Dr. Peter Bryce whose life and career were shaped by the maxim "Be kind to one another."

When proposed, this seemed like a fairly straightforward topic. After reading these authors' submissions, though, I wondered if the meaning of the terms "faith" and "experience" are as self-evident as we might think—or if they are much richer and more diverse than we may realize. In this extended version editorial, I want to delve deeper into the meaning and significance of these words.

What is experience? One dictionary defines it as "a direct observation of or participation in events as a basis for knowledge."[1] Experience is direct. It is not mere hearsay or second-hand information. It is something observed or participated in that has a direct impact on me. The word "experience" has the same root as "experiment"—the process of testing something to find out if it is true. At one time "experimental"

[1] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

meant what we mean by "experiential."

Experience has an epistemic dimension—it adds to knowledge. We learn from experience. But if knowledge is defined as that which is, at least in principle, universally accessible, the epistemic value of experience is less certain. Some philosophers confine valid experience to sense perceptions available immediately to any observer, excluding subjective thoughts and emotions. And when we qualify it further by specifying "the experience of *faith,*" matters become even murkier. What knowledge does faith provide? Is it knowledge accessible to others—and if not, is it really knowledge? Who is to judge whether or not that knowledge is valid? The modern and post-modern "mindsets" (if there is such a thing) are characterized by fundamental disagreements on these questions.

Preoccupation with the nature of experience is a feature of modernity with its bifurcation of subject and object, private and public, the natural world and the inner world. It has given birth to a whole new branch of philosophy, phenomenology, which is "the study of the structures of conscious experience from the first person point of view, along with the relevant conditions of experience."[2] Phenomenologists approach experience from "the first person point of view," describing experience from the perspective of the subject. It explores the "relevant conditions" of experience, which includes both the structures of human consciousness, but also the social context that shapes that experience and that furnishes the experiencing subject with language and conceptual tools that permit him or her to attribute meaning to experience. In other words, we are beings in relation, so that even what appears to be the most personal, private, idiosyncratic experience takes place within a consciousness shaped by our interaction with the natural and human world.

If you are of a certain age, you may remember the "Wesley Quadrilateral." According to Methodist historian Albert Outler, John Wesley relied on four foundational sources of theological insight and authority: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.[3] The Wesley Quadrilateral was a thing in the United Church about thirty years ago, frequently appealed to at Conference Annual Meetings and in United Church publications, at a time when the memory of our Methodist roots was still a living one for many. I can recall the excitement the quadrilateral generated, and how people were especially drawn to the discovery that

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[2] David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/.*

[3] *https://www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-wesleyan-quadrilateral-the.*

Wesley included experience as a source of authority. Wesley called his followers to embrace "heart religion," faith not confined to ecclesiastical forms or doctrines. Wesley led a reawakening of faith *experienced*, in contrast to the aridity of Protestant scholasticism, the cool detachment of Deism and the genteel respectability of established Anglicanism. His famous Aldersgate experience captures the Wesley's fourfold method in action:

> *In the evening I went very unwillingly to a* society *in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*[4]

Wesley describes an experience so intense that he felt it physically—the warming of his heart. But it was more than simply a feeling. It was a recognition of the truth of Scripture, explicated in the tradition of the Reformers, a truth he had grasped intellectually, but now experienced as true in that first person sense—true for him.

The rediscovery of the "Wesley Quadrilateral" was, for many, a helpful integrative tool for understanding the holistic nature of faith, received as a gift from the past, understood with the mind, but brought to life personally as a message relevant to the individual believer.

But it has also been much misunderstood. Outler himself came to dislike the term because many interpreted it to mean that the four sources were equally important. Wesley was clear that Scripture was the primary source of authority, to which the other three were subject. But I recall an even greater distortion of what Outler intended on the part of those who elevated experience to the level of an independent, normative, self-legitimating criterion of truth. These were the years when many United Church people, both professional and lay, were drinking deeply from the wells of those who, like John Shelby Spong, announced that "Christianity must change or die!" And by change, they meant recognizing that the Christianity we had received as children was outdated and increasingly irrelevant in a modern, scientific, critical age. We need to cast off the

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[4] Wesley's Journal, May 24, 1738, *https://www.umc.org/en/content/holy-spirit-moments-learning-from-wesley-at-aldersgate.*

"Sunday School faith" that taught us to accept Scripture unquestioningly as God's Word, no matter how preposterous or offensive it sounded. Although our ancestors in the faith meant well, we need to leave behind their admonitions, infected with superstition, sexism, and homophobia. The enthusiastic response to the Quadrilateral was fueled in part by a peculiarly post-modern attitude to experience—that experience is profoundly personal and inherently valid.

Our culture has increasingly come to privilege the first-person nature of experience as normative for both belief and action. Experience is not common human experience but experience defined by our place within structures of power and identity. Lived experience—especially racialized, gender-based, trauma determined experience—is the truest and most foundational aspect of our being. Experience in this sense becomes the criterion by which we judge the truth and validity of received traditions and even rationality itself, which is not objective but itself a product of these social power dynamics. Our experience is neither shaped nor validated by traditional sources of authority, but those sources of authority are interpreted and judged through the lens of experience.

Key to this pervasive view is the towering figure of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher's understanding of religious experience continues to cast a long shadow. Religion, Scheiermacher argued, is an independent mode of experiencing and knowing the world. In reaction to the Enlightenment, which subordinated experience to reason, and following Kant, who reduced religion to ethics, Schleiermacher argued that religion is a separate mode of knowledge, self-validating, and not subject to the verdicts of either belief or action. Feeling, not intellect or conscience, is the primary religious faculty. Religious feeling is an immediate intuition of God, pointing to a reality beyond sense perception or rational analysis. Schleiermacher defined Christian faith as the "feeling of absolute dependence," the communal life of the church as shared religious consciousness, and theology as the explication of states of religious consciousness through history.

My cursory reference to Schleiermacher's understanding of experience does not do justice to the profundity and subtlety of his program or the greatness of his achievement. But Schleiermacher's description of experience as irreducibly personal, not subject to the criteria of other modes of analysis, continues to reverberate among modern, liberal Protestants' attitudes to spiritual and religious experience, whether or not they are directly familiar with his work.

Experience in our culture is seen as the basis for defining the uniqueness of our personal journeys. I was speaking with someone about

a troubling personal issue and I offered an anecdote about a different situation that I thought might shed light on what I was hearing. "That is nothing like what I am going through," the other person angrily exclaimed. I was taken aback by this reaction. I thought I was trying to offer a helpful analogy, the nature of which is to be like someone else's experience in some ways, and unlike it in other ways. This individual saw it as an attempt to invalidate, rather than illuminate, their experience.

But experience today seems to be like that, a marker of bespoke identity which can never be truly understood by someone who has not shared it but must be unconditionally affirmed. In fact, to suggest that one's own experience may align with or shed light upon another's is often regarded as an act of aggressive appropriation and an invalidating of the other's truth.

I don't want to push this point too far because it is a massive overgeneralization. It is a feature of our contemporary cultural landscape, but only a feature and by no means the whole. But it does give us pause to examine what we mean when we talk about the experience of faith. Christian faith, by definition, is fundamentally communal in nature. In contrast to some forms of contemporary spirituality, we believe we are not called to find our own unique encounter with the Beyond, but to find our place in a shared tradition of faith. That tradition is dynamic and alive, constantly adjusting and responding to changes in the multiple contexts in which we live. But it is experience with a context, most of which we did not come up with on our own but received from others.

Religion scholar Wayne Proudfoot has written one of the most insightful analyses of religious experience, a term which, in itself, is context dependent, the product of Western modernity.[5] Proudfoot considers William James's contention in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that the first-person nature of religious experiences means that we may inquire into their effects but not into their origins. We may seek to understand how a person's consciousness of a "Something" beyond the everyday, to which we may assign the name "God," affects them. But to try to explain whence or why such experiences arose always amounts to reductionism, reducing that experience to some other explanation—social pressure, psychological disturbance, wishful thinking. We may inquire into the "fruits," but not the "roots."

Proudfoot argues that this is not an adequate account of religious experience; because religious experiences all take place within a context

[5] Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience,* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

of beliefs, practices, and responses that are socially determined. To give such an account, we must see that all experiences are experiences of something. What is the object, the "something," which gives rise to an experience named "religious"? Our relation to that "something," Proudfoot argues, is always related to our beliefs about the world. Experience and belief always exist is a dialectical relationship, belief providing the language and thought-forms by which we describe an experience, and experience making those beliefs personally significant. In fact, our pre-existing beliefs, including those implicit beliefs that shape our view of the world even when we are not conscious of holding them, are the root of our experience. And, contra James, roots as well as fruits do matter, according to Proudfoot.

"Reductionism" is the great bane of those who insist on the irreducibility of religious experience. Religion, according to philosopher and historian Mircea Eliade, is "an experience *sui generis*, incited by man's encounter with the sacred."[6] But even the concept of "the sacred" does not exist apart from a cultural and religious context. It has its own origins, its own history. And the experience of Christian faith is not only an ineffable sense of the numinous but a personal relation with the God revealed in a particular way.

In seeking to elucidate religious experience, Proudfoot argues, we need to distinguish between descriptive and explanatory reductionism. The former means not taking seriously the subject's own description of the experience—for example, by saying that he or she is not experiencing God but their own repressed father-issues. Not respecting the subject's first person description is illegitimate. Explanatory reductionism, on the other hand, is fair game. It is offering an explanation in terms different from those used by the subject, for the purpose of better understanding it. Explanatory reductionism includes attending to the origins of the type of experience the subject is describing, and the social, cultural and religious world that has made such an experience both possible and meaningful to the person who has it. It allows us to understand and to respect the significance of experiences, even if we do not share them. It allows us to appreciate the rich diversity of experiences that are encompassed by the human search for meaning beyond the limitations of our everyday existence—a search often described by the word "religion."

Our theme "The Experience of Faith" already contains clues that define what we are exploring in this issue of *Touchstone*. This is a journal of Christian theology, so implicit in the term "faith" is the Christian

[6] Quoted in Proudfoot, *Religious Experience,* 192.

meaning(s) of that word. We are not looking at generic experiences of "the sacred," but those that arise from the language and practices suggested by the term "Christian."

But approaching Christian faith from the perspective of experience also demonstrates the amazing capaciousness of the Gospel to inspire and incorporate a rich multiplicity of modes and means of knowing the God revealed in Jesus Christ and testified to in Scripture and Christian history.

I hope you read this issue of *Touchstone* with both pleasure and profit. And, I hope you will check out our new website: *www.touchstonejournal.ca*. It's still a work in progress, but you can subscribe, renew, donate, and find past issues of the journal.

Paul Miller

Testimony and Trust: Toward a Hermeneutic of Solidarity
By Foster Freed

My theme is experience: specifically, religious experience. I therefore have no choice but briefly to define the sense in which I am using that phrase, "religious experience". After all, a whole range of perfectly ordinary activities (such as weekly worship, Bible reading and table-graces) can rightly be said to be examples of what we could call religious experience. In this reflection, however, my definition will more or less parallel that of philosopher William Alston in his book, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience.*[1] Without denying the value of the many other forms of religious experience, Alston's focus is on "clear cases of (putative) direct awareness of God," in other words, the sort of far from ordinary occurrences William James had in mind when he spoke of the "varieties of religious experience" or what Rudolf Otto spoke of as an encounter with the numinous or with the holy. Having defined religious experience in that more narrow way, I want to make a claim, which may sound like something of a boast: I have been blessed, over the years, to have been a participant in an extraordinary number of just such experiences.

Let me begin by presenting three imaginatively reconstructed experiences that have helped to shape my own understanding.

> **November 23rd 1654, between 10:30 and 12:30 at night.**
> *At the time I was a well-known mathematician and scientist who had been wrestling with issues of faith for much of my life. That evening I underwent an intense religious vision which I immediately recorded in a brief note to myself; I subsequently sewed that note into my coat, a note that was only discovered by a servant after my death. What was the content of that brief note? 'Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scholars. . . 'I concluded by quoting from the 119th Psalm: 'I will not forget thy word. Amen.' Suffice it to state the obvious: that powerful experience has stayed with me over the centuries.*

[1] Kindle Edition, Chapter 1, section vii.(Originally published by Cornell University Press, 1993).

December, 1843

I was serving as a pastor in the German town of Möttlingen where I found myself confronted by a deeply troubled family, the Dittus family. While their daughter Gottliebin remains the best known of the two sisters at the heart of the drama that unfolded in my parish, the climactic event in that struggle actually involved her sister Katharina, who during the previous weeks had become increasingly subject to what I could only surmise was a demonic spirit. As I prayed for her healing and deliverance in the early morning hours of December 28th 1843, Katharina arched her upper body backward over her chair, and in a loud voice no human throat could make, bellowed out the words: 'Jesus is the victor! Jesus is the victor!' Everyone in the village who heard these words understood their significance, and they left an indelible impression on many. The strength and power of the demon now appeared to wane with every passing minute. It grew quieter, moved less and less, and finally left Katharina altogether unnoticed, just as the light of life goes out in a dying person—around eight o'clock in the morning.

May, 1991

I was employed as a nursing consultant in Vancouver. My husband Al had recently gone into St. Paul's Hospital with a serious ailment that was now responding quite well to treatment; his doctors believed he was making a full recovery. My normal routine, on those days when I was teaching an evening course at City University, was to visit Al in the late afternoon, on my way to the University. On this particular evening, however, as I finished my lecture, I had an odd feeling that was stopping me from going straight home. I knew that I needed to return to the hospital to see Al again. I walked into his private room on the fifth floor and he was sitting up in bed, smiling at me as I stopped in the doorway. He said, 'Jesus was here tonight.' I froze, and had trouble catching my breath, because my husband had no religious background or affiliation. I said, 'Are you afraid you are going to die?' He replied, 'I'm not afraid I'm going to die—He told me

> *that I am going to die.' At this point, I moved forward and stood at the foot of the bed. Immediately, I experienced hot air blowing up with force from under my feet—the effect was like standing on a hot air grate. I felt shaky and my knees were trembling. I asked Al where Jesus had stood. He said, 'Right where you are now—at the foot of the bed.' At that point, I moved away and the hot air and vibrations stopped immediately. Although I was in shock and frightened by my husband's expressed belief that he would die (which is precisely what did occur), I was also aware that I had just stood on holy ground: that Jesus had made a physical appearance on this earth in May of 1991, that I had been given an unbelievable gift, that I would need to be very thoughtful about how I shared this event.*

It should be obvious that these accounts are not my own, that they "belong" to others, not me. The first is taken from French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal's *Memorial*.[2] The second example is an account of a remarkable set of events that transpired early in the ministry of nineteenth century German theologian Johann Christoph Blumhardt, narrated in his memoir, *The Awakening*.[3] The third experience was offered to me a number of years ago by a member of one of the congregations I have been privileged to serve; I share it with her permission.

In relating them, I am describing "second-hand" experiences. However, are they only second hand? Or is there a sense in which they have become incorporated into my own experience in such a way that they are also mine? My central purpose in using these experiential "case studies," if you will, is precisely to question and, indeed, to challenge the often-unstated assumption that experiences like these are purely subjective and private and the "property" only of the one to whom they occur. I want to argue that, in fact, the testimony of others to their experiences is an essential component of our own.

Acknowledging that the epistemological value of religious experience is a hotly contested issue in both philosophical and theological circles, some might well question the wisdom of further complicating that

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[2] Pascal's Memorial is presented and discussed at length in Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?: An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 57-58.

[3] English translation available at: *http://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/spiritual-classics/awakening.*

already fraught topic, by mixing in the further question of "testimony". Nonetheless, I believe that there is good reason why theologians, philosophers and yes, preachers, are increasingly recognizing the crucial importance of testimony, not only to the life of faith but to the acquisition of knowledge in each and every aspect of human life.[4] As many philosophers have argued, the vast majority of the knowledge human beings regard as "knowledge," will inevitably have been acquired by accepting the testimony of others. Were we to refuse to regard such testimony as a generally reliable source of knowledge, human life as we know it would become unlivable. That, in turn, raises the obvious question. By what justification would we bracket off testimony concerning religious experience, and presume that it (unlike every other form of testimony) is a uniquely unreliable source of knowledge?

As someone who has personally been blessed with a small handful of what might well be described as "peak-experiences"—though none of them as dramatic as the three I have shared above—the fact remains that the vast store-house of shared human religious experience is of far greater moment (and ought to be given far greater weight) than any private religious experience you or I may have undergone, no matter how dramatic that may have been. Given the pervasiveness of testimony to all human knowing, surely it is the abundance of testimonies such as the three I earlier shared, that represents the experiential dimension's true contribution to the life of faith. Nor, from a distinctively Christian perspective, should we overlook St. Paul's injunction, enjoining us to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15). If my primary response to another's testimony concerning a vibrant religious experience is either crude dismissal or a flash of envy ("why them and not me, O Lord?"), I have thereby managed to overlook the extent to which I have been given an opportunity—through another's testimony—to become a participant.

Every act of interpretation rests on a set of hermeneutical assumptions, either stated or unstated. These assumptions guide us in making decisions about which data and experiences we will regard as valid

[4] For an example of a recent philosophic treatment of the issue, one that certainly reveals its full complexity, see Joseph Shieber, *Testimony: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2015). For an approach that seeks to regard revelation—including the revelation embodied in the Christian—as testimony, see Mats Wahlberg, *Revelation as Testimony: A Philosophical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

sources of knowledge and insight. I want to argue that a full understanding of religious experience depends on a willingness to embrace what could be described as a "hermeneutic of solidarity." We might also call it a "hermeneutic of participation" or—if we want to use a not inappropriate Greek term—a "hermeneutic of *koinonia.*" This hermeneutic of solidarity is not an excuse for credulity or tribalism. It does not contradict or replace the modern nor post-modern "hermeneutics of suspicion" in their modern and post-modern forms to which we have all grown accustomed. Subjective experiences cannot simply be taken uncritically as valid descriptions of reality. They need to be tested to uncover the hidden assumptions, motivations, agendas and power relations that undergird them. Serving as a crucial reminder that "credulity" is not a Christian virtue,[5] "hermeneutics of suspicion" have their place within the Church of Jesus Christ, most certainly that branch of the Church that regards John Calvin as one of its forebears![6] However, radical skepticism is not a Christian virtue either, especially when such skepticism seeks to discredit a whole category of testimonies that seek to articulate religious experience. For instance, one of the most poignant sections of self-professed atheist Gretta Vosper's second book, *Amen*, involves her frank acknowledgment that she has enjoyed many experiences that she once regarded as pointing to the reality of God. The fact that she now explains these moments in purely naturalistic terms—in other words as manifestations of brain activity—can rightly be described simply as profoundly sad.[7] Honesty impels the frank acknowledgement, however, that I have often talked myself into taking my own personal religious experiences less seriously than perhaps they ought to have been taken. That having been said: I have come to recognize, within my pastoral role, that while I may have the "right" to do as I please with my experiences, I have no such right to express contempt for others who have chosen, by making themselves vulnerable through a courageous act of testimony, to place their experiential pearl before me, in the hope and expectation that I will prove myself to be something other than a swine.

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[5] That has not prevented Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne from speaking approvingly of what he calls a "principle of credulity". See his *The Existence of God,* Second Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 293 ff.

[6] Calvin and other Reformers elevated suspicion of "superstition" (false or misconceived religious practice) to the level of a hermeneutical principle. See Alec Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2019), 48-9.

[7] Gretta Vosper, *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief*, (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2012), pp. 227-231.

Thoughtful readers will, of course, recognize, that the three specific experiences I narrated at the beginning of this paper were not chosen by accident. Each presents specific aspects worth pondering. Blaise Pascal's *Memoria* is of interest not only because of the intensity of the conversion Pascal underwent on that fateful evening, but because of the place Pascal occupies in the history of mathematical and scientific thought. Along with René Descartes, Pascal was present at—and indeed contributed to—the birth of modernity, with its profound and transformative appreciation of science. As Hans Kung explains in his magisterial *Does God Exist?,* Pascal—unlike Descartes—reserved a significant place for the "logic of the heart", a place (and a logic) that owed a great deal to his experience on the evening of November 23rd 1654.[8]

In the case of the dramatic exorcism that took place during Blumhardt's pastorate in Möttlingen, my initial acquaintance with that episode is a result of the ongoing impact Blumhardt's testimony exerted upon the theology of Karl Barth. Barth was always cautious where religious experience and religious testimony is concerned, always preferring to ground his theology in the experiences and testimonies found in Scripture; I remain convinced that Barth's example is one we discard at our peril. Nevertheless, the extent to which Blumhardt and his legacy impacted Barth is not to be denied. It earned Blumhardt a brief chapter in Barth's survey of 19th century theology despite Barth's frank acknowledgement that Blumhardt was not really a theologian. More famously, Barth paid tribute to Blumhardt by prefacing one of the final sub-sections of the *Church Dogmatics* with the unforgettable title, "Jesus is Victor".[9] The impact of testimony, hospitably received, ought never to be underestimated.

As for the final example I offered at the outset—what may well strike some as the least comfortable of these experiences—it was chosen precisely because it forms part of the growing body of "near death" and "approaching death" experiences that have become commonplace of the world in which we currently live, including the world in which many United Church folk now find themselves, sometimes to their unceasing astonishment. As Patricia Pearson aptly puts it in her excellent exploration of the near death experience, a surprising number of our contemporaries

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[8] Hans Kung, *Does God Exist: An Answer for Today, trans. Quinn* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), section A.,II.

[9] See chapter 28 in Barth's *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, as well as *Church Dogmatics,* IV.3.1. Paragraph 69.3.

now find themselves having become "accidental mystics".[10] In truth, as someone whose own outlook has been significantly shaped by Barth and other neo-orthodox theologians, I certainly share some of the caution with which many of us will instinctively approach mystical testimonies, accidental or otherwise! And yes, as a card-carrying member of the International Association for Near Death Studies, I can certainly testify to the extent to which much of the spirituality to which such experiences give birth is decidedly "New Age". Nevertheless, I believe that it is inappropriate for any Christian, let alone a Christian pastor, to be dismissive of such testimonies, based on either prevailing orthodoxies, either secular or theological. If a congregation's pastor is on the list of people with whom a congregant would be least likely to share such an experience, surely something has gone terribly wrong in the corporate life of that faith community.

As noted earlier, the hospitable reception of such testimonies involves not primarily the question of shaping our formal or doctrinal theologies: not so much a question of the "what-ness" or the "who-ness" of God, but rather an affirmation of the "that-ness" of God, the reality of God. Nor is that a small thing given the inevitable relationship between a Church's theology and a Church's culture. Thinking in cultural terms, I am reminded of John Lennon's plaintive cry that "God is a concept by which we measure our pain."[11] Let's honestly recognize that a Church in explicit or tacit agreement with Lennon can continue to "do" theology, can continue to engage in "God-talk", much of it, no doubt, heart-felt, passionate and deeply reflective of the human story. Let's also be honest enough to recognize, however, that such a Church is rightly vulnerable to the critique Vosper brings against traditional churches, including The United Church of Canada, questioning not only the utility but also the morality of God-talk in the context of an ecclesial body for which God is more metaphor than reality. In short, what is intended here is not the creation of a new way of doing theology, but rather the renewal of a denominational culture in which it is possible for participants, seekers and, yes, even Church leaders to share their testimony—their sightings of the Holy One—without fear of ridicule or rejection! Not John Lennon's God, as "concept", but rather the One celebrated in Leonard Cohen's haunting affirmation, the God of whom it is rightly said: "God is alive, magic is

[10] See Patricia Pearson, *Opening Heaven's Door,* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2015), p. 178.

[11] The 11th track on his 1970 album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band,* released on Apple Records.

afoot . . . God is afoot, magic is alive."[12] That the Church of Jesus Christ needs to say more than that is not to be doubted; that it dare not say less points toward a dimension of the Gospel that may well prove to be a non-negotiable feature of the kind of spiritual renewal for which The United Church of Canada continues to yearn.

[12] It comes from Cohen's second novel, *Beautiful Losers,* but is probably best known through Buffy Sainte-Marie's 1969 album, *Illuminations.*

Rainer Maria Rilke: Poet of the Invisible
By Britt L. Aerhart

> "You, God, who live next door—
> If at times, through the long night, I trouble you
> with my urgent knocking—
> this is why: I hear you breathe so seldom.
> I know you're all alone in that room.
> If you should be thirsty, there's no one
> to get you a glass of water.
> I wait listening, always. Just give me a sign!
> I'm right here....[1]

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) has long been recognized as one of the world's great German-language poets. I first met Rilke through his image, a woodcut print, which hung on the walls of my childhood home. Years later I read Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* and began to become acquainted with him by more than the artful contours of his profile. In Rilke's uniquely lyrical writing, I have found timeless human expressions of longing and desire, transcendence and immanence and the hiddenness of the divine in the face of suffering and decay. Rilke struggled throughout his life to express what is often inexpressible, just as many of us also struggle to meaningfully put into words our own aesthetic and faith experiences. Rilke's *poiesis*, his productive creative process, reminds us all that inner spaciousness is often required in order for us to creatively express the unsayable. Rilke once wrote, "The human is the focus where beauty and meaning converge."[2] Such convergence was for Rilke the crucible, not only of his writing, but of his awareness of the divine as the original creative impulse for all existence, an impulse which is always being held back by the weight of artificially enforced concealment. "Dear darkening ground," he wrote. "You've endured so patiently the walls we've built. . . Just give me more time! I want to love the things as no one has ever thought to love them, until they are real and ripe and worthy of you."[3]

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[1] Barrows, Anita and Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. "Poem I,6, The Book of a Monastic Life," *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 52-53.

[2] Doud, Robert E. "From Buddha To Orpheus: Rainer Maria Rilke's Quest for Internal Relations," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (Spring 1990, Vol. 73, No. 1), 156.

[3] Barrows, Anita & Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. *In Praise of Mortality, New*

Rainer Maria Rilke grew up in Prague during an era of great artistic, technological and cultural flourishing in Europe called the Belle Époque (1871-1914). Whereas bohemianism, sensualism and positivity toward a pan-European identity were emergent during the Belle Époque, Rilke's earliest experience of himself and the world was almost the opposite. His father's "stiff conventionality which gave little room for love" and his mother's expectation that she would live a life of aesthetic refinement and social uplift were key mediating influences of his upbringing.[4] "I was a plaything, I think," he eventually wrote, "like a bit of a doll."[5] Rilke's earliest religious experiences stressed attending Roman Catholic Mass along with bedtime veneration of the wounds of Christ on a crucifix. Thrown into the mix were his mother's stories of the spirit world derived from the popular seances she attended. Eventually, in his early youth, Rilke was sent away to military boarding school in Austria, in keeping with his father's preference that Rilke eventually undertake a military career. The experience of military school was, to say the least, excruciating for Rilke—one of "sudden terror, schoolrooms, slavery, the plunge into temptation and deep loss . . . . ", as hinted at in his poem *Imaginary Career*.[6] It was only after Rilke abandoned all attempts to live a settled, mediated life that he began to shape himself for a literary career in which he would eventually emerge as a so-called "poet of the invisible", a poet of what is "unknown, unseen, unfelt, dark, yet always there."[7]

In 1899, at the age of 24, Rainer Maria Rilke undertook a life-changing trip through Russia and Ukraine with his lover and life-long intellectual mentor, Lou Andreas-Salomé. This journey would prove to be one of several key "turnings", as he called all such transformational experiences which shaped his experience of himself as a participant in the unveiling of a far greater creative impetus in the world than his own.[8] Rilke arrived in Moscow just before Easter Sunday, whereupon he attended

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Translations of a Beloved Poet (Brattleboro: Echo Point Books and Media, 2016), 10.

[4] Prater, Donald. *A Ringing Glass, The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 4-6.

[5] Prater, Donald. *A Ringing Glass, The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 5.

[6] Mitchell, Stephen, trans. "Imaginary Career," *The Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. (New York: Vintage International (Random House), 1989), 259.

[7] Robinson, Jeremy Mack. *Space, Essence and Angels in the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, second edition (Maidstone: Crescent Moon Publishing, 2020), 21.

[8] Ashton, Dore. "Rilke In Search of the Uttermost", *A Fable of Modern Art*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1991), 48.

Easter morning service at the Cathedral of the Dormition on Kremlin Square. As was customary on Easter morning, the Orthodox liturgy began with a procession of the Holy Icons out from behind the doors of the sanctuary screen, the Iconostasis. The effect upon Rilke of the glittering procession of the previously-hidden icons, along with the accompaniment of the deep bass chanting of the priests, the censing of incense and the ringing of the Kremlin bells over the city of Moscow, was both bodily and transformational. He would later write, "…my voice has been lost in the Kremlin bells and my eye sees nothing after the golden dazzle of the domes."[9] This totally immersive religious experience, so different from his childhood religious inheritance, left Rilke overwhelmed with a kind of lightness of being. As he continued his journey through Ukraine and Russia, Rilke came to recognize that something exquisitely infinite and hidden had briefly emerged from a place of waiting to directly touch him, mind, body and spirit, that Easter morning. He also began to consider that there was, inherent in all things, a kind of creative force which was elusive and yet willing to be revealed if the human artist could but offer an opening. "Dawnling from which morning began," he wrote. "We build images of you on the walls, until a thousand of them hem you in. We conceal you with our pious hands, as often as our hearts openly see you."[10] Rilke would spend much of the rest of his life cultivating the unmediated experience of a great and beautiful luminosity which he discerned as moving in the world beneath layers of artificiality.

Following Rilke's journey to Russia and Ukraine, he began to live more fully the life of an itinerant writer. He composed his early poems which would in time accumulate some renown, including his *Book of Hours* and the epic poem *Orpheus. Euridice. Hermes.* He also translated works of Baudelaire, Shakespeare and Kierkegaard, and maintained correspondence in German, French and Russian with a vast network of artists and acquaintances.[11] His posthumously famous *"Letters To a Young Poet",* my first exposure to Rilke's writing, were composed during this time. Rilke eventually arrived in Paris after marrying and briefly living with his wife, the pioneer German sculptor Clara Westhoff, and his

[9] Cushman, Jennifer S. "Beyond Ekphrasis: Eikon and Logos in the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke", *College Literature*, (John Hopkins University Press, Vol. 29, No. 3, Summer 2002), 85.

[10] Barrows, Anita and Macy, Joanna, trans. & and eds. "The Book of the Monastic Life, Poem I, 4," *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, 48; rephrased from the German by Britt Aerhart.

[11] Ellison, Ian. "Unboxing Rilke's Nachlass", *LA Review of Books* (online) (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Review of Books), 6 April, 2023.

newborn daughter. In Paris, Rilke spent time in the company of the great French sculptor, Auguste Rodin, and secondarily the French painter, Paul Cézanne. As Rodin's secretary from 1905-6, Rilke had multiple opportunities to observe Rodin's inner process of artistic preparation, a kind of intense gazing at "La Modelé", as Rodin called it, which continued until the real structure of the object within the raw material revealed itself "through infinitely many meetings of light with the object."[12] This gazing to evoke the emergence of the true form of a thing, Rilke realized, could also be practised by him as a poet. As a result, Rilke began to seek out opportunities to engage in a kind of contemplation he called "*einsehen*" or "seeing into" in order to develop himself as a writer. For Rilke "*einsehen*" was the practice of patiently, persistently gazing deeply upon and into something as an invitation for its true hidden essence to emerge. "For there is a boundary to looking, and the world that is looked at so deeply wants to flourish into love."[13] Here Rilke touches on what has also been said of the experience of faith by generations of mystics and artists before and after him, which is that any real opening up to the divine must flow from the intimacy of gazing and being gazed upon without mediating assumptions or preconceived categories. [14] "God lies in wait for us with nothing more than love," the great German medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, once said. "The more you are caught, the more you are liberated."[15]

Arising from this time in his life, Rilke's compositions began to describe more finely nuanced glimpses of a hidden real presence embedded within the material nature of things. He observed a caged panther, for example, pacing in its enclosure in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and wrote:

> "His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
> has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else.
> … Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
> lifts quietly. An image enters in,

[12] Ashton, Dore. "Rilke In Search of the Uttermost," in *A Fable of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 55.

[13] Mitchell, Stephen, trans. "Turning Point," *roundhousepoetrycircle.wordpress.com*, 22 August, 2016.

[14] McGuire, Maria. "Divine Gazing: To Know and be Known," *Women In Theology* (online), 22 August, 2016.

[15] Fox, Matthew. *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*. (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1983), 60.

rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone." [16]
And on crossing the Pont du Carrousel, he observed a lone figure:
"The blind man, the one standing on the bridge,
Gray as the markstone of nameless empires, …
he is perhaps the thing, the always constant, …
he is the unmoveable upright one,
placed in many confused paths, …
among a superficial race." [17]

Rilke published these poems as *New Poetry/Neue Gedichte*, but they would eventually be called "Objectpoems" (*Dinggedichte*) by a commentator. More than object poems, however, these verses pointed to Rilke's developing sense that he, as a writer, was not only observing objects but was birthing a liminal inner sanctuary out of which his writing would emerge to express the inexpressible. He called this inner creative space *Weltinnenraum* ("World-inside-the-room"), or as I have chosen to translate it, "a boundless interiority." "Through all beings there extends one room: a boundless interiority."[18] Here, once again, Rilke's creative experience anticipates our own. Many of us, myself included, have experienced the rise of our own spiritual and aesthetic impetus because of a liminal encounter which an inwardly condensed singularity (which we intuit), can be nothing more nor less than the common ground of all being. Rilke wrote in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

We must accept our reality as vastly as we possibly can; everything, even the unprecedented, must be possible within it. This is in the end the only kind of courage that is required of us: the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us. The fact that people have in this sense been cowardly has done infinite harm to life; . . . To say nothing of God. . . . [19]

For Rilke, what emerged out of his entry into this silent inner space, this boundless interiority, was a kind of creative exchange of energy

[16] Kinnell, Galway & Liebmann, Hannah. "Der Panther/The Panther", *The Essential Rilke* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 12-13.

[17] Pike, Burton, trans. "Pont Du Carrousel", *Rainer Maria Rilke: Where the Paths Do Not Go*. (Connecticut: World Poetry Books, 2018), 19.

[18] Dowrick, Stephanie. *In The Company of Rilke: Why a 20th Century Visionary Poet Speaks So Eloquently to 21st Century Readers* (Kindle edition) (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), location 1368.

[19] Baer, Ulrich., trans. "In Silence We Find Ourselves, Letter 8", *theculturum.com*, 22 October, 2015.

which both formed him as an artist and also fuelled emergence of the creative divine through the art of his writing. "What will you do, God, when I die?" he asked. "I, your garment, I, your craft. Without me what reason have you?"[20]

Over the next decade and more, Rainer Maria Rilke would develop an outward solitary life which would increasingly reflect the seclusion of the inner one. He composed the first of his *Duino Elegies* but got no further, writing in fits and starts. Sensing the creep of an unsettling Zeitgeist in the early years of the new 20th century, he found himself increasingly out of joint within the social spaces around him. "The Kings of the world are old and feeble, . . . and their pale daughters abandon themselves to the brokers of violence. Their crowns are exchanged for money and melted down into machines and there is no health in it."[21] Depression and grief visited him. Then WWI began in 1914 and he found himself stranded in Germany while visiting Berlin. He remained there for a period of time and was unable to return to Paris, where his possessions, compositions and papers were seized from his rooms and auctioned off. As a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire he was eventually called up to brief military service in an administrative role in Vienna. All of these setbacks along with the desolation of WWI rendered him artistically immobile. "In the slaughterhouse that Europe had become, the darkness Rilke allowed himself to see almost paralyzed him with revulsion and helplessness."[22] Like many of us who today feel overwhelmed by current political, economic and ecological decay, Rilke became overwhelmed by a sense of pointlessness in any kind of creative endeavour in the face of a future which seemed to promise only the end of the world. "I am not living my own life. . . . I feel refuted, abandoned and above all threatened by a world ready to dissolve in such senseless disorder."[23] It was not, in fact, until 1922 that Rilke would truly experience a new and renewed impetus to write, picking up where he left off on the *Duino Elegies*, but flavoured now by his experiences of absence and negation and especially grief and death.

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[20] Barrows, Anita and Macy, Joanna, trans & eds. "The Book of a Monastic Life, Poem I,36," *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 94-95.

[21] Barrows, Anita & Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. *In Praise of Mortality, New Translations of a Beloved Poet*,15.

[22] Barrows, Anita & Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. *In Praise of Mortality, New Translations of a Beloved Poet*, 2.

[23] Barrows, Anita & Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. *In Praise of Mortality, New Translations of a Beloved Poet*, 2.

Rainer Maria Rilke spent the next years of his life seized by a new "turning", an awakening to the impermanence of the world in which death and the experience of absence became new creative ground for his writing. "Though the world changes quickly, like the shapes of clouds, everything once finished falls back home to ancient ground."[24] For Rilke, death was not a barrier to authentic artistic thriving nor was it a punishment arising from some human fall from grace, as he was taught in the faith formula of his childhood. For Rilke, death and impermanence shaped the shadows of his life, and those shadows served as a doorway to a new kind of abundance of being in which he was united with all living things.

See the flowers, so faithful to the Earth.
We know their fate because we share it.
If you could enter their dreaming and dream with them deeply,…
They would bloom and welcome you,
all those brothers and sisters tossing in the meadows,
and you would be one of them.[25]

Indeed, the phrase "superabundant being", as used by Rilke to conclude his second-last *Sonnet to Orpheus*, more adequately describes his experience of the impermanence of life, out of which intimations of God emerged anew for him, the way leaves are hinted at in the buds on a tree in springtime.

Hardness vanished. Suddenly Beauty settles
upon the meadow's blanketing of grey.
Small waters change their intonation. …
Unexpectedly you catch sight of your own arising,
Glimpsed in the emptiness of the tree.[26]

Now in his life, Rilke experienced a transcending creative impetus which "seeks to arise . . . invisible" in a kind of reciprocal resurrection. He asks of the earth, "Is it not your dream to enter us so wholly there is nothing left outside us to see?" Rilke answers for himself, "Earth, my love, I want that too, . . . and know I can trust the death you will bring."[27]

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[24] Sonnets of Orpheus

[25] Barrows, Anita & Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. *In Praise of Mortality, New Translations of a Beloved Poet*, 12-13.

[26] Pike, Burton. "Intimation of Spring," *Rainer Maria Rilke, Where Paths Do Not Go*, 86; Engl. trans. Britt Aerhart.

[27] Barrows, Anita & Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. *In Praise of Mortality, New Translations of a Beloved Poet*,14.

Rainer Maria Rilke, in the feverish span of a few short days in 1922, was now able to complete the rest of the *Duino Elegies*, which he began before WWI. He also composed his fifty-five *Sonnets to Orpheus,* which were written in response to a postcard he received bearing a cover image of the Greek demi-god of music. In the ancient legend, Orpheus descended into the underworld to win back his first love, but failed because he looked back on his way out of Hades. Nevertheless, the songs of ephemeral beauty which emerged from his eternal being would continue to resound, even after his death. Framed against this mythic fable of descent, return and the continuation of divine song, Rilke wrote his sonnets as if to evoke an almost luminous autobiography of his embrace of creaturely death for the sake of the continuation of eternal beauty in the world. "I too am there, where the paths do not go," he latterly wrote in his life, ". . . in the windrows, which many avoid, in which I have often extinguished myself, as if under the closing refrains of an eyelid."[28] Here we come at last to Rilke's native theology, developed over a lifetime of striving after both terrible and beautiful experiences. Through the terror and disappointment that we all experience beneath the mediated conventions of life, lies an unencumbered Beauty waiting to be released into the world to renew and re-create all that we have lost and forsaken. "Here among the disappearing, in the realm of the transient, be a ringing glass that shatters as it rings."[29] Through the far reaches of our knowing and perception, what is fundamentally unknowable and unsayable breaks through to us in our fragility, and we become the poems which are writing themselves into the world.

Rainer Maria Rilke died on December 29, 1926 from sepsis which he unexpectedly developed by pricking his finger on a rose stem. He had earlier been diagnosed with leukemia. The epitaph which appears on his rose covered gravestone in Switzerland is one he wrote in anticipation of his own death. It reads, "Rose, oh pure contradiction, joy of becoming no-one's sleep under so many eyelids."[30] Reciting this epitaph in German one can't help but notice that the word eyelids, *Lidern*, also sounds the same as *Liedern*, or songs. One might therefore suppose that Rilke is saying to anyone who comes to visit his graveside that the flowers which decorate

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[28] Pike, Burton. "Will O The Wisps," *Rainer Maria Rilke, Where Paths Do Not Go*, 89; Engl. trans. Britt Aerhart.

[29] Barrows, Anita & Macy, Joanna, trans. & eds. *In Praise of Mortality, New Translations of a Beloved Poet*,119.

[30] Pike, Burton. "Rilke's Epitaph," *Rainer Maria Rilke: Where Paths Do Not Go*, 99.

his tomb are no mere memorial to a deceased poet. Rather they are evidence of a living impulse, an ancient song, which continues playing long after the artist is gone. To hear this song we must each make the effort to enter into the boundless interiority of the rose or the poet. Therein we might begin to understand that the rose and the poet are really one and the same. We might each also begin to slowly return to the first ground of all being, the ancient one, out of which all that is perishable gives birth to an unperishable creativity. "Work of the eyes is done," Rilke wrote, "now go and do heart-work on all the images imprisoned in you."[31] In the end, what matters is that we, as limited, conditioned human beings, seek to creatively participate in the divine emergence of the world, the way a tree quietly rises from the earth to become complete in the full and generous life of the forest.

[31] Mitchell, Stephen, trans. "Turning Point," *roundhousepoetrycircle.wordpress.com*, 22 August, 2016.

Making Eye Contact with the Other
By Connie denBok

My church houses multiple congregations on Sundays. Every corner of the big ambling building is filled. In one wing the voice of a Brazilian preacher soars and overflows into the hallways; in another, four part harmony with Ghanaian intonation; a polite liturgy from Voices United in the upper auditorium; and in the sanctuary, shouted prayers and cries to the Almighty, accented with deep bass pounding from a worship band.

My congregation is the most traditional, the most ethnically British, and has more white hair than any of the ten churches meeting in one building. We are the quietest, the least emotive and most suspicious of expressive displays of faith. Even communion is celebrated sparingly. As their minister, I burn at least 400 calories per sermon less than any other preacher in the building.

This troubles me for two reasons. The first is that the original script for this church is far removed from its current identity and expression. The second is more personal.

There are two imposing downtown churches on the same main street, both formerly Methodist. The founding institution was an imposing brick church erected by the village establishment. They were respected small business operators, farmers, land speculators, politicians—the backbone of Upper Canada. They were Wesleyan Methodists.

The second was born out of the Primitive Methodist movement that swept Great Britain in the early 1800's, overflowing into what was then called British North America. To its proponents, Primitive Methodism was the recovery of John Wesley's vision—a heart warmed by a personal experience of the Holy Spirit. To its detractors in the Wesleyan Church, Primitive Methodism was mindless emotionalism, attractive to the uneducated, the labourer, the servant class. It was a movement that elevated the role of laity, including training for lay preachers and moral values intended to raise families out of poverty. Social justice by the poor, for the poor, took the form of trade unions and associations of farm labourers. It did not endear them to their Wesleyan employers. Predictably a chapel broke away from the Wesleyan church on Main Street, eventually erecting an even more imposing Methodist church built from stone, only 500 metres south on the same Main Street.

Both Methodist congregations became United in 1925, but are as different as two siblings can be. Logic dictates that the two should

amalgamate, and both agree on a single point—that the other ought to close and join them down the road.

The church that began as Primitive Methodist has had outbreaks of religious enthusiasm throughout its history. I recall a conversation with an elderly gentleman named Wilf Coombs in the very early 1970's. He told me of his childhood in that congregation, probably in the 1890's. There had been a "revival" which had inconvenienced him greatly as a child. It meant that every meal was followed by Bible reading, every bed time preceded by extensive prayer, and he was no long permitted to entertain himself on Sunday afternoons by sliding across the waxed wooden floors of his home in his stocking feet. It profaned the Sabbath which was to be kept holy. Morning church was followed by Sunday School in the afternoon, with an interval for quiet reflection before divine service resumed in the evening.

Anecdotally I heard of a similar movement in the 1920's and an enthusiasm for crusades by Canadian evangelist Charles Templeton, and American Billy Graham in the 1950's. There was renewed spiritual fervour among the men's group in the early 1960's through a United Church program AOTS (As One That Serves). The Jesus Movement, followed by the charismatic movement, found fertile ground. Evangelistic folk services were a regular feature in the downtown park across the road.

The original Wesleyan church up Main Street has rarely been troubled by religious enthusiasm, but has been generous directing wealth and programs to the city's poor, and excellent in sponsoring social events and fund raisers: a different variety of United Church.

The reason I tell this story is twofold. The first is to recall the difficulty created at Church Union, where the differences between founding churches were in tension from the beginning. They have been at times honoured, and sometimes ground down by standardizing. The fire that ignites each Christian movement cools over generations, and the red hot passion of any young movement, become unnecessary, embarrassing, or at least excessive to those who have inherited the benefits but not the sentiment. Hot coals are dampened lest they start some wildfire.

In the late 1990's I was invited to preach at a multiday meeting of United churches in Newfoundland, and to serve communion at the Sunday evening service in a little outport congregation. To my surprise, after the benediction I was invited to sit in the front pew, while lay persons took turns at the front testifying to God's work in their lives, exhorting others to faith, praying, confessing, repenting, and weeping. I had never seen anything like it.

Hours later, almost everyone present responded to an invitation to

leave their seats to join at the front for prayer. As we stood in a great circle with heads bowed and hands linked, there was an interval of silence. Suddenly I heard a bang so violent it shook the wooden floor. A huge man, who had been standing in the pews, had fallen with such force to the floor he must have bounced once. It was a miracle he hadn't hit his head going down between the narrow high backed benches. I was the only one to look up startled, and immediately tried to withdraw my hands and asked if anyone present had some medical background. Several people looked up. A woman I knew to be a nurse looked over her shoulder and said, "It's alright then. He's just having a Glory fit. The Holy Ghost has got hold of him." Then the prayer circle continued. As soon as possible I went back to check on the man who was now sitting on the pew with his head bowed. At least he wasn't dead. I was told afterward that the man wasn't a member of the church but had come to pick up his wife. I was told he was "an atheist going down, and a believer getting up."

My point is not the propriety of that particular gathering, but that the practice of an "after service" run by church laity, was an unbroken tradition received from the original Methodist missionaries to Newfoundland. Unlike the ordered services officiated by seminary graduates sent mostly from Toronto, the prayers were extemporaneous, the testimonies personal, the confessions made with tears, the songs sung from memory, and the meetings much longer.

Ten years later I was invited back again to multiple nights of meetings by gathered United Churches. This time a staff representative of the Region was present, and warmly received. But privately I was told there was concern: the churches of Newfoundland must forgo their backward outport ways, and learn United Church practice and ethos.

Eight years later I was invited back. The clergy were clearly in charge. Some were Newfoundlanders but all had been educated on the mainland. Prayers were read in the inclusive language patterns approved by the Region. There was no more emoting, falling down, or spontaneous prayer: A victory of the Spirit, or thoughtless loss, depending on perspective.

It brought to mind another story from Indigenous former Anglican Bishop Mark MacDonald of times of singing and drumming among Indigenous Christians. Eventually trained clergy arrived. Then they had a "proper" liturgy officiated by a priest in a wooden building. Fortunately, a clergy shortage opened fresh opportunities for singing gatherings again. A terrible loss, or a victory of the Spirit, depending on perspective.

How faith is experienced in and through the church, troubles me on a very personal level. The locus of my disquiet is in two precise sites,

both in the main floor women's washroom of the same church building erected by Primitive Methodists almost 200 years ago. One is situated just before the first wash basin. The second is by the door of the third cubicle. By some twist of history I have come a full circle to the church of my teen years. I am filling a vacant pulpit in retirement because available clergy are scarce. A major renovation in the 1980's transformed the minister's study used by generations of clergy to counsel, pray, and prepare messages. It became the women's loo. The spot where I came to a personal experience of faith houses a paper towel dispenser. The table where I signed the documents that made our wedding official is now a commode. Not exactly a place of pilgrimage.

A 2023 article on the BBC website, entitled "10 Churches around the World Given New Life" expresses the renewal of church life through repurposed buildings. They are no longer frequented by worshippers. They are now condominiums, public libraries, skate parks and more. The faith once experienced within is non-essential to its being a "church". Faith expression is vestigial like an appendix. If it becomes inflamed, surgical removal is an option.

I heard Russell Moore, the editor of the American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, quoted in relation to the exodus of young persons from his denominational family. His insights apply to any denomination that is aging out. He says:

> Where a 'de-churched' (to use an anachronistic term) 'ex-vangelical' (to use another) in the early 1920s was likely to have walked away due to the fact that she found the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection to be outdated and superstitious or because he found moral libertinism to be more attractive than the 'outmoded' strict moral code of his past or because she wanted to escape the stifling bonds of a home church for an autonomous individualism, now we see a markedly different—and jarring—model of a disillusioned evangelical. We now see young evangelicals walking away from evangelicalism not because they do not believe what the church teaches, but because they believe the church itself does not believe what the church teaches. The presenting issue in this secularization is not scientism and hedonism but disillusionment and cynicism.[1]

[1] Russell Moore. *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical America*. (New York: Sentinel 2023), 41.

Return with me for a moment to the main floor women's bathroom: In a sense, this story is about me and my certainty that I had an encounter with God in a liminal space of enduring miracles and providence. It was an experience of faith that ignited a lifetime of ordered ministry in, with, and to the church which is still my reality 50+ years later.

My story begins in the same place as many baby boomers who attended a United Church Sunday School from kindergarten to early adolescence. Almost all of us dropped out, protesting that it was boring, our only morning to sleep in, etc. Our parents most often acquiesced. I adopted an undemanding syncretism of Buddhism and pop culture that felt spiritual. It involved lighting a candle in a darkened room, and alternately listening to George Harrison's sitar music and my mother's album of Gregorian chants.

The summer I turned 15, a chance encounter with a friend took me to a drop-in centre held in our town's first United Church, where the speaker was a UCC minister from the church down Main Street. He arrived with an entourage of cool youth, not the nerdy ones I associated with church. The Jesus movement had burst into the media, with *Time* magazine featuring a front cover on the hippie culture that had "turned on to Jesus."

As a lifetime veteran of Sunday School, I was perplexed at this "Jesus" the other youth described in such vivid personal terms. I was a little offended because I had learned a great deal about this man, and was certain that I had heard none of this before. I raised every objection my 15 year old self could imagine to discredit Christianity as a religion, church as an institution, their peculiar understanding of Jesus as a living entity with whom one could have relationship.

But in the back of my mind, a memory emerged of my grandfather's interminably long prayers before meals at their home, spoken entirely in Dutch. My eyes were not closed, they were fixed on stealing slivers of food from the platter of roasted chicken. My mother's eyes were not closed because they were watching me, with disciplinary intent.

The moment that came to mind was a change of tone in my Opa's voice as he closed his eyes to address the Almighty. His voice softened to the intimate tone he used with his grandchildren. There was a loving familiarity in his voice he did not use outside of family. Although I knew nothing of what he said, I realized for the first time that he believed he was talking to Someone, with a very tender love.

I didn't go home that night as a believer, but I was less confident of my Sunday School doubts about this Jesus. Using clues from the evening's discussion, I closed my bedroom door and addressed the air above my head —just in case anyone was out there. I said something to the

effect of, "Jesus I want you to come into my life and I want to know you." Then, nothing happened.

Except something happened that I couldn't explain. It was not an emotional experience because I didn't feel any particular emotion. It was not an intellectual breakthrough, in that I had always believed in some kind of Jesus, that he was born, lived, died, maybe rose from the dead, and then went away somewhere far. It didn't matter anymore than if I had always believed Paris was the capital of France, and learned it was Marseilles.

I could only describe the moment as making eye contact. As if I had caught the eye of an extra on a movie set. There was someone in the background who had not warranted my attention, until I looked in that direction and saw that his full attention was on me, and had been on me for a long time—in a friendly way. And that this was no background player, but the producer, director, and star. No one had told me what to do, but I began to remember and apologize for instances where I had caused offense to him. Petty thefts from sisters, little lies, the kind of childish wrongdoing an adult would dismiss as nothing. In that moment I felt completely known, completely loved and I urgently wanted to clear any cause of offense between us. It was not a guilty conscience, but a compelling desire to acknowledge that I knew what I'd done and would like things to be different now.

The next day I went to the church office of the same minister who had invited me to come for some books the next day. I knocked on the door of the minister's study and told him what I had done. My memory of sitting in a comfortable leather chair by the door is clear. The minister sat behind his desk across the room, the same desk where wedding couples signed their documents. I asked more questions. He gave me some books and a paperback New Testament. As I prepared to leave, he enquired whether I had asked for the Holy Spirit. I was embarrassed that a 10 year graduate of Sunday School did not know what that meant. He offered an explanation I didn't understand and asked if I wanted him to pray. He asked if he could put a hand on my head while he sat in the chair next to mine. I don't remember what he said, but I do remember what I experienced. That sense of making eye contact with an "Other" solidified into an inexplicable knowledge of being loved that was unlike anything I'd known. I might have walked home levitating a half metre above the ground for what I felt, yet I would not have identified the "feeling" as an emotion. It was not elation, but something that felt peaceful and sensible to the core of my soul.

The following Sunday I could barely contain my excitement, sneaking out of the house while my family slept. I returned to the church where I had attended Sunday School. The adult service had never felt so

alive. Each Scripture lesson was about someone I cared about. The prayers were addressed to someone with whom I spoke many times a day. I don't recall ever having had a real conversation with the elderly minister who had been there all my life, but after church I poured out the wonderful thing that had happened to me that week. I was confident that he would affirm my discovery and guide me further. He was not enthused, but seemed rather more confused by what I told him.

The following week, he invited me to read the Scripture during worship. The sermon was dedicated to the dangers of emotionalism in religion, of which I gathered he disapproved. On the way out of church, he warned me again about enthusiastic religion and evangelists. We never spoke to each other again about my encounter with God, although I continued to come to church.

In 2010 John Bowen, an Anglican scholar at Toronto School of Theology, examined the differences between young adults who became Christian as young persons through a specific moment of decision and also continued in Christian patterns of prayer, worship, Bible reading, and service for decades into adulthood. He termed them Loyal Believers. There were also those who had become Christian through some kind of intention as young adults, but no longer engaged in these spiritual practices or attended church. These he termed Absent Believers.

Both the Loyal and the Absent groups self-identified as dedicated Christians and had similarities but there were significant differences between the cohorts. *Absent Christians* retained an intellectual conviction of Christianity as true, but that was not enough to engage in experiential practices, including public worship. For *Loyal believers*, intellectual assent ranked last. Both Absent and Loyal Christians named an experiential relationship with God as significant, but much more so for the Loyal cohort, for whom it was their *primary* reason for active practice, almost 90% vs. the Absent group's 64%. Bowen concluded that a personal experience of God is a primary indicator toward ongoing adult belief and practice. It exceeds the influence of friends, mentors, and intellectual assent.[2]

I do not suggest that a single kind of personal experience is proof or absence of a connection to the God of Jesus Christ. Christian Schwarz, the founder of Natural Church Development, identified no fewer than nine spiritual "styles" through which believers experience faith: sacraments,

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[2] John Bowen. *Growing Up Christian: Why Young People Stay in Church, Leave Church, and (Sometimes) Come Back*, (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2010), 120-123.

sensory, reason, Scripture, doctrine, sharing faith through words and action, aestheticism, mysticism, and enthusiastic outward expressions of faith. There is always something for the mind, something that speaks to the heart, and something that is experienced through life.

I do not understand why some people are drawn to God like a plant seeking light, and burst into faith with only a tiny spark. How is it that others hear skilful presentations of the Word, or even witness miracles and find their hearts unmoved? Why is it that one time, one place, one people are so receptive to the Gospel and others are insensible, dismissive, or hostile?

A church committee made the decision to move the minister's office from the Main Street entrance to a hidden location on the second floor. Presumably they wanted a bigger bathroom.

I have no answer, except that what once happened, at an identifiable time in Roman Palestine, and on the Main Street of my town, and in the place now occupied by a paper towel dispenser in a public washroom, was real enough to change the trajectory of my life, my work, my retirement—and perhaps even my eternity. My thirst was salted by my *experience* of faith in God which heightened awareness of the resurrected Christ: not only a warm fuzzy feeling, intellectual assent, obeyance to the laws of God, a life of service, but all of these and more that I cannot express in words.

Will AI come to know God?
By David Deane

Will AI—Artificial Intelligence—advance to the point where one day, it will have the ability to know God? Machine learning and quantum computing promise an artificial intelligence that can make discoveries about reality. God is real; therefore the question presents itself—will AI come to know God? It is a question that invites us to think about what "to know" means, what knowledge of God, in particular, means, and what the role of human experience and organic life is in knowing God. In this essay, I will argue that AI cannot come to know God. I will argue this without any real confidence in my final position because I have no expertise in AI and quantum computing. Nonetheless, I want to offer an answer to the question because offering an answer will allow me to explore what knowledge means when we use it in relation to God. It will allow me to explore what Scripture and tradition tell us about how human experience and organic life relate to faith. This, then, is what this essay is about. It is not about developing a confident answer to the question of whether AI can know God; it is about the elements that we need to consider when asking this question.

I will begin, in the first section, by looking at some modern, western understandings of knowledge. Key figures here will be David Hume and Immanuel Kant who, in different ways, made significant contributions to how modern people understand "knowledge". I will show that their approach to knowledge leaves little hope that AI can come to know God. In the second part, I will show that premodern approaches to knowledge, God, and faith leave even less room to argue that AI can come to know God. Here, my sources will be the book of Genesis and the Gospel of Luke, as well as Augustine and Hildegard of Bingen. While both "sides" seem to leave no room for AI coming to know God (which is why I argue that AI will not come to know God), the differences between the two approaches may offer us insights into how we understand what it means to know God.

Modern, Western Approaches to Knowledge[1]

In that the modern West has roots in the Enlightenment, it has roots in questions about what can be known and what knowing is. As Kant's

[1] This section engages themes explored in more detail in David Deane, *The Tyranny of the Banal: On the Renewal of Catholic Moral Theology* (Lexington: Fortress Academic, 2023) p.2-11.

famous 1874 essay "What is Enlightenment?" makes clear, for the Enlightenment the old truths are no longer accepted and once seemingly solid truths are starting to crumble. This is an era in which scientific discoveries are causing people to question all that was previously assumed. David Hume, who spurred so much of Kant's work on the question of knowledge, famously wrote:

> If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[2]

For Hume, much of our knowledge is held in fealty to ancient sources. We believe it only because of our enslavement to such sources. As such, modern, rational people must test it, and if it is found lacking, reject it. But what then? What are we left with? How can we know anything? For Hume, we are left with abstract reasoning; that is, things we can know on the basis of logic alone. For example, if I told you that David was heavier than Jennifer, and that Jennifer was heavier than Sophia, you would know that David was heavier than Sophia. You would know this having never met or seen David or Sophia and without anyone having told you directly that David is heavier than Sophia. You would come to know based on your logic alone. This is one source of knowledge, for Hume. The other is human experience, but only experience processed through rigorous experiment. Only these things, for Hume, can bring us close to facts, which are alone worthy of the designation "knowledge."

Immanuel Kant joins Hume in seeing that the "highest goal" of reason is "certainty and clarity."[3] This identification of knowledge with certainty is significant. It marks a break with much of what preceded it. To be sure, knowledge arrived at by "abstract reasoning" and scientific experiment is seen as a good before modern West thought. For pre-moderns such as Thomas Aquinas and the Islamic philosopher Ibn Sīnā, rational reflection that leads to certainty is good. Crucially, however, for

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[2] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 22.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 102.

such figures, the failure of inquiry to arrive at certainty does not deprive it of the status "knowledge." This contrasts with what we see in the modern West. In the modern West, knowledge that lacks the sure footing of certainty loses its claims to be real knowledge. Kant sees reason and knowledge (*wissen*) proceeding because of things about which we can be certain; it is only the possibility of certainty that distinguishes knowledge from believing (*glauben*) or opining (*meinen*), and, as he writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "in this kind of inquiry, it is in no way allowed to hold opinions."[4] It is not that the modern West invents experiment and the desire for certainty; it is that the modern West establishes a binary between things that can be known with certainty—knowledge, and that which has no hope of being known with certainty—belief or opinion.

This binding of knowledge to certainty has two important consequences for our inquiry into whether AI can know God. If knowledge aims at certainty, and certainty, as with Hume, involves measurement and number, then we can only know the material world. This is the case because we cannot have certainty about morality or about love or other things that cannot be measured or quantified. We will never know with certainty what justice or beauty are. If God is, as all Abrahamic religions hold, beyond matter, then any knowledge about an immaterial God cannot be held with the kind of certainty that warrants the term "knowledge" in the modern West. Thus AI, which is largely the product of modern western universities and the scientific methods they inculcate, cannot, within this model of knowledge, come to know God.

A consequence of this reduction of knowledge to that which is based on measurable data also mitigates against the possibility of AI coming to know God. Rational knowledge is understood as that produced by measurement. Material reality can be known. Non-material reality cannot be known in this fashion. It can be believed in or opined about, but it can't be known to be real. As a consequence of this, non-material reality (justice, beauty, the soul, God, etc.) loses its hold on reality in the modern West. The premodern notion of reality is vast, requiring Aquinas and Ibn Sīnā to offer a sophisticated taxonomy of rational knowledge predicated upon different forms of reason with differing degrees of certainty. In the modern West, rational knowledge is reduced to operation in relation to a sliver of reality (the material). While Kant is hopefully agnostic about the rest, the modern West he helps create increasingly reduces its understanding of reality to that which the reduced form of reason reveals.

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[4] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 103.

That which does not submit to this form of reason, instead of being seen as that outside the boundaries of this form of reason (as Kant does) increasingly loses its claim to reality. It is seen simply as delusion or illusion. Because AI is a product of universities in the modern West it "feeds" on information that embodies the binaries of the modern West, binaries between the most real, which is material, and that which is only possibly real—the meta-material. Binaries between reason, which can reflect on the measurable and quantifiable material reality, and faith, opinion, or prejudice, which has no chance of certainty and reflects upon non-material things. The former is public, shared, and worthy of the term "knowledge"; the latter is private, communal, and only merits the term "faith." Artificial intelligence, built using the techniques of the scientific revolution and the modern West, would have to forget or reject the axiomatic binaries of western science in order to posit reality about that of which we can attain no sure data. It would have to disobey and reject its "nature" in order to make a leap of faith.

This, however, seems unlikely, at least given how faith is understood in modern western religious thought; thought that operates in dialogue with the philosophical trajectories outlined above. For Schleiermacher, faith has its roots in a feeling of absolute dependence, it is a profound emotional response to which the person responds in a falling or submission. For Kierkegaard, faith is a form of what we see when Abraham commits to slaying Isaac; for Kierkegaard, it is with reason, logic, self-confidence, self-assertion on the altar at Mount Moriah, and in sheer trust in God, that Abraham is willing to stab it all. For Karl Barth, we are seized by God the revealer (the Father) and come to be chosen by God the revealed (the Son) through the work of God who is revealedness itself (the Holy Spirit). All of them agree that faith is, as Barth holds, an "impossible possibility." In all three, we have no rational grounds for it. It is a form of leaping (in Kierkegaard) or being pushed (Barth), but faith for such theological giants is largely what it is for such philosophical giants as Kant and Hume. Whether it is a response to the sublime (Schleiermacher), a wager (Pascal), pure illusion (Marx), it is an irrational (as reason is understood in the modern West) event.

Can AI, which has the very word "intelligence" in the name, be irrational? If not, then, within the modern western model of reason, it cannot come to know God.

Knowledge of God in Scripture and Tradition

The model of knowledge that comes to dominate in the modern West is, historically, an extreme minority position. The search for certainty is so

rabid after the upheavals that birth the modern West, that the meaning of the verb "to know" evolves in a way that would be unrecognizable for those before, or outside of, the modern West. We need only think of the very different uses of the verb "to know" in the Bible to see this. In Genesis 4:23, we are told that Adam knows Eve and the result is that she conceives. "Knowledge in the biblical sense" being a euphemism for sex should not dull us to how this use of knowledge is related to, not contradictory to, knowledge more generally in the biblical tradition. Knowledge is a relationship between the knower and the known before it is propositional. In Luke's account of the annunciation, the same verb "to know" appears, this time in Greek, as Mary rebuffs the angel by saying "how can this be, since I have not known a man?" In contrast, Mary comes to know the Holy Spirit, and the result is her conception. Again, knowledge is a relationship, one she doesn't have with any man, but one which she is about to have with the Holy Spirit. This relationship between the knower and the known, in both the Old and New Testaments, brings about change in the knower, a very obvious change in Mary's case. It is as explicit as a pregnant belly.

In the early Church, this intimate and indeed erotic encounter is axiomatic for how knowledge of God happens. To be sure, as Paul notes in Romans 1:20, something about God can be known through the world, but knowledge of God comes when, as he says in Romans 8:11, the Spirit "dwells in your mortal body". As the Holy Spirit rests on the body of Mary and the body of Christ comes to dwell within her, so too the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, for Paul, leads to the real presence of Christ within us (Gal. 2:20). The model for Mary and for Paul is the same. Here knowledge is a bodily change because it is based upon a relationship between the knower and known. It is like the knowledge a burn survivor has of fire, knowledge testified to by the scars visible on the body of the survivor.

Philosopher of science Michael Polanyi called modern western models of knowledge an "epistemology of spatial distance". The subject would study the object across a spatial distance and come to knowledge of it because of this space, which allows for experiment and objectivity. In contrast, knowledge of God in the early Church was possible only by virtue of the transgression of this space. It was possible through union with God not distance from God.

We may be tempted to see Mary's case as more literal than Paul's, but we would misrepresent Paul if we were to understand him as holding that Christ and the Holy Spirit dwell within him only in a symbolic sense. It is our "mortal bodies" that the Holy Spirit dwells within for Paul, and however he is imagining the presence of Christ within us, it is far more than allegorical.

It is because of this that when Church fathers write about "Saul" and "Paul", they ignore the simple difference in linguistic nomenclature that differentiates the names. Augustine follows Irenaeus in speaking about how Paul, infused with the Holy Spirit and one with Christ, is a new creation, a different thing. The old name would misrepresent the ontologically distinct creature—Paul, in whom the Spirit dwell. After blue paint is infused with yellow paint, we no longer call it blue paint, because that would not do justice to the green paint that the blue paint has now become. So too, for early Christians, knowledge of God shapes different selves. Knowledge of God is commensurate with ontological transformation; it comes from, and is, the presence of the Holy Spirit in a body, Christoforming matter.

This sense abounds, of course, in Augustine, and his understanding of revelation helps distinguish further this model of knowledge of God from our modern one. The word revelation comes from the Latin *revelare*, which means "to remove the veil." We moderns may think of a veil being removed, allowing us to see. But time and again[5], Augustine reminds us that the veil removed is the veil of the temple, the veil that separates us from the Holy of Holies. The cross and the rending of this veil allow, for Augustine, not an epistemological seeing, but an ontological union with God. Hence in revelation we encounter a self-giving God whom we can know through accepting the Spirit, leading to the presence of Christ within. This knowledge may lead to propositions, but prior to such propositions, this knowledge is an ontological reality. We know God as our skin knows the sun, and as skin darkening or the production of vitamin D may accompany this knowledge, so too there are ontological consequences from knowledge of God, namely faith, hope, and love.

The medievals remain faithful to this model of knowledge of God in sometimes beautiful, but sometimes ugly ways. Hildegard of Bingen winsomely holds that the soul is to the body as sap is to a tree, and this sap is "greened"[6] by the Holy Spirit. Knowing/union with the Holy Spirit, accepted in moral acts such as prayer, sacrament, charity, and so on, enables us to see the world differently, for Hildegard. This exact same logic is why, far less winsomely, Charlemagne forced conquered "pagans" to be

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[5] For example, see Augustine, Tractate 4 on John 6: 1-14, *The Harmony of the Gospels,* Chapter 19 (CreateSpace Independent publishing platform, 2013).

[6] "*Das grun*" for Hildegard, translated into Latin as *virditas* or "greening" as in Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum,* 2d ed., Translated, edited, and introduction by Barbara Newman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 150.

baptized. While the act is terrible, Charlemagne's logic is what interests us here. He didn't believe that the Pagans were free to accept God without baptism. Only after knowing the Holy Spirit were they free to accept or reject Her. Charlemagne didn't "follow up" and ensure the newly baptized throngs were remaining part of the Church; what mattered to him was that they could know God, and this knowledge, for saints like Hildegard and sinners like Charlemagne, was a relationship with the Spirit, leading to the presence of the Son.

Note that, in all these models, knowledge of God is organic, even material. The womb of Mary, Paul's "mortal body," Hildegard's greened sap, the water and oil Charlemagne inflicted on the vanquished, even Augustine, for whom (his Platonist roots showing) contemplation of God leads to union with God, we "know the invisible God through visible things"[7]. We often read this through a modern lens and assume that Augustine was a late medieval natural theologian, but the knowledge Augustine is focused on is union, made possible in water and oil, bread and wine, prayer, beauty, goodness, and more. So too Church is punctuated by touch at every baptism, ordination, and communion. If we ask ourselves what knowledge of God is, for Christians, we might rationally conclude that knowledge of God is more like a virus that is passed biologically than sterile data, acquired through experiment on a fixed object. Given this understanding of knowledge of God, as embodied, more than conscious, enacted, mediated through created things like water, and oil and bread, then on what grounds can we suggest that AI can come to contract it?

This essay has argued that, based on how knowledge of God is understood in the modern West, and before it, there is no basis on which we could rationally argue that AI can come to know God. As stressed at the outset, however, I don't have confidence in my answer. After all, someone who knows quantum computing better than I might envision a bread eating, cheek turning, faith leaping, sap permeated machine. But a good "answer" was never my goal in writing this essay. I aimed to offer two radically contrasting models of knowledge in order to make possible a reflection on what knowledge of God means. While knowledge of God may involve propositions, propositions that can be deduced and presented

[7] Augustine uses this conceit—knowing the invisible through the visible, the unchangeable through the changeable, countless times—rarely as beautifully as in Sermon 241, from Easter 411, see Augustine, "Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons," Mary Sarah Muldowney, trans., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 38. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1959) 256.

more in hope than in certainty, it has its roots in an ontological encounter and a resultant embodied process. When we think about knowledge of God, for ourselves, or in highly speculative musings about whether a future form of AI can know God, it is vital to be attentive to these embodied, even organic, elements. If we don't, as I hope I have shown, we will surely be breaking with the witness of Scripture and leaving far behind our parents in the faith.

FROM THE HEART
By Sue Campbell

"I wouldn't pick those if I were you," the menacing voice shouted from the other side of the dirt road where my boyfriend and I were walking. We had just stopped to pick some beautiful spring flowers growing in a ditch that we thought we'd take back to the "K-house"—our communal dining hall and living quarters at Jubilee Partners in Comer, Georgia where we were both volunteers.

We looked up and saw an older man, clad in a soiled, white undershirt and oil-stained overalls on his porch. He was pointing his shotgun right at us. "My wife planted those flowers so we'd have a view from our porch. She's dead now and so those flowers will stay right where they are."

We quickly raised our hands in the air and dropped the flowers, uttering our profuse apologies. We backed away slowly, telling him we meant no harm and assuring him we would leave the area. My heart didn't stop pounding in my chest until we were back at Jubilee.

Jubilee Partners is an intentional Christian service community in rural Comer, Georgia. Their primary work is to offer hospitality to refugees and immigrants who have experienced violence or persecution. Founded in 1979 by a group of families who left the rapidly growing Koinonia Farm community (the first inter-racial intentional community founded in 1942, and birthplace of Clarence Jordan's writings, *Habitat for Humanity*, and many other projects), Jubilee offers a place for refugees to recover and heal as well as practical supports such as language classes and legal resources. A group of permanent "partners" and resident volunteers take the lead on this justice work as an expression of Christian discipleship and service.

Growing up in a middle-class family in a small city in Ontario, I had never seen a gun, had only ever met one black person, and was sheltered from the worries of poverty. It was a culture shock in Georgia to experience such visible and blatant examples of the threat of gun violence, of racism, and of the marginalization of those who have nothing. For instance, on another walk in the small village of Comer, I was puzzled when the sidewalk ended and the asphalt road turned into a dirt road even though the houses continued. When I asked my friend why neither continued, he explained that this was where the black people in town lived. The end of the road provided a visual boundary to mark the division between whites and blacks. No road, no streetlights, no sewers. A pointed commentary on race, class, and culture in the southern US.

My experience at Jubilee helped to not only raise awareness of the realities of racism and poverty and violence but also provided a Christian perspective from which to reflect on them. "You must treat the outsider as one of your native-born people—as a full citizen—and you are to love him in the same way you love yourself" (Lev 19:34 *The Voice*). In 1987 when I was a volunteer, the refugees coming to Jubilee were from Central America. While I was happy to teach them English, I was astonished by their continual offering of gifts from the little they had. A woven bracelet. A hot tortilla filled with beans and rice. A cold drink on a hot day. I understood my call to service, but I hadn't expected to be on the receiving of others' love and grace to me.

I had been raised to save for a rainy day, not to give things away, especially when there was little to give. From these refugees fleeing war-torn countries, my understanding and experience of generosity, hospitality, and courage were deeply expanded. It became clear that I wasn't the only one serving. These Christian refugees were also living out Leviticus 19:34. I had much to learn. How could refugees fleeing war and persecution in their countries—whose corrupt governments and the wars they initiated were propped up by the very country in which they were now living—find it in their hearts to forgive, to build relationships, and to share their gifts? These were lessons in compassion and grace: of treating others as you would wish to be treated.

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A lone, white rose stood in a simple glass vase on the communion table. It was Mother's Day and it stood apart from the colourful bouquets placed elsewhere on the table. No one knew who put it there. For fifty years, it just appeared.

It took that long for the woman who placed the rose to tell her story. She had become pregnant as a teenager and had given her child up for adoption. Every year on Mother's Day, she placed a rose on the communion table, honouring both her child and her own deep sadness at not having been able to raise her child herself. When she was reunited with him fifty years later, she was determined to show her love even when faced with a now adult man who was on the opposite side of the political spectrum than her, who valued success as defined by consumerism, and who had no faith background. Her relief at finally meeting him and her sadness over their unshared values meant learning to live with competing emotions.

When this woman told me her story, I was facing my own deep sadness. I was struggling in ministry, disillusioned with the status quo, and mourning the unwillingness by some strong leaders to create a policy in support of same-sex marriage or to grant a much-needed and already nationally approved sabbatical policy. Month after month I took my deep sadness to my spiritual director. I read to her my lists of frustrations, regrets, and ruminations. And then she suggested I embrace the laments I carried and give voice to them.

And so I did. I sang through every lament song in Voices United and More Voices, grateful for the wisdom of the editors for adding songs which affirm that lament is also an experience of faith. I sang along with Mozart's and Faure's requiems. I sang gospel songs, spirituals, and South African freedom songs. And I repeatedly read and prayed my way through all the psalms of lament.

While at first my embrace of lament was about my own spiritual desolation (why can't I rise above this? why can't I take consolation in the hope of the resurrection?), it wasn't long before my own lament served to sensitize me in a deeper way to the laments of others: for parishioners who experienced a loved one's death; for friends whose marriage ended in divorce; for refugees fleeing violence and persecution; for indigenous persons mourning children put into unmarked graves at Indian Residential Schools. The cries of "Rachel weeping for her children" became louder for me. And in the cross, I again remembered how God suffers and weeps with us. I couldn't stop singing these lines from More Voices: "God weeps at love withheld, at strength misused, at children's innocence abused, and till we change the way we love, God weeps" (More Voices, #78).

Lament gives us a "vocabulary for pain" as preacher/musician John Bell says. The psalms give us a record of people who are in anguish, betrayed, downtrodden, disregarded, grieving, and suffering. My own lament became overlaid with gratitude that our Christian tradition gives voice in the Bible to a host of ordinary people who suffer and to a God who accompanies us in the midst of our pain. We learn it's okay to be vulnerable, to be honest, and to ask the kinds of questions for which no answer satisfies. And we learn to stand with others in their pain.

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A group of parishioners sat around a table. At a board meeting one July evening, the item on the agenda was whether to allow an openly

transgender minister to preach so that she could video herself as she sought out a new call. After five successful years of ministry, she had finally come out as transgender and was forced out of her congregation.

At the time, transgender identity was new to many around the table. But even if not everyone understood much about it, the farmer, the saleswoman, caterer, bookkeeper, administrator, engineer, and nurse all voted in favour. It was the right thing to do and it modelled the radically inclusive welcome of Jesus.

This small congregation was not in a busy city centre. It didn't have a huge budget for guest speakers or education programs. It was in an area that tended to vote for more socially conservative politicians. But it was a congregation familiar with the Gospel of Jesus.

My ministry has given me the privilege to sit at all kinds of tables: dining room tables as I plan a funeral with a grieving family; board room tables as we look at the budget and ponder what it means to be faithful to Christ's mission when the givings are down; potluck tables laden with food as we celebrate one occasion or another. I'm grateful that the life of faith has expanded my circles to include folks who I might not otherwise meet—people of all ages and stages of life who reflect the diversity of our society—and who also want to learn what it means to live God's love.

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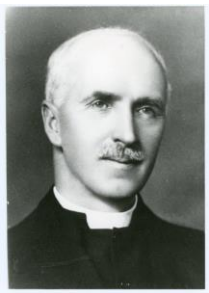
A shotgun. A lone white rose. A group of parishioners seated around a table. These three images reveal encounters which highlight some aspects of the experience of faith for me: community, justice, generosity, hospitality, lament, hope, diversity, gratitude. There are more encounters, too—other experiences—that have shaped my faith when I pause to ponder. I wonder what experiences you have had and how they have shaped your faith?

PETER BRYCE
By David Hughes



"Be kind to each other" (Mt 16:18). So the Very Rev. Peter Bryce D.D. LLD., one of the most influential leaders of The United Church of Canada in its formative years between 1910 and 1938, would bless any one of the multitude of young couples who may have asked him to bless their wedding through his forty-four year ministerial career. For Peter Bryce, it all came down to that: kindness.

Photo credit: United Church Archives

Beginnings

Peter Bryce was born on December 31, 1878, in Blantyre, Scotland, a small industrial town on the Clyde River twenty kilometers from Glasgow.[1] He was raised in an Auld Kirk (Presbyterian) working class home. A schoolmaster apparently informed his father that "this lad will be a minister one day."[2] Bryce wrote that growing up, he could never forget the "atmosphere of the hour of worship, its seriousness, its reality, its strength and its beauty."[3] Retaining his love of learning, young Peter was nevertheless forced into the work force at the age of fourteen as a store clerk and as a travelling salesman, in part by his father's lack of financial success as a contractor. His deep sensitivity to the needs of children and young people emerged out of personal experience. As the oldest of ten, he winkingly confessed to having "rocked a lot of 'cradles' in his life."[4]

Learning of an alternative Arminian approach to Christian salvation, Bryce asked, "Father, who are these Methodists?" Andrew

[1] Blantyre Scotland was also the birthplace of Dr David Livingstone (1813-1873) , the celebrated Victorian explorer often referred to as Africa's First Freedom Fighter.

[2] Ross Harkness. "Church Clear by Birthday Dr. Bryce's Friends' Goal*" Toronto Daily Star*, December 23, 1943, 3.

[3] Peter Bryce. "A "Wee Kirk" in the Country". *Toronto Star* September 24, 1931.p 6. He also added that he "only now" (in his mid 50's) can "better understand the heart of it all."

[4] Peter Bryce. "My Confession of Faith Forty Years in Ministry" *Toronto Daily Star,* February 7, 1946. 8.

Bryce replied that "they were very good people and kind to the poor."[5] Bryce was able to attend more than a few Methodist revival meetings in the local circuit area. His "conversion" centred on an immediate desire to be affirmed with confidence and authority in his Christian faith. Sitting with a man name Sharp and the New Testament, he received all that he needed to pursue the call of Methodist ministry. Thus, he was "born again" at the young age of eighteen.[6] Bryce diligently pursued his call to preach the gospel, working a Methodist circuit in Northern England and Blantyre where he taught Sunday School in a decommissioned streetcar. It was on this circuit that some listeners took him aside and told him everything that he should not do when addressing the crowd: useful feedback for an aspiring preacher and public speaker. Peter Bryce liked nothing more than to speak well to an audience, and he did it a lot.

Bryce arrived as a student minister in Toronto in 1906 following a three-year missionary internship in Western Newfoundland where he worked for the Newfoundland Conference of the Methodist Church of Canada. He reflected fondly on his time with the Newfoundlanders, proudly acknowledging them as the first colonists of the Empire (1610) and of the Methodist church (1766). Years later he would welcome many of his Newfoundland friends to the Earlscourt community in Toronto where they had migrated in the pre-war period.[7]

To complete his process for ordination Bryce was required to complete the Conference Theology Course at Victoria University,[8] which had been recently federated with the newly reorganized University of Toronto. At Vic, he came under the influence of a series of highly regarded academics including the Presbyterian scholar Sir Robert Falconer and the controversial socialist Scottish-Canadian economist James Mavor,[9] a world expert on Russian economic history and an advocate of public ownership of utilities, a novel idea in 1906. Mavor had been hired to teach

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[5] Judith St John, *Firm foundations: a chronicle of Toronto's Metropolitan United Church and her Methodist origins, 1795–1984* (Winfield, B.C., 1988), 147.

[6] Many of my impressions have been culled from a reading of the *Toronto Star* archives for the period from 1906 when Bryce started his student ministry through to the end of 1950, when Peter Bryce died just short of his 72nd birthday.

[7] He liked Newfoundlanders so much that he married one in 1909. His wife of 41 years was Julia Bemister Woods, Methodist Kindergarten teacher, Sunday school volunteer, and daughter of Newfoundland Postmaster general Henry J.B. Woods of St. John's and an active layman in the Methodist church.

[8] *https://archive.org/details/viccollegecalendar1906/page/288/mode/2up Vic*.

[9] *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Mavor.*

social sciences to theology students by Nathanael Burwash, who was Chancellor and President of Vic as well as a professor of Theology. Among other challenges, including church union, Burwash navigated the hiring of the Rev. George Jackson, whose historical-critical approach to biblical studies evinced some controversy. This ethos suited Peter Bryce. The task of being a Christian, as he understood it, was about being kind and meeting others' needs.

Earlscourt and Social Justice

The Social Gospel movement was gaining momentum in liberal Protestant North America. Recognizing that the conversion of sinners was only useful if it led to acts of repentance and sanctification, Methodists were abandoning their traditional revival meetings and their need for "conversion" experiences. The perfection of the human was now linked to being "saved for service." Cheap conversion testimonies would no longer cut it in the Methodist church. No one took that to heart as much as Peter Bryce. In 1906, while volunteering with the activist minister Rev. Gilbert Agar at King Street Methodist, Bryce learned of a mission being planned on Boon Avenue by Westmoreland Methodist Church in the Earlscourt neighborhood of Toronto, then commonly called "Shacktown," northwest of Dufferin and St. Clair Avenues. Bryce was hired by the Methodist Church to build Boon Avenue Methodist Mission into a self-supporting church.

He completed this work so effectively and efficiently that by the end of his tenure as Superintendent in 1920 (the longest any Methodist minister had been in a pulpit), the Earlscourt ministry circuit consisted of at least seven standalone churches, including the large Earlscourt Central Methodist which opened in 1911 with gymnasiums, public baths, community kitchens with nutrition education programs paid for by Lady Eaton, a children's home/daycare supported by Lady Flavelle, wife of Toronto's richest man, Sir Joseph Flavelle,[10] and community halls (one named in Bryce's honour after he left that community in 1920). In 1917, there were over 3400 Sunday school students registered across the Earlscourt ministries. There were 2000 Sunday school students and 1050

[10] Builders of Peterborough's George Street Methodist Church https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=1564, Flavelle (*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Flavelle*) and his friend George Cox *http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/cox_george_albertus_14E.html* later succeeded in Toronto, becoming the financial backbone of the Toronto Conference and the Methodist community.

members at Earlscourt Central Methodist itself, up from fifteen in 1906, making it one of Canada's largest and most active churches. There were social clubs for veterans, single men, mothers, and youths, and cooperative clubs for the buying and distributing of coal and food, all geared toward sociability and education. Earlscourt was largely English in origin; its members had urban industrial roots in Britain and now worked in the industrial plants of a rapidly expanding Toronto. In this era close to thirty percent of Toronto's population was British born.

The circuit was managed by Peter Bryce and his team, including E. Crossley Hunter[11] and Archer Wallace[12] whom Bryce had known in Newfoundland, two deaconesses, and Miss Hattie Inkpen[13] who managed the Earlscourt Children's Home for over thirty-five years, plus administrative support staff. Bryce gave oversight but was also not shy about swinging a hammer to help an English immigrant build his first tarpaper shack nor to deliver coal in the dead of night. By any measure, what he accomplished in Earlscourt was unprecedented in scale and scope. In 1917, the Star called it "almost like a fairytale" of growth and prosperity[14].

In these decades the "Institutional Church" model was popular in British and North American cities. It supplemented worship and pastoral care with community buildings, social services, education, and daycare. This model was successful in some British industrial cities and Bryce, always looking to Britain for best practices advocated for its expansion in Canadian cities.[15] The practical programming of institutional churches acted as a bridge between human experience and the new urban industrial context.

During his time at Earlscourt, Peter Bryce asserted the rights of the poor like a mother hen in this overlooked expansion neighbourhood of Toronto.[16] He lobbied governments and newspapers for material and financial aid as well as useable sidewalks, libraries, hospitals, public transit, and parks and recreation facilities. However, like most Methodist

[11] *https://www.archeion.ca/ernest-crossley-hunter-fonds*.

[12] *https://catalogue.unitedchurcharchives.ca/wallace-archer-1884-1958*.

[13] *https://www.jstor.org/stable/41669566*.

[14] "A New Methodist Church" *Toronto Daily Star* April 21, 1917, 11.

[15] Until Paul Murray was hired in 1954, you could not be hired as music director at Metropolitan United without being a graduate of the British Royal College of Organists.

[16] Todd R. Stubbs "Efficiency and Evangelism": Peter Bryce and the Making of Liberal Protestantism at Toronto's Earlscourt Methodist Church *Social History* 51 no 104 (November 2018).

ministers, he was against poolhalls and liquor. One of his first initiatives in Earlscourt was to approach Methodist publisher, Joseph Atkinson,[17] owner of the *Toronto Daily Star*, who had also grown up in poverty, to suggest that the newspaper sponsor a fundraising drive to provide Christmas presents and treats to the children of homes in need, including thirty in Earlscourt.[18] Bryce also lobbied for the successful passing of the Worker's Compensation Act in 1915. He also recognized the enormous sacrifice and loss of men in his community in the Great War and Spanish flu epidemic, as well as the sacrifices of the women who stayed home, waited patiently, and maintained happy and healthy homes for their children.

The close relationship between Atkinson and Bryce was a potent alliance for good. Peter Bryce was given his own podium in the *Toronto Star* whenever important social concerns needed to be explained to Torontonians or Bryce felt like the folks deserved a good talking to. It started with co-operative appeals for coal, food, and Christmas generosity. By the early 1920s, Bryce had also tapped into the *Star's* Fresh Air Fund to create Camp Bolton, a summer camp for urban mothers and their children, one of the largest summer camps in North America. Earlscourt activities were often featured in the Star along with Peter Bryce's personal appeals for community support, always made logically and statistically, yet with a final appeal to the emotions. It was a rhetorical device that he followed in almost all his newspaper columns and sermons. It made him one of the most identifiable and followed church ministers in the city, if not in the nation.

Through newspaper articles, countless addresses, and presentations to every type of organization, and of course his regular sermons delivered across the city, Bryce made the case for social programs, the right to collective bargaining, and public ownership of economic resources. When traveling he sent back missives informing the people of Toronto about what was going on outside Toronto in the USA, Western Canada, the Maritimes, and at British social sciences and church conferences. He was enamored of the British social welfare programs and saw any reluctance to follow Britain as a moral if not a patriotic failure.

Toronto's Methodist roots in 1906 were deep and increasingly powerful. Successful businessmen and money from across Ontario had earlier started to concentrate in Toronto. Many were Methodists who became the financial and industrial backbone of both the city and the

[17] *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_E._Atkinson.*

[18] The Toronto Star's Santa Claus fund was born in 1906, raising $150. In 2022 it raised almost $1.5 million.

Methodist church, locally and nationally. They set the moral tone for the community by example, swearing off liquor and most entertainments. The efficient mindset of the rich Methodist was one to which Peter Bryce could readily relate and much of his success was due to his ability to tap into this network of like-minded men. Bryce became a favourite of Toronto's moneyed elite. He was nominated for and sat on several denominational, municipal, and provincial boards. When asked why he took on such difficult leadership challenges, he asked, "Would you expect me to take on easy ones?" [19]

The absence of government programs to support widowed mothers during the war had turned Bryce into an activist. In 1920, he left Earlscourt to chair the Mothers Allowance Commission of Ontario, head the child welfare committee of the Social Services Council of Ontario, and to lead the "Pro" side of numerous popular referenda on prohibition. In 1919, he partnered with F.N. Stapleford (formerly of the Fred Victor Mission) of the Neighbourhood Workers Association (NWA), a local network of cooperative social aid operations which eventually became the United Way of Toronto. Meanwhile, he was also working for the General Conference of the Methodist Church as a fundraiser and surveyor ahead of church union. Peter Bryce was a Christian messenger with a mind for statistics and process in a community that valued businesslike efficiency. He was a perfect fit for the times of the city and the church.

In the wake of the war and as the 1920's progressed, the churches had sufficiently exposed several inadequacies in existing social services and started to make way for permanent government programs and administration. One of the church's initiatives was the founding of a School of Social Work at the University of Toronto to meet the great need in the rapidly growing city with virtually no social safety nets, when all of that work would have previously fallen to the church. Its success on the one hand was nevertheless causing the church to lose one of its major claims on the hearts of its members: the ability to serve the social good. Although the church membership handed off to government significant aspects of its mission and service agenda, Peter Bryce maintained for his whole career his reputation as an expert on social policy and its legislation.[20]

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[19] Editorial. *Toronto Daily Star* September 16, 1938, 4.

[20] On the "to do" list at the end of his ministry in 1950 were plans for contributory National Health and Dental Insurance, Unemployment Insurance, and an effective social housing policy. He was also concerned for a growing population of older people, living longer than ever, but requiring care

General Council Offices and National Leadership

Though he took on a new pastorate at Woodbine Methodist Church from 1923 to 1926, Bryce was increasingly involved in "head office" activities leading up to Church Union and after. He had been responsible for the Methodist Survey and subsequent fund-raising initiatives in support of the fledgling denomination. In his forties and at the peak of his power, Bryce was the representative for Toronto Conference on the Mission and Extension Board and within a year had been recruited by the moneyed elite of the Methodist and United Church to effectively take over the operation as Secretary for Mission and Maintenance (M&M), the highest paying job in General Council at about three times the salary of the average minister.[21] The initial fundraising target in 1925 for M&M was $4.5 million, out of which the United Church would pay for home missions and foreign missions (largely China, Japan, Korea, and India), ministerial pensions, evangelization and social services, and religious education. M&M had its own journal (*The United Church Record and Missionary Review*), which complemented the Church's weekly organ, the *New Outlook*.

Bryce's challenge at M&M was the lack of support by the general church membership, especially among the struggling rural and small churches, even when given the facility of duplex offering envelopes. By the mid-1930's the amount available for M&M had shrunk by half of its 1925 target. Despite most members' theoretical support for missions, especially through the WMS, there was increasing concern that the Toronto bureaucrats might not be the most "effective and efficient" after all. There was outright resistance to the appointment of new secretaries as funding shrank. And yet, Bryce's trips to western Canada at the height of the "dust bowl" were well-documented in the press. His appeals resulted in hundreds of boxcars being loaded with food in Eastern Canada for distribution on the Prairies, well beyond anything that the other denominations or governments were prepared to do. Bryce took very seriously the painful sacrifices of Prairie churches in difficult times, despite his having lived only in Newfoundland and then Toronto.

After eleven years at the General Council offices and with his high-profile advocacy for social justice issues, Peter Bryce was popularly

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nonetheless. Traffic accidents resulting in death were also an increasing concern that Bryce correctly linked to excess of alcohol (*Toronto Star*, Oct 22, 1948, 6).

[21] United Church Archives Missionary and Maintenance Fund Executive Minutes Nov. 1, 1932.

nominated for the position of Moderator and elected in September 1936.[22] Bryce's term as moderator was mostly uneventful. The church was broadly concerned for religious intolerance and looming war in Europe and made growing calls for a new economic order that would prevent future economic collapses. Many of Bryce's positions were open to the planned economic model of the USSR. Certainly, he was convinced that the capitalist model of competition at the expense of co-operation had failed badly and was not afraid to call it out. Bryce travelled and spoke extensively across the denomination, possibly relating his experience of being summoned to the coronation of King George VI, which audiences would love. The ordination of the first woman minister in the United Church, Lydia Gruchy, took place when Bryce was Moderator.

Metropolitan United Church

Peter Bryce returned to congregational ministry in 1938 at the age of sixty, stepping into the pulpit of Metropolitan United Church, in downtown Toronto: the "Cathedral of Methodism" in the "Methodist Rome."[23] Founded in 1818, it is centrally located today, as then, in the nation's economic, political, and cultural capital. As Peter Bryce assumed its pulpit in 1938 in a time of economic and spiritual depression and looming war, Metropolitan promised to be a challenging pastorate. It had great potential to transform and hold the city together. However, its local community was a cluster of rundown neighbourhoods being displaced physically and spiritually by the construction of a downtown core that continues to look down, literally, on Metropolitan United Church. The middle and professional classes were leaving downtown and taking their money to the suburbs. In postwar North America, the love of money, the "root of all evil" was gaining an upper hand just as Peter Bryce's strength to fight back was fading.

By the late 1940's, Bryce and the church had grown weary in the fight against the liquor barons and the war profiteers, the drugs, the gambling, the flawed economic and financial regimes, and peoples' increasing individualism and materialism.[24] Bryce especially hated the

[22] The nomination was made by N.W. Rowell, the day after he was appointed Chief Justice of Ontario. Rowell and Bryce shared community at Metropolitan United Church in downtown Toronto, which they had conspired together to rebuild following a January 30, 1928 fire which largely destroyed the structure.

[23] James Pedlar. "Toronto, a.k.a. 'The Methodist Rome,'" April 16, 2014. *https://jamespedlar.ca/2014/04/16/toronto-a-k-a-the-methodist-rome/*.

[24] The 1950 General Council received a remarkable study on Culture that captured the tension between economic progress and Christian life in community.

liquor trade for the devastation that it caused to families, the indigenous, and the poor. He deplored the obscene profits that were being earned by the likes of E.P. Taylor and the other liquor barons, as the most vulnerable paid the price, leaving the church to pick up the pieces. Metropolitan United Church, under the auspices of Peter Bryce and assistant minister, Percy G Price, was the first facility to host an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in Canada on January 28, 1943.[25] He remained confident that corruption had not yet infiltrated city hall but had started to despair that untamable forces of evil were afoot, and the church had an ethical responsibility to fight back.

When other ministers might think to retire Peter Bryce relished the Metropolitan challenge, especially as he planned to use many of the church and community building techniques that he had refined at Earlscourt. He also arranged the retirement of an $82,000 debt carried over from the reconstruction in 1928-9, much of it provided by his rich friends in the faith. The new community facilities at Metropolitan and the pressing need in the downtown core for supportive programming resulted in five thousand people a week accessing the Metropolitan community's numerous programs, in addition to the two worship services on Sundays. Bryce briskly hired leadership resources to execute efficiently programs such as Pleasant Sunday Afternoons and Business Girls' Lunches. A "Council of Women" oversaw "women's work," including support for the war effort. He relied on a commissioned diaconal minister and a former student, Ruby Brown, who watched over all the activities in the new "church house". However, Bryce also had an "open door" policy for receiving anyone who came seeking his help. His anguish at not being able to help men find work and therefore their own dignity was apparent in many of his essays in the Star during the 1930's. In essence, he was working his organizational magic again, not in a growing suburb, but in the downtown core, which many in the city and in the growing church had effectively written off.

Despite his drive for efficiency, Peter Bryce also had a strong aesthetic sensibility. He loved the music of the church and argued that there wasn't enough of it in the dark days of Depression and war. He was rarely seen without a rose in his lapel, and used roses as a metaphor for the

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[25] George Little, "The God Concept in Alcoholics Anonymous," *Religion in Life* 18:11 (Winter 1948), 33. *https://silkworth.net/alcoholics-anonymous/01-018-the-god-concept-in alcoholics-anonymous-by-george-a-little-religion-in-life-vol-181-25-33-winter-1948/.*

richness and beauty of life that is promised by the Gospels. He publicized his "Roses in December" service by asking the community to donate one thousand roses to be displayed in the chancel, then distributed to hospitals and shut-ins. A later flower campaign asked for two thousand and received six thousand, many supplied by Bryce's friend C.L. Burton. Burton also made sure that Bryce always had a choice table at the Arcadian Court restaurant in his Simpson's department store, where he would entertain both the pillars of the business community and the homeless who populated the park in front of Metropolitan. The elegant six foot "pastor to the city" walking through the Arcadian Court was likened to "god walking through his heaven."[26] For Peter Bryce, the projection of beauty was testimony.

The newspaper columns and activism slowed down when Bryce's health started to fail in 1948. His writing became more introspective, and he preached more tolerance, gentleness, and understanding, but remained adamantly opposed to the liquor trade. He retained his position with the Social Service Council and the Earlscourt Children's Home well into the postwar years. Denominationalism was unimportant to Bryce, and he encouraged the ecumenical union of all Protestant traditions. He argued Canada also should open its borders to immigrants so that all could take advantage of our physical and cultural riches. He did not use racist or prejudiced language, though he did have his blind spots, not least of which was a deeply felt confidence in the inherent superiority of British values and institutions.

The importance of Christianity to Bryce was that it quite simply "works."[27] His life was a testimony to its power. Helping others, being kind, being efficient and effective were all that God requires of us. He documented many of his decisions and perspectives for all Toronto and Canada to read and to reflect on. He used his powerful pulpit presence in service to the common good as the name Peter Bryce stood for "Christian Gentleman across the Dominion."[28] When he died on November 30, 1950,

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[26] Quoted in a CJRT-FM radio documentary on Dr. Peter Bryce April 26, 1984.

[27] Peter Bryce. "My Confession of faith Forty Years in Ministry" *Toronto Daily Star,* February 7, 1946. P 8

[28] Today, a Google search of the name Peter Bryce mostly leads to a profile of Peter Henderson Bryce, a public health officer of the province and the dominion who condemned the residential school system for its health inadequacies, but whose 1907 report was quashed by federal bureaucrats, notably Duncan Campbell Scott, about whom the Rev. Peter Bryce had nothing but good things to say in public. In 1919, the two Peter Bryces sat on the same committee of the Social services Council of Ontario, where Rev Peter Bryce oversaw child welfare

a *Toronto Daily Star* editorial summarized his service to the community, observing that "we will not see his like in this city again . . . Peter Bryce died in the faith and his works rise up to call him blessed. He was God's Good man and the Peoples' Friend."[29]

As a longtime resident of downtown Toronto and a member of Metropolitan United Church, I feel connected to the ministry of Peter Bryce and ponder its legacy to the church, broadly. Over seventy years on, the homeless and the hopeless continue to find refuge in Metropolitan United's park and in the studies of its ministers. Toronto, the fastest growing city in North America, battles all the complex social and economic conditions that wear at its soul. Metropolitan is a regular target of vandalism. Neighborhoods are now vertically gated communities, and the liberal churches are poorly attended. The massive church building is now supported by its parking lot, not by its members. These are conditions Peter Bryce would no doubt quickly identify and seek to address. The worship is still beautiful, musical, and meaningful in a way that he would appreciate, as we appreciate him and his influence to this day. But he would nevertheless preach that there is always much more work to do and remind us that God has no hands for the good work but ours. And above all, "Be kind to each other."

services. We don't know how they related to one another.

[29] Editorial Toronto Daily Star November 30, 1950, 6.

Getting to God: Preaching Good News in a Troubled World.
Joni S. Sancken, Luke A. Powery and John Rottman: Cascade Books, 2023. Pp. xi +113

The premise of the book seems obvious, perhaps even an unnecessary addition to the many books written about preaching. "If we could condense the God-soaked journey of preaching down to one saturated and concentrated destination, it is this: preaching needs to get to God" (1). Surely everyone knows that preaching is about helping people to get to God. But while everyone knows it, many preachers seem to forget it or struggle to achieve it Sunday after Sunday. Preaching often ends up looking like a lecture or a teaching moment geared to help people understand the Scripture or an event in the world. Preaching is often instructional and the response congregation members offer comes from the head: "that was an interesting sermon." The truth is even if you know that preaching is something deeper than an academic exercise it is not easy for a preacher to craft a sermon so that others can more easily experience the presence of God. Joni S. Sancken, Luke A. Powery and John Rottman want to encourage and aid those of us who preach to make God an active and central character in our sermons and in the lives of our listeners.

Each of the writers is situated in a very different context: Sancken in a largely secular setting in suburban Dayton, Ohio; Powery on a university campus with a history and a present steeped in racial tension; and Rottman in the prison system. The contexts are diverse and the reader may relate to one more than the others; however, each of the writers brings insights that will help the preacher in whatever context they find themselves.

The authors are connected by the fact that each of them studied under Paul Scott Wilson, and are well versed in Wilson's Four Pages of the sermon. This book takes a deeper dive into Page Three and especially Page Four of Wilson's framework. Wilson writes the acknowledgment and gives us an overview of the Four Pages. The first two pages of his framework are easy enough to attend to. These pages focus on the trouble that is present in the text and present in our world. The challenges and trouble present to each of the authors was clear: secularism, racism and the sharp divisions, and many challenges in the prison system; as well, the authors were each writing within the wider context of the global pandemic. It is not hard to find trouble in the Scriptures or in the world. Naming the trouble remains important and the authors encourage preachers to frame the trouble in a theological framework—to name racism as sin, for example.

However, it is Page Three and Page Four that remain the challenge for most preachers: finding and pointing to where God and God's grace are active and at work in the text and in our world today. How do we do that when all around us is challenge and misery? For the authors, the problems in the world and in their particular contexts become spaces for experiencing God. The authors describe the Celtic concept of "thin places" as "a fruitful way to describe God's presence with us amidst the deep challenges unearthed by the global coronavirus pandemic and the global social virus of racism" (5).

Each of the three authors writes about their context and how they have worked to get to God in their preaching. Each of the authors concludes their chapter with one of their preached sermons. Other preachers and their sermons are also referenced.

It was a good reminder to me as a preacher to ask where God is in my own sermons. Is God a primary actor or more like an extra on the set? I had to think about my sermons and see where I have highlighted God being present and active in the world. The authors encourage us to practise wearing our "God lenses" (112) as we look at the world, as we hear the news, as we experience tragedy, as we live in Christian Community so that we can translate this to our community.

Sermons need to "get to God"; however books about sermons do not. Nevertheless this book brings the reader closer to God while it encourages us to do the same in our preaching. The book helped to renew my faith and my desire to make the sermons I preach truly transformative.

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The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon.
By Bill McKibben. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2022. Pp. 226.

McKibben, founder of 350.org, is a major leader of the international campaign to combat climate change. Professor of Environmental Studies at Middlebury College, Vermont, author of numerous books, frequently arrested as a climate activist, he is a committed Christian and church member.

This book is a reflection on patriotism, religious faith, and middle

and upper class suburban life in the United States. An American book, it is nevertheless highly relevant to contextual theology in Canada. McKibben offers reflections on his life experience from the 1960s to the present. We hear of his growing up in Lexington, a prosperous suburb of Boston, and of the Congregationalist church where he first learned the Gospel.

"The Flag" is about patriotism and his early pride in America's revolutionary history, its commitment to equality and justice, and his later disillusionment about its subsequent history. He offers disturbing information about slavery, and "Indian removal," about the civil war and the civil rights movement. He asks whether it is still possible to be a proud, patriotic American, which is "above all a question of race in America."

"The Cross" speaks of his growing up in, and remaining, a member of "mainline" Protestant churches, where Sunday School and youth group "did much to shape my life." He remembers singing, with sincerity, "Someone's crying, Lord, Kumbaya," holding hands around a campfire. But that old song has become a joke today. During his lifetime the church has gone from a central place in American culture, shaping the identity of young people, to something marginal. Christianity has "lost its power and authority in America" (though he recognizes that the Black church is another story). He knows that clergy have played a major role in American history, spurring society forward. He cites the abolitionist clergy, and of course Martin Luther King, whose movement was backed by many clergy and lay people, both Black and white. He is also aware, however, of Christianity as a bulwark of slavery, and of ongoing white power and privilege.

But those traditions have "begun to die out" (109). In 1958, 52% of the U.S. population belonged to a mainline Protestant denomination. By 2016 that number had dropped to 13%. Just 4.5% under 35 belonged to these denominations. The majority now consists of atheists, agnostics, and the "spiritual but not religious." These outnumber not only mainline Protestants, but also Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, who are also diminishing swiftly. A change this large doesn't happen without causing and reflecting other shifts in society and culture.

Concerning evangelicalism, he notes its famously corrupt leadership, its support for white nationalism, for the Trump phenomenon, and climate change denial. He decries what he sees as the "hyper-individualism" of American evangelicalism, reflecting a broader cultural move away from community toward individual consumerism.

But McKibben sees hope in the new "outside" status of Christianity, because: "If you're the culture you can't be the counterculture" (130). The Gospels, he says, are "unrelentingly radical,"

and the church can play an important role from outside the cultural centre. This can happen only when it "escapes the need to serve consensus" (139). He notes, however, that a census of 2021 showed that in five years the "nones" and Evangelicals are dropping in numbers, while the mainline churches have grown slightly from 13% to 16%. His message for these churches: "Christianity works better as a counterculture" (145-146).

The Station Wagon is emblematic of suburbia, especially "high-end suburbs," and this is where climate change enters the picture. The American suburb is itself a huge industry, devoted to building ever bigger single family houses, its essential product being real estate. Since the suburban lifestyle is highly productive of carbon emissions, he asserts that failure to grapple with the economic force of the suburbs is a failure to grapple with climate change. With ever escalating valuations, suburban housing is substantially determinative of the national economy. These houses have to be heated and cooled, require lawns, driveways, garages, and cars. From the 1950s America constructed itself around the car, especially big cars. By 1970, America consumed a third of the world's energy, and it's mostly because of the car, without which the suburban lifestyle could not exist. Americans, he tells us, with about 4% of the world's population, produce about 25% of the world's excess carbon in the atmosphere, and suburbanites produce about twice the emissions as urban folk. (Lest Canadians feel morally superior, the analysis holds more or less for Canada as well.) The result is melting glaciers, floods, forest fires, drought and violent storms. "People of a certain age," who have benefited most from fossil fuel economies, have a particular responsibility to support the movement against climate change. If you're 60, 82% of the world's fossil fuel emissions occurred in your lifetime; if you're 85, it's 90% (206).

The book is highly readable, indeed a page turner, an inspiring educational tool. No footnotes here, but an annotated bibliography, showing the author's wide historical, economic and sociological sources.

Harold Wells
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In God's Image: An Anthropology of the Spirit. **By Michael Welker. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021. Pp. xii + 155.**

Michael Welker is senior professor at the University of Heidelberg and executive director of the Research Center for International and Interdisciplinary Theology. This slim book, based on his Gifford Lectures of 2019/2020, presents a natural theology of the divine and human spirit in six succinct yet far-reaching chapters. As a natural theology, he develops his pneumatology here with little attention to the Biblical traditions. His guiding question is: "how can human beings be understood as created in the image of God?" Chapter one sketches the breadth of human existence around three poles: (1) the weakness and wretchedness of human existence, (2) the immense power that some people can achieve and the grand destiny that all are called to, and (3) the tendency of people to engage in violence, or to be indifferent to the suffering of others or environmental destruction. He begins by noting how elite athletes or athletic teams attract followings characterized by "emotionally charged sentiment" (7). Similar phenomena happen in other domains. In politics, when a leader gathers such a following, the tainting of their message by hate speech can lead their followers to commit violence against others. This analysis is followed by a summary and reflection on Hannah Arendt's thought on these matters. This sets a pattern for the book. Observations about social realities are explored and accompanied by expositions of the thought of various philosophers or sociologists.

Having reflected on how the human capacity to be inspired or led can go wrong, Welker turns in chapter two to how movements can arise that move in an opposite direction. Here he introduces the notion of the divine and the human spirit as "multimodal powers" (20) that work simultaneously through different channels, in ways ranging from elemental to highly complex, creating emergent phenomena that are focused on particular goals, but that are made up of individuals acting in distinct yet coordinated fashion (26). Chapter three focuses on how this multimodal spirit works to form communities characterized by justice. Here he discusses how moral insights derived from settings such as the family can become encoded in institutions like the law as generally applicable principles that shape a community's ethos.

Chapter four focuses on freedom and its dialectical relationship to justice. Yearnings for freedom can provide fruitful unrest against injustices, but can also become ideologies of self-aggrandizement instigating violence to others. Religion as an expression of freedom can function either way. Chapter five studies how truth exists in different forms

at various levels. This leads to a reflection on Bonhoeffer's notion of the importance of recognizing and respecting the polyphonic nature of life (109). Curiously, there is no mention here of Bonhoeffer's insistence that ultimately, truth-telling requires speech that is inflected by love. At this point Welker summarizes his argument: human beings are made in God's image in terms of their destiny to seek justice, freedom and truth (111). Chapter six explores notions of peace. Central to peace is love, which occurs in hot, warm and cool forms. The latter is key to experiencing inner peace. Here Welker concludes that people are elevated to the image of God when they are moved by a spirit of peace and love to seek justice, freedom and truth for all, and that this elevation leads one to seeing all people as bearing the divine image.

A major theme in this book is the importance of recognizing the diverse ways in which God's Spirit is present and at work in history. As Welker sketches out various modes in which the spirit works to inspire people to fulfill their grand destiny, he is attentive to how these can be perverted or thwarted. However, he does not discuss much how different modes of the Spirit may conflict or compete for scarce resources, and how some modes, for example, traditional approaches to building community, may be undermined by the incursion of new ones.

This book can help people recognize how the goals of the Spirit are pursued in complex societies in many different ways. In a time when social divisions are rampant and numerous social causes clamor for attention, this is an important insight. It could help foster recognition of others, and cooperative and symbiotic relationships, rather than competition and denunciation between competing movements. It could also help social movements and communities plot realistic strategies to achieve their goals. Every theological library should have this book.

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Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race. **By Luke Powery. "Foreword" by Willie James Jennings. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022. Xii+141 Pp. $22.00 US (Paper).**

Luke Powery is Dean of the Chapel at Duke University and Associate Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School. In this book he relates the account of Pentecost in Acts 2 to the pandemic of racism in the United States. His thesis is that the description of the Holy Spirit and its work in Acts 2 provides a blueprint for the kind of intercultural community and witness that the church should be, especially in respect to racialized relations and cultural differences. This account of Pentecost provides a much needed counter to racist ideologies and practices by affirming all human flesh and tongues as created, beloved, and gifted by God.

Powery begins with a partly autobiographical sketch of racism and its effects in the United States, including at Duke University and its chapel. Chapter 2 examines attempts to provide legitimation for racism through the natural sciences. He maintains that racial differences are a social, not scientific reality. Racism dehumanizes both its victims and perpetrators. It represents a spirit of domination that is opposed to the Holy Spirit. Chapter 3 relates the Spirit critically to the reality of racism. Here Powery argues that life and breath are gifts from God to all human beings. This shared gift is a basis for unity, affirmation and solidarity amongst people. The Holy Spirit as the giver of life is the great equalizer. No race is inferior or superior to another. From here he moves to the Spirit as the giver of understanding, wisdom and speech. It is a power to witness to the truth. This witnessing may put life in danger, but when it does so, it is for the sake of God's future. According to Powery, the Spirit moves through racism, confronting and denouncing it, towards humanization, a fuller life for both victims of racism and their oppressors. The miracle of the first Pentecost was the creation of a community of people who were different and yet who retained their particularity. In the face of white racism it is important to stress that the Spirit embraces and enlivens Black bodies, minds and spirits, and is expressed through aspects of Black culture.

In chapter 4 Powery turns to preaching. He notes throughout his book that the church and academy have both been racialized. Racism taints even the notions of what constitutes good preaching and which books on homiletics should be read. Powery describes preaching as the Spirit breathing into preachers, who then release this breath into the world, so that it inspires and enlivens others. Powery calls this a "humanizing homiletic." It seeks to free, enhance and enliven the humanity of others.

Insightfully, he notes how congregations are socialized into listening patterns which categorize some sounds as noise and others as inspiring. He also attends to the embodied nature of preaching, and how the Spirit's presence is communicated and shared through the preacher's bodily presence and gestures. Jesus Christ is central to this humanizing homiletic. This should move this homiletic to attend to the poor, the wounded and the marginalized. There is a place for lament in such preaching, even while it proclaims hope, which has reconciliation as an eschatological goal.

Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of Howard Thurman's thought as a guide to moving through racism towards humanization. Drawing on Thurman, a frequently referenced resource throughout this book, Powery argues that the Spirit moves us to critique racism in its many forms, thus to humanize those who have been de-humanized, and so to move towards a community based on a common humanity.

This is a timely book. While it is focused on resisting and overcoming racism, it has many important insights into the work of the Holy Spirit that extend beyond this. It will benefit theologians and homiletics professors, clergy and educated lay people, and deserves to be widely read.

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A Human-Shaped God: Theology of an Embodied God. **By Charles Halton. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021. xviii+221 Pp.**

Charles Halton is affiliated with the Centre for the Social-Scientific Study of the Bible at St. Mary's University, Twickenham, UK. In this book he seeks to expand Christians' theological imaginations by discussing some of the ways in which God is described in anthropomorphic terms in the Hebrew Bible. He doesn't completely discount the doctrinal tradition of Western Christian theology, although he spends little time discussing this. In his view such doctrines and the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in Scripture each have a role to play in shaping Christian thought, worship and action. He posits that the latter can help Christians become more charitable and inclusive of others.

Chapter one introduces this theme. Chapter two examines how such anthropomorphisms are understood in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter

three discusses passages which describe God as having a body, a localized presence, and being encountered at certain places. Chapter four focuses on descriptions of God as having a heart or mind and testing people to learn something about them, as in Genesis 22:1. Chapter five looks at passages describing God as having emotions. Halton argues that passages like Genesis 8:21, which suggest regret for previous actions, indicate that these were sinful acts (150). Oddly enough, the tension between God's wrath and mercy in Hosea 11:8-9 is not discussed here. Chapter six examines portrayals of God as just, patient, vengeful, jealous and forgiving. Halton concludes that the divine-human relationship can lead God to change in the sense of becoming more tolerant, etc. The final chapter argues that such anthropomorphic descriptions of God should inspire Christians to become more loving and to create new understandings of God that help people become more inclusive and compassionate.

This is a wide-ranging book. Along the way Halton offers summaries of neurological theories, historical insights about various cultures and philosophical arguments, all aimed at illustrating and buttressing his argument. However, there is other material that he left out. He argues that anthropomorphic descriptions of God are largely absent from Eurocentric theology. But this overlooks Paul Tillich's discussion of Einstein's comments on God, in which Tillich described God as "suprapersonal" and argued that anthropomorphisms are necessary to describe God as a God of love. Karl Barth described the incarnation as one big anthropomorphism. Halton is aware of the criticism of anthropomorphic understandings of God made by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, but he does not consider how this was taken up into the doctrine of the Trinity, which, under the impact of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, still continued speaking of three divine "persons" in the Godhead. He unfortunately also does not discuss Hebrew Bible passages which use non-anthropomorphic terms to speak of God and how these relate to the anthropomorphisms he focuses on. The Psalms are peppered with both.

William of Ockham is reputed to have said that books are not written to be true, but to make people think. By this criterion this is a good book. All the anthropomorphisms that Halton describes are in the Hebrew Bible, and there are more in the Gospels and epistles. His presentation of these is thought provoking. He is also correct that Christian theology can be enriched by considering such passages along with traditional descriptions of God as unchanging, omniscient, etc. There is a tension at the heart of Jewish and Christian theology, between the radical transcendence of God to creation (God's aseity), and God's involvement in history. The latter suggests that creation and redemption make a

difference to God. Even Augustine, a stalwart proponent of God's aseity, acknowledged that Jesus' resurrection brings something new to God. There is also a creative tension between the anthropomorphic descriptions of God that Halton studies and the more abstract conceptual descriptions often employed in Eurocentric theology. The latter are necessary for a deeper understanding of God. Yet, just as the symbol gives rise to thought (Ricoeur), so these anthropomorphic descriptions, at their best, portray dimensions of the divine being, of God as a living God, in a way that abstract concepts can never exhaust. Halton's exploration of this theme makes this a useful book for theologians, clergy, theology students and educated lay people.

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