

Foreword by Bishop Rob Gillion

The Church has a Past-has it got a Future?

Andy Roland considers three fundamental questions: Where were we? Where are we? Where could we be?

(Spoiler alert - the questions kept changing)

1. CONTINUING CONVERSATIONS

During 2,000 years of Christianity, what questions arose from society to which the Church could give a response?

2. NEW WORLD /NEW CONSCIOUSNESS
All major changes and developments since 2000 are described:

from liberalism to autocracy, from graphene to CRISPR, from sexualities to AI, from mindfulness to food banks.

3. BEING CREDIBLE IN THE POST-MODERN WORLD Has the Church got a future in the public square? Only by reformulating its understanding of its sacred cows such as the Bible, other faiths, sin and death.

Enjoy the ride!

Rev Andy Roland is a retired vicar living with his wife in Earl's Court and writing books like 'Jesus the Troublemaker - his last eight days' and 'Daily Prayers from the World's Faiths'.

He has degrees in history and theology from Oxford and Durham.

He enjoys film and classical music.

His two websites are:

www.bibleinbrief.org www.revandybooks.org



The Church has a past does it have a future? by Rev Andy Roland UK £18 USA \$24 €22



WHAT PEOPLE SAY...

Steve Nicholas, retired evangelist and data scientist

It's been a joy to read Andy's thoughts and talk them through with him. Part 1 of the book covers the last 2000 years. It inevitably blurs between individual and communal faith and geopolitical powers. Andy's questions for discussion at the end of each section are excellent.

Part 2 covers many themes and sub-themes of the emerging digital global culture, including easily forgotten stresses of the early 21st century such as the Congo, as well as the rise of China with its big data surveillance. It's excellent for bringing up topics for conversation in home groups, at the pub, or wherever. Part 3 has plenty to pick up, reject, argue with. It's not meant to be definitive. It is a structured collection of musings that generate thinking and stimulate wider reading and discussion. It will be best published with white space and wide margins for making notes, ready for lively conversations!

James Behrens, barrister and licensed lay minister

The first part of Andy's book is an amazing account of almost two thousand years. The description of political and economic events are useful in enabling us to see the Christian story in perspective. I was slightly surprised that the second part covering the first twenty five years of this century's was as big as part one. The account of all the various new ideas was very fair.

I liked the third part, 'Being Credible in the Post-Modern World' because it challenges one to think. My response to the question 'Does the Church have a Future' is "Yes, but..."

Richard Knight, retired research scientist

Belief has an ancient history. Christianity has a rather shorter one. In his erudite book, Andy reviews that history largely, though not exclusively, in the Anglican interpretation. He wonders if, with the technological and cultural changes of the 21st century, the conventional church can survive.

Strangely, as an atheist, I am less pessimistic. I was in the West Kennet Long Barrow My brainwaves became synchronised with the three thousand six hundred years of the co-ordinated resonances of the burial chambers. I felt a sunrise penetrate the passages of my mind. As I worshipped, I lay in wonder on a floor of flint.

That wonder will never leave humanity. Whether sensed in organ music, stained glass and ritual, in the acoustic and optic stimuli of an Avebury tomb or the dignity of communion in Salisbury cathedral.



THE CHURCH HAS A PAST HAS IT GOT A FUTURE?

By Rev Andy Roland



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FOREWORD

BY RT REV ROB GILLION

daunting task to offer a foreword to a book which is packed full of history and enormous challenges. It is an adventurous journey through the history of the Church and asks important questions for its future.

I would describe Part 1 as a comprehensive map for the journey with some helpful directions and posing some insightful questions at the end of each section.

I suggest this first part might be filling your back pack as you prepare for the journey. Placing in it the tools you need for navigation and rich nourishment to sustain you - which include the stories, often personal, delightfully woven into the historical facts. Plenty of 'Food for Thought'.

The journey then begins in part 2 meeting others on this exciting pilgrimage. A lot of ground is covered, describing a quarter of a century's changes in politics, technology and society. It offers plenty of topics for conversations both christological, ecclesiological and theological.

It is a well crafted and fascinating pilgrimage, stopping often to be refreshed and challenged.

The strength of this pilgrimage is the story-rich journey with many opportunities to contemplate on what has been learnt and to admit there is so much still to be discovered about the future of the Church. I encourage you to retrace your steps from time to time to time to revisit some of the challenges and questions posed .

Part 3 provides the challenge to discern the credibility of the Church in a post modern world with so many relevant and resonating topics to contemplate and challenge us.

All in all, one is given a bag of tools to help us delve into the history of the Church and a journey with so many great teachers and theologians, including Andy himself!

The book encourages us to find answers, or perhaps to offer a response, to the big questions posed concerning the future of the Church. This book provides a challenge to think critically. It certainly made me think!

Rt Rev Rob Gillion

THE CHURCH HAS A PAST HAS IT GOT A FUTURE?

INTRODUCTION

In the heart of the Sussex woods lies the Monastery of the Holy Trinity. It is home to a small Anglian contemplative community, the Community of the Servants of the Will of God. Its community rule was written in 1966, and starts with this prophetic introduction:

"This rule has come into being within the period of transition between two stages of the Christian era:

"between the age of Christendom, during which the Western nations have been generally conscious of the law of God, even when failing to apply it, and the Church has been normally established, respected and in a position of power;

"and the coming age, when the Church must complete its appointed task of proclaiming the Gospel throughout the world, from within a worldwide, materialistic, and man-centred culture."

This paragraph, over sixty years old, expresses the heart of the question "Does the Church have a future?" By that, I do not mean, "Will the Church survive?" Even if some branches of the worldwide Church wither and die, others will reframe themselves to create new and vibrant communities, even in the Western world.

The question rather is, will the Church survive as a successful sect, something in the manner of the Church of the Latter Day Saints/Mormons in America? Modern Evangelicalism tends towards this pattern. And so, in a different way, does traditional Anglo-Catholicism. Or will the Christian faith reclaim a place in the public square, so that its beliefs and principles command widespread respect in society?

Journey of a Book

This book was not conceived all of a piece, it grew like Topsy. Here is how it developed.

May 2018

On May 2018 I was at a clergy study morning in Kensington on "Sharing Faith" - how we share our faith with others. As the morning progressed I began to feel uneasy about the use of the words "gospel" and "good news", repeated constantly as if their meaning was self-evident. I began to ask myself, "If the gospel is the answer, what's the question?" Perhaps the question is not the same in every society and at every time. During the question and answer session I tried to express my concern, but the bishop said, "That's a statement, I'll only take questions." I felt properly put in my place, but it got me thinking.

I decided to look at the last 2,000 years of Christian history. My central theme was not what the gospel meant or what the Church was saying, but what questions were bubbling up in society to which the Church could make a coherent response.

What sort of questions was I looking for? In 1943 the American psychologist Maslow famously identified a basic five-fold hierarchy of needs:

- physiological needs food, drink, shelter etc.
- safety needs health, financial and personal security.
- love and social belonging needs family, friends, trust.
- esteem needs: self-respect and respect from others
- self-actualisation needs, including cognitive and aesthetic needs and ultimately spiritual transcendence.

The reality of a hierarchy as such has been questioned, but many find it a useful model. It spotlights the question that I was seeking to look at both historically and today: once you have enough to eat, somewhere to live comfortably, protection from enemies; friends and family around you; work which you feel gives meaning to your life, what then? The question then arises: 'Why do I still feel dissatisfied? What else am I looking for?' How is that question posed in various societies at various times? And how can the Church respond appropriately?

June 2018

When my attention came to the twenty years post-2000 I had a shock. I realised that there were so many and such radical new developments that I needed a completely new approach.

Fortunately God (or the Universe) gave me a helping hand. Just a month after my original idea, I went to a free piano recital at St Bride's Fleet Street. Coming back to Blackfriars I met a young man offering a twelve weekly subscription to the Economist.

I took advantage of the offer and have been a subscriber ever since. It is consistently interesting and from time to time has indepth articles on special subjects such as Islam and synthetic biology. This has really helped, alongside Wikipedia and other sources of information. I was able to summarise every

major new development which has come to fruition in the last twenty or so years, developments which dramatically affect humanity. I have checked what I have written with people who have professional knowledge of these areas. Developments covered include climate change, the internet, social media, AI, euthanasia, synthetic biology, digital currencies, space colonisation and sexual revolutions (several). Normally we think of one of these topics at a time. I hope that in bringing them all together, we can appreciate how new the sea is which Christian churches now have to navigate.

March 2020 - present

By March 2020 most of the first two sections were complete. Then Covid struck! I had no idea what the world would look like after the pandemic. I put the book aside for the time being and wrote something less controversial: 'Jesus the Troublemaker – his last eight days', a historical novel. It seems to me that what we have now is an intensification of previous trends rather than something totally new. The main lines of the future have already been drawn.

STRUCTURE AND SUMMARY

Part 1 - Continuing Converstations

A brief overview of the historical background of western societies over the centuries, together with what religious questions arose to which the Church could give a response.

Part 2 - New World/ New Consciousness

In which all the main developments within politics, science and society over the last quarter of a century are described.

Part 3 - Being Credible in the Post-Modern World

In which the Church is challenged to rethink some of its sacred cows, and secular society is challenged to open its mind to some inconvenient ideas.

PART 1 THE FIRST TWO THOUSAND YEARS

THE FIRST CENTURY



Menorah from the Temple in Jerusalem carried by Roman soldiers. The Arch of Titus, 82 AD

Historical Background

he first century A.D. (Anno Domini) or C.E. (Common Era) was the first hundred years of the 'Pax Romana', the Roman Peace, in which the whole Mediterranean world enjoyed a united economic system and peace. This led to Jewish emigration throughout the empire, from Cadiz to the Crimea. There were eleven synagogues in Rome and over a million Jews in Alexandria and Egypt. The geographical limits of Roman power were decided in the West by the destruction of three Roman legions by Germanic tribes in 9 CE and by the conquest of Britain under

the emperor Claudius in 42. There was a period of violence in the 60's - Boudicca's destruction of London in 61, the Jewish revolt in Palestine in 66-70 and destruction of Jerusalem, and the civil war between four imperial claimants in 68. Culturally it was a Greek world, in which almost everyone spoke Greek either as a first or second language. Seneca disparagingly called Rome "Graeca urbs" - "the Greek city". Economically it was a system based on slavery, just as our modern system is based on wage-employment. In Palestine the main economic oppression was the system of absentee landowners, giving the peasant farmers very little security as well as liability to heavy taxation.

Jewish religion

The religious background in the Palestine of Jesus' day was complicated. The Sadducees ruled the Temple in Jerusalem and made up most of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council for Jews. Pharisees were those who were 'zealous' for keeping the Law and were held in high regard by the people. The Essenes lived in monastic communities and were looking forward to God's final liberation of Israel from the rule of the Romans and of the "wicked priest in Jerusalem. The Herodians were those who supported Herod the Great's grandsons as providing a limited Jewish autonomy under Rome. In Galilee people were open to a more charismatic form of Judaism, exemplified in the ministry of Jesus.

Jewish questions

Less than two hundred years before the ministry of Jesus, a popular revolt against the Seleucid (Persian) king's attempt to destroy Judaism (e.g. by sacrificing pigs on the altar in the temple at Jerusalem) amazingly defeated the might of the most powerful empire in the Middle East. In Jesus' day those in

power were the Romans, with the sons of the tyrannical Herod I and the heartily disliked Temple aristocracy. Perhaps God would deliver Israel again! As Jesus' disciples asked, "Will God at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus' reply was always, it's none of your business. "It is not for you to know the times or periods.." (Acts 1.6,7)

The early church lived in active expectation of the end times, of the final judgement. "(God) has fixed a day when he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed..." (Acts 17.31) Surely, Jesus' resurrection was the first instalment of the general resurrection which would bring an end to history, wasn't it?

This hope probably began to fade after the destruction of Jerusalem in 68 AD. How come Christianity did not fade along with it? I think it must have been the intense personal experience of being gripped by the Holy Spirit.. So much was this the case that Paul could use language of the end times to describe the normal experience of being a Christian: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" And this is something that Gentile Christians shared along with their Jewish brothers and sisters.

But what about ordinary Jewish people?

We are fortunate in knowing what the key question among ordinary Jews was in Jesus' time, because he was asked it twice, both times by non-disciples: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10.17, Luke 10.25). Note that the question was "What must I do?" not "What must I believe?"

What was going on here? At that time people's belief about the after-life was the mirror image of today's. Today a once definite belief in life after death is morphing into at best agnosticism, in Jesus' time a faith in which life after death played little or no part (e.g. the Sadducees) was transforming into a belief in God's eternal vindication of those who had stayed faithful, even dying as martyrs, as in the Maccabean revolt 160 years before Jesus' birth.

So the question at the back of the question might have been, "Do I have to die as a martyr - I hope not!" It is clear that the apostles' preaching of Jesus' death and resurrection directly spoke to this issue. The death had been done and the resurrection had already started.

Judaism was a practical religion. You showed your devotion by doing it, living your daily life in accordance with the laws laid down in the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. To do even more than keeping the all the 613 recognised rules was unrealistic, surely?

Jesus responded either by referring to the Ten Commandments (Mark 10.17ff) or by quoting with approval the Shema - the basic Jewish creed: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself." (Luke 10.25ff). Or as Paul wrote in Romans 13.9-10: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

What Jesus stressed was the need for a change of heart, (repentance), something that translated into a radical lifestyle which broke down barriers between people. That was how you inherited eternal life, and how you prepared for the coming reign of God.

So what were the questions?

When will God restore the kingdom to Israel? What must I do to inherit eternal life?

YOUR OWN REFLECTIONS

How would you answer someone who asked 'What must is do to inherit eternal life?'

What is eternal life?

Do you think that the establishment of the state of Israel, and the concomitant consequence expulsion of 75% of the Palestinian population being driven into exile, is a case of God restoring the kingdom?

THE GENTILE RELIGION

Gentile religion

Religion in the Roman empire was a mixture of traditional worship, religious philosophies, mystery religions and emperor worship.

Augustus (reigned 27 BCE-14 CE) carried out a vast programme of revival and reform of traditional religion. A classic account of traditional religion in practice comes in Acts, after Paul has healed a cripple: *The crowd shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!' Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice.* (Acts 14.11-13)

Philosophers such as the Stoics argued that people should lead moral lives according to the rational order that governed the universe. Religious debate was a favourite occupation, as seen in the account of Paul's visit to Athens: Paul argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with Paul. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and Resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' Now all the Athenians and

the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new." (Acts 17.17-21) In every city there were also a number of Gentiles who were on the fringe of the synagogue, 'God-fearers', attracted by Judaism's monotheism and morality.

The Persian 'mystery' religion of Mithras, with its secret rituals and banquets, though technically illegal, was especially popular among soldiers in the 2nd century.

There is a small Mithras temple outside one of the forts along Hadrian's Wall, with just enough room for the commander of the fort and his senior officers. You can get a taste of this in the Mithraeum opposite Cannon Street station in London.

Augustus had introduced emperor worship at the end of his life, as a ritual 'glue' to hold the empire together. It was particularly strong in the eastern Mediterranean at first, spreading gradually to the west. How this worked in practice is seen in how Pliny, governor of Bithynia (north-east Turkey), writing to emperor Trajan in 112, dealt with those accused and acquitted of being Christians: "They recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your statue… and moreover cursed Christ."

Gentile questions

To the Greeks of that time, both questions which Jews were asking made very little sense. Their world-view assumed that human beings were spirits temporarily enclosed in physical bodies. So what was their question? St Paul tells us. In 1 Corinthians 1.21 Paul says that the Greeks seek God, but that through "wisdom", i.e. philosophy, they failed to know God. In

other words, their question was "How can I know God?" Acts 17 reports how Paul's speech in Athens was well received while he stuck to that point, but went down like a lead balloon as soon as he mentioned the resurrection and the last judgement. This concern with the nature of God continued throughout the period of Rome's ascendancy. Around 160 AD Justin, a Christian philosopher, wrote a defence of his faith using the device of a dialogue with a Jew called Trypho. At one point Trypho says, "Do not the philosophers turn every discourse upon God? and do not questions continually arise abut his unity and providence? Is not this truly the duty of philosophy, to investigate the Deity?"

(Dialogue 1, from Michael Green, 'Evangelism in the Early Church' p.121)

So what were the questions?

Who or what is God? and How can I know God?

YOUR OWN REFLECTIONS

How would you answer someone who asks you 'How can I know God?'