

# **THE EVIL THAT MEN DO**

**Marcus K Paul**

**Sacristy Press**

*Just 1 in 4 people still believe religion is a force for good in the world. It's time to tell the real story.*

So wrote Steve Clifford earlier this year. Professor Tom Wright added that we have to show that the Church is not the problem but part of the solution to our current crises. Here at last in *The Evil That Men Do* is a book that deals precisely with this pressing issue, the feeling that “I might be able to believe in Christianity if the Church hadn’t done so many bad things.”

In this thoroughly researched account, which takes snapshots of key historical periods from Biblical times to the present day, Marcus Paul takes an unflinching look at some of the worst periods of the Church’s history, sets them in context and asks the reader to take off the anachronistic lenses of the twenty-first century, along with the prejudices inspired by a secular and antagonistic media establishment, and comes up with some counter-cultural conclusions.

He looks first at the unconscious and subtle influences which journalists, academics and historians today all too often write into their seemingly objective accounts of Christian history. By close reference he shows how their conclusions can sometimes be deeply mistaken. He then goes on to examine the accusations of the militant atheists about the depiction of God in the Bible before contrasting these with the impact that both Old Testament law, and New Testament teaching made on the societies in which they were first promulgated. His suggestion is that we are so unaware of our own history that it is hard for us to refute the current popular narrative, dominated by a secularising agenda which tells us that the history of the Church is largely a catalogue of errors and cruelties and intolerance: one to be ashamed of, rather than to be proud of. In the chapters that follow the author re-examines the role of monasticism, asks whether the Crusades were entirely inexcusable religious wars, and whether the Inquisition was the bloody and sadistic ‘Black Legend’ of popular imagination. He looks at the treatment of heresy and witches, the bloodied figure of the ‘monster’ Cromwell and the despised Puritans before turning his attention to the astonishing achievements of John Wesley, the Evangelical Revival and the Victorian reformers. He considers whether the missionaries in the far-flung posts of Empire were merely “commercial travellers” as Oscar Wilde called them and to what extent they supported or subverted Imperial values.

The last two historical chapters consider the brutalising effects of two world wars and the challenges to our understanding of the goodness of God which the Church had to face as a result of them. He sees the century as dystopian and ‘an abridgement of hope’ for secularity - in Churchill’s words. By contrast, Paul shows that the world-wide Church, for all its failings, has achieved unequalled success in demonstrating that its teaching makes for social stability and cohesion, for health, humane behaviour and for moral direction.

*The Evil That Men Do* ends with a reflection on why the errors of the past may not, and cannot, be repeated and offers some pointers, in the light of history, to the way forward.

EA members should find this far-reaching analysis a rich resource to return to in refuting the false narratives about our Christian past foisted so relentlessly on us by the culture we live in. The author does not duck any of the issues and is refreshingly frank in his treatment of the Church's past failings, while managing to create a new narrative of Christian history which the twenty-first century Christian can enjoy and be proud of. We are reminded throughout that "the evil that men do lives after them" as Shakespeare wrote, while "the good is oft interred with their bones" - especially where prevailing opinion, in this case about the Church, has good reason to want that to be the case.

There is no other book quite like this. It fills a gap in our understanding of what it is to be part of the greatest movement in history in an age when Christians are encouraged to lose sight of that extraordinary achievement.