

Nicholas Peter Harvey and Linda Woodhead, *Unknowing God: Toward a Post-Abusive Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), pp. 160. \$21.00/£18.00

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This is certainly the most arresting theological book I have read this year, and perhaps for several years. It comprises a series of very short essays, alternately written by the authors. Both are astonishingly well read, and the range of allusion that covers Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and the searing honesty of Marilynne Robinson, or Dag Hammarskjöld's search for God in *Markings*. On the way, it takes in poetry, prose, culture, politics and society. Though such a short book, it is crafted out of an abiding friendship and years of conversation, and the outcome is a modern spiritual 'classic'.

The book grows out of immersion in Catholic and Anglican traditions and acute awareness of abuses perpetrated by these churches. It is an honest and personal exploration of what still holds up and what has had to be discarded. It is, perhaps above all, a searingly honest book about God and gods, Spirit and spirits, prayer and sacraments, ghosts and resurrection, Jesus and the church. It is hard-hitting and immensely readable. It is effectively a set of 'Letters to the Church' – imagine a hybrid comprising C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer – that deliver a mind-expanding plea for a less negative, timid and oppressive form of religious faith. If anyone were to come into possession these letters – of this richness, quality and prescience on a regular basis – I am certain the recipient would make the time to pack a large suitcase, make the journey and hope for a long stay nearby the writers in the hope of eavesdropping on their chats and café conversations.

By even suggesting these letters have some parallel quality with Lewis and Bonhoeffer, I do not speak lightly. This is a book infused with the tradition of theological and confessional apologetics, together with that of the political and prophetic protest. Like the work of Lewis and Bonhoeffer, these epistles emerge from the serious institutional and denominational crises that afflict contemporary Christianity. The church is floundering today, not least from multiple authoritarianisms, incompetency, failings, cover-ups and even corruption.

One task of theology is to disrupt the constraints that prevent humans from being free, fully alive to God, and the possibilities of faith, hope and love. Christian theology has a role in those who restrict grace and freedom, and yet install themselves as blind guides and custodians of the tradition. Theology, done well, is courageous and brings with it permission to be spontaneous and creative. Rigidity is the enemy of orthodoxy – indeed, it is its jailer. If we live in fear getting things wrong, adopting neurotic super-orthodoxy will only mean imprisonment.

The abusive aspects of theology and practice that form the nucleus of this book are enveloped in concerns the churches have for safeguarding. Yet as the authors helpfully – but never laboriously – highlight, the churches only ever 'safeguards' itself. In so doing, the hideous cycle of spiritualised projective identification unfolds. Therapists regard projective identification as the process whereby one makes their feelings or pain

known, by acting in such a way as to cause the other person to feel precisely what the projector is feeling. Institutions and societies that cannot resolve their inner tensions, guilt, chaos or confusion, and so feel powerless, will frequently impose that impotence on other groups. Shame and rage, and other feelings that groups believe should be repressed, can be transferred to others too.

We find this in many recent church reports on same-sex relations and marriage. The significant changes in contemporary culture in respect of gender and sexuality have left senior church leaders feeling confused and powerless. The acerbic inner tensions within the church on these issues – complex debates on humanity, sexuality and authority – leave them feeling wary and impotent. They project this powerlessness on to the very groups who most need compassion and liberation. In the same way, the problems of projective identification can be found in concentrated forms around sexuality, safeguarding, atonement theory and hierarchies of social ordering rooted in theology (e.g. the Son is always obedient and subjected to the Father; the Son is punished to appease the justifiable wrath of the Father-God-figure).

If you have ever encountered upper-class English Conservative Evangelicalism, none of this is especially surprising. The Iwerne Camps were founded by Eric John Hewitson Nash (1898–1982), also known as ‘Basher Nash’. These ‘Bash Camps’, as they became known, specifically targeted boys at elite public schools and were classist and elitist. Attendance was by invitation only, and the camps used their own military terminology. Nash was known as ‘commandant’, and other leaders were ‘officers’. Iwerne Camps were rooted in Edwardian ‘muscular Christianity’ and valued ‘a stiff upper lip’. These camps, much like Conservative Evangelicalism more generally, promoted a kind of ‘Christian manliness’ that was rooted in the English public school system. In such environments, corporal punishment was normal – as were shaming and bullying.

In reality, it was the leaders working out their own ambivalences and hostilities towards their own bodies and desires. And such ambivalence was also directed against women, these camps being riddled with overt sexism. Moreover, the gendered consequences for men who were schooled was, of course, not to be ultimately carried by the attendees. Some Evangelicals may protest at this point. But one must remember the nickname given to the ‘female helpers’ at ‘Bash Camps’: ‘Bunnies’.

‘Bunnies’ were only there to help and support. It is hard to know if this nickname was meant to be mildly Heffner-esque in orientation, or to communicate a kind of warped juvenility – pet bunnies being cuddly and comforting. I imagine the ambivalence here is revealing, with the nickname pointing both ways: sexual objectification (but as at Heffner’s clubs, a ‘no-touching, no-dating’ policy) on the one hand; and childhood regression with a comforting passive pet on the other.

The projective identification is thus established. Those men who most fear their relationship with their own bodies and the bodies of women simply transfer that feeling to other groups, and attempt to make them feel as they do. Afraid of their own emotions and bodies, they also project this on to any threat to ‘Edwardian Christian manliness’ – with women and homosexuals especially vulnerable at this point. Cherished Conservative Evangelical doctrine flows from the family dynamics locked into this social-psychological pattern. So do ecclesial patterns of practice, such as placing a premium value on redemptive violence.

An atonement theory that posits an angry God who demands the sacrifice of his only cherished and innocent son, in order to abate the all-consuming-wrath of a (distant) father being visited upon the world, will invariably lead to more victims. The more the sense of sin grows in the individual or group, the greater the proportion of self-

sacrifice required. And it can be projected. It goes without saying that others can be sacrificed in this equation – as expendable collateral. Indeed, by punishing them, you may actually be saving them.

In twenty-six riveting, wise and incisive essays (the length of letters or short epistles) the authors firmly chip away at repositioning faith and the church, always appealing for the recovery of poise and bearings. There is nothing didactic here, but many passages of great profundity and insight which invite reflection and conversation. The commentary on aspects of contemporary religion emerges out of rich collegial co-authorship, fresh thinking and common sense.

Captivity in neurotic super-orthodoxy is a nervous state of mind that cannot pursue living questions to where they might lead. So talkative and diminutive versions of Christianity will always twitter away, projecting their pathologies and fantasies on to God. Yet as Linda Woodhead and Nicholas Peter Harvey show us, no matter what we want to project on to God, or on to one another, all Christ does with this is to look back at us. Not with hatred, or with judgement – but with a love that is wider than the measure of our minds, and deeper than the depths of our hearts. God is full of love for all humanity, not just a chosen few. We cannot earn it for ourselves, nor deprive or ration it to others. That is the amazing thing about grace: it is free and abundant. These letters celebrate that, richly, wisely and prophetically.

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