

A light-hearted, heavy-handed, devoutly devastating swipe at long-held traditions, taking believers where they have feared to tread, but written without disdain for the church who made it possible for me to become a devout believer in a divine presence and divine good-will.

Escape from Hell and the Almighty White Guy with a Beard

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**Escape from Hell
and
the Almighty White Guy with a Beard**

James La Croce

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**How I learned to stop worrying
and love the mystery**

THE HEART OF SPIRITUAL

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Preface: BUY THIS BOOK!

I believe I am qualified to write this book about God and Son. I have lived with them for over seventy years- as a boy and a man, a layman in the pew and a priest in the pulpit, a celibate and a married man (with church permission), a man with authority and a man opposed to authority, a man who once gloried in the right answers (I have a doctorate in Sacred Theology) and a man whose final comfort is in his questions (I have this book as evidence).

From 1950 to 1970 I was a seminary student and a priest. From 1970 to 1980 I was an anti-poverty and anti-war activist. (I remember those years as “my life on the road” with Jesus). From 1980 to 2000 I taught Religious Studies in a Roman Catholic College and in 2000 I retired as Professor Emeritus. From 2000 until God knows when I have been pondering.

My pondering led to questions and doubts which I came to call “Rude Awakenings”. I called them “Awakenings” because only now was I becoming aware that I could escape the fear of hell and the image of God as the almighty white guy with a

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beard, making threats and promising rewards. I called my questions “Rude” because they were offensive to pious ears, and, at times, even to mine.

God help me if I give the impression I am writing to you from high moral ground when I write about my ten years as an activist against war and for the poor. I gave only a decade of my life trying to put down the mighty by living with and working with the lowly. And I did so on the cheap. I just happened to be an angry celibate forty year old man at a time when my anger could be harnessed to religious and political movements that dominated the 1970’s in North and South America. I was always on the fringe of this mighty saga. But the saga did not remain on the fringe of me. Thus this book about God and Son.

Where am I taking you? Why am I taking you there? How am I going to take you there? What kind of rude questions am I asking?

Where am I taking you?

I am taking you where pious believers fear to tread – where peace and justice mean more than heaven and hell; where God

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as “the mystery” means more than God as “the almighty”; where questions about God and Son are revered more than the so-called answers.

The questions are rude:

1. Why is God not an almighty presence on our planet?
2. Why is the Son so unlike the Father?
3. Why always with the creeds when we worship?
 Why not “Lord, we believe, help our unbelief”?
4. Why do we not sing “Nobody knows God’s name”?

Why am I taking you there?

Planet earth will not be well served by Christianity in the cliff-hanging third millennium of the Christian calendar if Christians continue to live mostly by what John 3:16 says about God and Son at the expense of what Luke 4:18 tells us.

In 3:16 John quotes himself. He would have us believe God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to save only those who believed in Jesus.

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In 4:18 Luke quotes Jesus who would have us believe that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to serve those for whom life is a bitch and then it ends.

You should know that bible quotes are part of a sacred story not of a precise history. Thus the difference in what Jesus supposedly said about his mission and what John supposedly said about Jesus' mission.

The world in the third millennium needs more Luke 4:18 Christians than it does John 3:16 Christians. It needs Christians who believe Jesus was sent to do something wonderful for planet earth not to save only those who believe in him and let the others and the planet go to hell. It needs Christians who believe it is by living the Luke text that a follower of Jesus takes up the cross of Jesus. It needs more Jesus believers who take seriously the last parable of Jesus: depart from me you accursed sinner for when I was hungry you did not see the hungry one as me.

Jesus' parable on judgment is not a proof of the existence of hell but proof that Jesus was madder than hell when about to be

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crucified. He had been knocking himself out for the least and they were still not being treated as if they were Jesus. Worse yet, his mission to them was about to be stopped. The feet that took him to the least and the hands that fed and healed them were soon to be nailed to two planks of wood. That's when he lost his temper and told the parable about hell. Christianity needs believers who believe Jesus is still madder than hell that the least on planet earth are not treated as if they were Jesus.

The community of Jesus has always and everywhere lacked the ardor and tenacity of the ministry of Jesus to the wretched and huddling masses. Belief in treating them as if they were Jesus is not a belief included in any of the Christian creeds. A Christian must believe in God as almighty, in Jesus as divine, in the resurrection of the dead but not in treating the least as if they were Jesus.

The words of Jesus have been about as effective as those of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

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If things have not been going well for humanity on planet earth you can figure it out for yourselves.

How will I take you to where I want to take you?

I write as a friend talking to friends. But I do not rely on the day to day language I use with friends. Writing a book is like writing in another language. One must use words and put sentences together in a way that will hold the attention of countless readers. My words and sentences add up to a light hearted, heavy-handed, and devoutly devastating swipe at long held traditions about God and Son. That should hold your attention.

I rely heavily on stories about my personal experiences with God and Son. There is nothing more powerful than a story to make a point. That is why the bible is so popular.

It is a book of stories based on the religious experiences of two communities who have earned the respect and reverence of countless millions down through the centuries.

What kind of rude questions am I asking?

1. When reciting the creed at Sunday worship should I profess my faith in God only as “the Father” and only as “the Almighty”?

Look where this restriction has taken us. We have come to imagine God mostly as an all-powerful white man with a beard who knows when we’ve been good or bad and who has prepared a cruel and unforgiving punishment for those who are bad. That’s as almighty as almighty can get!

There is something unseemly about God as proclaiming “power is my name, power is my game.” That belief reminds me of a cartoon in *The New Yorker*. It shows an elderly white man with a beard about to hurl a bolt of lightning from heaven. Three females, “the Zeusettes”, are singing: “He’s got a fist full of lightnin’ and he’s gonna cut loose! He’s the man with a plan! He’s the cat they call Zeus.”

As a nation under the image of God as the Almighty we anointed ‘the bomb’ as our almighty prince of peace: “We got a fist full of lightnin’ and we are ready to cut loose”. But now the

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Prince has lost its power to protect us. Now we are more vulnerable than ever.

Other nations under God as the Almighty are waging war more and more in the name of God and less and less in the name of national sovereignty. It had wrongly been assumed that the modern world had put an end to that nonsense.

2. Must I imagine God as almost always angry about something or other? Should I relate to God as being “touchy” about what my Church insists are wrong beliefs and bad behavior? Don’t these hurt us more than they hurt God? Shouldn’t God feel anguish and concern about our “sins” rather than anger? Why should masturbation, missing mass, or membership in the wrong community of faith send anyone to hell? Have we fashioned an image of a God who has such poor self esteem, such a fragile ego that “He” so easily feels “offended” by what we do or fail to do? Being that touchy would make life as miserable for God as it is for us.

Being quick to anger and harsh in punishment sounds like bad parenting to me. That image of God calls to mind the sign I saw

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posted in a diner in Maine: “The beatings will continue until morale improves.”

3. Is it wrong to imagine God as “Love Unstoppable”? Any public attempt to do that has always been condemned as a heresy. And yet, even given free will, is it not a pious probing to imagine divine love as a weapon of mass seduction? Is it not true piety to imagine that the power of divine love is the mystery? Is it not an act of faith and hope to imagine that God has a way of taking care of justice without resorting to eternal unforgiveness and everlasting pain? Just because there was a Hitler does not mean there has to be a hell.

4. Does justice without hell sound too wishy-washy? Would you say then that the only thing that keeps belief in heaven from being wishy-washy is the belief that you get there and I don’t, or vice-versa? Should we thank God for our belief in hell since it helps us believe in heaven without being seen as being wishy-washy? Now there’s a worrisome thought.

Here’s a scary thought. If hell was first populated by angels who were kicked out of heaven what security do we have in heaven?

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This is even scarier. If God is an all-loving Father and if hell is as advertised then God as the architect and CEO of hell must be the most miserable S.O.B. who ever lived. Why would the CEO of hell insist that we call him “Father”?

5. Does God as advertised, have a list of hell-worthy sins? Why do not all faiths follow the same list? Suppose two women, one catholic and the other protestant, both practicing birth control, are both killed instantly in a car accident. Does the catholic go to hell while the protestant goes to heaven? Or do they both go to hell but only the protestant is surprised?

6. Why does Christian preaching and teaching on hell not feature Jesus’ last parable, told shortly before his death? It was Jesus’ final version of what to expect at judgment time. Jesus was a man about to die, and not merely posing as a man about to die. His parable was for himself as well as his listeners: “I am ready to face my father in heaven. I treated the least as if they were me.”

How can his last parable count for so little?

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In asking these very rude questions I am reminded of the cartoon showing a preacher in the pulpit announcing to the congregation: “No sermon for you today. You are all going to hell anyway.”

My questions are not expressions of disdain for mother Church. I would be a liar if I said I am not proud of her vigorous intellectual life and am not moved by her ancient rituals- especially her liturgical chants (words by King David and music by Pope Gregory). And I would be an ungrateful wretch if I did not confess that without mother Church I would not have had my long and rewarding life with God. She made it possible for me to become a devout believer in a divine presence and a divine good will at work in my life. Indeed, it may be that I can write this book only because my church raised me in a way that makes writing this book possible. As a wise philosopher once noted: “One repays a teacher badly if one always remains a pupil.”

I am not a religious idealist. I know the sins of my church as well as her enemies. But I do not sing their song: “’Tis a pity she’s a whore.” I can live with the sins of my mother, even

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those of the fetid fourteenth century when she was more an agent of corruption than of sanctification. I have even learned to live with her centuries of harping that she was the only true Church.

I can live with the weaknesses of my mother the church, except the one lamented in this book: 'Tis a pity her doctrines and rituals give so much to God as all mighty and so little to God as all mystery, and so much to Jesus as "the Christ" and so little to Jesus as "the Nazarene".

I am not a rationalist bigot. In questioning the reverence given to God as an almighty presence I do not suggest that God never cures a cancer. I do say cures will almost never, if ever, be done by God as an almighty show-off. There are no Divine "Ta-dahs!" No restoring legs blasted to bits by roadside bombs. That is not going to happen. I am at peace with my belief that it is not an almighty presence but a hidden godly presence we should revere, love and cherish, day in and day out. I believe it is the holy will of God not to be present to us as "the almighty".

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I am not a flaming liberal. I know that our stories and beliefs about the risen and glorified Christ have given and are giving peace and joy to countless millions. I was one of them for most of my life. I too lived my life of faith revering the Christ for what he can do for me. For me, the good that Jesus did in his road ministry had been interred with his bones.

I am not an ex-Catholic or former Catholic. I am a retired Roman Catholic. The meager pension that keeps my faith alive is provided by the Nazarene's road ministry to the kingdom on earth.

I am a man of faith who in good faith reveres his questions and doubts. They reflect my determination to make my faith as honest, straightforward, and personal as possible.

Believe me; I can understand if you do not want to go where my "Rude Awakenings" take you. I was in my fifties before I dared to go there and decided to stay there. Only in my seventies was I ready to publish the story of my religious experience of God and Son.

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I almost did not publish this book because of the fear of going to hell if I shared my questions and doubts with others. I decided not to give into that fear. That decision may seem foolish. It is foolish. Where eternal damnation is at stake it seems best to play it safe, as is the custom among pious and not so pious believers.

But I have no choice. Like any serious believer I am moved not just to keep the faith but share it – even more so having been a priest and professor. It will not be too long before I meet God. If God is all-knowing, as advertised, “He” already knows what is in my heart, what I have put in writing, what I am determined to publish. When we meet, face to face so to speak, I have no choice but to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Faking it before God will do me no good whatsoever.

There is no use moaning and groaning or quaking and shaking about the rude questions I am asking. In fact, I take great comfort in the two gospel accounts which have Jesus dying with a very rude question on his lips: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Yes, rude questions can be prayers). I am

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no Jesus but as a follower I cannot be faulted for taking heart in these two gospel accounts of the very last words of Jesus.

Permission to publish:

I would not give myself permission to publish this book about God if I believed God had written a book about God. Or if I believed God had an obviously godly hand in the biblical books about God – as in the kind of hand that could make two instant adults. I believe God was behind the making of the bible as much as he was behind the making of the universe – way behind.

Nor would I write this book about God if I felt obligated to refer to God, a pure spirit, always and only as a male. I usually refer to God as “He” only because it is customary. Even today, in our progressive culture, it is still not O.K. to refer to God as “She.” I personally believe that in referring to the incomprehensible divine presence in our life “mother” is as good as “father”, “breast” is as good as “rock”, “tears” are as good as “fire”, “womb” is as good as “fortress”- and yes, “pubic triangle” is as good as the “traditional triangle” that for far too long has highlighted God as a masculine presence among us.

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We should not reinforce the decisions of the men who run our church even though we obey them for the common good.

Some practical matters:

1. PRAYER:

While at prayer, should we not try harder to love our enemies? Should we ever ask for God's help in killing them when things have gotten out of hand and the killing machine has been unleashed?

While at prayer, should we not try harder to be practical? Does it not make sense to pray for leaders here and abroad who do not talk and act like a Louis L'Amour cowboy, leaders who are quick to boast: "I'll handle the shovel that puts dirt on your grave and the gun that puts you there"? Now more than ever do we not need leaders who are not trigger-happy?

Google "The War Prayer" by Mark Twain. That should help you in your prayers.

2. WAR:

In the Big Picture, Warriors go into battle willing to die for the defense of the nation that sent them there.

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In the Little Picture, those in the field of fire do not always have such noble sentiments. They die in self-defense and in defense of their comrades – especially in a war that is suspect and controversial.

In my lifetime our country fought in two wars that were vastly unpopular with many if not most of its citizens. Both were fought because of over zealous and misguided reactions by our leaders due mostly to wrongly placed threats to national security. And that is putting it kindly. What kind of a democracy is this if that dire situation continues?

Our country no longer professes to believe that slavery, segregation, and sexism are OK with God and Son. When will it bite the bullet on militarism? It is time to take a closer look at war, at the way we assume war is inevitable, at the way we fight our wars, at the reasons we go to war. Have we been O.K. with God on all counts? It is time to begin to imagine a world without war. It is time to confess that even mother earth suffers our violence. Is it not true that in this we are without shame?

3. JESUS:

Why has Jesus' birthday hymn "Peace on earth" not put an end to war? What could the angels at Bethlehem have been

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thinking? Silly song! What do angels know about life on planet earth?

Why has Jesus' kingdom prayer for "daily bread" not put an end to hunger? What could Jesus have been thinking in praying for food for all, food worthy of Our Father's table? Silly man! Or was he? Did he believe something we have not yet learned to believe?

4. OUR TROOPS:

Does "Support our troops" only and always mean "Support our war"? Is such a claim a graceless deception? Most likely many of our troops would prefer we get them out of this war. No doubt, the Support Slogan, though it may serve to kill more troops, gives comfort to those who want to be assured that a loved one's body or some of its parts were not given "in vain". This kind of pain killer reminds me of the oft-used pain killer given to parents when a child dies "in vain" – as in a five year old girl run over by a cement truck while riding her new birthday bicycle: "It is the will of God."

Not that there is anything wrong with these pain killers. Any piety that can help anyone get through the dark night of despair is O.K. by me – even if it prolongs a war or puts God's good

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name in a bad light. But to take one pain killer as patriotism and the other as theology is an abomination before God and country. I would suggest that the “Patriots” who chant “Support our Troops” read Walt Whitman on the Civil War:

“I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them....
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not,
... the armies that remain’d suffer’d.”

4. OUR WORSHIP:

While at worship, whether we worship on Friday, Saturday or Sunday, should we not try to be humble? When the going gets tough have not each of the three great Revelation Religions given good reason for doubting their boasts about being highly favored by God? Israel and Islam have made the land of milk and honey a land of blood and gore. Christianity has long been divided against itself and has helped shape a nation that is much better at bombing nations than baptizing them. What’s that all about?

5. THE ALMIGHTY:

Should we revere God as “The Almighty” if God is clearly determined to let the chips fall where they may? No Rabbi was sent by God to threaten Hitler as in the story of Moses threatening Pharaoh: “Let my people go – or else.” Our post 9/11 nation, still struggling with racism and sexism, will not be blessed with an African-American devout Muslim immigrant woman sent by God to be our unifying president. Such mighty signs would make the case that God wants to be revered as “The Almighty”. That case has yet to be made, except, of course, in our sacred stories.

6. GOOD FRIDAY:

Why is the Friday on which Jesus was crucified called “Good”? Is it because we favor the story that tells us that while Friday was bad for Jesus it was good for us, that the whips and nails which opened his body at that very moment opened the gates of heaven, saved sinners?

Another story suggests Jesus died fighting for the little guys against the big guys – suggesting that Friday should be called BAD Friday because the big guys won that battle and because that Friday was bad both for Jesus and for us.

7. GRANDCHILDREN:

While talking to your grandchildren about religion, try to be cautious, especially after reading this book. While writing it I was very cautious when my eight year old granddaughter called me on the phone.

Grandpa Jim, how did religion get started?

She still believed in Adam, Eve, and Santa. I could not tell her all three were fictional. So I shared with her a word-picture that went something like this:

Imagine yourself in a world with very few people, and everyone lives out in the open, almost like animals. It is a lonely world. You hardly know how to talk and there are very few people to talk to and they are scattered all over the place. It is a hard world to live in. You know very little about getting food or making clothes or building shelter. It is a scary world to live in. You are afraid of the dark, the cold, floods, fire, lightning, earthquakes, wild animals and dreams. It is an awesome world to look at – with its sun, moon, stars, mountains and oceans. It is a mysterious world to live in – for it gives freely and takes away just as freely. Who or what is behind this giving and this

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taking? How powerful they or it must be. How can we get their help and appease their anger? Eventually “help from above” was called God and belief in that help was called religion. God loving us and our loving God as well as one another was believed to be the highest form of religion.

Some day my granddaughter will, I trust, learn to see the Adam and Eve story in light of my explanation. Hopefully, it will not be too rude of an awakening for her, that she will learn to read the bible as a book of stories not of facts.

Now, on to the story of my life with God and Son.

This is my story and I’m sticking to it.

A light-hearted, heavy-handed, devoutly devastating swipe at long-held traditions, taking believers where they have feared to tread, but written without disdain for the church who made it possible for me to become a devout believer in a divine presence and divine good-will.

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