

As pews empty across the West, Pentecostal, spirit-filled churches and worship groups are flourishing. Their members experience an intensity of feeling that trumps reason and language. A psychologist and former believer has written about his time as a youthful member of an Evangelical church – and the sense of loss that still haunts him / By MADOC CAIRNS

When ecstasy breaks loose

“WORDS MAKE things happen,” Matthew McNaught tells me. “It’s something we don’t think about enough.” Words set the world in motion; they call it to a halt. The process of articulation language involves – taking the inert and unseen and making it tangible, gifting it form – is for sociologists the foundation of the self. And for Christians, words are “hierophanic”, sites of divine self-revelation; places where a prophet opens their mouth, and God speaks.

In *Immanuel*, winner of the inaugural Fitzcarraldo Editions Essay Prize, McNaught examines two points where prophecy entered his life and left it altered. One was Immanuel, the Evangelical church of his childhood in the southern English city of Winchester – informal, enthusiastic, middle-class. The other was the Synagogue, Church of All Nations (Scoan), the followers of celebrity Nigerian pastor T.B. Joshua – glossy, ecstatic, cultish, thoroughly, even extravagantly, Nigerian. But somehow, friends of his from Immanuel had joined. Following their journeys to enlisting as Scoan disciples – and the experiences of abuse and manipulation that drove them out again – McNaught realises the two churches were bound together more tightly than he had imagined.

Somewhere between Immanuel and Scoan, McNaught went on another journey: from Evangelicalism to atheism to an abiding uncertainty about his own belief in God. *Immanuel* is “quite deliberately”, he tells me, “an agnostic book”. “Most books produced about religion are either attacking it in a new atheist kind of vein or defending it, apologetics ... I wanted to write a book where the ontological questions were put to one side.” He says he wanted “to create and maintain a space” where you can ask not whether religion is true, “but how it feels from the inside”.

HOW RELIGION feels – and how believers navigate the fissures between private passion and public indifference – is the tension at the heart of McNaught’s book. It’s a tension *Immanuel* handles with unusual delicacy and care. A working psychologist, McNaught witnessed attempts by his field to work out rational, systematic explanations of mental illness: well meant, he recalls, but quixotic. Human beings are formed by the formless; our experiences exceed our vocabulary. They might exceed our current systems of rationality

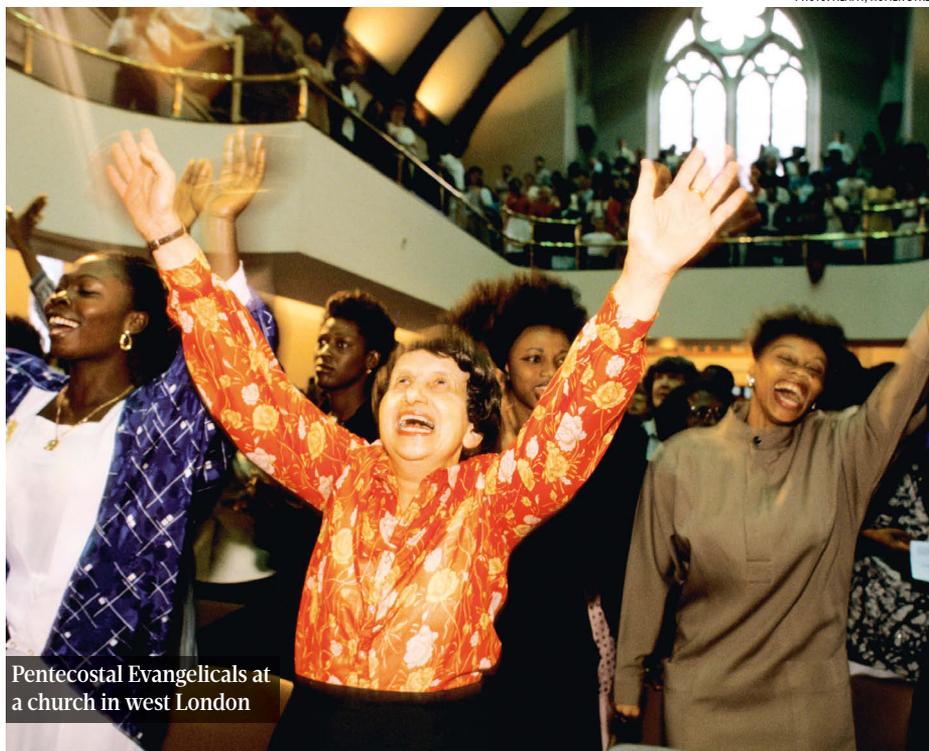


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too – McNaught won’t be drawn on the question – but spirit-driven Evangelicals and cutting-edge psychologists are, oddly enough, in agreement. Emotions really matter.

Some Christian Churches have a testy relationship with emotion. Emotions, and the turbulent interior lives emotions emerge from and subside into, are shifty, mutable, recalcitrant: inherently corrosive of authority, demanding and evading articulation. In *Enthusiasm*, his famous study of ecstatic religious movements, the Catholic priest-polemicist Ronald Knox described how intense emotion tends to displace all human authority – even reason itself – with “direct intercession from the divine”. It invariably ends badly, Knox thought: firestorms that blow up and blow over, leaving chaos behind.

Yet spirit-driven “charismatic” Christianity is thriving in contemporary Britain. Immanuel was one such community. It was a “cosy middle-class church in Winchester”, McNaught says. He attended Bible study, played bass in services, sang hymns when Immanuel baptised newcomers in the River Itchen.

“Most of my memories of it were fond,” McNaught says. He shared a conversation he had with another child of the group some years

ago: “I was saying to him – what was it about Immanuel that we don’t have now, and that we miss so much?” And he said, ‘community.’”

“And that’s it,” he says, laughing. “We have an impoverished vocabulary when it comes to talking about collective experiences – like community.” Other experiences, too. “I wanted to nail speaking in tongues.” Music is important to McNaught, and maybe, he accepts, because it can communicate without interpretation; feel without speech, talk without words. “I’m trying to name experiences,” McNaught adds, “that aren’t usually named.”

At one level, that’s some of the unconventional aspects of Immanuel: tongues, being slain in the spirit, an ardent belief in spiritual revival. At another, it’s the mundane reality of fellowship: when an Immanuelite knocked on another’s door, he remembers, they’d nearly always be welcomed in. But the nostalgia has an edge: “had Immanuel not been in some ways a genuinely solid and healthy community, the book wouldn’t have done what it did.”

In the gospel of Matthew, the disciples ask Jesus why they failed to drive a demon out of a boy. Christ remonstrates with them. You’re the problem here, he says. You lack faith. “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘move from here to

there, and it will move.” He gives a warning, makes a promise: “Nothing will be impossible for you.”

On first reading, it's intoxicating: a universe without limits, words that work wonders. Read it again, and the promise looks like a paradox. A faith that moves mountains has received a divine sanction so direct, so explicit, that the word “faith” barely applies. Faith fulfilled is faith overcome. Miracles are their own apologists.

Immanuel was, McNaught discovered as an adult, a “restorationist” community, convinced that the pristine spirit of the Early Church, mildewed by corruption and dogmatism for thousands of years, was making a return. As McNaught's childhood faith matured into adolescent doubt, he began to long for that kind of certitude. Like many young Christians – like many adult believers – the gap between private fervour and public insouciance troubled him. Unlike most believers, he expected that gap to be closed, definitively – and soon.

JANUARY, 1994: a small church by Toronto Airport hosts a visiting preacher from Kansas. At the church's regular Sunday service, the preacher stands up, thanks the congregation for receiving him and preaches on the day's gospel message, as he has hundreds of times before.

By the end of his sermon, hundreds of attendees are on the floor, “slain by the spirit”: crying, laughing, speaking in tongues. At the next service, the visitor preaches again, and again ecstasy breaks loose. By the end of the year, the event has a new title – “the Toronto Blessing” – and old names: pentecost, healing, revelation, revival.

Toronto marked the beginning of what some Immanuelites hoped would be a new pentecost, a global revival, a path out from the ignominy of secularism. But for McNaught, it marked the end of the road. His pastor's refusal of cancer treatment in favour of healing by prayer was a grim coda to his devout youth. His parents, open sceptics of revival, left Immanuel and, like many of his friends, remain Christians, albeit “reasonable, middle-of-the-road” ones. Entering the world of university – and then adult life, living and working for three years in Syria – McNaught left faith behind.

But it still haunted him. There are “places secular language can't reach”, he tells me: places religious words still touch. Words like “blessing”. Like “grace”. Those words – and the good they encapsulated, somehow preserved – nagged at him for years. “Love and bewilderment” led him into writing: love for the people, and the community, and the strange, dull, wonderful things they did together. Bewilderment over what that led to. Bewilderment that so much of what he had lost went beyond words.

Enthusiasts, wrote Ronald Knox, pursue and practise “inward experiences of peace and joy”. Such states are everywhere in religious belief – think about Pascal's tears of joy, Hopkins' “a zest, an edge, an ecstasy” – but

not everywhere discussed. As experiences, they're hard to articulate, to find words for. McNaught thinks there's a hidden population of ex-Evangelicals in our culture, “wounded, yearning and don't really talk about the experiences they'd had”. He hopes they'll see something of themselves in *Immanuel*. He hopes that it's a book people can, and will, talk about in church.

“The whole thing's a bit of an excuse to write about playing bass in a worship band,” McNaught adds, but the self-deprecation doesn't quite stick: earlier he'd told me that “the sound of singing in tongues was one of the things he really wanted to nail” writing *Immanuel*. And the section on singing in tongues is an eerily beautiful part of the book, in which McNaught catches the friction and the awe of spirituality in stubbornly unspiritual settings; lime-cordial communion, glossolalia in a sports hall, messages from God, streamable online.

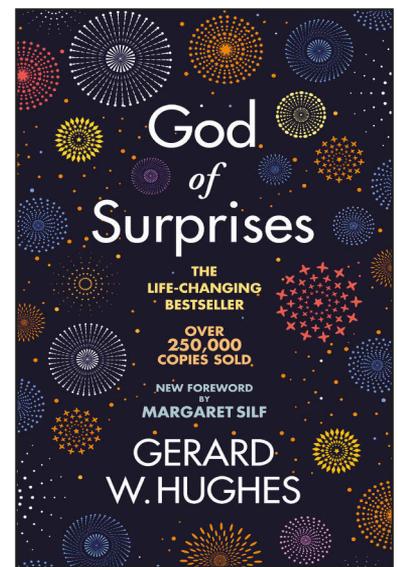
“Be eager to prophesy,” Paul says in 1 Corinthians, ranking prophets above any other vocation. Historians and theologians agree that prophecy played a vital role in the first Christian communities; oracles of God's will, sign interpreters, in ecstatic and continual communion with the divine. As the Church grew – maturing and becoming more “reasonable”, in the eyes of mainstream Christians such as Ronald Knox; ossifying, in restorationist eyes – prophecy retreated. Their authority eroded by hierarchs and theologians, supplanted by dogma, prophets were confined to Christianity's ragged outer edges. Revelation was refined to the past tense; prophecy lingered, rather than lived, whispering through century upon century in the dreams of old men, the wanderings of saints: the visions of women.

FOR KNOX'S Enthusiast, that won't ever be enough. “He has before his eyes a picture of the Early Church,” Knox writes, “visibly penetrated with supernatural influences; and nothing less will serve him for a model.” McNaught's summary of revivalism from Wesley to the present is pithier. “What if we didn't have to wait?” For some of McNaught's friends from Immanuel, that elusive promise, that search for certainty, took them to travel halfway around the world, living for years as disciples of a self-proclaimed prophet: praying for him, working for him, being abused by him. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus tells his followers in Matthew 5, “for they will see God.”

“Just because something actually happened,” McNaught says to me, a little regretfully, “doesn't mean it sounds plausible.” Scoan was like that, he adds. Factual, but not credible. The movement's founder, T.B. Joshua, is said to have spent 15 months in his mother's womb; age 24, he was commissioned to preach and teach the Gospel in a vision. According to his thousands of followers – and Joshua himself – he spoke with God.

Accused of criminal negligence and political interference, Joshua's fame blossomed. Scoan, “Nigeria's biggest tourist attraction”, drew

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international visitors in their thousands. Politicians, pastors, Christians from the West like McNaught's friends from Immanuel: all called him pastor, apostle, preacher, healer. Most often, they called him prophet.

A pastor who predicted the death of Michael Jackson, or who claimed to cast out "water demons" on DVD recorded services, sounds exotic and so is easily exoticised; attributed, with varying degrees of prejudice, to foreign cultures and developing nations. T.B. Joshua's Western disciples can be parsed in this light, too. But McNaught discovered that – for all that Nigerian folklore that pervaded Joshua's ministry – Scoan and Immanuel were, at one level, deeply attuned. T.B. Joshua's international followers weren't listening for a new voice, but for one they knew well. In Joshua's unpolished aspect, his homespun wisdom, his grand, visionary reports, they heard the first, faint, drops of a latter rain.

"T.B. Joshua, sitting on an office chair in the courtyard, would speak the words that God had given him." Sitting with Joshua, in the shade of Scoan's enormous satellite dish, McNaught's friends would make exacting notes of what the prophet said. In order to do so, disciples had to match Joshua's irregular sleeping schedule, and be ready at any time to catch God's words as they fell from human lips.

Those words were eloquent and insightful; surprisingly so, coming from a man without formal education. The significance of those words was surprising, too. They were, as McNaught's friends related to him years later, placed on the same level as Scripture. That alarmed Joshua's critics – and alienated otherwise sympathetic evangelicals – but it made sense to McNaught's friends.

Devout in a way McNaught never was, his friends shared something of his secret doubts, his desire for certainty. And even as Joshua's speeches skirted the outer limits of credulity, even transgressed basic elements of historic Christianity, they returned to the promises Immanuel had made them. If God spoke to us once – shaped revelation from human mouths and lips – why would he stop? If God asked something of you, how could you refuse?

ALL SCRIPTURE was prophecy, once. The Word of God is composed of words from God, however we define it: indwelling and inspiration, the visible traces of a movement invisible, incalculable, divine. Hierophany. McNaught tells me it was his original starting point for the book, "examining the objects and places through which we access the divine". And that's a project he approaches "from a position of ambivalence". Scoan proved to be closer to a cult than a church; Joshua, for all his charisma and near-supernatural acuity, a manic, sexually abusive control freak.

Immanuel is careful of the beliefs involved, cagey about their ultimate truth or falsehood. Revelation, prophecy, speaking with God; maligned and misunderstood, there's no Christianity without it. And there's the paradox for the mature, "orthodox" Christian. "What

right have we to assume," as Ronald Knox wrote, "that the man who lays credit to heavenly illumination must be a fraud?" "The older I'd got, the less I'd felt my journey away from church as an uncomplicated liberation," McNaught reflects.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, St Paul gives prophecy his blessing – but also a purpose. God sent prophets for the same reason he grants every other spiritual gift: "to equip his people for works of service". To "bear with each other in love". And although devotional pyrotechnics, then and now, fire his imagination, it's the community he found in Immanuel that sticks in McNaught's mind. The atomisation and loneliness of modern life weighs especially heavily on the young: for McNaught, now 35, it's a depressing contrast to the mutual love and support he saw as a child. As an agnostic adult, he can't look at Christianity with the eyes of faith any more. But he can see what he's lost.

It took six years to write *Immanuel*. Between winning the prestigious avant-garde publisher Fitzcarraldo's essay prize and final publication last month, McNaught reworked the text several times over, travelled to Nigeria to investigate Scoan first-hand and became a father. The experience – or experiences – have given him "a new respect for structure and dogma", he says, laughing. Structurelessness can be a prison; freedom from ideology "mask an ideology that's all the more insidious for being unnamed".

And "my thinking about individual psychology", McNaught tells me, "changed writing the book." A decade of experience in the field – he worked in an inpatient psychiatric ward during university – left him sceptical of the status quo in the treatment of mental illness. The model of "cordoned-off self-contained psyches" was wearing thin. "We're built out of the bonds we have with others." That reflects some of the newer ideas in cognitive psychology – and some of the older ideas in Christian theology. From Christ, writes Paul in Ephesians, "the whole body" of believers, "joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work".

"As a culture we're very good," McNaught adds, "at talking about casting off bonds and less good at talking about what happens when you have none." He quotes "The Silken Tent", a Robert Frost poem: "... the soul ... is loosely bound / By countless silken ties of love and thought." It was a lack of those ties – or being "cut off from them" – that made Scoan so powerful, and so dangerous. People with no ties drift; people with only one bond can find it pulls constructively tight.

T.B. Joshua, mired in accusations of financial misconduct and sexual abuse – a crisis he responded to by releasing pre-recorded exorcisms of his accusers, part miracle work, part blackmail – died in June 2021. His bizarre life concluded in an unexpected and

unexplained death. Immured in a mausoleum of bright white marble, Joshua lives on in a battered but surviving Scoan, in the pain he caused dozens of victims, and in the promises he held out to millions: of healing and certainty, prophecy and power.

IN 2019, McNaught watched in amazement as an American Evangelical preacher exorcised some of the very specific – and very Nigerian – water demons T.B. Joshua claimed to expose. Her name was Paula White. She was the personal chaplain to President Donald Trump.

At the end of *Enthusiasm*, Ronald Knox notes his subject's recent, precipitate and – he thought – irreversible decline. Knox didn't live to discover how badly he'd missed the mark. In the eyes of historians yet unborn, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries might well be known not for the death of God – but for the new life of the Spirit.

As pews empty across the West, "Wild Christianity" is discreetly flourishing. Pentecostal, spirit-filled churches and worship groups pullulate from megachurches to living rooms. Charismatic Catholicism is a post-Vatican Council success story, counting millions of adherents, defended and supported

by Pope Francis himself. And every morning Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, an establishment man to his Winchester-and-Oxford-educated fingertips, puts his breakfast aside for a moment, tilts his head skywards, opens his mouth and speaks in a language no living human knows.

All this sounds strange. But revealed religion is almost by

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definition strange, out of place; in but not of the world, standing at a slight angle to the universe. That oddity is important, McNaught thinks: "An alertness to and attending to the world in a different way, in a way that is open to the transcendent and divine in the most mundane of things." It's something, he says, religion shares with poetry.

All religious life ends in defeat. Faith, fickle, waxes and wanes. Churches rise and fall. Revival fades to habit, shades to doubt. Decline is inbuilt, predestined. Revelation turns to memory; prophecy to voice; the language of angels to the tongues of men.

Speaking to McNaught, reading *Immanuel*, it's striking how much of that tragic vision he inherits from his Christian upbringing. And how much hope. Even as he mourns the church of his childhood, laments Scoan and asks how – if ever – we can escape atomisation without falling for something worse, McNaught doesn't despair.

Recovery remains possible, in writing if not in life. We return to the beginning, training our ears, sharpening our eyes. Love and bewilderment; the lightness of speech, the weight of God. Gone, but not destroyed. Forgotten, but never lost. You just need to find the words.

Immanuel is published by Fitzcarraldo Editions at £12.99 (Tablet price £11.69).