



Latimer Trust Monthly Reading List - June 2017

This is a summary of recent books read by Martin Davie, compiling his evaluations and the commendations of others.

In this edition:

Author	Title	Martin's opinion
Andrew Angel	<i>Intimate Jesus</i>	This is an important scholarly study that properly acknowledges and explains the presence of a strong sexual element in John's portrayal of Jesus while also debunking the ideas that Jesus was ever in a sexual relationship with either a man or a woman. It is not a book for beginners, but for those with experience of studying biblical texts in detail it is a book that can be highly recommended.
Richard Bauckham	<i>Jesus and the Eyewitnesses</i>	This book is a solid piece of academic study, but it has proved accessible to non-academic readers. It is a book that is invaluable for anyone who wants to know what the basis is for our knowledge of Jesus and what kind of knowledge we have.
Marion L S Carson	<i>Human Trafficking, the Bible and the Church: An Interdisciplinary Study</i>	An important book that will be very helpful to anyone who wants to understand how the Bible can be used with theological integrity in helping to form an informed Christian response to the issue of contemporary slavery. Carson helps us to think hard, showing clearly why we need to oppose trafficking not in spite of the Bible, but because of it.
Rod Dreher	<i>The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation</i>	This is an important book that deserves to be read to all who want to think seriously about how we should live as Christians in an increasingly post Christian society. Dreher's book is a clarion call to return to real Christianity.
Krish Kandiah	<i>God is Stranger: What Happens When God Turns Up?</i>	This is an important book which points us to what the Bible has to say about how God is a mysterious and enigmatic God who constantly surprises people by presenting himself to them in unexpected ways. It also points us to the clear strand of biblical teaching about showing hospitality to the stranger. It would make an excellent basis for sermon series and/or a home group course.
Matthew Levering	<i>Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator</i>	Levering's book is a very helpful re-statement for our time of the classical Christian understanding of the creator God and the nature of his creative and redemptive activity. This is a detailed and scholarly study that presupposes some existing grasp of Christian theology. An invaluable resource.
Alister McGrath	<i>The Great Mystery: Science, God and the Human Quest for Meaning</i>	This is a fascinating book that shows how theology, philosophy, science and literature can help us to reflect on the mystery of human existence in complementary rather than competitive ways. It would make a good basis for a set of sermons and be a useful book for Christians to study with non-Christian friends.
Vaughan Roberts	<i>Talking Points, Assisted Suicide</i>	This is an excellent, clear and biblically grounded introduction to its subject matter. Highly recommended.
Rodney Stark	<i>Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History</i>	This is an important and accessible work of historical truth-telling which should be studied by Evangelicals. Buy, read, learn, ponder!
Tom Wright	<i>Spiritual and Religious: The Gospel in an Age of Paganism</i>	This book is a very helpful summary of how the message about Jesus contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments provides the resources that the Church needs to counteract the renewed paganism of our day.

Andrew Angel, *Intimate Jesus: The Sexuality of God Incarnate*, SPCK, ISBN 978-0-28107-240-8, £12.99 (e edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This is an important scholarly study of the Fourth Gospel that properly acknowledges and explains the presence of a strong sexual element in John's portrayal of Jesus while also debunking the ideas that Jesus was ever in a sexual relationship with either a man or a woman. It is also a book that shows that this sexual element is not a surd within John's account, but an integral part of his account of how the love of God present in the incarnate Jesus brings healing to the whole of human life. It is not a book for beginners, but for those with experience of studying biblical texts in detail it is a book that can be highly recommended.

Overview:

Dr Andrew Angel is a Church of England priest and New Testament scholar who was formerly Vice Principal of St. John's College Nottingham. As he explains in his introduction, the question he explores in his new book is 'how did God experience human sexuality?' As he goes on to say:

I do not ask this question with the intention of being irreverent, churlish or defiant. I ask it as a devout man of faith. The Christian faith teaches me that God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Given the struggles most of us have over sex, I am intrigued as to how he managed (or even flourished!) in this area of his humanity.

Angel explores the issue of the sexuality of God incarnate by means of a study of the Gospel of John, which he thinks was written by the Apostle John who was the 'beloved disciple' referred to in the Gospel. He acknowledges that Jesus' sexuality is a 'minor theme' in the Gospel, but he thinks that it is a theme that is nonetheless present from the prologue onwards.

The book begins with a study of the prologue which argues that the juxtaposition of the word 'flesh' in 1:13 and 14 indicates that when John says that the 'word became flesh' this means that Jesus was someone with human sexual desires and that the description of Jesus as lying in the 'bosom of the Father' in 1:18 is a description of loving intimacy that is picked up later in the description of Jesus' relationship with the beloved disciple.

The book then goes on to look in turn at what the Gospel tells us about Jesus' meeting with a Samaritan woman at a well, about his relationship with the beloved disciple and about Jesus' relationships with Peter, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene and an un-named woman caught in adultery.

As Angel sees it, in these accounts 'John plays with and develops ancient stories and motifs of both the sexual desire of men for women and the sexual desire of men for other men' to present a portrait of Jesus as a man who, while celibate, was sexually attracted to women and sexually attractive to them and who had an intimate, loving (but non-sexual) friendship with another man.

The theological point that John makes by telling us this is that the answer to the question 'how did God experience human sexuality?' is that:

God experienced his human sexuality in love. This love meets people where they are and respects all, even those who have lost self-respect and others' respect on account of their personal history. This love brings self-acceptance through divine acceptance and thereby brings healing. This love is unafraid to speak God's commands into our lives ('go and sin no more'), but there is an approachable holiness about it that attracts people. In this approachable holiness Jesus walks with his disciples, wanting to share more of his love but waiting until they—or we—are ready. He puts aside his own sexual needs and desires in order to meet the needs of others. He offers more than spiritualized salvation. John has Jesus offer salvation which reaches into the very depths of our being and genuinely heals—even our sexuality.

Commendations:

Christina Baxter writes:

'This is an important book ...it faces a question that is rarely addressed, namely how we are to understand the Incarnation in all its fullness...It is a timely discussion that deserves careful consideration.'

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2ed, Eerdmans, ISBN 978-080287-431-3, £41.99 (e edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This book is a solid piece of academic study, but it has proved accessible to non-academic readers. Eyewitness testimony tells us that it has even been made use of in sermons. It is a book that is invaluable for anyone who wants to know what the basis is for our knowledge of Jesus and what kind of knowledge we have. The three additional chapters and the new bibliography bring the book up to date and make it even more useful.

Overview:

Richard Bauckham is professor emeritus of New Testament studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and senior scholar at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. His new book is an expanded edition of a book which was first published in 2006 and which has been widely read and appreciated even by those who would not normally read academic books in the field of biblical studies.

In this new edition he has made no changes to the original text, but he has added three new chapters in which 'I have developed some of the arguments of the book further, added new evidence for some of the claims I made, and responded to some of the objections raised by my critics.' He has also added a comprehensive new bibliography.

The basic argument of the book is that we need to reject the view of the Gospels which dominated New Testament scholarship for much of the twentieth century, namely that the Gospels were the products of oral traditions about Jesus which circulated anonymously among the first Christian communities. In Bauckham's words:

If, as I shall argue in this book, the period between the 'historical' Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of the traditions until their deaths, then the usual ways of thinking of oral tradition are not appropriate at all. Gospel traditions did not, for the most part, circulate anonymously but in the name of the eyewitnesses to whom they were due. Throughout the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, Christians remained interested in and aware of the ways the eyewitnesses themselves told their stories. So, in imagining how the traditions reached the Gospel writers, not oral tradition but eyewitness testimony should be our principal model.

In support of this argument Bauckham draws on the internal literary evidence contained in the Gospels, the use of personal names in first-century Jewish Palestine, recent developments in the understanding of oral tradition, and the resources provided by the modern study of memory, especially in the field cognitive psychology. Finally, Bauckham calls for an end to the idea that we have to make a choice between the 'historical Jesus' and the 'Christ of faith.' He proposes instead that the basis for Christian faith is the 'Jesus of testimony' presented to us by the Gospels.

Testimony, he says:

...is both the historically, appropriate category for understanding what kind of history the Gospels are and the theologically appropriate category for understanding what kind of access Christian readers of the Gospels thereby have to Jesus and his history. It is the category that enables us to surmount the dichotomy between the so-called historical Jesus and the so-called Christ of faith. It enables us to see that the Gospels are not some kind of obstacle to knowledge of the real Jesus and his history but precisely the kind of means of access to the real Jesus and his history that, as historians and as believers, we need.

Commendations:

Tom Wright has commented:

'The question of whether the Gospels are based on eyewitness accounts has long been controversial. Richard Bauckham, in a characteristic tour de force, draws on his unparalleled knowledge of the world of the first Christians to argue not only that the Gospels do indeed contain eyewitness testimony but that their first readers would certainly have recognized them as such. This book is a remarkable piece of detective work, resulting in a fresh and vivid approach to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of well-known problems and passages.'

Marion L S Carson, *Human Trafficking, the Bible and the Church: An Interdisciplinary Study*, SCM, ISBN 978-0-33405-559-4, £16.99 (hardcover edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This is an important book that will be very helpful to anyone who wants to understand how the Bible can be used with theological integrity in helping to form an informed Christian response to the issue of contemporary slavery. As Carson notes, previous generations had to engage with this issue during the debates about the abolition of the slave trade and her book will help Christians to engage with it today. It is no good affirming in principle that the Bible needs to be the foundation for Christian thinking and practice if we then have no idea about how to bridge the hermeneutical gap by knowing how to apply its teaching to the real life issues we face. Carson helps us to think hard about how this gap can be bridged, showing clearly why we need to oppose sex trafficking not in spite of the Bible, but because of it.

Overview:

Marion L. S. Carson is a freelance theologian and writer. She is Secretary of the European Baptist Federation Anti-trafficking Network. The starting point for her new book is the observation that:

There is, at present, considerable confusion with regard to the Bible and its place in the life of the church. Some ignore the Scriptures altogether, while others claim that its principles and precepts inform every moment of their lives. Some say that they do not know, and will never know, what its documents might mean, while others are convinced that they do know and will brook no disagreement with their interpretation. There are, of course, many gradations between the two extremes. This state of affairs results not only in divisions within the church, but in the routine side-lining of Scripture in discussions regarding Christian practice.

These problems with the use of Scripture in the Church are, she says:

...highlighted when we ask what Scripture might have to say about human trafficking. Over many years' involvement in Christian anti-trafficking work, I have realized that there is a need to help Christians bridge the hermeneutical gap between the worlds of the Old and New Testaments and our own. To put it bluntly, simplistic readings of Scripture are hindering a Christian response to human trafficking. Some churches refuse to talk about the subject, considering it too shameful to speak of. It is not uncommon for women who have been trafficked into prostitution to be shunned and punished by their churches on the grounds that they are unclean whores (citing, for example, Ezekiel 34 or Revelation 18). Female victims of trafficking are frequently blamed for their situation on the grounds that women are always responsible for the sins of men and that somehow it must have been their fault. Many Christians have reported to me that they have been actively prevented from becoming involved in anti-trafficking work, their church leadership having told them that they should not associate with sinners or that they should be focussing on their own communities. It is even still possible, on occasion, to hear the view expressed that slavery is in line with God's will because the Bible says so.

In order to respond to this situation Carson explores two questions in the course of her book 'what does the Bible say about slavery in general?' and '[h]ow can it inform a Christian response to modern-day trafficking of persons?' In order to help answer these questions she looks at the nature of people trafficking today (focussing on the issue of sex trafficking) and considers how the Bible has been understood in relation to slavery during the course of Church history (focussing on its use during the debates about the abolition of slavery which took place in Britain and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.).

Following an introduction which sets out the parameters of her study she looks in turn at 'The Bible and the Abolitionist Debate,' 'The Bible and Slavery,' 'The Problem of Prostitution,' 'The Bible and Prostitution' and 'The Bible and Contemporary Slavery.'

Commendations:

David Smith declares:

'Marion Carson combines the skills of a trained biblical scholar with the passion of a social activist engaged in resistance to the injustices of contemporary forms of slavery. She is thus uniquely qualified to write on this crucial yet frequently misunderstood or evaded topic. She does so with skill, honesty, and courage, placing us in her debt and confronting us with the urgent ethical and theological challenges so well articulated in this superb study.'

Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Sentinel, ISBN 978-0-73521-329-6, £19.47 (audio edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This is an important book that deserves to be read to all who want to think seriously about how we should live as Christians in an increasingly post Christian society. As one perceptive reviewer has pointed out, what Dreher is proposing is a 'strategic withdrawal from the world.' This does not mean seeking to live apart from the world. What it does mean is that those who are committed to following Christ must take this commitment seriously. Dreher's book is a clarion call to return to real Christianity.

Overview:

Rod Dreher is a conservative American writer and editor. His book *The Benedict Option* is inspired by the argument put forward by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre that a time was coming:

....when men and women of virtue would understand that continued full participation in mainstream society was not possible for those who wanted to live a life of traditional virtue. There people would find news to live in community, he said, just as Saint Benedict, the sixth-century father of Western monasticism, responded to the collapse of Roman civilization by founding a monastic order.

In the light of the decision by the American Supreme Court to permit same-sex marriage, Dreher argues that for Christians in the United States the time predicted by MacIntyre has now come:

Christians who hold the biblical teaching about sex and marriage have the same status in culture, and increasingly in law, as racists. The culture war that began with the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s has now ended in defeat for Christian conservatives. The cultural left –which is to say, increasingly the American mainstream – has no intention of living in post-war peace. It is pressing forward with a harsh, relentless occupation, one that is aided by the cluelessness of Christians who don't understand what's happening. Don't be fooled, the upset presidential victory of Donald Trump has at best given us a bit more time to prepare for the inevitable.

In the face of this situation, argues Dreher:

...we are going to have return to the roots of our faith both in thought and in practice. We are going to have to learn habits of the heart forgotten by believers in the West. We are going to have to change our lives, and our approach to life in radical ways. In short, we are going to *have to be the church*, without compromise, no matter what it costs.

The purpose of *The Benedict Option* is to set out what he thinks this might mean in practice.

The book is in three parts.

In the first part Dreher defines the challenge of living in post-Christian America. He explores the philosophical and theological roots of the fragmentation of American society and explains how the Christian virtues embodied in the Rule of St. Benedict can still help believers today.

In the second part he discusses how the way of Christian living set out in the Rule of St. Benedict can be adapted to the lives of conservative Christians of all churches and confessions. According to Dreher, the Rule offers insights in how to approach politics, faith, family, community, and work and he looks at how these insights manifest themselves in the lives of a diverse number of contemporary Christians who have lessons to teach the entire Church.

In the third part he considers the critical importance of Christian believers thinking and acting radically in the light of the Rule in the face of the 'the two most powerful phenomena directing contemporary life and pulverising the church's foundations: sex and technology.'

This is an important book that deserves to be read to all who want to think seriously about how we should live as Christians in an increasingly post Christian society. As one perceptive reviewer has pointed out, what Dreher is proposing is a 'strategic withdrawal from the world.' This does not mean seeking to live apart from the world. What it does mean is that those who are committed to following Christ:

.... must take this commitment seriously, and take it seriously in all aspects of life: in politics, at church, in the home, in school, at work, and in the bedroom. This requires an intentional decision to think, live, and love differently than the world.

So for instance, families should set regular times of prayer and Bible reading. Politics should be about serving the local community. Churches should be about worship, not entertainment. Education should be about

learning virtue (and ultimately, knowing God). Work should be a vocation, a stewardship of the talents and blessings of God for His glory. Sex should be celebrated in the context of marriage between a man and woman as a reflection of the intimacy and life-giving nature of God Himself. And technology should be a servant to these purposes, not a master of the world's purposes.

What passes as Christianity in many parts of the West, including the UK, is not genuine Christianity at all but what has been called a 'moral therapeutic deism,' in which what matters is that people should be 'nice' and 'happy' on their own terms and God's sole role is reduced to helping this to happen. Dreher's book is a clarion call to return to real Christianity instead.

Commendations:

Russell Moore writes:

'I'm more missionary than monastery, but I think every Christian should read this book. Rod Dreher is brilliant, prophetic, and wise. Even if you don't agree with everything in this book, there are warnings here to heed, and habits here to practice.'

Krish Kandiah, *God is Stranger: What Happens When God Turns Up?*, Hodder and Stoughton, ISBN 978-1-4736-4891-3, £9.99 (e edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This is an important book in two ways. It points us to what the Bible has to say about how God is a mysterious and enigmatic God who constantly surprises people by presenting himself to them in unexpected ways. In the words of Karl Barth it reminds us that God is a 'God who loves in freedom.' It also points us to the clear strand of biblical teaching that tells us that God calls us to show hospitality to the stranger who is in need of our help or our welcome. It would make an excellent basis for sermon series and/or a home group course.

Overview:

This new book from Krish Kandiah, founder and director of the adoption and fostering charity Home for Good, and a Vice-President of Tearfund, is a study of those parts of the Bible in which people encounter God in ways that they were not expecting.

In the introductory chapter Kandiah explains that the origins of the book lie in a renewed study of the Bible he undertook after he encountered a Syrian refugee family in Lebanon and found it difficult to think of 'anything in the Bible that could speak to someone in the middle of such a terrible situation.'

He decided that:

It was time for me to rediscover the stranger parts of my Bible. The parts lurking between the highlighted sections. The black-and-white verses. The angry parts. The eccentric parts. The politically incorrect parts. The forgotten parts. The horrific stories of executions, displacement, genocide and depression – stories which sadly reflect much of the world today.

As he studied these passages, he writes, he discovered:

...an unlikely narrative arc flowing through the whole – one that challenged me, that undid some of my most cherished prejudices and made me question the parts of the Bible I thought I knew so well. This narrative that spans the centuries and crosses continents contains a thread of deliberate strangeness. It is full of misery but also mystery, packed with the weird but also somehow weirdly wonderful. Through the more perplexing, stranger stories and more difficult incidents related in the Bible, I discovered a God who cannot be fully pinned down, explained or predicted. Travelling the inhospitable terrain of much of the Old Testament, I discovered there was much to learn about the hospitality of God. In the more fearsome passages, where God turns up as a stranger, I began to hear his offer of an opportunity too good to turn down.

In the following chapters of the book Kandiah traces this narrative arc through the Bible, looking in turn at how God was encountered by Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, Naomi, David, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Mary, by the people who encountered Jesus in the ways described in his parable of the sheep and the goats, by the penitent thief who died alongside Jesus, and by Cleopas on the road to Emmaus.

In all these encounters, Kandiah argues, people met God in ways they did not expect, but in meeting him in this way they were provided with an opportunity to receive his blessing. In addition, he argues these stories also challenge us to echo God's hospitality to us by offering hospitality to others. Just as God does not reject us so also we must overcome our ingrained xenophobia and not reject others. In Kandiah's words:

The Bible, through its plethora of stories, memoirs, historical accounts, poems and parables, challenges our xenophobic prejudices at every turn. God's concern is focused on the last, the lost, the least and the left out. And we should include ourselves on that list too. The Bible is realistic about the fact that each one of us is flawed, selfish and broken. It is also consistent, insistent and persistent that if we love God, we will make room for strangers, getting close enough to offer the hospitality that Jesus modelled for us by being the perfect stranger.

Commendations:

Chris Wright comments:

'Has God become as familiar and forgettable as a fridge-magnet? That's the danger Krish Kandiah faces up to in this wonderfully readable and very challenging book. Bible stories come to life as Krish tells them afresh, richly illustrated with personal experience and social relevance, and in each case the living God turns up - strange, dangerous, and, like Aslan, not safe but good.'

Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*, Baker Academic, ISBN 978-0-80103-099-4, £35.04, (e edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

Levering's book is a very helpful re-statement for our time of the classical Christian understanding of the creator God and the nature of his creative and redemptive activity, an understanding which orthodox Protestants and orthodox Roman Catholics hold in common. This is a detailed and scholarly study that presupposes some existing grasp of Christian theology, so it is not a book to give to enquirers or those just beginning the study of Christian doctrine. However, those who do have prior knowledge about Christian theology and who want to be stimulated to reflect more deeply about what it means to confess that God is the creator of heaven will find Levering's work an invaluable resource.

Overview:

Matthew Levering is a Roman Catholic theologian who is Chair of Theology at Mundelein Seminary in the United States.

As he explains in his introductory chapter, the issue which his new book addresses is:

Given our modern worldview, is it not the more reasonable course to regard the authors of Genesis 1–3—as too the later authors of Scripture (including the New Testament)—as products of their “axial age” worldview, a worldview which has little to say to educated people today? Why (and here my imaginary interlocutor throws his hands up in the air with a sigh of exasperation) should we still allow these ancient texts to have authority over our lives?

The purpose of his book is to engage the Christian doctrine of creation ‘with such concerns in mind.’

The structure of the book is to first of all look at who the creator God is and to then look in turn at creation, fall and atonement:

As for the plan of this book, I first emphasize that no theology of creation can succeed without distinguishing the wise and good creator from every kind of creaturely mode of being. If the creator is conceived in a way that logically identifies the creator as merely yet another (however powerful) creature, then there can in fact be no creator, no transcendent source of all finite modes of being. Thus, I begin the book with two chapters on the distinction of the creator from every kind of creaturely reality, emphasizing God's ideas and his simplicity as the underpinnings of creation ex nihilo, understood as the fruit of God's infinite goodness. With regard to God's free act of creation, David Burrell rightly observes that ‘the relation between Creator and creatures . . . is unlike any causal relation we know since God's causation in creating produces [in God] no change or motion or succession in time.’

My third chapter then examines the unfathomably vast profusion of organic and nonorganic creatures over time and space. How could this vast profusion reflect a truly wise creator, rather than being evidence of the absurd flux of things? I argue that the answer is cosmic theophany, although I recognize that the often brutal processes of material decay and destruction are, for now, deeply embedded in this theophanic creation. My fourth chapter turns to the human being, who is unique among animals. What does it mean for the wise and good God to create human beings “in the image of God”? I suggest that the answer involves human rationality—knowing and loving—but not in a way that is separated from the wise and good stewardship of the creation that God calls humans to undertake.

My fifth chapter enquires into the wisdom and goodness of God's command to humans to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” I argue that this command, which may seem rather imprudent, does indeed embody the wisdom of the creator God, whose creative and redemptive love goes to extraordinary lengths in order to expand the creaturely communion of love, in which God shares his “beatitude” with us. My sixth chapter explores whether Christians should believe in the historicity of the biblically attested fall, given the scientific issues involved as well as the fact that Genesis 3's portrait of this fall is highly symbolic. In my view, the connection between a fully free original sin and human death as we now experience it must be insisted upon, or else the wisdom and goodness of God's creative work would be undermined. My final chapter addresses the relationship of creation and atonement, by which the deepest consequences of human sin are reversed through the death of the incarnate Word. As will be clear, I agree with Jonathan Wilson's insistence upon ‘holding creation and redemption together,’ since Christ restores the created order of relational justice and thereby restores the human image in relation to the divine exemplar.

Levering explains the theological logic underlying this approach as follows:

In an essay on Christian soteriology, John Webster makes a simple point that guides my book's engagement with the doctrine of creation: 'The matter of the Christian gospel is the eternal God who has life in himself, and temporal creatures who have life in him. The gospel, that is, concerns the history of fellowship—covenant—between God and creatures.' It is this gospel, in the light of Genesis 1–3, that I examine through reflection upon 'the eternal God who has life in himself' (chapters 1 and 2); 'temporal creatures who have life in him' (chapters 3–5); and the 'history of fellowship—covenant—between God and creatures,' marred by original sin and restored by the cross of Christ (chapters 6 and 7). Along the way, I seek to respond to the commonplace questions noted above about why a creator would produce such an unfathomably vast cosmos, why there is such a strange array of creatures, what makes humans distinctive and why the presence of humans is good, why anyone would believe in original sin, why the creator became incarnate and died on the cross, and so forth. I also aim to show appreciation for modern science without falling into what David Bradshaw insightfully describes as the erroneous view that 'science provides the deepest possible insight into nature.'

Commendations:

Kevin Vanhoozer has written:

'Levering's engaging book on the doctrine of creation goes well beyond discussions about 'in the beginning.' Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians alike will find here a thick description not only of the cosmos and the human creature but also of the creator--the good, wise, and transcendent source of everything that is. Levering mines a number of other doctrinal shafts as well in an inspired effort to retrieve the riches of the much-neglected biblical and theological perspectives (especially Aquinas's) on creation. He convincingly shows in the process that rumors of dogmatic theology's death at the hands of modern science and cosmology are much exaggerated. If that were not enough, he also displays how the doctrine of original sin functions to preserve the goodness of God's creation and how the atonement restores it. This is a fine guide for Christians who want to understand what it means to be in the world and of it (in a good sense).'

Alister McGrath, *The Great Mystery: Science, God and the Human Quest for Meaning*, Hodder and Stoughton, 978-1-47363-431-2, £20.00 (e edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This is a fascinating book that shows how theology, philosophy, science and literature can help us to reflect on the mystery of human existence in complementary rather than competitive ways. Although it is not a book of Christian apologetics it provides the basis for a Christian apologetic by showing how a Christian world view coheres with what we know about the world and human existence from other sources. Christianity, it argues, rather than offering a limited view of human existence, can help to enrich it. This book would make a good basis for a set of sermons on how the Christian worldview helps us to answer the questions raised by reflection on human existence and it would be a useful book for Christians to study with non-Christian friends who are interested in understanding why Christians think that their faith helps them to make sense of what it means to be human.

Overview:

This new book from Alister McGrath is a follow up to his previous book *Inventing the Universe* which looked at the relationship between science and faith. In his new book he looks at the question of 'what it means to be a human being.'

The aim of the book, he says, is 'to open up some of the deepest and most pressing issues about human identity, welcoming scientific insights on the one hand, while aiming to develop a 'big picture' of human nature which transcends the limits of the natural sciences on the other.'

He looks at the accounts of humanity given by St. Augustine, by the Renaissance writer Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, by novelist Iris Murdoch and by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and notes the key issues each of them raises. St. Augustine exposes 'the consequences of human beings existing within an historical process which limits our capacities and ability to think and act.' Mirandola emphasises that humans 'have the capacity to determine what we are (or what we might become).' Murdoch highlights 'our disturbing tendency to deceive ourselves and Dawkins asks whether we can now 'take charge of our evolution, and determine we should be?'

He then goes on to draw on the symbols of the 'balcony' and the 'road' to argue that:

A clinically detached objective view of the world has its merits; it is, however, existentially inadequate. A purely subjective view of the world might easily be illusory and self-serving, simply echoing our own prejudices and pre-commitments. Somehow these must be integrated into a greater whole.

He next considers the fact that human beings 'need more than facts; they seek meaning.' Very often, he writes, 'they express this meaning using stories' such as the 'grand narratives' offered by Marxism on the one hand and Christianity on the other. He rejects the idea that we have to make a choice between objective and subjective forms of meaning (what is true and what is true for me) and suggests that we should see meaning as 'something that is objectively grounded, but is subjectively applied.'

He also argues, building on the work of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, that personal relationships are crucial for creating and maintaining a sense of meaning in life and that to 'relate to God is to be loved and affirmed, and transformed in and through this new relationship in which we become more like God precisely because we relate to God.'

Moving on to the question of how we make sense of the larger world of which we are a part, he argues that there are parallels between faith and science. 'Many people find that their religious faith, like science itself, originates in and through a sense of wonder, which raises questions about their place in the world, and a deeper reality which might lie behind the world of experience.' He further argues that this sense of wonder is what gives rise to natural theology because from a Christian perspective 'the natural world is embedded with signs pointing beyond itself to its creator' and so 'an appreciation of nature leads effortlessly and naturally to an appreciation of God as creator.'

He then examines the question of our place within the universe and agrees with the medieval theologian Abelard that our experience teaches us that 'this world is God's world, and is to be valued, appreciated and enjoyed. Yet it is studded with clues that it is not our real home; that there is a still better world beyond its frontiers; and that we may hope one day to enter and inhabit this better place.'

The next issue he looks at is the question 'What's wrong with us?' He notes that Christianity 'sets out a vision of human nature which recognises its enormous potential, while nevertheless affirming that it is wounded, damaged and broken' and that this vision chimes in with the scientific insight that human beings have an inbuilt propensity towards violence and selfishness.

Moving on to the topic of 'humanism' he notes that there are religious as well as secular forms of humanism and that

they share a common challenge of resisting 'the perennial threat of dehumanisation.' He warns about the limits of the transhumanist project, noting that there is no guarantee that human dreams for the future will not turn be illusions or lead to a dystopian world and that the new idea of 'transhumanism' wisely promises only the postponement of death rather than promising immortality.

He finishes the book by highlighting three key points which have arisen in the course of his study, all of which are 'religiously significant'. The proper response to the mystery of human existence which his book has been exploring is, he says:

... a sense of humility in the presence of something greater than us; an intellectual generosity, not a narrow dogmatism in seeking to make sense of it; and perhaps above all, a feeling of awed wonder that we are temporarily placed within such a vast and beautiful universe, and are capable of reflecting on its deeper significance – as well as our own.

Commendations:

Tom McLeish comments

'In this personal, scholarly yet gripping account of the human search for meaning, Alister McGrath reveals this eirenic question to be as vital in our own times as in previous ages. In the spirit of Chesterton, Thoreau and C S Lewis, and in dialogue with Augustine, Pico, Murdoch, and his neighbourhood nemesis Dawkins, McGrath takes his breathless readers first to a high balcony-view of the science, religion and philosophy of purpose, but then leads us back down to the road where we must make our own journeys, the richer for our reading.'

Vaughan Roberts, *Talking Points, Assisted Suicide*, The Good Book Company, ISBN 978-1784981938, £2.99.

Martin's opinion:

Like his previous book on the Transgender issue, this is an excellent, clear and biblically grounded introduction to its subject matter. It would make an excellent basis for a sermon on the issue of assisted suicide or for an exploration of this topic in a small group setting. Assisted suicide is an issue which is likely to grow in importance and it is important that Christians grasp what it is about and what their faith has to say about it. This little book will help them to do both. Highly recommended.

Overview:

Vaughan Roberts is a Church of England Priest who is the Rector of St Ebbe's Oxford and the author of a number of books looking at a Christian view of some of the key issues raised for Christians by developments in the contemporary world. In this new book in the Good Book Company's 'Talking Points' series he looks at the issue of assisted suicide.

As Tim Thornborough explains in the introduction. The aim of this short book:

... is to give you an accessible introduction to the many questions that surround the issue of assisted suicide, and a starting point for constructive discussion between Christian believers and with others. It aims to give you a cultural briefing on where we are with this question, and some pointers on how Christians should think, talk and act.

The book is in five chapters.

The first chapter explains why assisted suicide is a complex issue and chapter two explains why it is a growing issue in our society.

Chapter three looks at the arguments in favour of assisted suicide based on the relief of pain, lack of quality of life, fear of dependence, loss of dignity and the growing cost of looking after the elderly and the terminally ill.

Chapter four looks at the Christian case against assisted suicide on the grounds that we are designed by God and therefore have inherent dignity regardless of circumstances, that we are made to be dependent on God and on each other and that suffering is not the ultimate evil.

Chapter five looks at facing death and argues that 'More than anyone else, Christians should be able to think and speak about death and dying with hope, confidence, meaning and purpose.'

The book finishes with a discussion guide for use in a study group and points for prayer.

Rodney Stark, *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History*, SPCK, ISBN 978-0-28107-774-8, £14.99 (e edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This is an important and accessible work of historical truth-telling which should be studied by Evangelicals for three reasons. First, in order to ensure that we are not guilty of spreading such falsehoods ourselves. Secondly, to better equip ourselves apologetically, since a number of these misleading ideas are commonly brought forward not only as reasons for rejecting Roman Catholicism, but for rejecting Christianity as a whole. Thirdly, to stimulate us to think about the real reasons why we are not Roman Catholic. If all these hoary historical objections to Roman Catholicism are simply wrong, then what are the genuine theological problems with Roman Catholicism? Buy, read, learn, ponder!

Overview:

Professor Rodney Stark is an American Protestant historian and sociologist who has written a series of important books on the emergence and development of the Christian Church and its contribution to Western civilization. He begins his book by noting that he was brought up to believe that Christopher Columbus' voyage that resulted in his discovery of the New World was discouraged by the Roman Catholic church because it believed that the world was flat. He goes on to explain that this is not what the Roman Catholic Church taught and the belief that it was is typical of a whole series of misleading ideas about the Catholic Church which were invented by Protestant polemicists and Enlightenment sceptics and which have since 'become part of the common culture, widely accepted and frequently repeated.'

In his book, which is written not 'in defense of the Church', but in 'defense of history,' Stark looks in turn at ten such ideas:

- The Catholic Church incited and actively colluded in nearly two millennia of anti-Semitic violence, and Pope Pius XII is still rightfully known as 'Hitler's Pope'.
- Only recently have we become aware of ancient and remarkably enlightened Christian gospels, which narrow-minded Catholic authorities tried to suppress.
- Once in power as the official Church of Rome, Christians quickly and brutally persecuted paganism out of existence.
- The fall of Rome and the ascendancy of the Church precipitated Europe's decline into a millennium of ignorance and backwardness, which lasted until the Renaissance.
- Initiated by the pope, the Crusades were but the first bloody chapter in the history of unprovoked and brutal Christian colonialism.
- The Spanish Inquisition tortured and murdered huge numbers of innocent people for 'imaginary' crimes, such as witchcraft and blasphemy.
- The Catholic Church persecuted and tried to suppress scientists such as Galileo, and the Scientific 'Revolution' therefore occurred mainly in more tolerant Protestant societies.
- Being entirely comfortable with slavery, the Catholic Church did nothing to oppose its introduction in the New World, or to make it more humane.
- Until very recently, Catholicism's hierarchical view of the ideal state has resulted in its bitter resistance to all efforts to establish more liberal governments and its eager support for right-wing dictators.
- It was the Protestant Reformation that broke the repressive Catholic grip on progress and ushered in capitalism, religious freedom and the modern world.

In each chapter of his book Stark demonstrate that 'each is false and many are the exact opposite of the truth!' For example:

Instead of the Spanish Inquisition being an anomaly of torture and murder of innocent people persecuted for 'imaginary' crimes such as witchcraft and blasphemy, Stark argues that not only did the Spanish Inquisition spill very little blood, but it was a major force in support of moderation and justice.

Instead of Pope Pius XII being apathetic or even helpful to the Nazi movement, such as to merit the title, 'Hitler's Pope,' Stark shows that the campaign to link Pope Pius XII to Hitler was initiated by the Soviet Union, presumably in hopes of neutralizing the Vatican in post-World War II affairs. Pope Pius XII was widely praised for his vigorous and devoted efforts to saving Jewish lives during the war.

Instead of the Dark Ages being a millennium of ignorance and backwardness inspired by the Catholic Church's power, Stark argues that the whole notion of the 'Dark Ages' was an act of pride perpetuated by anti-religious intellectuals who were determined to claim that theirs was the era of "Enlightenment."

Commendations:

Alexi Sargeant has commented:

'Bearing False Witness by Rodney Stark is a generous book though more importantly, a judicious one. Stark is a Protestant who grew up believing many anti-Catholic myths, including that old canard from Washington Irving that Columbus's voyage had been discouraged by the Church because of her belief that the world was flat. Stark dismantles this quaint piece of ahistorical folklore in his Introduction, then sets his sights on the whole panoply of Black Legends maliciously promulgated throughout history to justify bigotry towards Catholics, first by rival denominations (English and Dutch Protestants invented the lurid, baseless cartoon we picture when we hear Spanish Inquisition) and then by secular forces (I learned here that it was Soviet propagandists who started the lie that Pius XII was Hitler's Pope). The book is an across-the-aisle attempt to right some wrongs of Christian historiography.'

Tom Wright, *Spiritual and Religious: The Gospel in an Age of Paganism*, SPCK, ISBN 978-0-28107284-2, £9.99 (e edition also available).

Martin's opinion:

This book is a very helpful summary of how the message about Jesus contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments provides the resources that the Church needs to counteract the renewed paganism of our day just as it provided the resources for the Church to overcome the paganism of the first century. It answers very clearly and concisely the basis question 'why does the message of Jesus matter today?' As Wright explains, the two halves of the book could helpfully be used 'for personal or group studies (for which questions are suggested at the end of each chapter) in the weeks leading up to, and then leading on from, Good Friday and Easter.' In addition they would also make a good basis for a sermon series.

Overview:

People today often say that they are 'spiritual but not religious' as a way of explaining that they still feel that life must have some kind of transcendent meaning even though they never go to church. In his new book, which is revised edition of his 1992 book *New Tasks for a Reformed Church* Tom Wright argues that when people take this approach they are often simply reverting to forms of ancient paganism that are very similar to those that confronted the earliest Christians. As he says 'the worship of Mammon (the god of money), Aphrodite (the goddess of erotic love), Mars (the god of war or violence and many other deities – are engrained in the way we think, in the assumptions we make about 'how life works.'

In his book Wright looks at how Christians should respond to this revived paganism by focusing on the story of Jesus.

The first half of the book:

....follows the double pathway of exploring the world of paganism on the one hand and the story of Israel, with its focus on Jesus and his death and resurrection on the other. This half of the book follows the journey which many Christians take in Lent each year, starting with Ash Wednesday, a time of reflection and penitence, and moving on to stand at the foot of the cross on Good Friday.

The second half of the book:

....begins with Jesus' victorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. It then works forward, exploring the many new things that God has been doing in the church in recent decades, and suggesting ways in which these movements equip the church for a true, rich, spirituality, a 'religion' that goes far beyond the outward shell and into a life transforming encounter with God and an outward looking confrontation with the paganisms which corrupt and deface his world. The church from ancient times has celebrated this new way of life in the Sundays following Easter, moving on to the Ascension which sees Jesus enthroned as the true Lord of the world (over against all rival divinities), to the gift of the Holy spirit at Pentecost, and so to the celebration of the life-giving mystery of the Trinity. The second half of the book follows this sequence.