

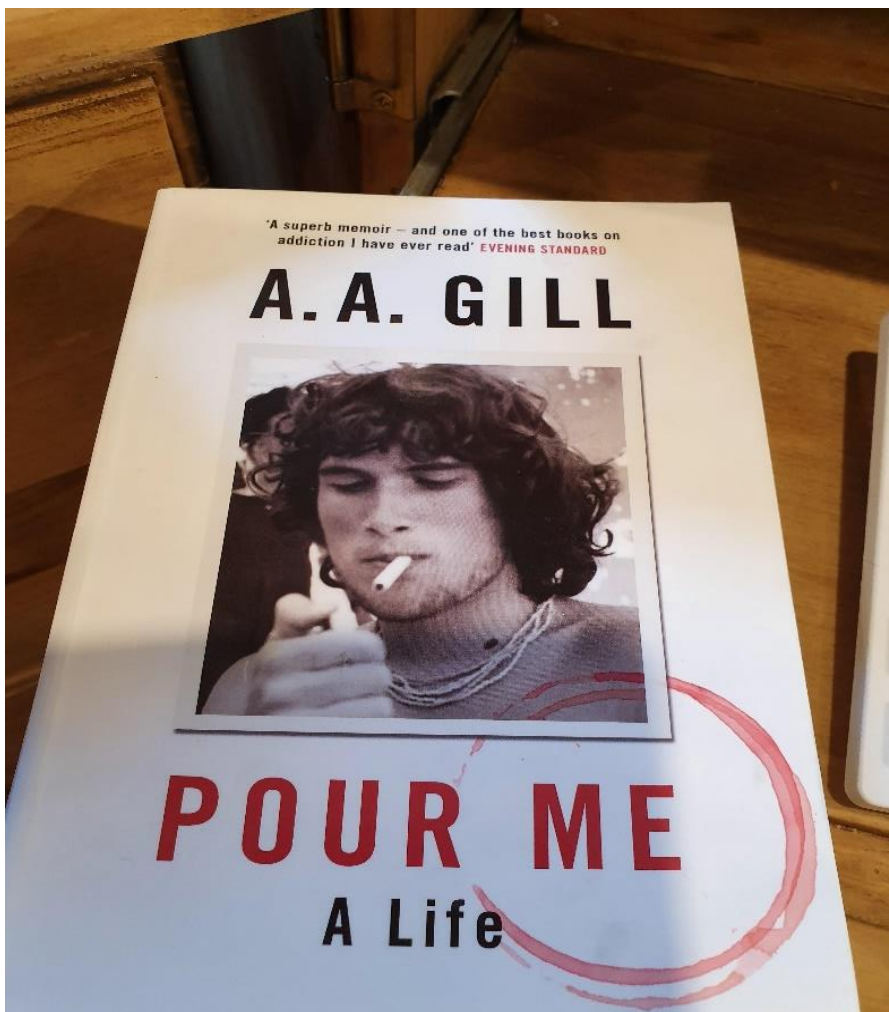
## Weekly Reflections for Week beginning Monday 6<sup>th</sup> July

### Monday

This week I am going to write a short reflection on six books which I have read, which say something about God. However they are not books you would find in the 'religion' section of your local bookshop, neither are any academic or otherwise difficult reads ...

So the first book is A. A. Gill's memoir 'Pour Me.' A. A. Gill is perhaps best known as the acerbic food and restaurant critic writing mainly for The Times. He had a tempestuous personal life, being married and divorced twice (secondly to Amber Rudd), an alcoholic, dyslexic, with a mysteriously missing brother. His alcoholism very nearly killed him, but he recovered, dying of cancer in 2016 aged 62. His mind was off-the-scale intelligent, and he writes brilliantly on people, places, art, cooking and food. His restaurant reviews could be incredibly funny, but also devastating for the restaurant in question, and he made many enemies in the trade.

The memoir is moving, unflinching, very funny, by turns lacerating and uplifting. You don't expect to find him in a church, until six pages from the end. 'And then there's God' begins chapter 14. 'I am a reluctant Christian.' On telling this in an interview with Lynn Barber, she replied 'You just can't. You're not remotely Christian.' Brought up by atheists he then lists all the downsides of religion. As he so rightly says 'I'm not the sort of Christian that atheists or even other Christians want to argue with,' then describing himself as a low to middle Anglican with a love of the King James Bible. He isn't full of zeal, he hasn't taken against homosexuality or any other puritan litmus tests, but as he grew older, and arguably wiser, there was just a space in his life, a still chaotic and wit-filled life that was filled by God. And strangely, though it might appear a kind of luke warm sort of faith to some, you therefore get the feeling that on such unlikely ground, it has become utterly unshakable, even as he bravely begins to narrate his own final illness and death.



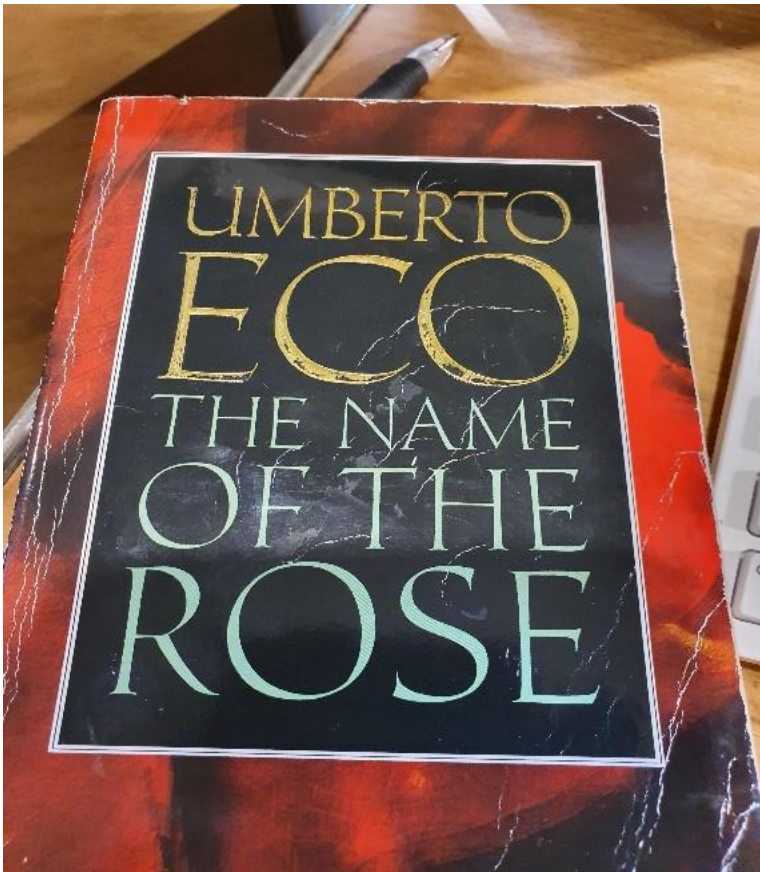
## Tuesday

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Since Brother Cadfael, the murder mystery set in the medieval monastery has become a recognised fiction genre. The upmarket version of it is 'The Name of the Rose' written by the Italian Umberto Eco. If its 500 pages are a bit daunting there is a wonderful film with Sean Connery, and a slightly ponderous TV adaptation with Rupert Everett. Eco is probably known as a 'difficult' writer, no doubt because of his other smash hit 'Foucault's Pendulum,' but it is possible to read the Name of the Rose as a fairly straightforward murder mystery.

There are two aspects of the book which are worth thinking about. Firstly it is set in an era beset with worries about religious heresy, and the possible intervention of the Inquisition. Now the Inquisition (especially like flu, the Spanish variety) gets a bit of a bad press these days. Of course at the time it was seen by many as a brutal and oppressive quest for power by the church, but historically like all such phenomena, we need also to understand how it came about. Put simply it was an age when your eternal soul was far more important than your mortal body, and heresy was seen as putting the former into mortal danger, and therefore any collateral damage done to the latter (including sometimes torture and even death) was worth bearing. Furthermore heresy was seen as a little like a virus (just as computer 'bugs' are metaphorically called viruses today) – it could spread, and it was better to sacrifice diseased branches for the sake of the healthy plant. Obviously that doesn't excuse what went on, but it does allow us to understand why it might have happened – and indeed therefore also to be on the watch for it in our own culture.

Secondly the main 'character' in the book is the library. The monastery is built around, and known for, its remarkable library. However it is built as a tower labyrinth, the secrets of which are passed on only to the librarian from one generation to another. Eco animates the library brilliantly, seeing it not as a collection of dusty books, but as a vigorous conversation going on down the centuries by its authors – pagan and Christian, ancient and modern – and in that conversation there are secrets and lies, and some of those secrets can kill..... Without giving too much away everything comes to a head when the treasured library goes up in flames....



## Wednesday

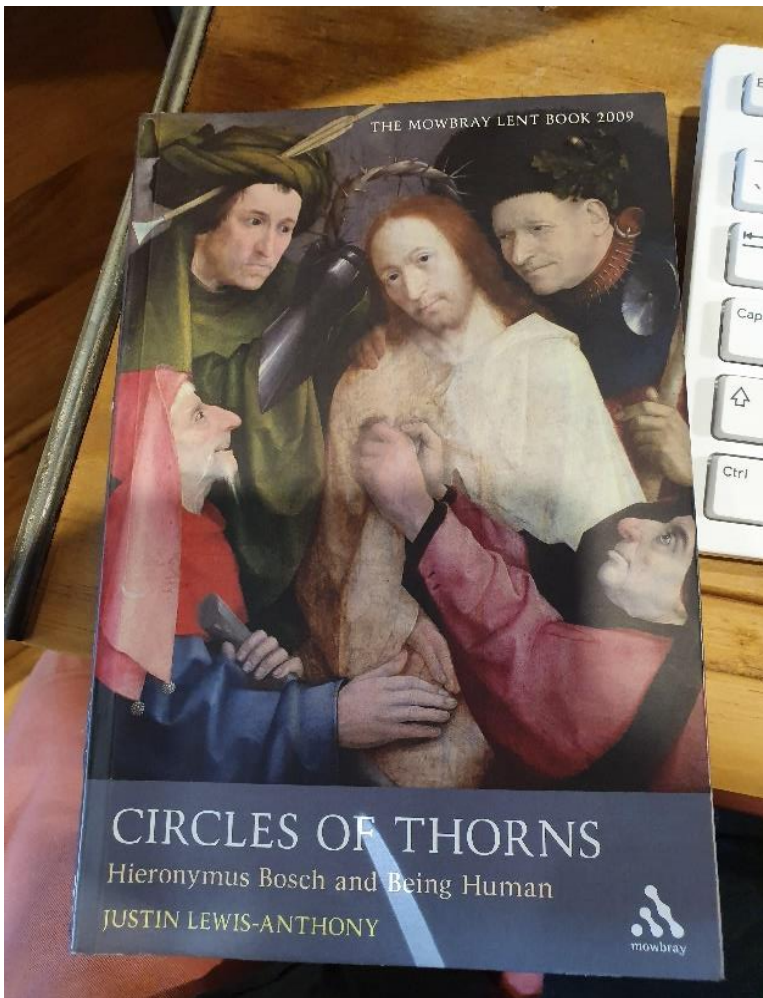
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Some of you may remember my friend Justin Lewis-Anthony who has on occasion preached at Welwyn. In fact between returning from a job in Rome and moving to be Vicar of Chingford, we was for a couple of months licensed to the Welwyn Team, but being in lockdown you may not have noticed. Justin has written several books on ministry, but his first book was a book about art, or more precisely about one painting: 'Christ mocked' by Hieronymus Bosch.

In 2006 Justin had a nervous breakdown – he won't mind me telling you this, as these are the opening words of the book. As part of his recovery he used to go to the National Gallery in London and sit for hours looking at this painting (it's still there if you want to go and see it). Bosch (as well as being a prolific producer of power tools) is better known for huge 'Where's Wally meets Rocky Horror Show' canvasses, but this picture is very simple and small. It is roughly the size of an A3 piece of paper.

Justin analyses the painting and what the four mockers represent. The book takes the reader through politics, the four ancient elements, the four humours, different styles of Christian devotion, the story of Christ's incarnation, and finally what all of that means for us as (whole) human beings. The four humours, with their associated temperaments, were the basis of Greek and then medieval medicine.

The book is erudite without being difficult or dense. It takes the reader, assuming no previous knowledge of these things, through the medieval mind, Christian theology and what it might mean to be a human being today. Particularly what it might mean to be a human being recovering after mental trauma. It's still available and if you buy it, Justin gets a small royalty, which can only enhance the admittedly small chance that he'll take his turn buying a round at the pub.

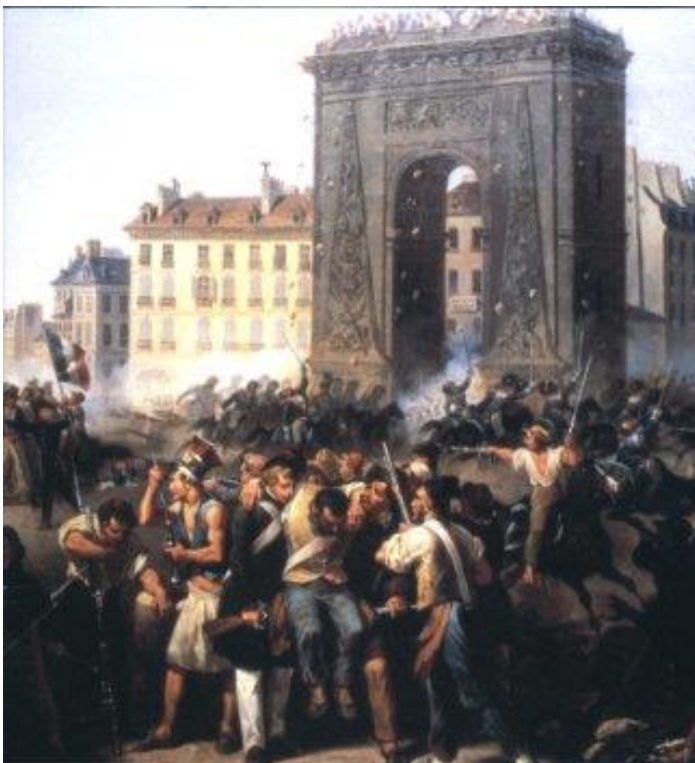


## Thursday

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If the 1200 plus pages of Victor Hugo's epic historical novel are a bit daunting you can always watch the wonderful musical or the terrible film of the musical (the clue is in the title: if you want to film a musical best to book actors who can sing....). Divided into five parts, each part telling the story of five different characters, the novel is not only epic in its scale but also its ambition. Set in post revolutionary France and climaxing in the June rebellion of 1832, the novel seeks to tackle huge questions about human existence – about love and loss, crime and punishment, sin and redemption, politics and society, poverty and wealth – all found within its pages (sometimes, it has be said, discussed at great length).

The question of religious belief, always contentious until this day in France, is also of vital importance in this book. That is clear from the start when the convict Valjean, the ultimate hero of the book, is released on parole from hard labour. Rejected as a criminal from every place he passes through he is lucky enough to finally find lodgings with the saintly Bishop of Digne. But old habits die hard and in the middle of the night Valjean absconds with the Bishop's silver. He is arrested on the road and brought back to face the Bishop. 'But of course', says the Bishop, 'I gave him these things, but my friend you have forgotten the most valuable items, these solid silver candlesticks'. The police have no option but to release Valjean, now a wealthy man. This act of kindness marks a change for Valjean and sets him on a new life, which will form the basis for the narrative.



PENGUIN CLASSICS

VICTOR HUGO  
*Les Misérables*

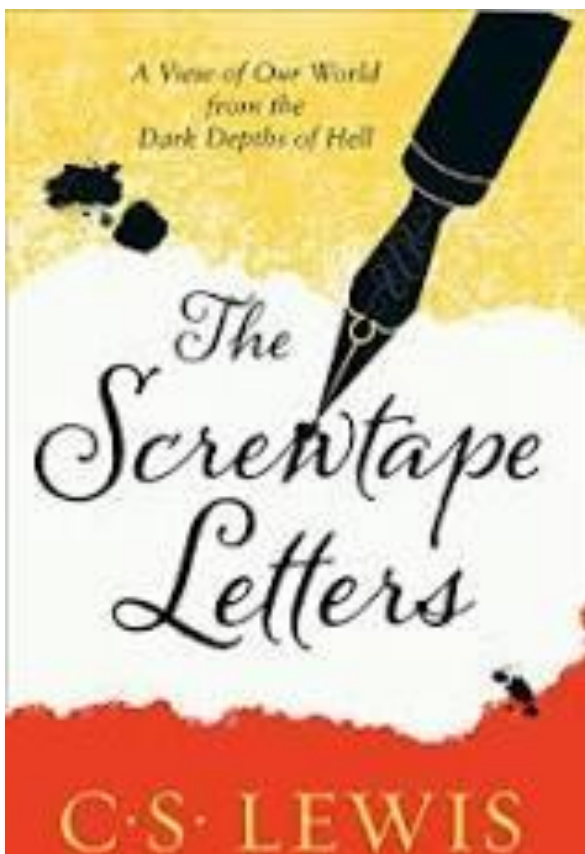
## Friday

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Ok so I might not get away with this one, but I do think if C S Lewis had written no other 'religious' books, 'The Screwtape Letters' would not be in 'Religion' section of your book shop. He would be known as a children's writer and professionally as an academic specialist in Medieval Literature (he held chairs in the subject at both Oxford and Cambridge). The short volume that is The Screwtape letters would have been classed alongside his other fictional output. They are very easily readable and very funny.

The letters purport to be from a senior devil (Screwtape) to a junior tempter, who happens to be Screwtape's nephew (Wormwood). Wormwood has been assigned to look after a young man, but things have not gone well, and at the start of the letters the young man has become a Christian. However Screwtape insists that all is not lost and that his young nephew should not despair (ironically). There are still plenty of ways to get the young man back on the curved and wide. He could start by making him look around his local church and see what a bunch of oddballs are there (!). And don't get carried away by the prospect of a war – great for us devils, but watch out in case your particular subject manages to do something humane and courageous.

Mixed in with the humour are also many of C S Lewis serious points which I often keep coming back to, as he does in other more straightforwardly 'religious' books. The devil remarks, that whereas they are known as hedonists, ironically they have never been able to make their own pleasure. All they can do is pervert the pleasures given my God. Another of my favourites, as a former mathematician, is his advice on science – get your subject to have a general impression that science has disproved all that religious nonsense. Whatever you do don't let him actually study it in any detail. As Screwtape remarks 'There have been some sad cases amongst the modern physicists.' And one of my favourite quotes about the dangers of Christian living: 'She lives for others ... you can tell who the others are, by the hunted looks on their faces.'



## Saturday

This week I am going to write a short reflection on six books which I have read, which say something about God. However they are not books you would find in the 'religion' section of your local bookshop, neither are any academic or otherwise difficult reads ...

The problem with any exercise such as this, is that there are probably two or three books that you simply must write about, and then about fifty that are vying for sixth place. Another danger is that the book you have just finished is disproportionately in your head, though this does have the advantage that it is at hand, and you still have a fairly passable memory of what it was all about.

So the book I have just finished (and it makes a nice balance with memoir, art, novels, other non-fiction) is Lotharingia by Simon Winder. It's the history of the territory that lies on the borders of France and Germany, some of which are now the low countries, some is in France, some is in Germany and Switzerland. If the balance of European power is seen to this day to be between France and Germany, then it is not hard to see that being at the fulcrum of this balance, is both historically interesting, and probably rather horrible to live through.

It's particularly interesting because it's a region that I cycled through on my trip to Rome, and having fallen somewhat in love with Alsace have already returned to. Even here politics intervenes. A good cycle routing app will take you there at least 200 miles shorter than the official Eurovelo route which I followed. Why? Because European politics demands that such money should route the rider via Brussels and Strasbourg (both of which I cut off the route to avoid), as well as Schengen (of the 'agreement') and all along the delightful and notably peaceful and open French – German border.

The book is extremely informative, readable, interesting, well written and above all laugh out loud funny. But what then does it tell us about God? Well to get technical for the moment, a Marxist view of history fails imaginatively to allow any reasons for historical change which aren't at base about class or economics. What is clear from this book is that if we use some historical perspective, then in their place, knowing what they knew, we realise that there are many other factors involved. The fact that some of them now appear ridiculous is what makes the book so amusing. But at the time they made perfect sense. And one very major factor is that people took God and religion very seriously. Much more seriously than we do. Though Winder does not particularly share that faith, he does understand why it made people act in certain ways that seem bemusing to us. Whilst we are in the middle of a pandemic, it might sound odd to hear of Catholics warding off the plague with chanting, processions and relics – but to them this made obvious sense as a reaction to what simply seemed like a random act of divine providence. Or to give another example, Cathedrals were often build on a vast scale compared to the size of surrounding settlement, taking up value resources and energies – ultimately an endeavour which could only be understood if you took your faith seriously. Winder also kills some other sacred cows like Max Weber's belief that Protestantism and Capitalism went hand in hand, by the simple expedient of showing that many catholic states embraced capitalism with equal fervour. However as I say, what I often wonder today is exactly how it felt to be a medieval peasant or nobleperson, and wonder how I really would have thought, and what priorities I really would have had, a what role faith might have played in my life.

