

Cardinal's sea-change

John Wilkins looks at the life left behind by a penitent pope

Pope Francis: Untying the knots
Paul Valley
Bloomsbury £12.99
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IN 2005, I learned that the Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, a Jesuit, was emerging as the chief contender with Joseph Ratzinger for the papacy after the death of John Paul II. I knew little of Bergoglio then; so I enquired from contacts I had in or close to the Jesuit order. I was disconcerted by some of the replies. As head of the Jesuit province of Argentina for six years from 1973, he had been authoritarian and divisive, I was told. He was a man who did not smile.

How can such judgements be reconciled with the Jorge Bergoglio now known to the world as Pope Francis, whose style in five months since his election has taken the world and the media by storm? Paul Valley's answer, drawn from research that included visits to Argentina and Rome, is that Bergoglio has been on a journey of change. This is his golden thread, and it puts this book in a different class from the other instant biographies.

The charismatic Jesuit General Pedro Arrupe appointed Bergoglio as Provincial in 1973, as soon as he had taken his final vows, at the age of only 36. He was already seen as a leader. But the order in Argentina was at sixes and sevens. Jesuits aim to be "contemplatives in action", but some wanted more contemplation, and some more action. Bergoglio sought to stabilise his men by taking them back behind the Vatican II reforms that his predecessor had been implementing. Valley enumerates in disturbing detail the conservative measures that Bergoglio imposed. They loved or loathed him for it: the force of his personality was such that neutrality was not an option.

Politically, too, he was on the Right. As Valley puts it, Bergoglio at this time believed that "something in Peronism constituted Argentina's best hope." Peronists believed that uniquely in Argentina they were implementing Catholic social teaching in seeking to carve out a third way between capitalism and communism. They envisaged a grand collective strategy that would bring Church, army, and trade unions together. Peronism had a left wing and a right wing. Many liked to think of themselves as socialist; but their model pointed towards fascism, and in the 1970s it came apart under the weight of its own contradictions.

Left-wing guerrillas and right-wing death squads took to the streets. Many Argentines breathed a sigh of relief when the military took charge in 1976. An appalling "Dirty War" followed the coup, when anyone associating with the poor risked kidnapping, torture, and death as a communist subversive.

Bergoglio brought his men through safely — a tribute to his political antennae — but only just. The case of Francisco Jalics and Orlando Yorio casts a shadow to this day. Valley's account of the



Smiling: Pope Francis greets the faithful as he leaves the village of Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence, on Thursday of last week

torture centre to which the two snatched Jesuits were taken is horribly graphic. He does not absolve Bergoglio of all responsibility, though he gives him credit for his part in getting the two out, at personal risk. Bergoglio was courageous also in setting up escape networks. But the Jesuits in Argentina did not combat the repression as their colleagues in social institutes elsewhere in Latin America did in similar circumstances.

The book does not dwell on Bergoglio's second important post, as Rector of the Colegio Máximo in Buenos Aires for six years after his term as Provincial ended in 1979. By the time Bergoglio had finished there, the Jesuits in Argentina had become more open to the teaching and practice he had opposed. They had moved on. Bergoglio was left somewhat stranded. Valley thinks the order did not know what to do with him.

While spending several months in Germany, he came across an 18th-century painting, *Mary, Untier of Knots*, which gives Valley his subtitle. It showed the Virgin straightening out a tangled ribbon. Bergoglio was struck to the heart by it, and a full-sized reproduction now stands in a church in Buenos Aires. Eventually he was sent to Córdoba — into exile, Valley says, stretching a point; for Córdoba is Argentina's second city, containing important Jesuit institutions.

As a Jesuit, Bergoglio was schooled in self-examination and discernment. It is inconceivable that he was not now reflecting critically on his career so far. "From a young age", he told two journalist interviewers in 2010, "life pushed me into leadership roles. I had to learn from my errors along the way. . . Errors and sins. It would be wrong for me to say that these days I ask

forgiveness for the sins and offences that I might have committed. Today I ask forgiveness for the sins and offences that I did indeed commit."

But he did not leave it there. "For me, feeling that you have sinned is one of the most beautiful things that can happen to a person. . . Sin properly assumed is the privileged place of personally finding Jesus Christ our Saviour. . . It is the possibility to live the wonder of having been saved." The twin themes of mercy and joy have characterised his preaching.

In 1992, Cardinal Quarracino rescued him by appointing him one of his auxiliaries in Buenos Aires. It was "a relief for him and for the order", according to one Jesuit observer. But Bergoglio was now a changed man. The authoritarianism of the past had given way to humility and simplicity. In 1998, he himself became Archbishop. He did not move into the palace. He walked everywhere, or went by bus or Underground. He spent hours in the slums, talking to the people, drinking tea with them. These were signs that, though thought out, had become part of him. He denounced structures of sin and supported initiatives by the poor to raise themselves up. In 2007, a US diplomat described him as the "leader of the opposition" to the government. Valley emphasises that he was now taking precisely the positions that in his earlier life he had spurned.

Now he is Pope. The cardinals who elected him wanted radical institutional change. Will he be able to deliver? He is "easily tough enough", his sister says. We shall see. Meanwhile, we have this compelling account of his conversion.

John Wilkins is a former editor of the *The Tablet*.

Taking exception to the 'R' word

Once, that box wasn't on the form, says
Duncan Dormor

Before Religion: A history of a modern concept
Brent Nongbri
Yale £25
(978-0-300-15416-0)
Church Times Bookshop £22.50

THERE is a very high chance that as a reader of this esteemed paper you will be described by others as "religious" — as a person who practises a "religion" called Christianity. There are a number of reasons why you may feel uncomfortable with that label: the fact that it is a generic description might be one (religion as opposed to Christianity); and the implication that "it" involves a sphere of activity separable from the rest of life (social, political, and economic) might be another.

Profound discomfort with the concept or category of "religion" is very well established among scholars, be they anthropologists, historians, or theologians. So Nongbri's argument that, before the 16th century, cultures, nations, and ethnicities did not "have a religion", but rather had customs, rules, laws, and rituals, is not new. Nevertheless, given that volumes continue to be produced on *The Religion of the . . .* — Incas, Greeks, Manichees, Hindus: just insert a name — there remains a real need for clear and closely argued books such as *Before Religion*.

The real strength of Nongbri's contribution lies in the attention that he pays to texts and to the business of translation, and his breadth of knowledge of the ancient world. In carefully presented chapters, he documents the ways in which modern scholars have inserted "religion" into their translations of Greek, Roman, and Arabic texts, or have attempted to identify the birth of something that can be distinctively identified as a "religion" in the ancient world.

He then proceeds to consider the ways in which Christians categorised "others" in the pre-modern period with a heretic/idolater model, giving way to the fourfold distinction that included Jews, Mohammedans, and pagans (all considered to be deeply flawed Christians), as well as proper Christians.

The key historical moment for Nongbri comes in the 17th century with the advent of Deism, and political thinkers such as John Locke. Here a shift, which comes to see religion as an inward persuasion of the mind, and Churches as voluntary organisations, provides the foundation for a world in which Christianity is no longer the pinnacle of true and genuine worship, but one manifestation of religion among others.

CHRISTOPHER ABRAM's *Myths of the Pagan North: The gods of the Norsemen* considers their history from early times to the 13th century; when and why they were created, what shaped them, and how they were transmitted (Continuum, £20 (£18); 978-1-84725-247-0).

I have a couple of observations to make. At the outset, the reader is asked to accept Nongbri's account of what constitutes the modern concept of religion; a fuller justification would certainly have been helpful. Similarly, the implications of his thesis are not drawn out with the utmost clarity.

Nevertheless, this is a fascinating book, which makes its points with well-worked examples, such as the 18th-century account of the "Religion of the Hottentots" (described as being very akin to that of the Jews), or the irresistible tale of St Josaphat, canonised, with his friend Barlaam, by Pope Gregory XIII in 1580.

Not only was the tale of Josaphat clearly a Christian reworking of the legendary biography of the Buddha: it came from India by way of an Arabic version in which Josaphat was portrayed as a Muslim mystic — pre-modern "religion" at its most creative.

The Revd Duncan Dormor is the Dean and President of St John's College, Cambridge.

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The Evolving God: Charles Darwin on the naturalness of religion by J. David Pleins (Bloomsbury, £19.99 (£18); 978-1-62356-247-2).

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