

Brought to life by Christ

Theology was not optional for me as a child. It was a matter of life or death.

by [James Alison](#) in the [August 26, 2020](#) issue



(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be

difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, “How my mind has changed.” This essay is the third in the new series.

My first reaction to the prompt “how my mind has changed” was to give an account of how I have been wrong. I assumed, having once written a book called *The Joy of Being Wrong*, that I might address the topic simply by engaging in festive recantation. On reflection, the question asks for something much more subtle.

As it turns out, my mind is of little importance. What is important is who has changed my mind. Both the big Who and the many, many secondary whos and whats we all represent for each other as we interact during our time on earth. For me, those secondary interactions occur in the light of the primary changer of my mind, the One in whom we live and move and have our being. The One from whom we may also occasionally experience direct graces.

The privilege of being in a position to write this essay has reached me through entirely conventional means: the development throughout my life of the three typical levers by which our minds can be transformed, the gifts known as faith, hope, and charity. These are the dynamic routes by which God our Savior brings us out of the dark, semifinished enclosures of our bodies, and thus our minds, and into beginning to enjoy being the image of God, called into life.

How did those levers get traction in me? John Stott, the late “pope” of evangelical Anglicanism, baptized me when I was an infant. I knew Stott only when I was a child, so never closely. I don’t know whether he believed infant baptism to be valid. My father—who was a convert of his and was mentored by him until his death—did not. I remember my dad explaining to me that he and my mother were going to heaven because they had been saved, whereas we children hadn’t been saved yet, although he hoped that one day we would be.

Nonetheless, my trinitarian baptism in the Church of England seems to have taken. The last time I saw Stott he was seated at the back of my father’s funeral, his modest choice of place vastly underplaying his importance to my father. It is my plaintive hope that this bolted colt from Saint Dominic’s stable has not become too grotesque a betrayal of the Stott-like preacher and teacher my father would dearly have loved me to become.

But oh, the orchestral combination which has played those baptismally given theological virtues into life: how strange and different from anything Stott, my father, or I could have imagined! Alongside my father's rigid penal substitution-theory evangelicalism, my mother, a Billy Graham convert of very great but unformed intelligence, had, like so many women of her generation, sacrificed higher education in order to become a homemaker. She suffered until quite late in life from an intense hyperreligiosity. Demons and witches were omnipresent, and conspiracy theories dominated her political and religious views.

My plan was to become the best fake Christian I could.

For some reason I felt it necessary, even as a child, to protest in favor of rationality. I was quickly cast as "the mocker and the scoffer," a diabolical figure. So when I was sent to boarding school at the age of eight, in addition to the normal forms of bereftness and abandonment which such children feel, I carried with me something of my mother's religious hypervigilance. Little was I aware that I would turn out to be that against which such vigilance is vain.

At this boys' school, at age nine, I discovered the struggle of my life. I fell in love with a classmate of, to my eyes, astounding beauty. It was an utterly wrenching experience because, although it was in no way reciprocated and I had no language to match the feelings, I knew it was real. Here for the first time, reading the Bible after lights out (for we were sent to bed at 7 p.m., but in the summer darkness fell only after ten) I realized that there was something true about the gospel, that it had something to do with what I was experiencing, and that this was surely not the same thing as my parents' religion.

A few months later, I was told by a slightly older contemporary what a *queer* was. (In 1969, the word had none of its present-day chic.) Instantly I knew I was one—with relief that there was a word to match my experience. Almost as instantly came the realization that now I was cast adrift on a sea of impossibility, was an abomination, would never arrive at a safe port, had lost my parents, and worse, that my love would—could—only do harm. I would need to protect those who I loved against myself.

Aware as I was that Jesus wouldn't be wanting me, my plan was to become the best fake Christian I could. Just in case, rather than the hell which surely beckoned, God might one day at least approve my damage limitation exercise. The sheer panic of

this experience between the ages of nine and 11, along with the inability it provoked in me to form stable relationships, either personal or work-related, is only finally dissipating 50 years later.

The Almighty, unimpressed by my enactment of a demon constantly trying to clip its own wings, gave me my next experience of unrequited love: a Catholic classmate. With him, I experienced a hint of a version of Christianity in which I might, after all, be saved. Over the next adolescent years I sensed that the difference lay in the realm of original sin. In the fallen world of total depravity which my father taught, where only the Bible's words give light for salvation, there was perfectly clearly none for me. But maybe in a world in which God seemed more relaxed about creation, I would find some space?

With Girard, an entirely new approach to atonement opened itself to me.

I had glimpsed the specificity of Catholic Christianity. The phrase "grace perfects nature" would not enter my conscious mind until years later, but a sense that something like that must be the case was already at work in me.

I describe all this in order to bring out something about my relationship with theology. Although I didn't understand this as it crept upon me, theology was not optional for me. It was a matter of life or death. An English teacher at Eton remarked that I thought more like a theologian than a literary critic. I laughed when I heard it, but by the time I reached Oxford University in 1978, having within the previous six months both come out as gay and become a Catholic, I had lost forever the world of my upbringing and any security of belonging. I came close to killing myself during my first year at Oxford, undergoing what I now understand to have been a psychotic break. (I thought I was possessed at the time, but an ancient, no-nonsense Jesuit, whose face bore an uncanny resemblance to the mummy of Ramses II, put paid to that.)

Within a few months of starting a degree in Spanish and history, I lost all interest in the latter. Only the language part of Spanish, my ticket out of the country and culture in which I was brought up, held my attention. Instead, I was devouring spiritual texts as a matter of desperation. I knew that I would have no life, and that there was in any case no point in having one, until I had resolved the issue of whether someone like me could indeed have real faith and might indeed be brought to life.

The Lord in his goodness gave me a Mexican friend at the university who introduced me to the thought of Aquinas, and I started to love the serenity, the clear logic, which his approach to Christianity embodies. I saw it reflected in the few English Dominicans I met during that period, for they were quite unencumbered by fussy devotions or cultic weirdness.

Soon I was one of six British students chosen to go to Mexico City on exchange. Once in that legendary megalopolis, I was invited to live with my Mexican friend's family—and to them I owe my survival. Their gentle, unpressured company brought me back from the pain of the psychotic break, opened me up to friendships that have endured a lifetime, and pointed me toward the Mexican Dominicans.

Although I had clearly received the gift of the Catholic faith three years earlier, in a form so obvious to the priest who received me into the church that a few weeks of instruction sufficed, it was in this period in Mexico, and through the mentorship of Daniel Ulloa, Raúl Vera, and the late Oscar Mayorga, that faith started to become serene. My concerns and fear about being gay were still very much there. But the basic God issue—that God was just there and was much, much bigger than my panic, and that I was indeed part of the church—was slowly being resolved.

As I left Mexico to return to the United Kingdom in 1983, hoping to continue my studies with the English Dominicans, I read a *Newsweek* article concerning a baffling set of infections leading to rapid death among gay men in San Francisco and New York. Eventually named AIDS, this would be the backdrop of the next decade of my life, and a formative element whose importance in the changing of my mind cannot be overestimated. In retrospect, had I not spent the years 1981–1995 with the Dominicans, and thus with very little sexual activity indeed, I would no more be alive now than are my first boyfriend, our friends, and much of the rest of my generation of gay men.

Before we get to AIDS, however: what a privilege were the years I spent studying with the English Dominicans in Oxford! The now legendary Herbert McCabe was a benignly neglectful novice master, a wonderful teacher, and something of a father figure to me. Although the polar opposite of my dad (and thus of my upbringing) in both his strongly socialist politics and his passion for the Irish cause, he never made me feel guilt by association, and we shared a genuine respect.

It would be invidious to single out names among the other magnificent teachers, role models, and friends who influenced me, since they are still among the living. But little by little I was enabled to swim in at least the shallow end of their very rich, subtle Thomism, quite different from the neo-Scholasticism which pervades so much Catholic officialese. It was the serenity and broad-mindedness of this thinking and the unfussed way of living that went with it that did so much to break me out of the binary world in which I had been brought up and to alleviate the panic it had induced. And it was through these teachers that I first heard the name René Girard.

When I read Girard, it was as though I had been waiting all my life for his thought: a single intuition concerning the relationship between imitation, desire, and violence. The anthropological, psychological, and literary pathways that open up from his understanding have made sense of so much for me that even now, 35 years later, I'm still unpacking them. At the time, it seemed as though a depth charge had gone off. I remember telling one of my teachers, a very distinguished philosopher: "I only have one idea, and it isn't mine." With a wry Scottish groan, he replied: "Well, I suppose that's half an idea more than most people. And when you come to think of it, Karl Rahner really only had a single idea." Chuffed with the company, I plowed ahead.

Girard, slowly but surely, has changed (and is still changing) my mind in three main areas: salvation, the Bible, and my own psychology. I immediately intuited that he had resolved the problem of "why Christ's death." With God bereft of wrath, and with a violent human mechanism for containing violence shown to be omnipresent and foundational, an entirely new approach to atonement opened itself up to me.

Second, having been simultaneously bored with and terrified of the Bible as a result of my upbringing, I suddenly found it to have come alive. Passage after passage became illuminated from within: first texts upon which Girard had commented himself, and then so many others as I found myself transferring his insight into new spaces.

As to my psychology: Girard understands that we are all imitators, desiring according to the desire of another, and therefore that even our rationality is relational rather than primarily cerebral. This set off in me the long, slow climb down from the clever but defensive individual with ideas rather than relationships. I'd been given at least something of the relational and intellectual humility necessary to begin learning theology, let alone becoming a viable human being.

All this time I was still wrestling with being gay. Not that this was a problem for the English Dominicans. They had been dealing with the issue with relative openness since the 1920s, had acquired a certain notoriety in the mid-1970s, and their members, whether themselves straight or gay, continued throughout the 35 years of backlash that began with John Paul II to be as grown-up and sensible as was possible in the church of the period. Indeed, my friend Timothy Radcliffe, as master of the Dominican order and subsequently as a writer and lecturer, was a rare beacon of light in dark times, just as he continues to be in Francis's far less fraught pontificate.

In the mid-'80s, however, I was still wrestling with the notion that although I could be a Christian and a member of the church, yet there was something basically wrong with me, that any sexual expression was wrong, that partnership would be both psychologically impossible and a sin, and that celibacy was in my case an obligation rather than an option. So it seemed as though I was in the right place: in a religious order, preparing for solemn vows.

Girard's brief, slightly quirky treatment of homosexuality in his book *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, rather improved in his later *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*, came as a relief. As part of his polemic with Freud, he showed how same-sex and other-sex desire are equally mimetic, equally likely to be inflected by envy and rivalry, and that any real work of conversion lies in facing up to imitative rivalry, much deeper in us than the relatively malleable erotic epiphenomena it casts up. In addition, in *The Scapegoat* Girard gives a marvelous and perennially valid account of the scapegoating mechanism, fueled by just such rivalry and feeding on any number of stereotypical accusations.

When the *Sun* newspaper and its hateful tabloid siblings got wind of a vicar who was in the hospital dying of AIDS and the resultant "Gay Plague" headlines burst upon us all, I had the resources to begin to face up to elements of a reality that had so far eluded me. In late 1986, I participated in a weekend conference on the church and AIDS, organized by the English Dominicans. By the time it ended, the "Halloween letter" from Rome, which declared homosexual acts "intrinsically evil" and even the homosexual tendency "objectively disordered," had exploded like a shrapnel bomb in our midst.

These, then, were the issues on my table, as it were, when I arrived in Brazil in late 1987 to study theology. The Jesuits in Belo Horizonte constituted, at the time, the best Catholic theological faculty south of the Río Bravo. Several of the teachers

could have been stars anywhere they wanted. Some were of a more classical and speculative bent, like my supervisor, Ulpiano Vázquez. Others were more liberation-minded in those heady years before the Berlin Wall came down. They gave me a theological education far better, I have no doubt, than I would have received had I returned to Oxford.

For a start, each Gospel was the major credit for a 16-week semester (rather than the four Gospels being studied, two weeks each, in just one eight-week term). It was in Brazil, studying Mark with J. A. Ruiz de Gopegui, that I was introduced to the Anglican exegete J. Duncan M. Derrett. Any capacity I have to read and preach from the Gospels comes from slowly sinking into Derrett's grasp of the Semitic world of allusive wordplay underlying the Greek New Testament. He had mined those veins to sneers of over-erudition from his exegete contemporaries. Yet he understood early on what now seems clear: things erudite to us were familiar references to Jesus' listeners.

Then again, it was a liberation theologian, J. B. Libânio, who first introduced me to the elegant, compact, and deeply Christian thought of Joseph Ratzinger. The then cardinal was not presented as an enemy but as offering bases for thinking about Jesus and the church, bases that have continued to nourish me ever since. Even as we have moved past the difficult years of Ratzinger's own church leadership, I have found much in his thought that meshes with Girard. Together they have enabled me to imagine and inhabit the post-clerical church which is coming upon us.

All students at the Jesuit Theology Faculty also had to be involved in pastoral work. We were required to learn to think about what we were doing, first sociologically and anthropologically and then theologically. Our teachers wanted to ensure that we were not tempted to imagine that learning theology was possible anywhere except face to face with the suffering servant.

McCabe had instructed me, "James, whenever you write anything theological, stop and ask yourself: Yes, but is it true?" St. Ignatius's companions now wanted me to ask, in a way with which McCabe would wholeheartedly have concurred, "Where in all of this is Christ crucified?"

And so AIDS became the constant crucible for my learning. AIDS as it was before 1994, with death so fast and agonies so cruel but also loves so poignant, shame so rampant, backstories so bizarre, poverty so omnipresent, and families so riven that

even the terrified and self-obsessed person that I was began to be pulled into the orbit of the suffering servant. And by this I mean that I began to glimpse that the suffering servant was not me. I am not the victim here. The center is radiantly elsewhere, and I am, thank God, peripheral to it. Never had I been so alive as in the face of this emergency.

Is it shocking to say this? Only in the AIDS trenches (a First World War metaphor not taken lightly) could the full measure of the drastic inner logic of my fear, my shame, my sense of worthlessness, and my semi-suicidal dance with death and danger come alive and meet its match in the shames and glories of the lives and deaths of those I accompanied. The utter privilege of being a priest accompanying people with AIDS, while learning theology at graced hands, was what allowed Jesus finally to apply balm to the drasticity that had so precociously ripped through the heart of a nine-year-old boy.

In retrospect, it is no longer surprising to me that when I finally finished writing my doctoral dissertation on original sin in 1994, some huge need went out of me. The issue of original sin, and thus of my capacity to be saved, had been resolved. Formerly a voracious reader, I suddenly lost the will or ability to read books, to take any pleasure in them. I am only slowly reacquiring the habit 25 years later.

Nor is it weird that the nearest thing I have to a “vocational narrative” did not become real until 1994. Then, just as my life as a Dominican—and any sense of what being a priest might mean—started to crumble, I received an open-ended, nondirective word: “feed my sheep.” One of very few occasions in which I have had no doubt Who was addressing me, or rather speaking me into being, it came as I prayed before the blessed sacrament following a casual walk around a gay cruising ground.

Even throughout those AIDS years, as I did that dance with death, my conscience was still bound by the notion that something was wrong with me because I was gay. The evangelical presumptions with which I had been brought up fit quite nicely into the “objectively disordered” Aristotelian garments of the Roman congregations.

In the years between 1988 and 1993, I put myself through three “ex-gay” programs: two run by Leanne Payne and one, called “Living Waters,” run by Andy Comiskey. I emerged from them every bit as gay as I had entered. However, in neither case did I, an adult who had freely chosen to attend them, feel abused or mistreated. Looking

back, I'm glad I made myself go through them, however flawed their organizers' basic premise. My mind was not finally changed until after I had, by my obedience, given the church's official teaching every last chance to impress its "truth" upon me.

The final act in this drama came at the end of 1994 with the sudden death in Brazil of the man I had loved for several years, Laércio. He died within three weeks of his first opportunistic infection, just as I was packing to move from Chile to Brazil to be with him for what I had assumed would be the last few months of his life. His parting gift reached me as I wandered, zombielike with shock and grief, through the kind warmth of a Santiago December night. It was the awareness that our love had been real. From God. Not silly, hedonistic, or distorted. To pretend otherwise was to kick God in the teeth. The teaching which had bound my conscience, as it has that of so many others, was simply untrue.

Laércio's dying gave me more indeed than that. Over the next few months I not only lost my fear of death completely but also any fear of the shame of dying of AIDS, and with it all the self-destructive dynamics which had run me. Over the next couple of years, as every form of belonging to which I had clung so desperately collapsed, my false persona was able finally, and very painfully, to die. Its death was possible because the gift of faith had been stretched into giving me a taste, already now, of eternal life. This sense, that death is mysteriously behind me, has not left me since. I had finally died and was beginning to become alive in Christ.

Everything in my life had thus been the wrong way around: doctorate before priesthood before baptism. Over the quarter century since 1994, these things have started catching up with themselves. As my baptismal priesthood has grown, I've started living into the things I understood before but scarcely inhabited. My ministerial charge, to give flesh to the biblical word "feed my sheep," is coming alive, even being affirmed by papal phone call.

And I've started to be able to branch out intellectually again. Margaret Barker's rediscovery of the temple "imagination" of ancient Israel has opened up my understanding of the Hebrew Bible, following from Derrett and making so much sense thanks to Girard. More recently I've had the pleasure of being stretched by Ian Hodder and his archaeological team at Çatalhöyük in Turkey, taken way outside my comfort zone and into prehistory. And on and on, with so much more to come.

Jesus' promises are true: I've received the sisters and brothers and mothers and homes of gospel fame—as well as, rather unexpectedly, an adopted son whose role

in the changing of my mind and heart is far too great to be described here. And naturally enough, the persecutions as well. I wouldn't have it any other way.