

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T

1. This 5-week course explores the emotional, intellectual, and deeply human dimensions of Christian belief, inspired by Francis Spufford's bold and unconventional book *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*.
 - 1.1. Rather than offering a traditional defense of doctrine, Spufford focuses on the felt experience of faith—its emotional weight, moral complexity, and the honest recognition of human failure.
 - 1.2. Through guided readings and discussions, we'll examine themes like belief as emotional truth, the raw demands of love and grace, the role of power and failure in the Church, and why Jesus remains the theological and emotional center of the Christian story.
2. The Author
 - 2.1. Francis Spufford is a British writer and former atheist who returned to Christian faith as an adult. Known for his work across genres—from history to fiction—Spufford brings a literary, humorous, and deeply honest voice to the conversation around belief in the modern world. *Unapologetic* is both personal and provocative, offering a fresh way to talk about Christianity for those who are skeptical of traditional religious language but still hungry for meaning

DATE	SERIES	SPEAKER	TITLE
May 4 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"FAITH AND EMOTIONS: WHY BELIEVING IN GOD FEELS SO RIGHT"
May 11 2025	CONFIRMATION SUNDAY		NO CLASS
May 18 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"A FAITH THAT DOES NOT GIVE ALL THE ANSWERS AND MAKES IMPOSSIBLE DEMANDS".
May 25 2025	MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND		NO CLASS
June 1 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"THE PUZZLE OF JESUS"
June 8 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"POWER, SIN, AND THE CHURCH WE GET"
June 15 2025	GUEST SPEAKER HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER	The Rev. Dr. Andrew McGowan <i>Dean of Berkeley Divinity School and McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies</i>	THE BEGINNINGS OF AN AMERICAN PRAYER BOOK (3)
June 22 2025	GUEST SPEAKER HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER	The Rev. Dr. Andrew McGowan <i>Dean of Berkeley Divinity School and McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies</i>	THE NEW PRAYER BOOK: FROM 1928 TO 1979 (4)
June 29 2025	SHARP FAITH: "FAITH IN GOD HOLDS EVEN WHEN RELIGION DOESN'T"	The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia <i>Theologian In Residence, Saint Thomas Church</i>	"LOVE, HOPE, AND THE DEFIANT STORY OF GRACE"

POWER, SIN, AND THE CHURCH WE GET (4)

3. Undisputable areas in which Christianity has brought improvement:
 - 3.1. the invention of kindness as an ideal of behavior to rival honor or dominance or stoicism (168)
 - 3.2. the emphasis on people being loveable to God irrespective of what they deserve laid the groundwork for the idea of there being rights owed to people irrespective of their status, their behavior, their capabilities. (168)
 - 3.3. The Christian campaign against slavery (168)
4. The very logic of Christianity however does not allow us to argue that these positive aspects balance off Christianity's many grievous sins:
 - 4.1. If Christianity is anything, it's a refusal to see human behavior as ruled by the balance sheet. (169)
 - 4.2. The weight of sorrow is not lightened by happiness elsewhere. The bad stuff cannot be averaged. It can only be confessed. (169)
5. Across all the variants [of Christianity], some things go wrong persistently. There's a set of failures which repeat, a group of malignant possibilities which come round again and again in different forms because they are failures generated close in to the unvarying core of the religion. They're Christianity's intimate disasters. (173)
6. **Antisemitism**
 - 6.1. From the very beginning, the hate-inducing potential of the story was entangled in Christianity's relationship with its Jewish older sibling. (175)
 - 6.2. Meanwhile, Jesus's own Jewishness, and his mother's, and his friends', disappeared from sight. (175)
7. **Embracing suffering for its own sake**
 - 7.1. Suffering always is a possibility for everyone who chooses love: "Take up your cross and follow me," says Jesus in St Mark's Gospel, meaning: risk everything, even death. Take love's consequences. Don't be careful. (176)
 - 7.2. It does not mean that we should choose suffering for its own sake.
 - 7.3. Christianity isn't a religion of self-harm, but self-harm can find a home in it, especially during one of the church's periodic panics about sexuality, when it can look as if the church is only willing to tolerate bodies on the most limited terms, and someone who doesn't like bodies at all can seem to be a spiritual virtuoso. (177)
8. **Downgrade grace**
 - 8.1. Having begun with a powerful instruction to look beyond law [...] Christianity has constantly tried to build new systems of law. To hold it, to restrain it, to domesticate it, to bind it with rules[...]
 - 8.2. because something kinder than fairness is, by definition, unfair, and once you take grace seriously it immediately threatens to produce scandalous unfairness in human terms. (177)
 - 8.3. So for most of its history, with varying degrees of certainty about whether

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the church really does have a bureaucratic grip on what happens after we're dead, Christianity has been in the hell business.

- 8.4. But of course hell's handy little bundle of social utility-unlike the grace of God-comes at a cost. Hell makes God Himself a torturer. It produces grotesque distortions in what we'd have to mean when we talk about His "love."

9. Confidence about power

- 9.1. Power as such is not optional. Having a relationship with it of some kind, whether wielding it or being subject to it, comes as standard in human societies.
- 9.2. In order to still be there tomorrow saying, "Take no thought for tomorrow," the church has to think about tomorrow.
- 9.3. Given that inevitability, none of the choices available for the Christian relationship with power are uncomplicated. All of them are compromises of some description, and all of them lead to culpability of some kind.
- 9.4. You can refuse the violence all power depends on, as some sects of Christians have always done, and be pacifists like the Quakers or the Amish, but then you end up tacitly depending, for protection and civil order, on those who do get their hands dirty. You become power's free riders, taking the benefits without paying the price.
- 9.5. Though Christianity will function, more or less, as an ideology of power, it never does so easily and conveniently, like the law-giving religions.
- 9.6. No matter how hunky-dory the authorities of some supposedly Christian set-up declare things to be, the church is always nurturing the seeds of a critique. We can't help it. The critique is always there in the story, and as we value the story, we have to keep the critique of power available.
- 9.7. For the source of our shame, the source of the general pattern of sorrow power has created in Christian history, is not power itself, but confidence about power.
- 9.8. When Christians try to exercise power as if it were God doing it, cruelty and suffering and tyranny follow swiftly.
- 9.9. It is not the medium in which the kingdom can be realized.
- 9.10. Power, rather than being just another medium in which we're sure to struggle and blunder as we try to articulate the vision of grace, might itself be sanctified.

10. Tendency to be ideologically conservative [be on the 'good' side]

- 10.1. [Another] persistent damage for which Christianity is to blame [is] our recurring tendency to give religious sanction to whatever is small-"c" conservative in a society, at the expense of everybody who falls outside the conservative definition of what's good and natural.
- 10.2. We are supposed to be on the side of goodness in the sense that we need it, not that we are it.
- 10.3. Then whatever is inside the tribal boundary begins to seem good because it is inside, and whatever is outside begins to seem wicked because it is outside.

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- 10.4. This produces a moral map of the world where virtue is determined by labels rather than by actions: by what your label says you are, not by what you do. (188)
- 10.5. Area of sexuality:
 - i. Where consenting adults are concerned, we ought to be as uninterested in lists of forbidden sexual acts as we are in lists of forbidden foods.
 - ii. The founding story of Christianity is astonishingly unbothered about it. Jesus didn't think it was worth picking it out in particular to talk about it.
- 10.6. In [the] areas of [...] race or class or caste, we have managed at times over the last century to live up to the emancipatory promise of our faith. The Civil Rights movement in the United States being a proud case in point, where Christian theology and the Christian critique of power helped a dispossessed people to demand freedom.
- 10.7. When it comes to the oppression of women and sexual minorities, not so much. Far from giving any kind of emancipatory lead, the church has struggled along behind, always late, always reluctant, accepting with palpable difficulty and discomfort liberations that became normal outside the church a generation earlier.
- 10.8. However, there is a misapprehension here.
 - i. The everyday moral consensus of the western European and North American world has shifted sharply on the subjects of sexuality and gender roles over the last fifty years.
 - ii. And because the church has been slow to participate in it, and was committed before it (with only a very few exceptions) to the pre-feminist and pre-Stonewall understanding of what was right 'n' proper, many people now assume that the church must be bigoted on principle.
 - iii. They presume that the bigoted world of the past was bigoted because the church then had the power to enforce its bigoted principle, and is no longer bigoted because the church has lost the power to impose it.
 - iv. Christian homophobia and misogyny do not proceed from [the Bible] (And in any case the Bible is a library, not a manual.)
 - v. They are a consequence of the church's immersion in the prejudices, assumptions, and habits of the world before the change, formed by that world as much as forming it.
- 11. The church will always be clumsy and time-lagged and complicit in the corruptions of its times.
 - 11.1. The slowness of the church will sometimes exhibit a kind of wisdom, protecting what is beautiful and vulnerable in our inheritance, insulating us from inane enthusiasm for change as such, guarding us against the illusion that we can renew ourselves at will;
 - 11.2. but there will always be costs exacted for it too, in human needs recognized too sluggishly, in injustices scandalously tolerated.

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12. We don't, in fact, believe the church is precious because it is good or does good or because it may do good in future. We care about its behavior, but we don't believe that its muddled and sometimes awful record is the only truth about it.

THE CHURCH (TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO)

13. Creed

13.1. Notice the difference

I believe **in** one God the Father almighty,
And **in** one Lord Jesus Christ,
And I believe **in** the Holy Ghost

13.2. When we say “I believe in you” to someone, we mean that we trust this person, we believe in her for herself, and we are prepared to stick to her in all circumstances.

13.3. When we say “We believe in God” we mean that we trust him.

14. It is significant then that when we come to the Church in the Creed, we do not say, as with God,

I believe “in” the Church

14.1. but

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

14.2. Which can be translated in this way

I believe **that** the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic

14.3. “Believing in” expresses trust; “believing *that*” expresses a conviction, maybe very strong, about something but based on something else

14.4. “I believe that it is going to rain, or that the stock market will not crush” because I can rely on my experience or I have done my research. I certainly don’t trust the stock market!

15. In the case of the Church, the reason why we keep being part of her, work for her, support her is not because of her, but because of God – it is because we trust in God that we are prepared to be patient with the Church .

16. And indeed, we say in the Creed that the Church is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” and yet in reality, just to take the first two characteristics,

16.1. The Church is all but one – marred by constant divisions

16.2. It certainly is not holy

17. So what we are saying is something else, that is

17.1. We believe that despite the Church being such an imperfect, contradictory, and often flawed institution

17.2. God is committed to make her the instrument of his unity, his holiness – which he is committed to share with the whole of humanity.

18. This is why we should be careful about the way we picture to ourselves what the church is

18.1. We might be tempted to represent to ourselves the Church as an ancient building – established, unmovable, stable

18.2. When in fact, a much more appropriate image is the river

19. A river

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- 19.1. Exists only insofar as it receives water from a source, or from tributaries. If the source stops giving water, the river disappears
 - 19.2. A river is not like a lake, it does not stay there – a river exists only because it goes somewhere
 - 19.3. And the river could not go where it has to go unless it continuously gathers more water from rain and tributaries
20. In the same way, the church
- 20.1. Exists only insofar as it is constantly gathered, affirmed, guided by the Word of God, it is a *creature of the Word* – this is her continual source
 - 20.2. It is oriented towards an end, the return of Christ, or *eschatology* (which means “the last thing”)
 - 20.3. But it cannot flow towards that end unless it keeps being missionary, unless it keeps making new disciples
 - i. By announcing the Gospel
 - ii. Baptising them
 - iii. Gathering them around the same table.
21. So to sum up
- 21.1. The church is **one** in the sense that it continually needs to be reconciled by God
 - 21.2. It is **holy**, in the sense that it incessantly needs to be forgiven by the Lord
 - 21.3. It is **catholic** [from *katholou*, “the whole”], in the sense that its vocation is to embrace “the whole” world
 - 21.4. It is **apostolic** [from *apostello*, “to send”], in the sense that it is sent to the whole world
22. In a nutshell, the best image of the Church I have ever found comes from the great Swiss Theologian Karl Barth
- 22.1. He says that the Church could be compared to a neon light which is visible only when electricity passes through it and so illuminates it.
 - 22.2. If there is no electricity the neon, though existing, cannot be seen and is indistinguishable from the darkness of the night.
23. Unless the church keep relying not on herself but on her God for her mission, she will not just become less bright – she will end up with no light at all.