

*The Ironic Christian's Companion*, by Patrick Henry

reviewed by [Douglas R. Loving](#) in the [April 5, 2000](#) issue

What does an ironic Christian look like? "One of the chief characteristics of an ironic Christian," says Patrick Henry, "is an instinctive, abiding suspicion of no-loose-ends answers." An ironic Christian "inhabits a world that is more 'as if' than 'just like.'" Henry seeks to discern the "field marks" of God's grace embedded in life's paradoxes and unpredictability.

Henry gathers a rich assortment of conversation partners from the worlds of physics, literature, history, politics and psychology. Folks as diverse as Vaclav Havel, Thomas More, Alice in Wonderland, Julian of Norwich, the "Star Trek" crew and Clement of Alexander illuminate his path. He explores the interior landscape of hope through a letter he wrote--during a time of isolation and loneliness--to Alyosha, a character in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Here he introduces Alyosha to characters in Solzhenitsyn's *The Cancer Ward*. Another chapter exegetes Dr. Seuss's *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, demonstrating the unexpected avenues through which grace touches our lives. Bartholomew discovers that "hope and despair, problem and solution, and plea and help uncannily masquerade as each other."

I would have welcomed a more extensive exploration of Jesus's place in this "ironic" world. Henry's affirmation that "I can take Jesus in stride because I don't require that he fill in the blanks in my own life" leaves me wanting to hear more about his understanding of how and where Jesus takes us in stride.

As executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, Henry has often brought together people from varied religious traditions for dialogue about challenging contemporary issues. He writes out of a close acquaintance with and appreciation for other faith perspectives. His book is a welcome guide to discerning Christ's presence in our postmodern world where no single "center" prevails. Religious traditions in North America grow increasingly pluralistic, and challenges to the ultimate truth of any authority, even the God of Jesus Christ, abound. Henry leads us in a way of looking at the world, "a way of thinking and doubting and still believing--all at the same time--that there is a meaning and purpose in life."

His lively language ("science fiction has been an aerobic workout for my imagination") and personally revealing style make the book eminently readable. True to his word, we are treated as companions in discovering the "field marks" of an extraordinary/everyday grace that surprises and transforms.