

Exploring religion through dialogue

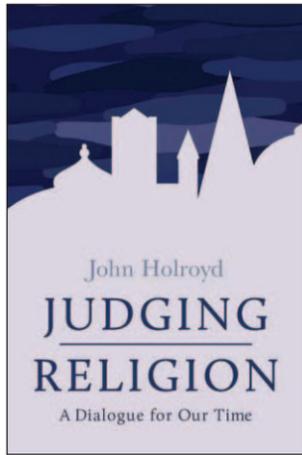
THE idea that religion is a bad thing is a commonplace of atheist argument, offered with poorly evidenced assertions. Nothing is achieved; so enter John Holroyd in **Judging Religion, A Dialogue for Our Time** (Silver Wood Books, £16.99). I would like to say that this book is unique, books written in this area, or arena (they are confrontational), seek either to condemn religion, or push it. This is where academia comes in, hopefully, avoiding the usual polarisation.

The author begins with questions of why religion should be morally evaluated, not doing so is immoral. No one seems to adopt his evidential approach, which leads to the “way of dialogue” (p 30) – listening to practitioners, appreciating what religion means to them, rather than prejudging it. We know we are in safe hands when we read, “I am not suggesting ... that the believer’s account of meaning, salvation or ethics is the end of the story. But without it we shall never be able to understand nor judge religion” (p 31).

Holroyd opens by illustrating how popular media, driven by simplification and sensationalism, is not up to the task of fair evaluation. Religion cannot get a fair hearing in the media because the basics of Christianity are unfamiliar to most journalists; we should not blame them for this, it is outside their area of expertise. He observes, “Understanding doesn’t sell as well as judgement” (p 47).

Christian readers will ask, “Does he give Christianity a fair hearing?” Holroyd remarks that media unfairness to-

Book review by Julian Bond



wards Christianity is a key complaint Christians make. He therefore offers historical contexts for ethical evaluation. Unsurprisingly, he highlights anti-Semitism as “a basic thread throughout much of the Church’s histories”, though “many Christians are not particularly aware of [Christianity’s] vast history of anti-Semitism” (p 51). He concludes that religion is on both sides of this and other moral problems, both causing it and challenging it.

Having looked at history he moves on to “Elements of Religious Life”, examining mental health, prayer, meditation and mission. The ethical outcome in relation to the mental health question is contested. However, he makes a positive assessment of prayer, while noting that petitionary prayer seems morally dubious (p 93). Similarly, meditation is regarded positively. Mission fares less well; he criticises the failings of missionary behaviour and the shortcomings of Alpha. His overall positive conclusion



emphasises that too often neither atheists nor the religious have a full picture of the good and bad of religion.

The strongest characteristic of his treatment of Islam is his constant reminder of its plurality. He observes, “Sticking closely to the Qur’an ... is not at the heart of moral problems within Islam” (p 142). I loved his following line: “Some readers might be extremely irritated at this point thinking the Qur’an clearly discriminates against women and espouses militancy especially against unbelievers so the idea that there isn’t a causal connection here is absurd” (p 143). After much diligent work, challenging the Islamic credentials of contemporary “jihad” and suicide bombing, he concludes, “The most effective counters to Islamist militancy today come from within Islam” (p 225).

In “Problems of Evil and Suffering” he makes telling

ethical judgments against theodicies, responses to the problem of suffering – “to dismiss [great suffering] with some theoretical construct in the shape of a theodicy seems to me both callous and metaphysically and socially inept” (p 242).

In the final chapter, “Beyond Conclusions”, he writes, “ethical evaluations of religion are going to be ever more relevant to our lives” (p 247). He proposes sympathetic imagination (positive dialogical regard) as a way ahead. Judging religion leads to the realisation that “reaching conclusions can appear far more satisfying than the graft of pursuing an understanding that will almost certainly never be complete” (p 255). This is his final appeal, inviting us all to explore religion’s ethical value through dialogue.

Julian Bond is a former director of the Christian-Muslim Forum.

2019 Booker Prize

Winners – Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo

THE winners of the 2019 Booker Prize were “The Testaments” by Margaret Atwood (McClelland and Stewart, £15.99) and “Girl, Woman, Other” by Bernardine Evaristo (Hamish Hamilton, £16.99). All six of the titles shortlisted for the award were reviewed in the *Methodist Recorder* (October 11).

The play that comes round again

ARE you going to see the Oberammergau Passion Play in 2020?

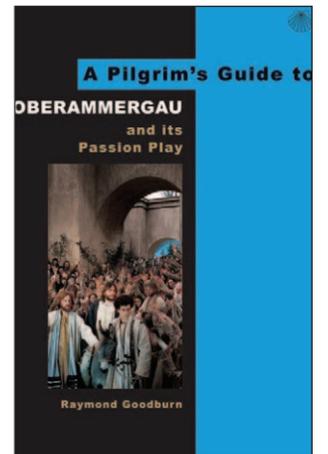
In **A Pilgrim’s Guide to Oberammergau and its Passion Play** (Pilgrim Books, £11.95), Raymond Goodburn has done a great service for us and others who plan to see the passion play in the Bavarian Village of Oberammergau. His book gives valuable information about what to expect, what to see, where to go and yes, what to buy.

The author begins by setting the historical and geographical context of the play. He describes the village houses, many of which are decorated externally with scenes from the Gospel.

The play was first performed in 1634. There is a discussion about the way it has evolved over the years. Critics raised the charge of anti-Semitism because of the reference to the “blood curse” (Matthew 27. 24). Raymond writes that the text has been “adapted to project Jesus’ radical message of love to a present day audience”.

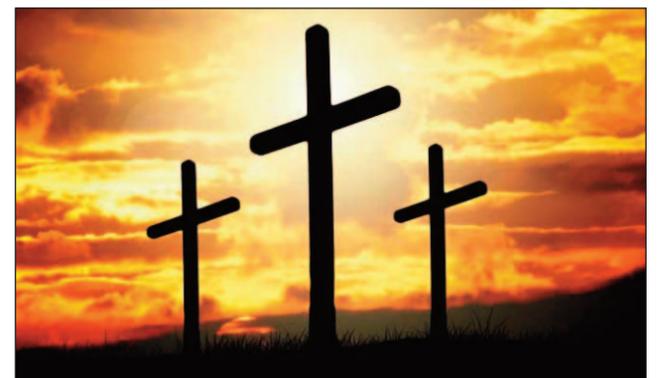
There is much information on the behind-the-scenes work, on how the cast is selected and how they prepare for their roles; for example that the male cast members are forbidden to cut their hair from the previous Ash Wednesday. The cast is towns-people, amateur actors

Book review by Ivor Sperring



who have jobs, and we are told how they manage the balance between the demands of the play and their employment. You may see Jesus or one of the disciples riding on bikes to the theatre before the performance. There are also maps and photographs, all of which help the prospective visitor to gain an idea of the place and experience that awaits.

A Pilgrim’s Guide to Oberammergau and its Passion Play will be a good companion to anyone who plans a visit to this beautiful village and the passion play to which it has given its name. **The Rev Ivor Sperring is a supernumerary minister in the Wolverhampton circuit.**



BOOKS IN BRIEF

IF there is anything that distinguishes us from animals, it is our ability to understand that such a thing as the future exists and our willingness to try and look into it. But how have people through the ages gone about making predictions? What were their underlying assumptions and what methods did they use? Have increased computer power and the newest algorithms improved our success in anticipating the future, or are we still only as good (or as bad) at it as our ancestors? *Seeing Into the Future* by Martin van Creveld (Reaktion Books, £17) gives us an insight into the past, present and future of prediction. As Christians we have a vested interest because we know that the Bible is

packed with predictions of one sort or another from Genesis to Revelations.

IN *Holy Envy* (Canterbury Press, £16.99), subtitled “Finding God in the faith of others”, renowned author Barbara Brown Taylor continues her spiritual journey, contemplating the myriad ways she encountered God while exploring other faiths with her students in the classroom and on field trips to diverse places of worship. Both she and her students ponder how the knowledge and insights they have gained raise important questions about belief and explore how different practices relate to their own faith. Inspired by this intellectual and spiritual quest, the author turns once again to

the Bible for guidance and to see what secrets lay buried there.

SUBTITLED “Life, prayer and relationship with God”, *Amid Passing Things* (Paraclete Press, £13) is a collection of reflections by Franciscan friar Jeremiah Shryock as he explores the struggles and joys of encountering God, not in some far-off place, but right here in this life, “amid passing things”. The author has a zeal for bringing others closer to God having recorded more than 30 podcasts on various aspects of faith and spirituality and developed “Into the Deep Retreat”, a contemplative retreat geared toward introducing people towards silent prayer. – JS