

**The Widening
Circle of Us:**
A Theological
Memoir



Peter Francis

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To Helen

in admiration of your passion for equality, your intelligence, and the unearned love that lights up my life. I hope this book will help to explain my own preoccupations and why I spend time, thought and energy on something as incomprehensible, in your eyes, as rethinking faith.

It matters to me but not nearly as much as you do.

Valentine's Day, 14 February 2021

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer
slave or free, there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!
Edwin Markham – ‘Outwitted’ – 1852

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a theological memoir. What on earth does that mean? On one level it is quite clear – it charts my life and theological views over 40-plus years of ministry in the Anglican church.

The period of my life, in British terms, is the second Elizabethan age, which has seen a widening of the circle of us – of those no longer excluded. A sadness in this progress has been the slowness of the mainstream churches to respond to this growth of tolerance and acceptance and in the process, they have made themselves seem extremely foolish and out of touch. The churches have lagged behind the liberal spirit of the age and have often been a brake on the forward momentum of society. Strange to think that they claim to worship a truly human being, Jesus, who broke the religious conventions of his society and whose spirit and truth is claimed to set us free. It set me free to be myself rather than following an expected path mapped out for me.

I am thankful that the outriders of my tradition have kept the freeing, widening truth of Jesus alive. There are many who prefer the old certainties of a previous age. They ignore the realisation that the great gift of Christianity to the world was the gift of liberation which underpins all religious and secular movements of liberation. Paul in his letter to the Galatians, probably reciting a well-known song or creed of the early church, states that in the early Christian community ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for we are all one’. Or, in contemporary parlance, they were in effect saying ‘no race, class or gender discrimination within our community’. It is sad that so often the churches, including my own Anglican tradition, have seen themselves as preserving the status quo and have been slow to recognise those struggling for the fullness of life that Jesus promised.

Why write this book now? I suppose, on a practical level, I have to thank the pandemic which allowed me the time and space to shape and conclude this manuscript which I had been working on for some

Introduction

time. However, there is another rather more essential reason for writing at this time: for the first time in my lifetime the widening of the circle is under threat and hard-won freedoms are threatened by populist movements and populist leaders.

In Hungary (2021), Viktor Orbán limits press freedom, is careless over democratic rights, remains aggressively socially conservative as well as being accused of anti-Semitism and exhibiting Islamophobia. Yet, he proudly considers his government to be Christian. In Poland, the right-wing populist government led by Andrzej Duda attacks LGBTQ and women's rights with connivance on the part of many within the Catholic church in Poland. In the USA, four years of a Trump administration has seen his attempts to roll back on women's and LGBTQ rights and to have a hard line on immigration to make America great again. Trump is lauded and was elected with the help of the Christian right. In the UK, the Brexit vote was secured with fears of immigration and by harking back to the days of Empire - make Britain Great again.¹ For me, the harsh reality is that plenty of those who follow populist leaders propounding views that call for a simpler, whiter, straighter, masculine world can be found in the churches of the West. If not necessarily amongst many of the Anglican clergy - only 6% of whom voted Conservative at the last general election compared to 43.6% of the population² - certainly amongst the Anglican laity as 66% voted in favour of Brexit.³

What can be done? How can Christianity become a force for justice amidst this right-wing surge of traditionalism and insularity? A focus on the teaching of the historical Jesus and the early church's radical inclusion would be as good a place to start as any.

The current populism is counter to the movements that dominate this book and my own awakening. I want to tell my story in order to defend the widening of the circle of us. My life is set in an age of struggles for justice and fairness - an era of inclusion rather than exclusion. It is about my developing liberal view of faith and exclusions that I had grown up blissfully unaware of. I have come from a conservative home and schooling both lower case and upper case 'C' and shed those often

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ingrained and insular attitudes in the light of my experience and life choices. It is about my 'widening' as well as that of British society.

To begin at my beginning ...

PART I
BECOMING

CHAPTER 1

SCHOOLED

(1953–1971)

We look at the world once, in childhood.

The rest is memory.

Louise Glück – ‘Nostos’ – 1996

I was born during the tea interval of the Lord’s test match in June 1953 to the soothing and quintessentially British soundtrack of the BBC’s ball-by-ball cricket commentary. Well, that’s the myth anyway. We lived in Tutshill, a small village on the English–Welsh border a mile from the Welsh town of Chepstow but just on the English side, which was deemed important by my parents, although the postal address indicated Wales. I was the third child of the family but the first boy. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth had just taken place and my parents had bought a television to watch the ceremony. Meat rationing was still in force after the Second World War but there was a feeling that Britain was experiencing a new dawn – a new Elizabethan era – Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay had just conquered Everest and planted the Union Jack on the top of the highest point of the world. Soon Harold Macmillan would be announcing that we had ‘never had it so good’. This was the world I was born into. I was destined to become a lawyer like my father, uncle, grandfather and, indeed, great-grandfather. I bucked the trend and became a priest instead.

I have a vivid memory of my parents, Pauline and Richard, kneeling either side of their double bed silently praying. I know, because my mother told me, that the prayers that they both said each night were just a grown-up version of how they taught my sisters and I to pray – God bless Mummy, God bless Daddy, etc. Praying, as Mum taught us, was a recital of the names of those closest to us who we entrusted to God’s loving care. It included listing special worries about people we knew who were ill or unhappy. It was comforting to do and created a cosy feeling that we were wrapped in a cocoon

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of protection and love. I don't think any of us expected God to do anything about our list of requests which included, in my case, a list of childish requests for Christmas presents, harm to those who were beastly to me at school and so on. It was an articulation of hopes and fears. Praying in a sense was 'good manners' like remembering to say 'thank you' and 'please'. So far, so very Christopher Robin. It was a tableau straight out of A. A. Milne's poem 'Vespers': 'Hush! Hush! Whisper who dares! Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.'⁴

I never believed in this method of prayer and instead when left to my own devices as a child I prayed not the conventional 'God bless x, y and z' but rather that God would kill my parents and my sisters, Diana and Clare, that we would be burgled and that the house would burn down - for I believed that God did the exact opposite of what was asked for. I would then sleep soundly totally content that all would be well. Where did that come from? Strange boy! Even stranger that with such a contrary beginning I should become an Anglican priest.

The genteel, almost 'Ladybird book', upper-middle-class world of comfort and entitlement that my parental home exuded gave out strange and contradictory messages about Christianity and its practice. Yes, it was good (required) to say prayers every night and good (required) to go to church. However, church-going was recognised as something boring and a duty that had to be endured - a sort of medicine you took to ensure something - God's protection? A moral compass? Or was it just something expected of us? Something we should be seen to be doing? Values that our attendance showed we subscribed to - I am not quite sure.

In my early years, my mother found an excuse for cutting short our church-going. She used to take me to the main morning service at 11am. It was the service of Matins from the *Book of Common Prayer* with hymns and sermon added. We would always walk out before the sermon thus cutting the tedious hour to just 30 minutes, long enough to hear my Dad read the two lessons. Our exit was always during the hymn before the sermon, during the first verse if it was a hymn we didn't know or during the last verse if it was one of Mum's favourites.

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It was not a question of sneaking out surreptitiously but straight down the central aisle from the very front of the church to the door at the back. Nobody else did this.

There was never any thought of sending me to Sunday school, although I asked to go, which would have meant mixing with children of a different social standing. Eventually, the family abandoned Matins altogether and went instead to the early morning communion service at which there was no sermon and the whole thing was over in about 40 minutes. This variation to our routine was because we always had visitors who came to Sunday lunch and we needed to be at home to cook and get ready during the time when the main service was droning on. There was no question about where priorities should lie. Christianity was important – up to a point.

My parents were key figures in the parish – my father was churchwarden and my mother was Enrolling Member (head) of the parish branch of the Mothers' Union, but both these positions had more to do with social status than with devotion. The church fête was held either in my grandfather's garden, a sports field that we owned or, very occasionally, in our own garden.

I don't want to slur my parents' Christianity. It showed itself in their commitment to each other and to a sense of duty and beneficence in the local community. I don't think my father thought about his faith very much. I think for him it was a 'duty'. My mother, on the other hand, had a more enquiring mind. In the 1960s, she read John Robinson's *Honest to God* and the various traditional responses to his book.⁵ The book caused a national, even international, stir as Robinson was a Church of England bishop and questioned the whole concept of a God up there; he spoke of God as the ground of our being or, simply, as love. Ethics, for Robinson, was a case of doing the most loving thing rather than obeying prescribed commandments from on high. It is hard to imagine now, but the book was a bestseller and has apparently sold more copies than any other theological book apart from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It raised questions and doubts that ordinary people had and was part of the questioning spirit of the

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1960s. Robinson himself had been part of that spirit of cultural and moral change when he had given evidence in support of lifting the ban on D H Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Robinson's book, *Honest to God*, was written quickly when he was laid up with a bad back and was trying to explain to his wife, Ruth, in what he believed and why. It was her sceptical questioning that inveigled the 'honest' response. In reflecting on the people who have influenced my thoughts on religion from my mother onwards, *Honest to God* plays a significant part in their lives, it is a common denominator. Not that the book was saying anything new or unthought but a person in authority, a bishop no less, was publicly pronouncing these views and this enabled other public responses that altered the theological conversation. It became a 'marker' for liberal theological thought, it was something you were 'for' or 'against', theologically liberal or conservative.

Years later, when I was going through my training as a priest, Mum professed an interest in progressive Christian theology. Neither parent was a biblical literalist in any sense. I never, for instance, thought that creation stories, the great hero stories of the Hebrew Bible or the virgin birth and miracles of the New Testament were anything other than myths and fables. The resurrection seemed to be an exception and was believed or at least outwardly believed. I noted, even when I was quite young, that it was not included in the list of Christian fairy tales.

Not always totally at ease with all progressive Christian thought and especially anything that was to do with life after death, Mum worried about the souls of my sister Clare's two daughters, Penelope and Deborah, as their father, Jeremy, was a Buddhist and Mum feared his spiritual influence over them. She, in the old-fashioned phrase, feared for their mortal souls. I wonder what nonsense she had been taught by clergy and schoolteachers that made her think that Buddhists would be excluded from heaven? She wrote to John Hick, a world-renowned theologian with a pluralistic approach to world faiths, to express her worries. He wrote back a very sweet letter about the benefits of the Buddhist way and a confidence that there was only

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one God but many paths. The letter pleased her and, I think, removed some anxiety for her.

The upper-middle-class faith that I was brought up with was strong on morality and family values. I was cocooned, secure and protected from anything subversive or threatening. It was a loving and caring home, and provided all three of us children with a supportive and happy background. It had its boundaries, it governed who we could and should play with and taught a strongly ingrained politeness of manner. Class and our God-given position in society were clearly defined. It taught a sense of entitlement and expectation of a certain position in society just as England (and I use the word deliberately rather than saying Britain or the UK) was entitled to a prominent place in the world. Those were the days when school rooms proudly displayed a map of the world with the countries of the British Empire marked red on the map and Britain presented as the very centre of the world. The church, especially the established Church of England, was one of the stakeholders in protecting that entitlement. All of this I subconsciously imbibed at a very young age.

Life experience determines our understanding of faith, consciously or unconsciously. So why was it, many years later, if I was dreaming of home, did I nearly always had the same image of a large room full of sunlight with large French windows but where the carpet should be there was beautiful tranquil, blue sunlit water? I always told my therapist that I thought it represented a happy, loving and secure home. Diana, Clare and I would and could proffer witness to that, we had a loving mother and a supportive father. Throughout my childhood years, home represented happiness, warmth, log fires, nursery puddings and playing Racing Demon in front of the fire with Mum and my sisters. There was no violence, no money problems, it was all very secure and privileged. Why then did that same recurring dream always have me in the corner of the room hunched up, naked and cowering in fear with my hands shielding my head from some unseen but anticipated blow? What is it about? Freedom and happiness balanced against fear, constraint and, perhaps cowardice?

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I remember vividly when as a young child I was ill I always asked Mum to read *Peter Pan* to me. I presume it was a children's version, but the end of the book had a disconcerting phrase about the corner of Mrs Darling's mouth that never smiled. Mum always made a point of explaining this disconcerting image to me as a 'worry'. It was a symbol of worry and as she explained this, she said that we all have worries which stay with us. I loved that book but the bit I was most intrigued by was the corner of Mrs Darling's mouth. It was obviously important to Mum as well, as we always dwelt on the phrase. Strangely, I have looked this up in several versions of the story and in the original J M Barrie text it uses a different yet more understandable image of Mrs Darling (and it was at the very beginning of the book not the end). My childhood was a happy, cosseted world but there was perhaps a corner that was a 'worry'. Re-reading *Peter Pan* now I see it is all rather more complex.

She was a lovely lady, with a romantic mind and such a sweet mocking mouth. Her romantic mind was like the tiny boxes, one within the other, that come from the puzzling East, however many you discover there is always one more; and her sweet mocking mouth ... which had one kiss on it that Wendy could never get, though there it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right-hand corner.⁶

My mother, avoiding the subject of the one kiss that Wendy could never get, gave me the worry of that conspicuous worry! Is it a parallel image to me cowering in the corner of a sunlit room? Nevertheless, despite the cowering worry, or perhaps the kiss that eluded me, home was basically secure and happy; it was school that was the antithesis.

When I was seven years old, I was sent away to a 'prep' school that was 240 miles from home. It was a bewildering experience. At Charing Cross Station in London, I was handed over to a master from the school and we boarded the school train with about 30 other boys. I remember that I was the only 'new boy' on the train.

I sometimes wonder, almost certainly wrongly, whether the experience of a bespectacled boy with a scar above his eye, which

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I received from climbing on railings at Tintern Abbey and being pierced by a spike when I slipped and almost impaled my head when I was about three, ever impinged on the consciousness of our village neighbour at home, J K Rowling. Our two mothers knew each other well, my mother often visiting Anne Rowling when she was ill. Anne used to work for my mother for a while. What gives me pause for thought is that I used to play in a den under the stairs at my parents' home. If at the end of the Harry Potter saga Harry had become an Anglican priest I might have had a case for a tiny percentage. I have written to J K Rowling once or twice, not to make any preposterous claim, but to tell her something that my mother said often in her later years about how happy Anne would have been at Joanne's success. Alas, my missives have not got beyond her gatekeepers.

The school I went to was not Harry Potter's Hogwarts but Tormore in Deal on the Kent coast (1960–1966). The school was chosen because my uncle, a man I had never met before, was headmaster. He told me some years later that he was very careful not to show me any favouritism and perhaps had been rather hard on me. During the first months, new boys felt especially vulnerable with no parental visits or phone calls allowed. Even sending letters home was controlled with the weekly Sunday letter written on the blackboard for us to copy. Other letters could be sent but they had to be left open in the school post box – some, I guess, just disappeared. It was like living in a police state.

The dormitory of new boys was a sad place with all of us crying ourselves to sleep during those first weeks. We were told repeatedly that things would get better and that it was character building and would make us strong leaders. There were frequent short early morning runs before breakfast and then a dunk in fairly cold water in a bath with Matron presiding and holding a sponge with which she washed what she termed as our undercarriage.

I remember being told during a period of unhappiness that if there was another world war, and if I was captured and imprisoned, then I would easily survive as concentration camps would not be as bad as

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school. Come the war, I would be able to be a leader supporting those less fortunate than myself. It still gets me angry when I think about it. It was quite clear that we were expected to hold significant positions in society, positions with power and influence. This entitlement would be the reward for this hard schooling – you have to be cruel to be kind.

Daily prayers, consisting of a couple of hymns and a reading from Scripture, were held for the whole school seven days a week, usually with my uncle presiding. We all had to pack a Bible and a combined prayer and hymn book to bring with us to school. My great-aunt Phyllis had given me a honey-coloured hymn book that became my comfort blanket. It had a plastic faux-leather cover, and, in my anxiety, I nibbled away at it until the cover looked chewed and had a significant area missing from each corner. Of course, my nervous nibbling had been observed and one day the book was taken off me by my uncle at the end of morning prayers as he processed out with other staff. Embarrassment enough, but it didn't begin to prepare me for the next day when it was publicly returned to me at the start of prayers by him with a short speech about defacing holy objects and my wickedness in so doing. Of course, duly humiliated, I became the laughing stock of the whole school. I had a further mild scolding when I went home for the holidays and we had to set out to buy a less enticingly chewable replacement.

At Tormore, I learned huge gobbets from the Bible in the 4th Form under the tutelage of Myles Raven, a fearsomely large presence to us 10-year-old boys. He, all six-foot-three and 24-stone of him, took us through selected highlights of the whole Bible in one year. What he did was simply tell the stories with some strange embellishments of his own and get us to copy down famous verses. There was no distinction between history and myth – but at least, I suppose, we learnt the stories. He was a good storyteller like his brother the novelist Simon Raven. We were not allowed to copy down his embellishments – for instance, 'The Lord said unto Moses all Jews shall have long noses, except for Aaron and he'll have a square one.' In fact, despite his storytelling gift, Myles Raven peddled insulting Empire views and jokes on religion

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and race to children who knew no better. To our shame we laughed and giggled and probably repeated them – certainly they have stuck in my memory. Misogynistic too; for him the story of Adam and Eve was a divine warning that you couldn't and shouldn't trust women – women led you astray. When I was a little older and one of his favoured cricket players, he used to refer to women in crude and derogatory terms. These are not the ideal values that you should want children to imbibe.

The school inculcated not only a strong sense of personal entitlement but also a sense of national entitlement and in some strange way it was all tied up with the brand of Anglicanism to which we were subjected. The attitudes promulgated provided the seedbed for the awful views that have risen to the surface in the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum.

We were taken once a term to the local church for Sung Communion. None of us boys were confirmed and, therefore, we were not allowed to receive the sacrament, but it was a hated Sunday for us all. It lasted about an hour and a half and seemed interminable. To help us follow and understand the service we were given a small pamphlet, *Our Bounden Duty*.⁷ Aged eight or nine we had no idea what 'bounden duty' meant but knew that for sure it was boring and long. It strikes me now as a perfect way of describing this upper-middle-class understanding of Christianity.

Tormore no longer exists. It has disappeared as part, I hope, of a vanishing age. The industrialist and former Chairman of ICI, John Harvey-Jones, even filmed a sequence of Tormore being demolished in his popular *Troubleshooter* (BBC) series about industry in the 1990s. In *The Independent* newspaper (9 December 1993)⁸ he gleefully reported that demolishing the place was 'something I always wanted to do when I was there, and now I'm going to take a jack-hammer to it. I hated the place.' In his autobiography, he confessed to the misery that he felt at Tormore: 'for many years I could not even bear to think back to it, as I was aware that I could bring no balance or fairness, or generosity of spirit to my view of the place'.⁹

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Like, I suppose many similar institutions, there was a culture of cruelty that was inflicted but tolerated in the name of character building. But who would ever want characters to be moulded like this? Aged nine or ten, I was taught Latin by, let's call him, Mr Smithers. One day he found an ingenious way of punishing us for getting things wrong. He took a broken wooden coat-hanger with a tack sticking out of the wood and if we got something wrong he would tap us on the hand with the exposed tack. Imagine my surprise when many years later I arrived in Glasgow as Provost (Dean) of the cathedral to find he was a member of the congregation.

The wise way to survive this trainee concentration camp was to make enough friends to feel secure and protected. Those who were loners were picked off by the groups, teased and their lives made hell. The other way of ensuring security was to be good at sports. Excel at sports and you became a school hero, untouchable by the bullies. On the other hand, being in the school team didn't necessarily make you immune from the casual cruelty of the school. For instance, a myth abounded that a year or two earlier after playing a neighbouring school at rugby and winning on a biting cold and frosty day, with the frosted ground almost like concrete, the team were deemed not to have tried hard enough and the whole team were caned by the headmaster. This story was told often by staff and pupils and was a myth which ensured that come rain, snow, frost or thunderstorm we would always give 100% or risk punishment.

Such tales are common to those of us 'privileged' to have had this sort of education in the 1950s and 1960s. Apart from the sense of entitlement, perhaps the most harmful thing of all was that we had been schooled in a culture of cruelty and bullying that can persist from generation to generation and somehow religion was seamlessly enmeshed into this culture. I often wonder why my father, who clearly knew what boarding schools were like, inflicted it on us. Perhaps he thought they were character building.

Character building, maybe, but I remember running away from the school to my grandmother's house where my mother and sister,

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Diana, were staying. I was being bullied at the time and longed to get away. The cause of the bullying was a second-hand towelling dressing gown that was multi-coloured and had belonged to Diana before it was passed on to me. The dressing gown still had Diana's name tag in – so for several weeks whenever I walked into a room or tried to sit next to someone, they called me 'Diana' and mocked and shunned me. It had become unbearable and I was extremely unhappy. My mother's visit to see my grandmother in Deal offered a chance of escape and I took it. The house was about a mile away, if that, but it seemed to me a great escape. On the way to the house, I was shouted at and punched in the stomach and generally shoved around by a group of local boys from whom I tried to flee but they pushed me to the ground and kicked me. It wasn't very serious, it hurt and caused me to cry, mainly out of loss of dignity, but it remains the abiding memory of my futile escape attempt. I can understand that when this small teenage gang, dressed casually and laughing, found a young boy in school uniform, with short trousers, a neat tie and a silly cap on his head, it was an irresistible target. They were venting their scorn at class privilege and the yawning gap between the haves and the have nots. Little did they know that I wished so much to be in their shoes and clothes rather than my polished Clarks lace-up black shoes and a uniform purchased from Swan and Edgar of Piccadilly.

When I rang the doorbell of my grandmother's house, I tearfully blurted out my unhappiness with school but said nothing about the boys; it was too humiliating. I was soon bundled back to school, but the lasting impression was of that hostility by the boys, all a bit older than me, that made me think perhaps for the first time that there were two nations and I was very firmly, despite my unhappiness, in the privileged nation and there was a sense of conflict seething under the surface.

Theology is not something you consciously think about much before the teenage years. My concept of God was based on the sleeve of the record album of *My Fair Lady*, the soundtrack from the musical play based on Shaw's *Pygmalion*. The picture shows George Bernard