

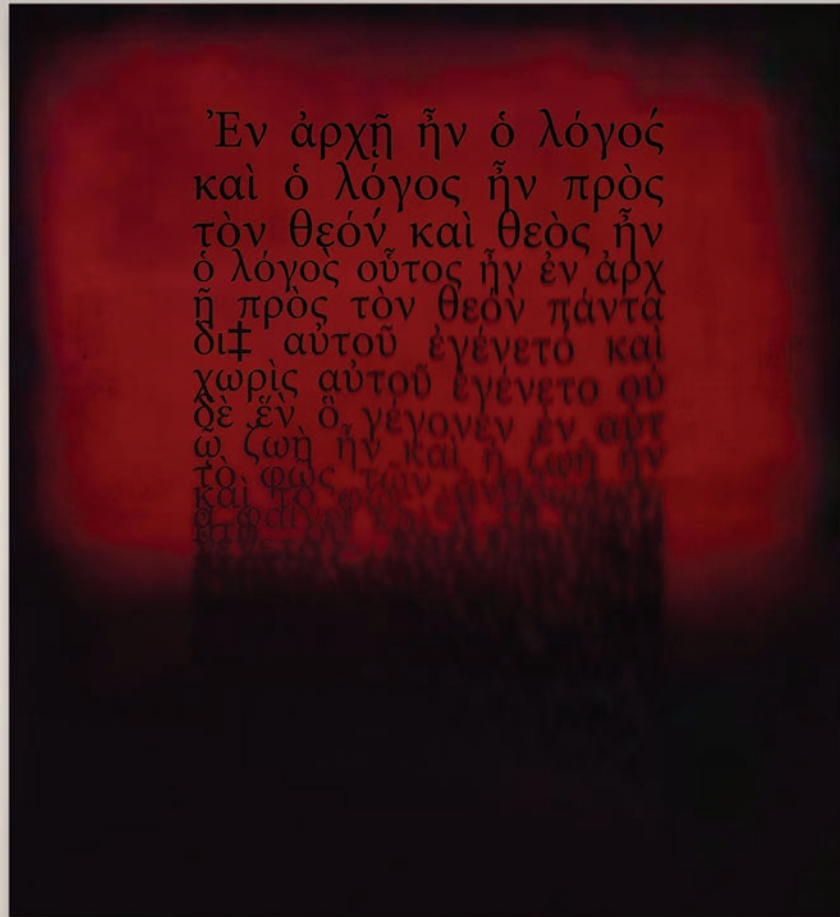


MISSION

ISSUE 4 2012

# CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



## MYSTERY

the art of unknowing

### MUSIC, MODERN ART & MYSTERY

06//Mark Rothko, Makoto Fujimura and James MacMillan: A celebrated abstract expressionist painter and one of Britain's greatest living composers discuss the numinous.

02//THE ART OF UNKNOWING 03//THE LORD'S SUPPER 04//Q&A: FR RICHARD ROHR 10//GRAHAM GREENE AND THE APPALLING STRANGENESS 12//SCRIPTURE'S OPEN DOOR 13//THREE CHRISTIAN MYSTIC PATHS 14// R S THOMAS AND POETIC MYSTERY 15//FURTHER READING/LISTENING

# MYSTERY: THE ART OF UNKNOWING



## IF WE EMBRACE TRUTH WITHOUT ACCEPTING MYSTERY, WE RISK MISSING OUT ON ALL GOD HAS TO OFFER

When we consider our Christian faith there are two realities we can encounter.

Let's call the first reality – *truth*. It might be truth about the person and work of Christ, or an explanation of why we can speak of the eternal security of the believer. We will speak passionately of that which we believe to be true. But we will be humble in accepting that our grasp of truth is often tentative because it relates to the God who is infinitely greater and infinitely 'other' than we are. But it is nonetheless possible to speak confidently of truth because God has revealed this truth to us.

Let's call the second reality – *mystery*. By mystery I mean the experience of reaching the point of unknowing where such unknowing is not our inability to grasp the truth but our acceptance that some truths are ultimately unknowable. We speak of God being ontologically

different, as different as the 'creator of all' is from 'all of creation'. This divine ontology is the root of all mystery.

Reaching the point of mystery is to encounter a choice. We can embrace mystery and abandon ourselves into the presence of the God who is utterly trustworthy.

Alternatively we can turn back to a place of supposed safety and deny the potential of the moment.

To embrace mystery is to become a child once more, as when a child leaps into its parent's arms from the side of a pool. To leap is to grow in trust, in understanding, in love and in knowing. To stand on the supposed safety of the side is to allow fear and mistrust to take root, to stunt our growth and limit our horizons.

Mystery therefore is not a failure to find the truth, it is to encounter a different order of truth, a more complex, but ultimately richer truth.

So here's the deal. As we seek to share our faith there are great truths to be offered. But there is also great mystery to be accepted. And with eyes and ears attuned to mystery, we will begin to find it in abundance.

We will find that mystery ultimately

in Jesus, the exact representation of God's being. Jesus, seen and unseen, known and unknowable at one and the same moment. We see it when he turns water into wine, or when a woman touches the hem of his garment and power flows and heals her. We see it in a

“MYSTERY IS TO ENCOUNTER A DIFFERENT ORDER OF TRUTH”

draughty stable, on a rugged cross and at an empty tomb.

But we will find it too in men, women and children, made in the image of God. We see it when their lives take our breath away. We will find it in creation. We can encounter it in poetry and music, art and dance, architecture and design, for these are the faint echoes of the God who created all that has been created, and fashioned humankind as those capable of our own acts of creation.

Mystery is not to be feared. It should be sought out, welcomed and embraced.

David

**David Kerrigan**  
General Director



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# THE LORD'S SUPPER A FAITHFUL MYSTERY

## THE SYMBOLISM OF COMMUNION IS NOT MAGIC, BUT IT DOES HAVE THE POWER TO REVEAL HIDDEN SPIRITUAL REALITIES.

There are, I would suggest, two clear reasons why as Baptists we need to consider afresh our attitude towards mystery: the first reason concerns our impoverished approach to celebrating the Lord's Supper. Mystery in the Church, since its earliest times has been linked to the practices of baptism and communion. In our reforming zeal to counter malpractice we have unwittingly condemned or downplayed the mystery of salvation at the heart of worship when we share bread and wine. The second reason flows from the first, for by re-engaging with the mystery of the faith enacted in the sharing of bread and wine, we open up new possibilities for mission in contemporary culture.

“THE LORD'S SUPPER HAS BEEN DIMINISHED BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN CONCERNED TO PLAY DOWN MYSTERY”

Sam Richards suggests that in this current age we have in bread and wine a pre-modern form of communication that connects perfectly with the visual, narrative-based postmodern mindset. In other words, symbols speak on many different levels. Symbols are word pictures. They point beyond themselves to another deeper reality. Consider for example the way a national flag points

beyond itself to the story that has shaped a nation. On one level it is nothing more than a colourful and decorative piece of cloth, but on another level through its association with the history, identity and destiny of a people, it has the power to evoke pride and loyalty and to draw people together. By analogy, bread and wine is more than food and drink for daily nourishment. In the context of a shared meal, recalling the Passover meal before the exodus and the last supper between Christ and his disciples, bread and wine evoke the memory of God's liberating acts to save and restore his people.

Symbolism is not magic or make-believe. Neither is it naïve or primitive communication. The symbolic power of the visible material world to reveal spiritual realities hidden to the naked eye is not fully explainable, it is a mystery. In baptism and the Lord's Supper – traditionally called the sacraments – the ordinary material things of life take on extraordinary depth because of their association with Christ's coming, dying and rising. Hence in the breaking of bread, says Luke, “their eyes were opened”. Bread and wine shared in the company of the risen Lord became for the disciples a unique meeting point with God.

The potential of this resurrection meal in the life of the church is enormous, both for nourishing disciples and also for inviting those who

may be far from the faith to taste and see how good and gracious is God.

I am persuaded that the potential to meet God through the Lord's Supper has been diminished in our tradition because we have been more concerned to play down mystery than to embrace it. Just as the psalmist wanted to flee from God's presence, so sometimes we do the same when we run from the symbolic power of this meal rather than explore its rich potential. Our senses have been dulled to the power of the Lord's Supper by reducing it to a very sombre funereal event on occasional Sundays. It needs to be shared more and widely: in members' homes, or in social gatherings, parties and picnics, as well as in formal worship settings. Imagination and creativity can help ordinary meals to become extraordinary sacraments of grace.

If we can re-engage with the mystery of the Lord's Supper as a sacramental meal, and do so in a way that celebrates the lavish hospitality of a missionary God, then like the disciples on the Emmaus road, we might begin to experience – as if for the first time – the mysterious power of the gospel to re-enchant the world.



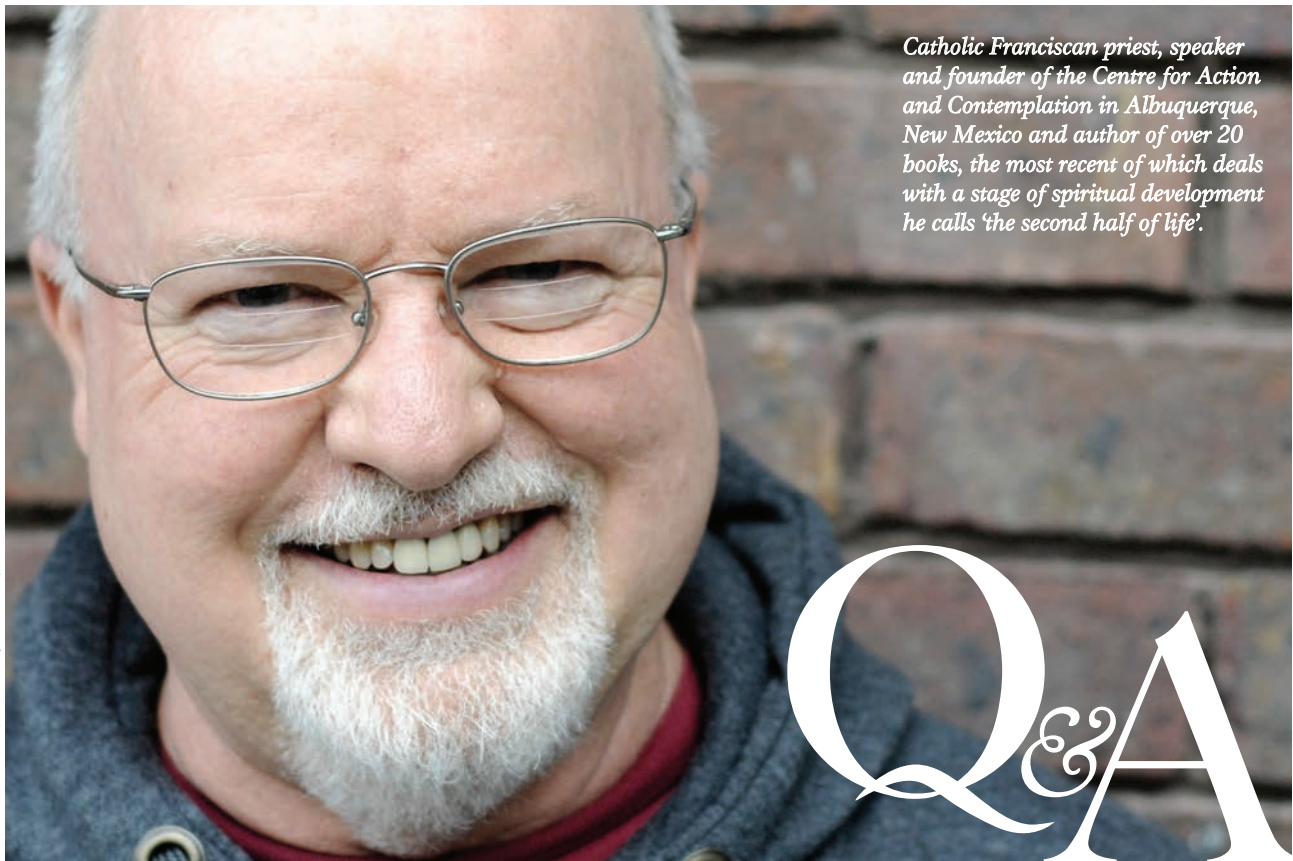
Photo © Cadregrey

This article has been abridged. The full version is available at [bmsworldmission.org/catalyst](http://bmsworldmission.org/catalyst)



*Catholic Franciscan priest, speaker and founder of the Centre for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico and author of over 20 books, the most recent of which deals with a stage of spiritual development he calls 'the second half of life'.*

Photo © Alex Baker (www.studiojstizen.com)



# Q&A

# FR. RICHARD ROHR

**CATHOLICISM'S FAILINGS, PROTESTANTISM'S 'NEUROTIC NEED FOR CERTITUDE' AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DARKNESS: ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL CHRISTIANS DISCUSSES MYSTERY.**

**Today, Catholics seem to be much better at handling mystery than Protestants. Would you say that's true?**

Well, yes, because we're still drawing upon the first 1500 years [of Christianity]. And I know there is plenty of darkness in that period, too. But there were two parallel streams in spirituality: the *cataphatic* tradition and the *apophatic*. *Cataphatic* meant knowing God through words, symbols, images. But it always had to be balanced by the *apophatic*, which was knowing God through absence, silence, darkness and mystery. Whatever the weaknesses of Catholicism were, and

there were plenty, it still drew upon this appreciation for mystery. Which it was able to exemplify through the sacraments, through a well-celebrated eucharist.

The dark side of Catholicism is that very often the word 'mystery' is a cover up for mystification. And I think that's what Protestantism rightly reacted against: that we used the word 'mystery' to justify almost everything and said, 'oh it's a mystery, don't think about it.' Protestantism brought in a necessary critical mind. But, yes, largely because of the sacraments and the images and the emphasis upon quality music not

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just loud music, the Catholic mind still has opened people up much more to the contemplative mind, which does open you up to mystery.

**Why are some protestant traditions so uncomfortable with the idea of mystery?**

The first obvious answer is that, historically, Protestantism emerged around the same time as the invention of the printing press and also, in the next centuries, the Enlightenment. What has marked Protestantism from the beginning is a beautiful but almost neurotic need for certitude, ending up in redefining biblical faith with little knowledge of the older tradition of darkness, of not knowing, of *unknowing* and silence. Everything was a theology of light, clarity, order, certitude. So much so that Protestantism came to think it had a right to certitude. Which, when you think of it, is almost the exact opposite of biblical faith.

Faith got defined in a very western, left-brain, verbal way that had almost no space for mystery.

**Is the value of darkness and 'unknowing' the attaining of more certainty as we come out of it, or is it more about being transformed in and through these experiences?**

True spiritual knowing has to be balanced by the non-need to know. Our word for that in most of the mystics would be darkness. You're held so tightly by your deeper experience of God that there's a non-need to have answers for everything. And that's why most of our mystics – your own Julian of Norwich, who is one of my favourites – they use this language of darkness so consistently. John of the Cross would be the supreme example. But they still understood that spiritual knowing is a convergence of knowing with not needing to know. That the two work together. And non-need to know among most Protestants and low level Catholics is interpreted as scepticism or unbelief or fuzzy thinking. And that shows that we've been much more influenced by the Enlightenment than we have by the gospel.

**Other ways in which people seem to access mystery seem to be solitude, silence and suffering. Is a loss of personal control always essential to encountering the mystery of God directly?**

I couldn't have said it better. Silence and suffering: those are the only things that, against our will, take away our manipulating of the moment, our managing of the event. They leave us temporarily out of control. Now if God

wants to take control in a good way, which I believe God always does, that's God's opening. That's when grace can get at you in a much more ready way, basically because you're out of the driver's seat. And as long as you're in the driver's seat, God really has very little chance of guiding you.

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“ THINKING YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO CERTITUDE IS ALMOST THE OPPOSITE OF BIBLICAL FAITH ”

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We don't realise that a lot of our glib religious clichés and even our misuse of Scripture quotes has been just another way to remain in the driver's seat.

**Many Christians' desire for control may come from a positive motive of wanting to get things right for God. What would you say to them?**

I'm not trying to push my book [*Falling upward*], but in terms of that vocabulary, that's much more a first half of life need and a legitimate first half of life need. I certainly had it as a young man. It seems that you need a certain ego structure – what I call in *Falling Upward* a certain 'containment' – and once you have your containment long enough that you can go deep in that contained place, then you don't need the container anymore. That's the second half of life.

My conviction is that all of our denominations only get a minority of

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“ JESUS IS ONLY UPSET AT PEOPLE WHO DON'T THINK THEY ARE SINNERS ”

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their people to the second half of life. But I meet people from every denomination who are there. I have met second half of life Baptists who put Catholics to shame. But they have always been people who have suffered, who've been humbled by life somehow, so they're not all in their heads anymore.

But I think you're affirming an important thing. That a young 22-year-old boy newly arrived in college, he needs some certitudes. He needs some clarity. You just can't dive into non-dual consciousness. It feels to them like fuzzy thinking. It feels like relativism. It feels like a loss of all boundaries. And for them

it is. Because they haven't found their boundaries yet. But I'm 69. I did all that, and it served me well. What my soul needs at my age isn't more certitudes.

**Catholic novelists like Graham Greene and Shusaku Endo seem to express this better than writers we'd think of as Evangelical. Is that because they leave space in their narratives for mystery or because their works seem more comfortable with darkness, failure and weakness as things that can be used by God?**

Well, in many ways the two go together. That very patience with darkness also makes you very patient with morality. You realise by the second half of life that what looked like the moral person again and again in time showed itself to be well-disguised selfishness. And what looked like the immoral person – the prostitutes and the drunkards and tax collectors that Jesus talks about – again and again show themselves to often have levels of compassion, communion, humility, honesty.... So you're much more patient with it and less sure of yourself about who's right and who's wrong. That does rearrange your understanding of what gets you to God. You realise that it isn't obeying commandments. Which is what we all start out thinking. I did too. And yet, when you go back to Jesus, it's pretty clear. And you wonder why you never saw it. Jesus really is not upset at sinners. He really isn't. He's only upset at people who don't think they are sinners. Once you hear that, you go back and think: my gosh, that's obvious. And that's a very different stance. But it takes all of us years to get there. You're not there naturally.

In fact, the older I get, the more counter-intuitive I realise the gospel is.

**If we're addicted to certitude, even death isn't mysterious. Does death hold any fear for you?**

I've been lucky to have to face it twice. As recently as this April I got another cancer diagnosis (I got another diagnosis in '91), but then seem to have passed through it. And both times I was told I had cancer, perhaps a fatal cancer, I was just more sad than fearful. But I'm sure I'm lying if I say there's no fear, because we're all afraid of what we don't know. And you know I haven't died yet, so...





**MAKOTO FUJIMURA**  
**John - In the Beginning**

*“The first chapter of the Gospel of John speaks not only about the origin of all creation in Jesus, but also about the mystery behind creation. Art needs to inhabit such mysteries - to open us up to the generative reality of the deeper questions that lie behind our questions.”*

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# MUSIC MODERN AND MYSTERY

MARK ROTHKO, MAKOTO FUJIMURA  
AND JAMES MACMILLAN

*CAN ART HAVE SPIRITUAL VALUE IF IT  
CHOOSES MYSTERY OVER CONVEYING AN  
OBVIOUS MESSAGE? A CELEBRATED ABSTRACT  
EXPRESSIONIST PAINTER AND ONE OF BRITAIN'S  
GREATEST LIVING COMPOSERS, BOTH OF THEM  
CHRISTIANS, THINK IT CAN.*

The first time I stood in front of a Mark Rothko painting, I found myself close to tears. It was profoundly irritating.

I had always agreed with the cartoonist and wit, Al Capp, who called abstract art “a product of the untalented, sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered”. Being moved emotionally by what appeared to be two squares of black, seemingly haphazardly painted on a background of red, apparently representing nothing, made a nonsense of my rigid opinions on the relationship between art and meaning.

Mark Rothko himself said that there was no such thing as ‘good painting about nothing’ and famously denied being an abstract painter: “I’m not interested in the

relationship of colour or form or anything else,” he said. “I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom...”

“TRAGEDY, ECSTASY, DOOM...”

relationship of colour or form or anything else,” he said. “I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom...” And most art-lovers who aren’t trapped in the ‘my four-year-old could paint that’ mindset, whatever they think of abstract painting generally,

recognise the power of Rothko’s work. Rothko is important when discussing spiritual mystery, not because he ever publicly confessed a faith in Jesus (Rothko was Jewish, but employed much Christian imagery in earlier works) but because his later ‘colour field’ paintings hold a clue as to how mystery works in art.

## Communicating Christ without words?

Swathes of colour and subtle texture in rough geometric form can’t say anything about Christ, God, salvation or truth, though, can they? Rothko maintained that many people viewing his paintings felt the same ‘religious experience’ he had while painting them, and many commentators have likened the manner in which

abstract art forms communicate to the way music stirs emotions.

According to a celebrated Christian artist and one of Britain’s greatest living composers of sacred music, words, representations of reality, direct analogies and verbal messages represent just one stream of valuable expression in art. Christians who write off the more abstract

forms of painting as ‘meaningless’ or ignore modern classical music as ‘atonal noise’ risk missing out on experiences that point to the numinous and grasp for the transcendent. They risk missing out on being brought face to face with mystery.

Makoto Fujimura is an internationally renowned artist and a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church in America, whose work fits somewhere between the traditional Japanese pigment on paper discipline of Nihonga and Western abstract expressionism. For the 400-year anniversary of the King James Bible in 2011, Fujimura was commissioned to combine the two elements to illuminate and illustrate The Four Holy Gospels, an exquisite fusion of art and Scripture.

## Representation v abstraction

“I get categorised as an abstract artist,” he says, “but in The Four Holy Gospels, I have representational images. I don’t consider myself a pure abstract artist.”

Fujimura’s work is about as far as you can get from the bumper-stickers and t-shirts to which author Franky Schaeffer once wrote Christian art in the West had descended. While expressing Christian meaning, his paintings resist simplistic attempts to extract a message. For Fujimura, abstraction communicates what purely representational art cannot. Those who criticise abstract art as being devoid of meaning, he suggests, fail to understand abstraction. “We live in abstraction all the time,” he says. “Whether you even know what that word is or not. Music is abstract: there’s no representation in jazz. If you enjoy watching fireworks, that’s pure abstraction. A sunset is pure abstraction.”

Intriguingly, Fujimura argues that some



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of the greatest representational painters, from Andrew Wyeth to some of the photo-realists, are really abstract painters. "I always shock people when I say this, but look at Andrew Wyeth's work," he says. "That is not representation. He is getting at the mystery of something, an 'in-between things' that he is able to capture through representational means."

From the feeling of talking to our children to memories of past romance, Fujimura says that the things we treasure most are often deeply abstract: "These things cannot be literal, you can talk about them all day but the experience is tangibly a different quality and different order." In our desire to explain and rationally define as much as possible, Fujimura feels we lose some of what he calls the 'experiential core' of life. "All of us know, what this mystery is, this quality of existence that we can't define, that we don't have words for."

Of course, a tradition has existed for centuries that has communicated great truths, both sacred and secular, without resorting to words or easily decoded symbolism: classical music.

James MacMillan CBE is widely regarded as Scotland's greatest living composer and one of the world's

shortage of worship leaders, sportspeople and preachers being profiled on Christian radio, TV and websites, does the relative ignorance in these celebrated Christians in Evangelical circles say something about our attitude to art forms that eschew words and direct representations? Why is our branch of the Church afraid of mystery?

### **Why we fear mystery**

Makoto Fujimura feels that some Christians prefer to avoid the uncertainty inherent in less verbal, more intuitive art. "We are uncomfortable when we don't have a grasp on God, when we can't 'control' God," he says. "Maybe, in our deepest sinfulness, we desperately want Christian faith experience to be manageable." Fujimura identifies what he calls a 'utilitarian pragmatism' that characterises much of the Evangelical world's attitude to art: an emphasis on art serving a particular message. And most of us would recognise the value of art that spreads our message overtly and efficiently. But, when it excludes all else, such an attitude has more in common with a Marxist aesthetic philosophy or, indeed, the world of advertising, than with the impulse behind great Christian art of

Arvo Pärt as its own), do not have a monopoly on music that brings us to the point of mystery. "There are aspects of the Reformed tradition, too, that are very rich in music," he says, pointing to Handel and Bach, "but maybe there's something in those other traditions that Evangelicals can look to and be renewed by." The need for renewal is not limited to music.

"We have held on to the truth of the gospel in our churches," says Fujimura, "but we lost the mystery and beauty." In a recent address to students at Biola University in the US, Fujimura illustrates this with an analysis of a painting that is far from abstract. "Van Gogh was intuiting, through the *Starry Night* painting, something wrong with the church," he says. "The church is the only bit in the painting that's been darkened. The other houses are lit and the church is dark." Fujimura points to the fact that the church is Dutch Reformed in style, out of place in the landscape of southern France, but part of Van Gogh's own religious background. "Van Gogh still considered [the Church] central to his identity in his life and yet it's dark and, of course, the light has gone out into the world, into the swirling cosmos of the starry night. I think that says it, right there."

For Fujimura, the flight of beauty and mystery from many of our churches may be partly connected to our mistrust of the non-verbal and the abstract, but it has far more to do with whether we give the Holy Spirit freedom to influence religious creative expression. That freedom can be constricted in churches with too much emphasis on the rational, he says, but can equally be stifled in more charismatic churches if they have an anti-rationalist culture. Neither intuitive nor rationalist sensibilities are a guarantee of mystery. The real issue is an homogenising culture when it comes to a community's relationship to art. "When the Holy Spirit breaks out it's nothing like that, you can't contain it and you can't control it," he says. "Where the Holy Spirit is operating there's enormous diversity in expression."

And for those who might be a little more cautious about charismatic expressions that diverge from the practices and ideas with which we are familiar, Fujimura points also to Scripture: "Jesus tends to speak in parables and speak in metaphors and abstraction more than contemporary churches would like him to."

If bringing people to a point of mystery is important for Christian life, MacMillan sees his particular art form as having a

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## **“ JESUS SPEAKS IN ABSTRACTION MORE THAN CHURCHES WANT HIM TO ”**

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greatest composers of sacred music. An accomplished conductor and a devout Catholic, he believes music, too, communicates in ways that transcend the verbal and purely representational. "Music communicates in ways beyond words, mostly. Beyond images," he says. "That's what makes it mysterious to the modern man: because we have become a culture mostly dominated by the visual and verbal." That culture has many good things to offer, says MacMillan, but music, specifically classical music, "communicates something profound, something convulsive and life-changing beyond those words and pictures."

The *New York Times* recently called MacMillan "a figure of considerable prominence" and Fujimura was, from 2003 to 2009, a Presidential appointment to the US National Council on the Arts. And how many of us, I wonder, will have read about these two Christians, so respected in secular circles and overt about their faith, in the evangelical Christian press? With no

the past. It's an attitude that seems more prevalent among Protestants.

"Perhaps it's something to do with the fact that the Reformed tradition is a tradition of the word," says MacMillan. "Many would say that's one of the great things about the Reformed tradition and the impact it's had on the Church, but it's nevertheless left certain things behind when it comes to our human needs as worshipping people." Citing the example of a few countries in the 16th and 17th centuries, MacMillan says that one of the problematic dimensions of the Reformed tradition is that it grew out of a sense of iconoclasm. "In many ways that has marked the experience of the Reformed tradition ever since," he says. "The idea that anything beyond the written and revealed word of God is superfluous or maybe even dangerous."

Of course, Catholicism and the Orthodox tradition (which claims the great Estonian sacred music composer



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peculiar spiritual power. "Perhaps it would be useful to see music as a window that opens onto the mind of God, and that music is the act of opening up a vista onto something that sometimes lies hidden." For him, the idea of music as "a bridge through the transcendent rather than an instrumentalist phenomenon at the service of preaching" is helpful. "That resonates more with me rather than a more literal, clunking explanation of revelation and truth."

### Art and music as prayer

Listening to serious music, MacMillan has said in the past, is analogous to prayer itself. "I believe that analogy holds good, because it requires a kind of obedience to listening," he says. "What's required of us when we go to a concert or put on some music that is not simply background music D background to doing something more self-centred," says MacMillan, "is giving up something of ourselves in order to contemplate this other that is bigger than ourselves."

MacMillan does not, however, believe that this applies to all music. "I depart from those in the Church that think that the more liturgy is influenced by popular culture the more relevant and meaningful it could be," he says. "I have a great love of Catholic liturgy and a commitment to try and keep alive that deep sense of devotion, awe and mystery." MacMillan says it is not that he doesn't value the great popular hymns of the Wesleyan era, but sees very few similarities between modern worship music and his own tradition: "The more popular so-called 'praise music' has become in recent years, the more distant I feel it has become from my concept of what that liturgy is."

If listening to music can be analogous to prayer and if abstract art can bring us to the point of confronting the mystery of God, does a something spiritual happen in its creation? Is the word inspiration one we might use?

"It's an inherently spiritual act," says Fujimura, "and I think it is both implicit and explicit. I feel his presence when I create. I always did, even as a child." For Fujimura, the experience is more than 'having a quiet time in the studio', as some people perceive it: "It's almost like my whole being is being bathed with Christ as I work," he says. "I don't understand it. I even try not to understand it." The creative process, for Fujimura, has "a reality to it that reveals my brokenness, what a wretched person I am, and reveals it in all of its intense reality. But I am



#### MAKOTO FUJIMURA, *Mark - Water Flames*

*"Water Flames series depict the way in which flames not only consume, but ultimately sanctify... The work moves our gaze upward, even as we stand in the ever-expanding Ground Zero conditions of the world."*

also able to be God's child, to play in the margins and allow God to use whatever little that I have in my slice of expression to honour him, to dance with him and be invited into that reality."

MacMillan, too, likes to think that God is present in the act of creation. "In my prayers about what I do, I am certainly open to that possibility and hope and pray that inspiration is there and, if it does come from the Holy Spirit, that it will touch me." Interestingly, just as Fujimura is made aware of his brokenness, MacMillan feels that "a kind of self-abasement" is necessary in opening himself up to the will of God in his act of creation, a prayer of "thy will be done" that must precede inspiration.

Whether we find religious experience before abstract expressionist paintings and in listening to wordless sacred music or

whether we prefer the safer certainties of the verbal, rational and representational, Christians must at least agree with Makoto Fujimura that the freedom we enjoy in exploring theology and thought should be extended to the world of art: "Artists out there need permission to openly wrestle with language of faith and with art, bringing in these elements that we actually swim in but we often do not recognise."

If they are given that permission, our Church and culture cannot fail to be enriched.

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*To see more of Makoto Fujimura's work and to hear James MacMillan's compositions, we have suggestions on our Recommended Reading list, page 15.*



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**GRAHAM**  
**GREENE**  
*& THE APPALLING*  
*STRANGENESS OF*  
*THE MERCY OF GOD*

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# THE OFTEN CONTROVERSIAL WORKS OF CATHOLIC NOVELIST GRAHAM GREENE PROVIDE EXCELLENT EXAMPLES OF HOW LITERATURE CAN BRING US FACE TO FACE WITH THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S MERCY.

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'The crankiest Christian that ever  
was seen  
Is surely His Eminence Graham  
Greene.  
His creatures find scandal and  
degradation  
The sole sure means to attain  
salvation.'

The poem accompanying the *Punch* cartoon marking the publication of *Monsignor Quixote* in 1982 consolidates the prevailing view of the kind of theology permeating Greene's writings. Characters struggle with the tension between their faith and their human desires in the psychological landscape that has come to be known as Greeneland – a landscape of shame, of isolation, and of despair. Throughout his writings, Greene returns to the inability of the limited human mind to grapple with

brings with it a sense of hopelessness and alienation. Paradoxically, though, it is this conflict between doubt and faith – between hope and despair – that cements the idea of mercy firmly at the heart of his worldview.

Pinkie Brown, the young protagonist of *Brighton Rock*, arguably provides us with one of the most complex manifestations of Greene's heavily problematised relational theology. Fated by the hellish life into which he was born, this 17-year-old murderer has never known heaven to be a part of his spiritual understanding: "Heaven was a word: hell was something he could trust. A brain was only capable of what it could conceive, and it couldn't conceive what it had never experienced." Pinkie's potential salvation, though, rests with the witness to his crime, whom he marries to ensure her silence. A believer in God's clemency, Rose is torn between her

which characters despair at their own inadequate responses to God and what they perceive to be their unworthiness of salvation. This despair produces an externalising love, and an acceptance of the frailties of others. The protagonist of *The Power and the Glory* realises that it is through sin and imperfection that the mercy of God is made manifest: "God was the parent, but he was also the policeman, the criminal, the priest, the maniac, and the judge." For him, being made in God's image means being accepting of human frailty and human difference, and leaving judgement to God's appallingly strange mercy.

Human love therefore functions as a counterpoint to religious despair. And it is through despair that characters strive to forge meaningful horizontal relationships. In this focus on the horizontal, Greene's theology is aligned with the Catholic Church's post-Vatican II emphasis on the love of others as a way of relating to God. Rather than attempting to portray a vision of hope by reiterating the promise of the eternal happiness to be found in divine love, these novels instead paint a rather bleaker picture by focusing instead on the redemptive power, and yet the transience, of human love.

Reading Greene is not a theologically comfortable experience. The reader will find here neither the avenging God of the Old Testament nor the loving God of the New. In fact, the reader only ever approaches Greene's God through the eyes of his disenchanting, and often disaffected characters. There is no simple moralising or acceptance of doctrine. But what Greene does provide is a testament to the complexity of faith and a tribute to the mystery that he believed to be central to the religious life – a mystery testified to by the human capacity for love.

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## “ GREENE SITUATES THE SINNER AT THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH ”

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the mysteries of faith and, in particular, the apparent distance of God from his fallible creation. Yet his discomfiting writings belie a conviction that God's mercy operates in an apparently disordered and chaotic world.

Greene situates the sinner at the heart of the Christian faith. His protagonists are not idealised, sinless or sanctified. Instead, he depicts individuals confronted with profound moral crises that test the limits of their belief. Characters are often torn between physical desire and the prospect of eternal punishment. And this tension between the animal and moral selves

love for Pinkie and her hatred of his sinful lifestyle. So profound is her empathy for him that she is willing to risk her own damnation by colluding in his cover-up of the crime. Yet while Pinkie dies out of a state of grace, and while Rose has rejected God's favour for which she had previously striven, there is hope of salvation to be found in benevolent, compassionate love. "You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the appalling... strangeness of the mercy of God... If he [Pinkie] loved you, surely... that shows there was some good."

Human love is a redemptive force in Greene's so-called religious novels, in



# MYSTERY, SCRIPTURE & GOD'S FREEDOM

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD IS NOT A GAP IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OR A SHORTCOMING, BUT WHAT SCRIPTURE CALLS AN OPEN DOOR FOR THE WORD

It is a shame that 'mystery' has become a word that does not rest well with some Christian communities. Like all words, it has a history. It was tainted early in the Christian story by association with 'mystery religions', in contrast to which our forebears defined their distinctive experience of God. Today it is easily confused with the merely 'not-yet-solved',

actions are genuine outcomes of freedom, or merely the result of conditioning. It surfaces when I realise that I cannot finally know another's motivation, that I cannot determine how they will act next.

Philosophers have enjoyed a field-day with talk about freedom. If they make it too much like a 'thing', one thing amongst other things, something that

will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ..." (Colossians 4: 3), this is not to suggest that declaring the mystery will finally lay God bare before them, taming and securing God in an intellectual box. This does not mean that the mystery of God is annulled, nor that God has finally been explained. The New Testament never goes back on that great insight in the story of Moses when he received from God the name we typically spell Yahweh (Exodus 3: 14). In Hebrew the name remains a string of consonants, YHWH, that defy pronunciation. The coming of Jesus has not banished the mystery of this God; rather it has laid bare the true scale of the mystery, showing us more clearly how and where to locate it.

We cannot pin Jesus down with concepts, any more than we can pin down his Abba, who remains the YHWH of Moses. The difference for Christians is that we glimpse the magnitude of God's mystery revealed in an unparalleled act of God's freedom, breaking into the world as self-giving love. That "God so loved the world..." (John 3: 16) defies all human explanation. It is as inexplicable as the love we might experience from family and friends. Their love for us is a mystery; God's love for us is a Mystery – and always will be! At most, YHWH will be for us a pre-concept, an horizon to live by – and I as a believer I would not want it any other way. This mystery is the guarantee of that extravagance I know as the love of Christ, working in me the miracle of faith, calling me to adoration and the radical challenge of discipleship.

### “ THE COMING OF JESUS HAS NOT BANISHED THE MYSTERY OF GOD, BUT LAID BARE THE TRUE SCALE OF THE MYSTERY ”

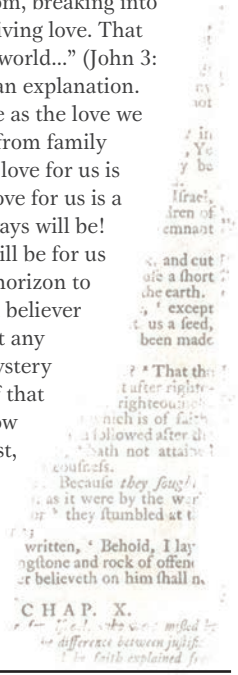
be it a murder mystery or a fertile area for scientific research. The result is that many Christians bypass talk of mystery altogether, rather than work for an appropriate Christian understanding.

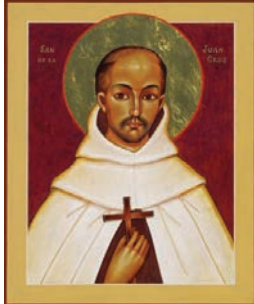
If we miss mystery, properly understood, we miss something essential about God, something crucial for a full understanding of the Christian gospel. Where, then, might our search after mystery begin? My answer is: in our meetings with other human beings. Humanity is the most intense focus of mystery available to us. At the core of every person lies a 'somewhat' – if I call it a 'something' I might miss the mystery – a somewhat, inscrutable both to ourselves and to others. I glimpse it when I wonder if my

could be pinned down with the right experiment, then freedom dissolves and runs through their fingers. It is telling, I think, that even the strongest champions of empiricism, still beaver away at testing their hypotheses as if freely on the trail of discovery.

People of faith are amongst those who courageously hold out for human freedom and, with it, the mystery of God. When we look back at the way that faith first took shape within us, was it not this sense of mystery in human life that held us to task in the search after God, that opened a chink in our unbelief and enabled us to recognise God coming towards us?

This is a common testimony in Christian scripture. If we rush for the idea that 'the mystery of God' is a temporary gap in our knowing, a short-coming in our grasp of God's revelation, we miss the point entirely. When scripture speaks of a hope that "God





Thomas Merton artwork © Jinforest

Katherine Mannion  
Researcher for BMS World Mission.

Julian of Norwich (top left) John of the Cross (bottom left)  
Thomas Merton (right)

# THREE PATHS TO MYSTERY

SUFFERING, SILENCE AND DARKNESS CAN BE GREAT TEACHERS, AS CAN THE EXAMPLE OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICS WHO EPITOMISED THEIR PRACTICE

Mystery asks us to look inward further than is comfortable, and to look outward to a place just beyond the limits of our knowledge of God. As we do this, a door to a new world is opened and, each time we glance through, we mature a little in realising we are beginners.

Many of us are naturally more familiar with growing through learning, knowledge, enlightenment, reasoning, logic and certainty. But there is an opposite, topsy-turvy, 'other' world, where we grow through suffering, silence, darkness, a loss of control and the unknown. Both are

required for a deep and holistic spiritual development.

## 1 Suffering: Julian of Norwich

The 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich developed a counter-cultural theology of God's compassion when she received a series of revelations during a grave illness. "I was astonished that our God who is to be feared and revered would be so intimate with a sinful creature such as I," she wrote – words as strange and disturbing to our worldview as much of Julian's writing.

Whether our suffering occurs by circumstance or request, the situation can be viewed as an opportunity to empathise with Christ's sufferings and commune with God.

***"I wanted to experience every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual, which I would have if I were to die – every fear and temptation. I intended this because I wanted to be purged by God's mercy and afterwards live more to his glory because of that sickness."***

## 2 Silence and solitude: Thomas Merton

We rarely spend a minute in silence in our hectic lives, and even feel uncomfortable without the familiar background noise of the TV or radio. But some have found that silence leads to a symphony of communication, and solitude leads to an unprecedented closeness with the Lord.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) gained precious insights from his time spent in solitude and silence: "As soon as you are really alone you are with God." Merton recognised that this is not easy, and success should not be judged according to feelings.

***"Sometimes prayer, meditation and contemplation are 'death' – a kind of descent into our own nothingness, a recognition of helplessness, frustration, infidelity, confusion, ignorance."***

## 3 Darkness: John of the Cross

As with many persecuted Christians, John of the Cross (1542-1591) found his faith deepened when he was arrested and confined for his part in the Catholic Reform. He coined this process the 'dark night of the soul'. John encourages us all to loosen our grip on theologies, formulas and certainties and embrace this mystery: "a soul will never grow until it is able to let go of the tight grasp it has on God".

***"His love is not content to leave us in our weakness, and for this reason he takes us into a dark night. He weans us from all of the pleasures by giving us dry times and inward darkness. In doing so he is able to take away all these vices and create virtues within us."***

## Journey to the numinous

On these frontiers of experience, we have a choice to stay in the safety of certainty or to relinquish control, to accept that the ways of creator God are greater than created minds will ever be and to humbly set out on our faith journey into a world of mystery.

If we do, we will become accustomed to living the unexplained, to wrestling with unanswered questions and maturing through childlikeness. With eyes open, we will see echoes of God reverberating through nature, in people and art. We will hear the groaning of earth straining for heaven and God reaching into our lives. Let deep call to deep, endure the dark night with hope, and allow ourselves to fall into the riches of the mystery of Christ.



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By Alison Goodlad

Author of several works on theology in literature, including *Leaving the reason torn*, while completing her MA in theology, imagination and culture at Sarum College, Salisbury.

St Pancras Church, Exeter © Rex Harris



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# R S THOMAS & THE EMPTY CHURCH

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## HOW POETRY CAN ILLUMINATE THE SOMETIMES WORDLESS MYSTERY OF GOD

In the ancient church of St Pancras, which is thought to have its origins in the fourth century – now set somewhat incongruously and anachronistically in the middle of a 1970s Exeter shopping precinct – visitors are continuously wandering in and out through its open door. What is it they experience?

I have been looking at the comments left by visitors to this place and ‘peaceful’ is their most commonly used word. The otherness, the apartness from the world

And yet no words had been said to these people for these are ‘empty church goers’. There was something about the atmosphere of this small unpretentious church, made of rough local Heavitree stone, a place where Christians have met for many centuries, which ‘spoke’ to them.

The Welsh 20th century poet/priest R S Thomas was a frequent visitor to empty churches, spending long periods there praying, waiting. It was indeed a phrase in R S Thomas’ poem *The Empty*

ideally suited to this mission.

For R S Thomas, faith was never easy, but he dedicatedly followed his pilgrim walk with God. In one of his best known and loved poems, *Kneeling*, we find R S Thomas possessed by a great calm, waiting in a stone church before the wooden altar, bathed, haloed, in a summer light, thronged by the spirits waiting, like him, for the message. But because there is a mystery in God which no finite being can fully comprehend, the message even though it comes from God, will lose something in its transmission. So, although R S Thomas knows, as we all do, that words must be found in the end to convey the message, the poet wants to remain for a while in that waiting time, meaning soaking into him in the calm which pervades the stone church.

The St Pancras visitors witness to the mystery they experienced when they entered into that set apart, hallowed space. They tell of their experiences, but as R S Thomas would say, something is lost in the telling. Perhaps poetic words are the closest we can get to conveying in words the mystery of the God who loves, but is greater than we can fully understand.

The poems *Kneeling* and *The Empty Church* are easily found online.

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## “ REASON FRAGMENTS WHEN WE APPROACH THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION ”

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outside, is another popular comment, and linked with that are the descriptions of the place as a sanctuary, refuge, haven or retreat. In this sanctuary they particularly appreciate the silence, tranquillity and beauty, which have a calming and relaxing effect on them. According to the visitors’ words, they go out changed, re-oriented, aware of another dimension to life: they feel blessed, loved and profoundly thankful.

Church which gave me the title for my recent book on re-thinking cross and resurrection through R S Thomas. *Leaving the Reason Torn* explores the idea that reason fragments when we approach the central tenet of our faith, the cross and resurrection, so we need to find another way that does justice to its mystery and challenge. Poetry, with its ambiguity, suggestiveness, use of metaphor, appeal to the heart and reverberative rhythms, is

**DEFINING THE  
NUMINOUS AND  
SETTING DOWN  
THE NON-VERBAL  
ON PAPER IS NO  
EASY TASK,**

*but our contributors and researchers have suggested several books, websites and albums in which to immerse yourself in your quest to fathom Christian mystery.*



**BOOKS:**

**Devotional classics**

*Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith (editors)*

An invaluable source of introductions to great Christian thinkers, including the great mystics.

**God and the art of seeing**

*Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes*

A lesson in experiencing faith without words, through the paintings of Munch and Van Gogh.

**Gathering for worship:**

**patterns and prayers for the community of disciples**

*Myra Blyth and Christopher Ellis*

Beautiful and versatile texts for all occasions, based on the recent renewal in Baptist liturgy.

**Leaving the reason torn: re-thinking cross and resurrection through R S Thomas**

*Alison Goodlad*

Theology experienced through the wonderful poetry of one of Britain's greatest poets.

**Dangerous edges of Graham Greene – journeys with saints and sinners**

*Dermot Gilvary (editor)*

Essays on Greene's life, work and faith, featuring Mission Catalyst contributor Frances McCormack.

**Refractions: a journey of faith, art and culture**

*Makoto Fujimura*

With a foreword by Tim Keller, this is a collection of essays on culture, art, and humanity.

**Silence**

*Shusaku Endo*

A novel about the persecution of Christians in feudal Japan, Silence epitomises 'unknowing'. James MacMillan's symphonic interpretation of this meditation on inhumanity and God is very powerful.

**More:**

*Seven storey mountain* – Thomas Merton; *God in all things* – Gerard W Hughes; *The four holy gospels* – illustrated by Makoto Fujimura; *The power and the glory* – Graham Greene; *Teaching a stone to talk* – Annie Dillard; *Brighton rock* – Graham Greene; *Everything belongs* – Richard Rohr; *Thomas Merton: contemplative critic* – Henri Nouwen; *An altar in the world* – Barbara Brown; *New seeds of contemplation* – Thomas Merton; *Silence and the word* – Edited by Oliver Davies; *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* – Annie Dillard; *Chasing Francis* – Ian Morgan Cron; *Sacred journey* – Mike Riddell; *Blue like jazz* – Donald Miller; any collection of poetry by R S Thomas

**WEB:**

Makoto Fujimura [makotofujimura.com](http://makotofujimura.com)  
 SPCK Publishing [spck.org.uk](http://spck.org.uk)  
 Lion Hudson publishers [lionhudson.com](http://lionhudson.com)  
 Thomas Merton Society [thomasmertonsociety.org.uk](http://thomasmertonsociety.org.uk)  
 James MacMillan [boosey.com/jamesmacmillan](http://boosey.com/jamesmacmillan)  
 Mark Rothko's religious imagination [theartstory.org/jewish-artist-rothko-mark.htm](http://theartstory.org/jewish-artist-rothko-mark.htm)

**MUSIC:**

**James MacMillan** premiered several new works in 2012, including a setting of the Credo he wrote for the BBC Proms at the Albert Hall. Here are a few other pieces to introduce you to his work:

*St John Passion*

The London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Colin Davis, available from [lso.co.uk](http://lso.co.uk)

*Veni, Veni, Emmanuel*

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra with percussionist Evelyn Glennie, available from Amazon UK

*Symphony no 3: 'Silence'*

The BBC Philharmonic conducted by James MacMillan and available from [Boosey.com](http://Boosey.com)



*RELEVANT READS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS, ASSESSED BY A BROAD RANGE OF REVIEWERS*

**FALLING UPWARD:  
A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE  
TWO HALVES OF LIFE**

By Richard Rohr  
SPCK, 2012, Price £10.99\*  
ISBN 978 0 28106 891 3

Mystery is less frightening in the second half of life, argues Richard Rohr, because the second half of life is less concerned with certainty, ego-identity and systems of belonging. The 'dualistic mind' of the first half of life, that seeks to define everything in black and white terms, is replaced by the 'contemplative mind' of the second half. Both are necessary, but the first builds the wall of our cosmological container, while the second fills it up. Mystery can be embraced because doctrine and boundaries are taken for granted. This book goes way beyond chronological age to the heart of our spiritual identity. Challenging, on the dangerous edge of orthodoxy and deeply profound.

Wallace Pringle is a Christian journalist

**OCCASIONS FOR  
ALLELUIA**

By David Adam  
SPCK, 2012, Price £8.99\*  
ISBN: 978 0 28106 577 6

Stressed, exhausted or joyless? Life's busyness impacts not only our physical and emotional wellbeing but we become spiritually lethargic too. Our soul gets stuck in a rut. Occasions for Alleluia deals with such feelings head-on. Writing from vast experience and with a gentle, honest tone, author David Adam encourages us "to be open to the wonder and mystery [of] ordinary things and ordinary people". The book explores how we can more naturally rest, see, know, love and enjoy God and the world around us. Packed full of helpful practical exercises, poems and prayers, this book is ideal for both personal reflection and church retreats. I found it enlightening and refreshing.

Andrew Dubock is Editor of Engage magazine

**CELTIC CHRISTIAN  
SPIRITUALITY**

By Mary C Earle  
SPCK, 2012, Price £9.99\*  
ISBN 978 0 28106 707 7

In Celtic prayer the mystery and fundamental unknowableness of God combines, without strain, with the practicality of acknowledging God's presence while dressing, milking, herding or kindling the fire. This short book presents translations of some original writings from Celtic peoples and traditions over the centuries, arranged into eight themes at the core of Celtic worldview: creation, prayer, incarnation, daily life and work, soul friends, pilgrimage, social justice, and blessing as a way of life. Each section has an introduction, and each excerpt is accompanied by a commentary explaining terms, concepts and relevance to Christian faith. It forms a learned, stimulating and beautiful introduction to some authentic Celtic thought.

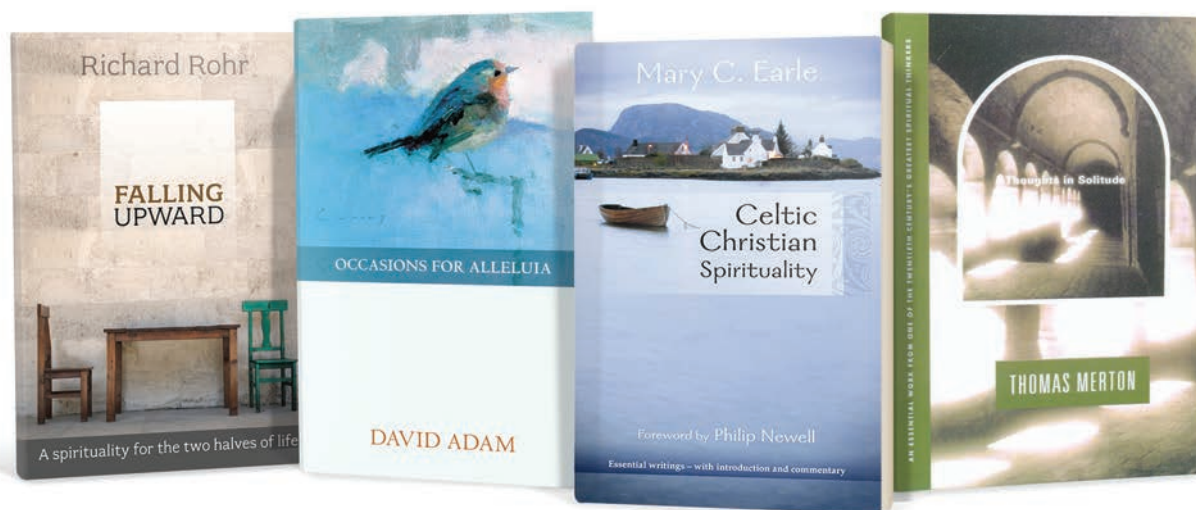
Margaret Gibbs is BMS Regional Team Leader for Asia

**THOUGHTS IN  
SOLITUDE**

By Thomas Merton  
Burns and Oates, 1958  
Price and ISBN vary per edition

In the early 1950s the young monk Thomas Merton found an old shed in the grounds of his Kentucky monastery and made use of it as a hermitage. Out of his hours there came this early book on the essential human need for silence and solitude in our seeking of God. Not thoughts about solitude, but thoughts written in solitude. Without silence what quality can there be in our speech? A short book of short chapters, almost a series of aphorisms, it retains its power in the noisy world of today and is the perfect introduction to this great writer.

Rev Keith Griffin is Co-editor of The Merton Journal



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**Congratulations** to the winners of our science and faith giveaway, courtesy of Lion Hudson Publishers. They were Catriona Gorton of Glasgow and Arderne Gillies of Hertfordshire.