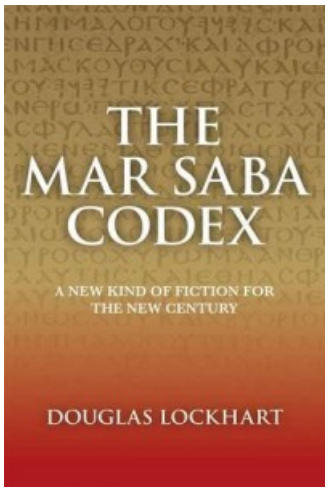
Review: The Mar Saba Codex



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 continously 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: Can an atheist give a testimony?

Anonymous asks: Can an atheist give a testimony?

The short answer is: yes.

The long answer is:

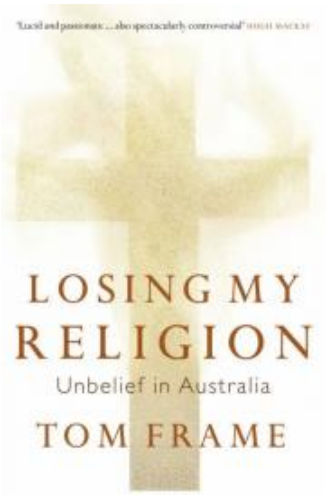
"Testimony" has a wide semantic range. For instance, you could be asking, "Can an atheist give a true account of something, such as in court?" The answer is, of course: yes. You could also be asking "Can an atheist give an account of some significant event, moment, or transition in their life?" And again, of course, the answer is yes.

Christians often use "testimony" to mean something like "the account of how God has worked in my life, particularly towards my coming to faith." This is similar to, but more subjective than, the Biblical sense of being a "witness" (being able to "testify", having a "testimony") of the objective truth of Christ's resurrection.

In this particular sense, of course, an "atheist testimony" would be oxymoronic: an account of the work of someone they do not accept as reality.

Thanks for the question.

Review: Two books by Tom Frame #2 – Losing My Religion



Losing My Religion is the second Tom Frame book I have read recently. The title says it all – it's about "Unbelief in Australia." Frame is a bishop in the Anglican Church and the head of a theological institution and this book is a passionate attempt to understand the context of his church and his gospel. With the long-term prevalence of anti or non-religious sentiment in Australian society, and it's growing impact, it is a worthy examination.

In this sense, this book is not an apology for the Christian faith as much as it is a consideration of that which the Christian faith must interact with or make a defense to. He sets out his agenda clearly; to give the background or context for unbelief in Australia, to examine the causes of unbelief and "the reasons for the loss of religious beliefs in Australia", and finally the "consequences of unbelief" (Page 7).

Perhaps wary of the critiques he will receive from positive atheists and other more militant nonbelievers (not that I've come across any review from an obviously anti-theistic point of view, pointers welcome in the comments) Frame spends a significant amount of time defining his terms – "faith", "belief", "disbelief", "unbelief", positive and negative atheism and anti-theism etc. This is a necessary precursor to examining statistics and other background material about the extent of unbelief in Australia. It is also extremely useful

to cut across the grand sweeping statements that abound in this area about the death or religion (on the one hand) or the up and coming rise of the religious right (on the other hand). Some myths are dispelled simply by knowing what you're talking about.

The section on the causes of unbelief is also very useful. His broad overviews are excellent introductions to history – the rise and fall of different philosophies and their impact, the various characters in the development of science and how they are taken today. It is good solid stuff and for the most part quite objective. It is only in the examination of the theological response to unbelief (characterised as "confusion and incoherence") that you do sense some of the passion he has for the church to get this engagement right.

If this book is controversial (as Hugh Mackay's imprimatur on the cover says) I think that controversy rests in his section on the "consequences" of unbelief. He attacks the so-called New Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens et al.) – whom he calls anti-theists – not so much for their position, but for their attitude. He finds that this intolerance infects not just intellectual debates but the whole concept of secularism in a way that corrupts true plurality and makes it a form of tyranny.

> *"I want to conclude this discussion of tolerance by highlighting my concern that changing attitudes towards religious beliefs will have a bearing on attitudes towards all beliefs in Australia. When it becomes acceptable, even admirable, to mock and ridicule a person's religious convictions and customs – especially when the intention is to provoke an indignant reaction – the next step is to prohibit the expression of religious sentiments in all public places and forums. This has been the approach of the French Government in recent years and there are signs that Australia is poised to do likewise under the guise of promoting social cohesion and cultural harmony. Citizens are free to hold*

> *religious beliefs and to act on them, but only in their personal lives and only within their homes. Once religion is completely privatised, the next step usually involves incursions on freedom of conscience and obstructions to the right of free association. We are some way from this kind of tyranny but it must be recognised that movements in this direction are usually incremental… I believe that contemporary anti-theism has some of the characteristics of fundamentalism and, like all fundamentalisms, needs to be opposed." (Pages 267-268)*

Frame therefore calls for a genuine secularism in Australia. He also calls for a genuine church that can engage within this freedom, not presuming belief, not using coercion, but taking its place in the market place of ideas and so exhibiting a genuine spirituality with a substantial kerygma.

This is a unique book. It mixes polemic with vulnerability, precision with empassioned argument. It is prophetic for both church and world. For those who are persistent in their derision, it will be ignored. For others it will be provide food for thought and a basis for conversation. In that sense it lives out what it envisions – a genuine engagement.

My only concern is that it is a bit too "meta" – a book about books, an idea about ideas. It doesn't so much argue the gospel of Christ but for the *space* for the gospel of Christ. That's no bad thing though, and the question of how to fill that space, how to preach the gospel well in the light of unbelief, is a whole new task.

Q&A: Imagine you are Atheist, and cannot believe in God no matter how much you want to, what would you live for?

Asked by Anonymous.

The hypothetical in your question suggests some form of internal disconnect between wanting to believe and not being able to believe. I would like to think I would live for a true resolution of that disconnect – holding the tension with intellectual and emotional prowess until a satisfactory outcome is found.

But that's probably an overly optimistic view. Given a clear understanding of the inclinations of my own heart, mixed with my own experience of "there but for the grace of God I go" and "there despite the grace of God I went", I suspect I would cover the tension with some temporary comfort and be a purveyor of some form of vice or another and live to soothe my existential angst by using people.

Review: The Rage Against God

Here's a lesson in "Don't judge a book by it's cover." My expectation of this book by Peter Hitchens, the Christian brother of prominent atheist polemicist, Christopher Hitchens, was guided by blurbs and dust-cover pieces that could be pronounced by the voice-over of a Bruce Willis movie trailer: *"Two brothers. Two beliefs. Two revolted. One returned."*

From the subtitle ("How atheism led me to faith") I was expecting something autobiographical mixed together with some apologetics and philosophical defense of the Christian worldview against today's myriad attacks by the neo-atheists. I was expecting an armourer handing out rhetorical ammunition.

There *is* a very small amount of that, and you can tell that a Zondervan editor has done his or her best to shoehorn the book into that very sellable category. Which is a shame – because that is not where the heart of this book lies, and the attempt to dress it in sensationalist clothes is simply annoying.

What we do have in this book is not a broad-ranging apologetic. Rather we have an excellent analysis of 20th Century sociology, particularly with reference to the impact of socialism and communism and the associated decline in the influence of the church in Western society. In the notes I jot down as a I read I included this observation: "a commentary on being British more than a commentary on being atheist."

There is some autobiography which borders on nostalgia for its own sake at times. Its value lies in his identification with a generation that "was too clever to believe" (title of Chapter 1, page 17) and allows him to use the first person as an abstractive tool both in the singular: For instance:

> *I had spotted the dry, disillusioned, and apparently*

> *disinterested atheism of so many intellectuals, artists, and leaders of our age. I liked their crooked smiles, their knowing worldliness, and their air of finding human credulity amusing. I envied their confidence that we lived in a place where there was no darkness, where death was the end, the dead were gone, and there would be no judgment. It did not then cross my mind that they, like religious apologists, might have any personal reasons for holding to this disbelief. It certainly did not cross my mind that I had any low motives for it. Unlike Christians, atheists have a high opinion of their own virtue." (Pages 24-25)*

…and the plural, speaking of the attitude toward parenthood:

> *"…[it] has much to do with this sensation of lost control, of being pulled downward into a world of servitude, into becoming our own parents… Others may have expected and even enjoyed this transformation of themselves into mature and responsible beings. My generation, perhaps because we pitied our mothers and fathers, believed that we could escape it. In fact, we believed that we would be more mature, and more responsible, if we refused to enter into that state of life…"*

The apparent 'commentary on being British' emphasises, quite validly I believe, the impact of the two great wars of the 20th Century on the decline of British Christianity. Hitchens speaks of "a society with Christian forms and traditions" and that "it does not know what to do with them or how to replace them." He asserts, "Into this confusion and emptiness the new militant secularists now seek to bring an aggressive atheism." (Page 123)

In response, according to the title of the second part of the book, he then attempts to address the "three failed arguments of atheism." I'm not sure if these three arguments were ever clearly enumerated. One wonders if the section title was the brainchild of the Zondervan editor.

What we do have is an extensive examination of the correlation between this "aggressive atheism" and the communist regimes of the 20th Century. Although, in my opinion, he never pulls the argument tight, the threads he draws are clear and strong. He has lived in Soviet Russia, has travelled and read extensively, and has been an avid Trotskyite (those that assert the validity of communism and that it has only failed because of poor implementation by Stalin etc.). He unpacks the inherent humanism of these movements and shows how religion – Christianity in particular – cannot be allowed to co-exist with them. Christian "concepts are safeguards against the worship of human power" (Page 135), he writes having made the point that:

> *God is the leftist' chief rival. Christian belief, by subjecting all men to divine authority and by asserting in the words 'My kingdom is not of this world' that the ideal society does not exist in this life, is the most coherent and potent obstacle to secular utopianism. Christ's reproof of Judas – 'the poor always ye have with you' -… is also a stumbling-block and an annoyance to world reformers… by stating so baldly the truth known to all conservatives that poverty cannot be eradicated, the Bible angers and frustrates those who believe the pursuit of a perfect society justifies the quest for absolute power." (Page 134)*

In such manner he warns of the danger of a fiercely anti-pluralist atheism. He sees, for instance, in the rhetoric of Richard Dawkins and his own brother Christopher, and their assertion that the teaching of religious belief to children is "child abuse":

> *…if we ourselves believe – and are asked by our own children what we believe – we will tell them, and they will instantly know if we mean it and also know how much it matters to us. They will learn from this that belief is a good thing… And for this we are to be called abusers of children? This has*

> *the stench of totalitarian slander, paving the road to suppression and persecution.” (Page 205)*

And so this book is not so much a philosophical engagement with the neo-atheists. Nor is it, despite what the cover suggests, the titillating inside look into the relationship between two brothers in the public light. Rather it is a look at some of the darker sides of recent history by someone who is lived a lot of it, and a warning to see it in much of today’s popular rhetoric, so that we need not repeat it.