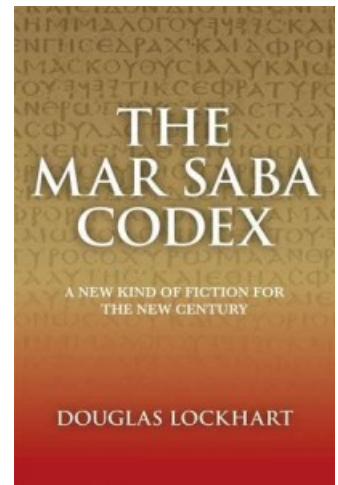


Review: The Mar Saba Codex

Within the first few weeks of my moving to Hobart I happened to find myself at a book launch that someone had pointed out to me in the local newspaper. The event involved a local author writing on religious issues, and it also involved wine and a professor of philosophy at the nearby university. It intrigued me enough to go. The speech by the author, Douglas Lockhart, exhorted the church to redefine itself and its doctrine to be more reasonable, and intrigued me enough to buy the ebook.



There is a companion volume of philosophical theory and *The Mar Saba Codex* was consequently touted as being fast-paced, suspenseful, with interesting characters in interesting places. Although I wasn't expecting anything Dan Brown-esque I was hoping to find something with some grip and engagement.

I was a little disappointed. The characters are monochrome, the plot somewhat-stagnant, and the eventual suspense anticlimactic. I realised I was reading what could only be called a "narrative philosophy" – a sequence of dialogues loosely tied together around a mythical motif that attempts to espouse the benefits of a form of humanism that feels it necessary to demand the second mile from the Christian church and the borrowed guise of the Christian cloak. I feel no need to read the companion volume.

The narrative is wrapped around the finding of a letter written by an early bishop called *Theophilus*. The letter affirms an understanding of Jesus that underplays (eliminates?) the divine, eschews trinitarian theology, and embraces a somewhat-non-theistic somewhat-Jewish human messianicism. As we are introduced to the main characters – in particular Jack Duggan, a former priest-in-training, ongoing ancient-text expert and now disgruntled journalist –

this letter is set up as a touchstone against dogmatism, absolutism, and revelatory epistemology – as if the divinity of Christ somehow is the cornerstone for all that is wrong with the Christian religion.

For instance,

“I gave up believing in belief a long time ago.” Duggan was faintly dismissive, “It’s about power and very little else...”

“Choice is by definition heresy,” said Mayle, reminding Duggan of an ancient truth, “You can’t have choice if truth is a fixed entity. You either believe, or you do not believe.”

In Paul’s hands, the term ‘Christos’ has been used to create a God-man, a theologically inflated figure that even in Theodore’s day, had generated bitter conflict for Christians and pagans alike.

In the Nazoraen view, which was the Aposotolic view, Jesus had not been the Second Person in a divine trinity... Only later... has this act of believing in Jesus been transformed by St. Paul into the magical rite of salvation through faith alone.

I did begin to wonder if Lockhart was going to simply use the characters’ voices to tear down. It is one thing to fight against an edifice – but is it from a substantive philosophy that can build in its place? There are hints at the beginning that become explicit at the end – a subjective, experiential, humanism is Lockhart’s answer

“Faith is more than knowing doctrine and Church teachign ; it is discovering God in experience and allowing experience to inform conscience.”

“The ‘I Am’ of your being is not in place. ‘Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to

you.’ That’s a quote from the Gospel of Thomas. The person who wrote those words was wide awake... It’s the Christianity behind the Christianity. It’s what’s been lost to doctrinalized Christianity for centuries.”

And all this is well and good, I guess. Lockhart is a decent writer and a stimulating intellect. I could enjoy engaging with his ideas in their own right. But why this task of whiteanting them into Christian spirituality – a spirituality that he doesn’t seem to grasp? He sees no positive in engaging with the bible as revelation, the sense of dependence on God is assumed to be stultifying and imprisoning, not releasing and freeing as so many have found it to be.

In the midst of all the voices – which I take to be Lockhart’s own because they all sound so similar – the crux of the issue, becomes the point.

“God had never at any time worked miracles to make up for human deficiency.”

Lockhart’s philosophy, then, like all humanism, is a gospel only to the elite, the intellectually rigorous (for some definition of that) – the well able, the unbroken, the self-actualised – the non-deficient. In reality, the outcome of such a framework is the fruit of selfish selves. We *do* have a human deficiency, without God working miracles, there is no answer from humanism in the real world.

Perhaps this is why I found the story ultimately unreal. From the depiction of an Anglican Archbishop of Sydney – the sort of character I know quite well in my real world – that is simply strange, to a plotline involving an AWOL pope that requires a shark to be jumped. Maybe it was just because all the typos continuously broke down the fourth wall.

But it was a good stimulation. It caused thoughtfulness on my

part. It demonstrates an expertise and an academic studiousness that I do not and can not match. At the book launch Douglas Lockhart offered me a conversation over a glass of wine, or a decent whiskey. Perhaps I'll go find him and take up the offer.

Q&A: Is it now possible to be an electronic Christian via all the technology?

Bright spark! asks: *Is it now possible to be an electronic Christian via all the technology?*

What's an *electronic* Christian? I assume you don't mean robotics ('Pastor Data') so I take it referring to the use of technology in the necessary exercise of the Christian faith.

To which the answer is yes. But then, at that level it's possible for someone to be a *penpal* Christian, a *sign-language* Christian or even a *liturgically-dancing* one.

But to focus on technology. Christianity is a communicative faith – it involves proclamation, and the bringing of good news. Over the centuries Christian mission has promoted and embraced new technologies. The early church leadership made use of letters and constructed networks for passing messages around different congregations. Church proclamation helped standardise languages – Latin and Greek in earlier times, German and English in later times. The earliest use of the printing press was to print Bibles, and later, tracts and magazines etc.

The electronic communication media is no different except perhaps in the sense that the Christian mission as received rather than innovated the technology – there are many examples of Radio, TV, VHS/DVD mail orders, Web sites, Social Media all being used for Christian purposes even if they were not developed for them.

So yes, you can be an “electronic Christian” but this is not a revolutionary thing, in fact its quite an old idea.

Q&A: Were you ever a member of Little River Band?

Shannon asks: *Were you ever a member of Little River Band?*

No. But I once had hair like John Farnham in the '80s

Q&A: What is the practical role of recent retired people in the church?

Big Bad Wolf asks: *What is the practical role of recent retired people in the church? Stacking chairs and serving cups of tea?*

Hi Wolf,

Is there some personal hurt behind your question? I would understand if there was because I have come across churches where the retired/older people are relegated to (what might sometimes be considered to be) menial or trivial tasks, and this is hurtful. So there might be a question behind your question.

But to interact with your question as it stands...

A church, like any organised community, takes a lot of energy to run. If people are to be blessed, particularly newcomers, then there is a necessary reliance on people putting their hand up to serve the community in many various ways. This includes stacking chairs and serving cups of tea!

So, there is no reason why a recently retired person should be excluded from acts of service, if they are willing and able.

I have come across many recently retired people who have delighted to serve the church in such a way, and have valued the fact that they can carry some of that load while they have the energy and the freedom from caring for children etc. that may not be afforded to others. Let us not denigrate the necessity, importance, and value of those so-called menial tasks of service and those that volunteer for them. As someone who has reached the end of service to be faced with 100 chairs to pack up, having someone say, "Will, I'll do that" is such a relief and a blessing, truly soothing. I value it greatly.

But perhaps your question implies an "only" – is that the "only" role for the recently retired? Absolutely not! Each member of the body is gifted according to the Spirit one to another so as to build the people of God and further the gospel. The task of the church is to encourage everyone, regardless of their age, towards ongoing maturity and the wise application of their gifts and talents.

However, if there is one direction that I would, generally

speaking, encourage the “recently retired” to particularly explore, it is the task of mentoring. The age group you refer to have a particular wealth of experience and knowledge to gift the church with. If they can be involved in some way, large or small with the ongoing task of identifying, apprenticing, releasing and commissioning newer leaders they will have blessed God’s people and produced much fruit for his glory in that way, and it may be a useful framework for their direct hands-on ministry.

Thanks for the question,

W.