

One New Book for the Preacher

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Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense, Francis Spufford (HarperOne, 2013, originally published by Faber and Faber Limited in 2012), 221 pages.

This is a rollicking read, a short survey of Christian theology and church history written brilliantly, impudently, and conversationally for those who don't have a clue about much of what Christians believe and do. They may have familiarity with the cultural residue of Christian faith (manger scenes, Christmas carols, Easter lilies, the Crusades, and the Inquisition) in a post-Christian, sometimes anti-Christian age, but they are ignorant of its substance. *Unapologetic* was written for a British public and so requires a preface to the American edition, which explains that while Christianity has a ceremonial, public face at coronations, royal weddings, and funerals, it's largely ignored by a majority of the British population, who know about it mostly from the media's coverage of church controversies and scandals that make believers appear to be homophobic, misogynist, or abusers of children.

In a telling part of the American preface, Spufford, after commenting on the difference in church attendance (six percent in the U.K. compared to 26 percent in the USA), reveals that there are another 16 percent in the United States who say they attend church, when in truth they do not. He thinks that simply astonishing. In his country, people who attend worship might instead deny it out of embarrassment. Church attendance, the mention of God, and religious language are never an enhancement to status or position. In the U.K., "we are well past the tipping point where the religion [Christian faith] provides a language that can be confidently manipulated in the expectation that it will be [rhetorically] powerful" (p. viii - xi).

Spufford also lets his American readers know that he is aware of the virulent, religious culture wars in the United States. In the U.K. there are no school board fights over biology textbooks. There is no aggressive creationist lobby, or much of a religious lobby about anything else. He writes that we will find him liberal, in American terms, but he does not argue for a left-leaning Christianity. The most he is trying for "is to persuade people that Christianity as such, in any variety, should be seen as something not axiomatically contemptible, something emotionally comprehensible even if not shared ..." (p. xi). Further, he believes that the nature of Christianity in the U.K. (a state-sanctioned church that pervades public life) is more detrimental to authentic Christian faith than our attempts at constitutional separation of church and state, where religion is voluntary.

Finally, for us Americans, he explains that this book is full of swearing. Why should that be? He says he wants to make "a tonal point: to suggest that religious sensibilities are not made of glass, do not need to hide themselves nervously from whole dimensions of human experience. To express a serious and appropriate judgment on human destructiveness, in the natural language of that destructiveness" (p. xiii). Some of his spicy, scatological language makes you laugh out loud. And some is so damned clever you are astonished by his facility with language, his cultural and

theological depth, and his ingenuity. For instance, in defining original sin (which he declares, you might guess, as hopelessly lacking in emotional or intellectual heft), he uses the acronym HPtFtU which is “the human propensity to f#*k things up.” After he’s explained it, he uses the acronym. It’s effective, basic, and demonstrates that religious sensibilities [understandings] need not hide themselves from whole dimensions of human experience. Should this offend any readers of this *Journal* (and I doubt it), one only needs to recall some of the epithets Martin Luther hurled at the Pope, the Church of Rome, and God help us all, the Jews. At least Spufford does not use this language as a weapon, but only as a tool for communicating with those who have little clue about Christian faith.

Do not be fooled by his swearing. It is not frivolous. *Unapologetic*, while often humorous and irreverent, engages the whole of Christian doctrine: the formation of the canon of scripture with its internal and external history, the doctrines of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, of eschatology, together with several expositions of theodicy both personal and cosmic.

It is the last theological conundrum (why supposedly good people do such bad things to each other and how God can allow it, if God exists?) for which Spufford is especially helpful. As he acknowledges, many people not only hate the church, but they also assume that the church, Christianity, and religion in general are responsible for all the evils that have been foisted on Humankind, especially by the faithful. In a next to last chapter, “The International League of the Guilty, Part Two,” he addresses what he calls “Christian committed iniquities.” He does not spare us, makes no exceptions, and does not argue that what the good Christians do outweighs the bad: you cannot balance good and evil.

Spufford approaches the dilemma head on, beginning with the hatred that from the beginning was “entangled with Christianity’s relationship with its older Jewish sibling” (p. 173). He follows anti-Semitism through history to the present, yet argues that human societies of all sorts (once we have left behind our hunter/gatherer life) can be/have been organized around the hatred and persecution of someone. Sometimes (usually?) with the sanction of the church where the church was present. (In a footnote he mentions that Christopher Hitchens argued that Martin Luther King could not be counted to the credit of religion. “He was too good...the non-violence, the humility utterly incompatible with Christianity’s proven wickedness” (p. 189). And of course, he returns frequently in this chapter to our friend (our real enemy, more like) HPtFtU. It infects us all, even (especially?) the church, and only by God’s mercy and grace are we rescued from its power.

If you’re still with me, you may have wondered more than once why an account, written. . . for those who don’t have a clue about what Christians believe and do is a *new* book for preachers. After all, are not we the ones who, week after week through the exposition of scripture and the teaching of theology and doctrine, declare what Christians believe and do? So why is this good for us?

First, because it is written by an intelligent layperson who has taken his faith seriously. Francis Spufford is an academic who teaches creative writing at Goldsmiths College (University of London). Before he wrote *Unapologetic*, he was an accomplished public intellectual, the winner of several awards and prizes for his non-fiction writing. Like his intellectual forebears, C.S. Lewis and Jacques Ellul, themselves laymen, he is writing because of his passionate faith in Jesus Christ and his love for the church.

(He is also writing for his six-year-old daughter, whose friends will soon begin telling her that she's weird because her parents go to church.) He has no professional axe to grind, even though he is married to a vicar in the Church of England. He is certainly not attempting to impress his colleagues if his descriptions of withering attitudes toward Christian faith in the U.K. are even marginally accurate. He is writing from faith for the faith itself, not so much in its defense as on behalf of faith's understandability. Such an approach is enormously helpful in mainline congregations in the United States who lose their children to unbelief at an alarming rate. According to the *Huffington Post*, 70 percent of young adults raised by mainline Protestants showed minimal or lower levels of faith than their parents (quoted in *The Christian Century*, 11/26/14). There is no agenda in this book, no ideology, and thank God, no position taken, except delight in, thankfulness for, and fidelity to Christian faith. It will give vigorous tonal accents to our preaching.

Second, it is useful for the preacher's faith. I don't know about you, but I have always been inspired and ennobled by the testimony of laypersons and by their obedience and faithfulness. More than anything else, when they live out their faith, they are and have been a means of grace to me. *Unapologetic* passes this smell test as well as anything I've read. Here we engage a mind at work in the service of God, a will not distorted by anger, and a heart which has been shaped by and rejoices in God's mercy, God's love, and God's forgiveness. Spufford is a man who inspires faith brilliantly, amusingly, and outrageously. When I survey the geography and climate of ecclesial life in the United States and absorb its confusion, distress, and sadness, I know of no better antidote than *Unapologetic*.