



Editorial



Chris Sunderland

Chris Sunderland is a former research scientist, currently an Anglican priest and Coordinator of Agora, a charity working in active citizenship and democratic engagement. He recently launched EarthAbbey (www.earthabbey.com).

This society seems very confused about surveillance. We might complain about speed cameras, while stashing our purses with loyalty cards that give phenomenal power to marketers. We might be glad about scrapping ID cards, while putting intimate details about ourselves on Facebook. We might broadly welcome CCTV in our high streets and yet not realise that surveillance machinery now intrudes into almost every part of our lives.

Camera images and CCTV footage are often in mind when the word surveillance is uttered, but, in fact, as David Lyon points out, non-visual forms of surveillance are far more significant in the grand scheme. We still use the French word *surveillance*, meaning 'watching over' or 'overseeing,' but this is more often virtual than visual. Data, processed by computers, using software and statistics, are much more usually the raw materials of surveillance than visual images. Most often, surveillance can be thought of simply as 'knowledge for governance'. A slightly longer working definition would be 'any routine, systematic and focused attention to personal details, for a given organisational purpose (that may include influence, protection, control, entitlement, among others)!'. As a new government claims to be rolling back the power of the state perhaps it is a good moment to reflect on these things and engage with Scripture.

As I see it, the theme that embraces our discussions about surveillance in this issue is trust. The life of the Judaeo-Christian community recorded in the Bible was built on a trust, or covenant, between creation, people and God. This understanding placed human relationships at the heart of the vision for a good society and fostered the development of a strong civil society with a sense

of mutual cooperation and responsibility. Such societies can largely keep track of one another in an informal way. People are known to one another in a positive sense as colleagues, friends and neighbours, and necessary disciplines are placed in a generally affirming context.

By contrast, many of the commentators in this edition of *The Bible in Transmission* portray our society today as one which has been relationally deconstructed, being reduced to one great mass of competing individuals, whose life is held together by a surveillance machinery in the hands of the great powers, national government and market. The reasons we have got here are many and varied. Enlightenment philosophers and economists have given fuel to politicians, who have, in their turn, fed us a language of choice, competition, diversity and rights while neglecting communality, character and interdependence. Technological development, personal mobility and information systems have also played their part in extending our reach while unsettling our communal life. In his review of this process in this issue, David Landrum comes to the provocative conclusion that the New Labour project has also been deeply subversive of our associational life. Readers are likely to take different views on that, but the implication of this type of analysis is that if the ordinary relational life of any society is diminished, then surveillance becomes necessary to keep track of one another and maintain social cohesion.

Nowhere is this clearer than with child abuse. Given the Church's history, none of us should criticise the call from Pearl Luxon for strict standards of monitoring to protect our children. Yet we do need to paint this within a larger picture, because risk and surveillance issues are touching

almost every part of our lives today. In an authoritative article on risk, Eric Stoddart analyses our present moral panic, exacerbated as it is by media reporting that assumes an entitlement to a risk-free life. He calls us to recognise an inevitable level of risk in any healthy society, encourages us to learn to 'fear well' and model a kind of risk taking in our church communities that confronts the terrible truth that the poor tend to bear the most risk in any society, while the rich buy their way out.

David Lyon asks the key question, 'What sort of social, cultural and political world have we moderns made, that depends so heavily on surveillance?' He takes us to the dreams of Jeremy Bentham for an all-seeing or 'panopticon' prison, where the gaolers could view the inmates all the time. For Bentham this was a benign development and all part of the utilitarian dream. Today, as David Landrum points out, we have a situation in Shenzhen in China, where more than 12 million people are openly subject to CCTV surveillance and an individual monitoring of their transactions, in an effort to produce the harmonious society. It feels, in Bentham's terms, that they have turned the whole society into the panopticon prison.

That might send a shudder down our spine. And perhaps it should. There are those who all too easily say about surveillance, 'if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear'. The foolishness of this is dramatically demonstrated in Toivo Pilli's description of surveillance in communist Estonia, where every relationship became a risk, because you never knew who was watching and informing. Toivo's narrative is powerful because of its realism. This, as he says is 'no heroic tale' but the story of actually how it was, how the Christians struggled, and the variety of Scriptures that they used to justify their very different responses to surveillance.

There are also those who would justify surveillance through the idea that God watches over us. With this in mind, David Lyon expounds Psalm 139 and considers the all-seeing knowledge of God. David points out that the sort of knowing recognised in the psalm is of a quite different character from the human knowing in the panopticon prison. God's knowledge of us is predicated around the certainty of love. In contrast, argues Jason Pridmore, a surveillance society, in human to human context, actually shapes us human beings for the worse, replacing trust and deep interpersonal relationships, undermining our sense of belonging and even our self-identity. No wonder the culture becomes dominated by fear as these things proliferate.

A fly gets caught in a spider's web, because it is so fine and so extensive that the fly cannot register its presence before it is too late. I wonder if the growth of surveillance in our society is something like a spider's web? If we are to avoid becoming trapped into this culture of fear that we have created for ourselves, perhaps we need to take a fresh look at trust as the foundation of life, and a relationship with our divine creator as its heart.

The Gospels: Take and Read

Alive Publishing, 2009
Box set rrp £35; individual volumes rrp £9.99

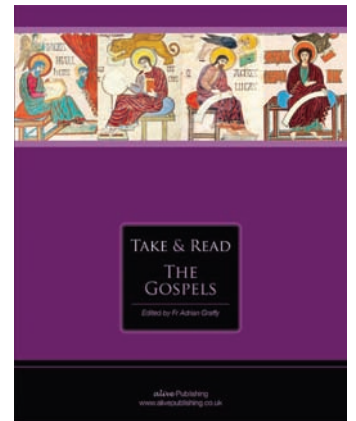
If you are looking for a Bible resource that will engage both halves of the brain, as well as the heart, try this for size:

Written by four Catholic scholars (Henry Wansborough, Adrian Graffy, Ian Boxall and John J Henry), this series offers laypeople an extremely helpful introduction to the Gospels. Each of the four volumes is devoted to one Gospel, but cross-references and comparisons are frequent, as well as illustrations of what makes each Gospel unique.

Scholarship is taken seriously. Clearly, the authors are convinced that we are dealing with more than just another piece of ancient human literature. This is about God revealed in Christ and God revealed in Scripture. But the Gospels are also shown to have been written in particular contexts, with specific agendas that guided the writers and led them to select and shape their material in their own, unique way. Each volume presents 12 passages with explanation, accompanied by quotations from the Fathers and Church documents, Christian art and inspiring photographs, and suggestions for prayer and reflection. This is a very rich and multifaceted approach to Scripture reading and engagement.

While designed for a Catholic audience, the *Take and Read* series will be of great value to any individual or group, across the Church spectrum, who wants to engage more deeply with the message of Jesus, allowing the Gospels to capture both their hearts and minds.

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Notes

1. See the discussion on definitions in David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).