

open

Christianity

an occasional newsletter
of hope for Christianity in Ireland

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Friends –

For encouragement about Christianity in Ireland go see the new issue of the Irish Ecumenical News, available from www.irishchurches.org or irish.churches@btconnect.com. There's more information-in-brief there than we could ever include here.
Happy Easter.
Hilary

One church for four Churches

A new satellite town has broken fresh ecumenical ground in Dublin, as it contains a church building designed to be shared by all four of the main Christian denominations. The new building at Adamstown ... will be used for worship by Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations – the first of its kind in the whole of Ireland.

From: The Church Times (15.02.08)

Higher taxes for common good: Cardinal

Cardinal Seán Brady, Roman Catholic primate of All-Ireland, has called for taxes to be raised in order to provide better social and health services for the more vulnerable members of society. He was speaking at a one-day conference organised by the Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs.

Professor Conor Gearty of the London School of Economics said that Catholic clergy and non-governmental organisation should be able to work together by sharing the common goal of spreading social justice and human rights around the globe.

From: The Irish Times (19.02.08)

Intelligent Design? Lousy Theology

Arminta Wallace

“WHO will at last give evolution its own God?” the scientist-theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin asked in 1953. Teilhard was convinced that people were deserting religion in droves because of its intractable inability to accept the truths of science: half a century later the debate threatens to polarise even further as science in general, and evolutionary theory in particular, is cast in a role more akin to that of cartoon baddie than to any recognisably religious saviour. A shrill and simplistic debate has crystallised (or should that be coagulated?) around Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*, which presents religious belief as an outlandish and dangerous anachronism - a most unsuitable pursuit for intelligent organisms.

The fact that this book has sold more than a million copies must give any intelligent organism pause for thought. In a world where religion has been written off as a proto-medieval concern, the question of belief in God clearly still matters a good deal to a great number of people. It is, it must be said, good to see an atheistic position being freely articulated in a world where, until very recently, atheists were routinely and often viciously silenced. But it's also good to see religious believers holding their own in the debate, batting back a variety of ripostes from Alistair McGrath's meticulously argued *Dawkins's God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life*, to John Cornwell's engaging and emotive *Darwin's Angel*.

Most heartening of all was the evidence offered in Dublin last week that the scientist-theologian is far from being an extinct species. Two lively specimens gave lectures in the city: at the Milltown Institute, the particle physicist and ordained minister John Polkinghorne spoke about human personhood, while the paleobiologist and “committed Anglican” Simon Conway Morris chose “Life's Solutions: what happens when we re-run the tape of life”. Both lectures were billed as responses to the most extreme variety of deterministic neo-Darwinism; both went on to address what one of them described as “the most profoundly scientific question of all”, namely, the emergence of conscious life on planet Earth.

Conway Morris didn't so much present an argument as throw out a series of suggestions, accompanied by arresting images and humorous asides. He touched lightly on many topics, from the idea of an intimate connection between language, myth and birdsong through delinquent behaviours in teenage crows to the sophisticated grieving rituals of elephants. The differences between humans and animals, he said, are real – but “paper, paper thin”. He also aired his controversial view of the brain as “an antenna of the mind” - the opposite of the conventional scientific view of mind as an almost accidental by-product of matter.

Polkinghorne, who has produced a book a year since the late 1960s, began with a question: what's the most astonishing thing that has happened in 13.7 billion years? Us, was his answer. Humanity is “not just another twig on the burgeoning bush of the biological process of evolution”,

but a qualitatively different kind of creature. The description of the fall in Genesis chapter 3 is, he noted, "a myth" – which he defined as something "which conveys a truth so deep" that only story can convey it. "It's about the dawning of self-consciousness in man."

Both Polkinghorne and Conway Morris made a point of dismissing the Intelligent Design argument which right-wing Christians in the US have used to attack the theory of evolution. Not only is it hopelessly unscientific, they said, but it also makes for, as Conway Morris put it, "lousy theology" by taking away God's white beard – only to give him a white labcoat instead. To listen to these speakers switch effortlessly between scientific and theological language, and offer many suggestions as to how the debate between science and religion might continue to be fruitful and multiply, was quite a treat. If only Teilhard de Chardin could have been there to hear it: but perhaps, in spirit, he was.

Book reviews

Bart D. Ehrman: **MISQUOTING JESUS**
HarperSanFrancisco (\$24.95)

"Maybe Mark just made a mistake." This comment, written by a revered professor at the bottom of an essay submitted to him by young Bart Ehrman, may not seem sensational, but it proved to be a turning-point in the life of this prolific but always readable Bible scholar.

Bart Ehrman was brought up as an Episcopalian, but after having a "born-again" experience at the age of 15 he went off to that most fundamentalist of colleges, the Moody Bible Institute. From there he graduated to Wheaton College, the alma mater of Billy Graham, and finally to the Presbyterian Seminary at Princeton. Having a great gift for languages - he memorized the entire Greek vocabulary of St Mark's Gospel in a single week - he made rapid progress; but it was only when his tutor's brief comment led him to question the inerrancy of the biblical texts that, to use his own words, "the floodgates opened."

From then on, Ehrman felt driven to follow the truth wherever it led him, and in this volume he analyses with great clarity the many different ways in which the text of the New Testament has been altered over the two past millennia. To many people, getting the text right means producing a good translation of the original manuscripts, admitting that perfect translations may not be possible but that inspired ones are. (Bearing this in mind, it is worth noting that the canonized text of the Roman Church is the Latin Vulgate, not any Greek version.)

But there are no original manuscripts! Of course there are early ones, some from as far back as the Third Century; but think how many copying errors could have crept in during the previous two hundred years. One particular aspect of all this arises from a fact that few people now consider. When we talk of copying a text today, we accept that the copier will be both fully literate and familiar with the subject matter. Ehrman points out that this could not have been the case in the early days of Christianity,

besides which an absence of spaces between words and of punctuation would have added to confusion.

By the time that serious textual scholars came along, there were so many variations that inspired guesswork was necessary, and inevitably not all the guesses were the same. Ehrman's scholarly but also gently witty book will lead you to read the Bible with increased interest.

Christopher Fettes

Brian C. Taylor: **SETTING THE GOSPEL FREE**
SCM Press, 1997 (£9.95)

'The seeker and the church must break Christianity open into life, where Jesus intended our faith experience to be; this...sets the gospel free from its imaginary ownership and limitation by the church, and takes on the responsibility of moving it into our experience of God-in-life.' So says Brian C. Taylor, rector of an Episcopal church in New Mexico, in this British-published book.

Coming to Ireland, it was a long while before I realised that Irish Catholics of my age had grown up without access to the Bible. At first I thought they meant they were unfamiliar with the Old Testament. But no, they said they were not allowed read even the New Testament. They could only listen to selected passages read at Mass. That this was within the life of a present generation was a shock. This really was the church – in Taylor's words – 'owning and limiting' the Gospel.

The book is concerned with the freedom of not only the Gospels but also those who are attracted to Christianity yet wary of it. It begins by asking what religion is, what belief is, and warns of the danger of religion as a *thing*, which it becomes when it is institutionalised. Thanks to the Emperor Constantine, this happened in a big way in the fourth century. Theology replaced experience, Jesus was set on a pedestal as an object, and in came authoritarianism. But even now, 'faith' and 'belief' can rise above this frozen old religion, and lead into transformation.

The author calls for a more experiential and mature understanding of God, prayer, Jesus, faith and health. A Christianity must be found, he says, that is big enough to honour the diversity and sacredness of all. This is an inspiring, encouraging, book, with good sections on what liturgy, and sacraments, can be.

The appendix however, 'An Instruction for Practicing Contemplative Prayer', is a let-down. There is far more to that way of praying than merely using it to deal with the distractions that surface when the mind is still, however useful an exercise that may be. The appendix is an unnecessary addition to what is otherwise a very good and readable book.

Hilary Wakeman

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