

## **Christianity and Paradox**

By LUTHER ZEIGLER

*Review of*     **TRUE PARADOX: HOW CHRISTIANITY MAKES SENSE OF OUR  
COMPLEX WORLD**, by David Skeel

Intervarsity Press, 2014

---

“I believe in Christianity,” C.S. Lewis once observed, “as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” Embedded within Lewis’ well-known aphorism is an important philosophical insight about the grammar of religious commitment. Religious faith is more than just a series of cognitive claims about God and the ultimate nature of reality; it is, rather, a way of seeing and experiencing life that, when fully lived into, can completely transform who we are, how we relate to others and to our world, and what we make of our selves.

Building on this insight, Professor David Skeel, who teaches corporate law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, has written this slender volume of Christian apologetics with an eye toward re-directing the conversation between skeptics and believers about the truth of the Christian faith. Skeel is persuaded that recent debates between “new atheists” and religious believers have stalled over an obsession with cosmological claims about the nature of reality and its origins, and have become bogged down because of a commitment to narrow forms of philosophical and rhetorical argument that show no signs of finding common ground. He seeks to breath new life into the debate by inviting us instead into a richly textured exploration of the complexities of the intangible dimensions of human experience – consciousness, beauty, morality, suffering, and the pursuit of justice – to see whether the Christian faith offers a more compelling account of these dimensions of the human condition than its rivals.

Skeel’s strategy is not merely to steer the subject matter of the conversation to a different set of topics. He also seeks to enrich *how* we talk about faith by drawing as much upon literary, artistic, and other imaginative forms of human expression as the more common argumentative techniques of philosophers that have dominated recent apologetics. To be sure, Skeel’s style is lawyerly in its tone and rhythm – he writes with precision, clarity, and a fine sense of organization. Yet, at the same time, he displays an openness to aesthetics and the diverse discourses of the humanities that is unusual for this genre as he seeks to elucidate Christian perspectives on the myriad dimensions of human experience.

Skeel also writes with a respectful civility for those with whom he disagrees (Steven Pinker, Peter Singer, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, among others), exploring their views with a fair-mindedness that seeks to acknowledge the strengths of their positions even as he ultimately finds them to be unconvincing. Sadly, Christian apologetics has not always displayed the kind of intellectual charity that one would hope for from a tradition that is supposed to be anchored in a love for neighbor, including one’s enemies. We can be as thankful for the generous tone of this book, as much as for its re-focusing of the substance of the conversation.

## *Final Draft*

As a chaplain who spends most of his day on the campus of an Ivy League school talking to students about questions of ultimate meaning, I also find it refreshing to encounter a person of faith who is *not* a professional theologian or biblical scholar who nevertheless seeks to integrate his faith commitments with the rest of his life, as Skeel does here. Too often on today's campuses, people of faith are discouraged from claiming their religious identities publicly and from openly exploring the implications of these identities for how they live and the choices they make. Purely secular perspectives have come to dominate intellectual discourse on many university campuses, with the often-unstated expectation that our religious lives should remain "private." Skeel's book is in this respect a model for how to sustain an intellectually engaged, multi-disciplinary conversation about faith that is at once clear and bold in articulating its own perspective (in his case, a theologically conservative, Reformed, Christian point of view), while at the same time being respectful and charitable.

Yet, despite Skeel's effort to broaden and enrich the conversation of Christian apologetics, there seems a slight imbalance to his presentation. He tends to frame his discussion around proving the veracity of Christian *beliefs* – viewing Christianity primarily as a "system of thought" – while paying relatively less attention to the rich history of Christian practice, sacramental life, community building, and prophetically embodied witness against the world's injustices.

For many Christians, our faith is as much a way of life as it is a system of thought; as much a rhythm of life-giving practices as a collection of beliefs; as much a way of relating to others and the created world as a prescription for understanding it. Long before Christianity became an institutionalized religion with creeds and confessional statements, it was known simply as "the Way," and was organized around a commitment to Jesus Christ as the divine embodiment of a new humanity and a new model for human community. Jesus tended to describe the in-breaking of this new social reality as the "Kingdom of God," and he empowered his disciples to form a witnessing community (the Church) intended to give the world a glimpse of this Kingdom through its community life and practice.

Thus, in the early Church, what differentiated Christians from others in the Empire were primarily *practices* that pointed to this Kingdom: the early Christians gave to the poor; cared for the sick; established communities without regard to class, social status, privilege or gender; shared their resources without possessiveness; practiced hospitality to strangers and foreigners; repented of their sins with humility; sought and extended forgiveness; exercised an unrelenting ministry of reconciliation; prayed with regularity; and tried, individually and in community, to embody the fruits of a Spirit-filled life (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control); among the many other hallmarks of Christian living.

It's not that an understanding of Scripture and statements of belief were unimportant to early Christians; but they viewed their beliefs as inextricably bound up with the incarnational reality of seeking to live as the Body of Christ in the world. As Jesus himself said in the one parable he shared with his disciples about the Final Judgment, the famous parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46: what will separate the sheep from the goats on the Day of Judgment will be less about their *beliefs* and more about whether and how they cared for the least among us.

I doubt that Professor Skeel would quarrel with much of this; my point is merely that a more balanced approach to Christian identity as involving *the integration of belief and practice* actually has implications for how we do apologetics. Most of the young people I engage with on campus each day are much more moved – and ultimately persuaded – by genuine expressions of Christian love, mercy, forgiveness, care, and the like, than they are by any set of arguments. It's not more arguments that the Church needs, but more compelling examples of faithful people whose lives give quiet witness to the power of the gospel. As St. Francis put it, "preach the Gospel always; use words if you must."

While Professor Skeel's book recognizes this truth in part, his approach still seems wedded to an overly intellectualized account of Christianity that views human salvation as turning more on a set of cognitive claims *about* Jesus Christ, rather than on how we *reflect* an authentic commitment to Christ in who we are and what we do. Yet, from its beginnings, the Church has recognized the truth of *lex orandi lex credendi* – loosely, the law of praying is the law of believing. Or, to put the matter generally, how we worship, pray, and otherwise embody Christ's teachings is often the purest expression of who we are and what we really believe.

Professor Skeel's Calvinist commitment to the "total depravity of humanity" also makes his discussion of justice more anemic than it need be and that the broader Christian tradition would warrant. Skeel quite appropriately criticizes many humanistic social theories for a tendency toward utopianism that fails adequately to recognize the inherently broken and often corrupt nature of human behavior. The reason human systems of justice never seem to achieve the aims they seek, Skeel argues, is because people have an inveterate propensity to misbehave, and this is as true of the people who are entrusted to enforce the laws as those who are subject to them. This is what Christians call sin. And because of the reality of sin, Skeel contends, the best we can hope for in this world is "law with a light touch," a minimalist vision of legal institutions.

Yet, to acknowledge sin does not necessarily mean that we have to give up on the project of creating more just social arrangements through law and morality, or be satisfied with a minimalist vision of justice. Roman Catholic social teaching, mature expressions of the Social Gospel movement within Protestantism, and certain strands of liberation theology are rich sources for what a more robust vision of Christian justice might look like. For whatever reason, Skeel largely ignores these traditions, giving the impression that there is relatively little Christians can do in this sinful world to promote justice through law.

Skeel's final chapter on "heaven" is an engaging discussion of the topic and offers a helpful corrective to the popular view that heaven is an otherworldly place separate and apart from this world. Drawing on the important work of Anglican Bishop Tom Wright, Skeel points out that a more biblically sound view of heaven is the eventual, eschatological merger of heaven and earth in a new and transformed social reality. As Wright has written, "When the New Testament speaks of God's kingdom, it never, ever, refers to heaven pure and simple. It always refers to God's kingdom coming *on earth as it is in heaven.*" These words are, after all, at the heart of the Lord's Prayer. Heaven is not some place up in the sky we go to after we're dead, but rather the ultimate end of human history as the Old and New Jerusalem merge in God's Kingdom come to earth.

Skeel has this just right, I think, and it is precisely because he does that his vision of justice ought to be more robust than it is. For if "heaven" means the ultimate realization of

God's kingdom on earth, then it seems plain that Christians are called to be "Kingdom-bearers" by, among other things, creating more just social arrangements, advocating for the dispossessed, protecting the vulnerable, and insisting that our laws and institutions embody more responsible ways of caring for each other. This vision of the Kingdom is one of the most compelling aspects of the Christian faith, and Skeel's case for Christianity would be even stronger than it is if he gave it its due.

Finally, I would note that Skeel's book largely "brackets" some of the controversial issues that divide conservative and liberal Christians, such as the status of gay and lesbian persons in the Church, the role of women in leadership positions, the relationship between scientific and biblical accounts of creation, biblical hermeneutics, and the like. I suspect his decision to set these matters aside for now was a strategic choice, and probably a prudent one at that. Liberal and conservative Christians often spend so much time quarreling among themselves over these issues (important as they are) that they fail to explore the common ground they share over against secular perspectives. So, even as I suspect I likely would disagree with Professor Skeel on many of the foregoing matters, I deeply appreciate how he has explored common ground in this book, re-framing the landscape of Christian apologetics in an articulate, accessible, and open-hearted way.

---

LUTHER ZEIGLER is the Episcopal Chaplain at Harvard University and President of the Harvard Chaplains.