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## Roundtable Review of Stephen Pattison's *Saving Face*

*Saving Face: Enfacement, Shame, Theology*. By STEPHEN PATTISON. 202 + viii pp. Farnham: Ashgate. 2013. (Abingdon: Routledge. 2016.) £34.99 (PBK). ISBN: 978-1-4094-3692-8.

**Review by:** Stephen Roberts, Senior Lecturer in Modern Theology, University of Chichester, UK.  
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There is a twofold inspiration for this roundtable review of Stephen Pattison's *Saving Face*. Firstly, on becoming reviews editor for *Practical Theology*, I wanted to explore different approaches to generating discussion about relevant books to enrich and extend the practical theological conversation served by the journal. Secondly, *Saving Face* was among the un-reviewed books that I inherited and it seemed an ideal candidate for a roundtable discussion. It is an evocative and engaging, interdisciplinary study that is rooted in Christian theology, informed by biblical studies, pastorally significant, alert to social scientific insight, and can be read as a work of public theology. Every now and then a book comes along that opens up whole new ways of seeing the world. This is certainly one of those books, except that 'seeing the world' differently is no mere metaphor for a change in intellectual outlook: *Saving Face* literally invites us to see faces differently or, perhaps more accurately, really to see them in the first place in a context where their ubiquity renders them invisible (31). Before reading the book, I thought I knew a bit about faces (I had read Levinas), but I was wrong. I knew about face as a metaphor, but had paid far too little attention to the particularity of faces and their theological significance. The idea that 'seeing the face of God' might involve actual physical sight has been spiritually and theologically transformative. And thinking about the way I look at faces has been both enriching and challenging, changing the way I see in contexts as wide ranging as the concert hall (increasing my appreciation of the singer's art) and the street corner (just how should I see the homeless?). This is a book that invites us to see humanity and God more clearly.

The title of Pattison's introduction, 'Lost Faces', has a double meaning: faces are notable by their absence from contemporary Christian theological discourse, except as vague metaphor; but the ultimate concern here is not to restore a lost theological concept; it is a pastoral concern with the redemption of those who, in various ways, have 'lost face'. The first chapter examines the place of face in the contemporary cultural context, the second investigating different ways of looking at and thinking about faces. Chapter three offers a sustained focus on problems with face, covering both a range of ways in which faces can be difficult to see, and ways in which people have difficulty seeing faces. A brief fourth chapter then opens up the possible significance of what Pattison calls 'Face beyond Face' as a way of introducing the deeper significance of faciality in dialogue with Levinas. The next three chapters are where the sustained theological work is done, examining biblical, historical and modern theological resources for thinking about face. A penultimate chapter uses these resources to sketch a practical theological vision for 'shining up the face of God' (149), before the final chapter invites us to see human faces in the light of the face of God, which in turn is seen through human faces in a reciprocal divine-human relationship of partnership that is central to the approach in the book.

*Saving Face* develops several themes that have featured prominently in Pattison's earlier contributions to the field. His work on pastoral and practical theology generally (1993, 1997, 2007a)

and shame in particular (2000) are clearly reflected here; more immediately, however, this builds on aspects of *Seeing Things* (2007b), the book of his Gifford Lectures which is also concerned with how we see. It is a work of public theology - 'the book is addressed to all of those who are interested in understanding and thinking about faces more concertedly'<sup>1</sup> – and, as such, addresses some of the concerns he raises in 'Public Theology: A Polemical Epilogue' (2000a).

There are four further responses following these introductory reflections. Manon Ceridwen James considers the pastoral and liturgical significance of Pattison's work: it has clear implications for practice and those involved in ministry will find much insight in its pages. She notes that the brief discussion of attractiveness in the context of consumerism could have been further developed. Andrew Todd considers *Saving Face* within the correlational framework of practical theology, noting its potentially transformative effect, before reflecting on the relationship between Pattison's emphasis on the outward and physical, and the inner contemplative journey. This is illustrated with a striking inter-faith example of seeing the face of the Buddha. In his response, Graeme Smith sees nothing less than a new vision for Western Christian theology in his reading of Pattison's account of intellectual history and the loss, in modernity, of any meaningful physical encounter with God's face. He notes how central to the argument is the work of Jewish theologian, Melissa Raphael, so it is a particular pleasure to have her contribution concluding this roundtable review. Drawing deeply on sources of Jewish theology she picks up precisely the point that Manon Ceridwen James noted could be further explored and offers a 'feminist supplement' to Pattison's argument.

Between them, the reviews highlight the theologically rich, inter-faith, culturally engaged conversation that is both contained in the pages of *Saving Face* and that it can, in turn, inspire. At many points the book is tantalising, inviting further exploration, and part of its significance is precisely the way it opens up many new avenues of thought and enquiry. I hope that the contributions to this roundtable review will inspire further conversation about the theological and practical significance of face and, as Melissa Raphael suggests, help us 'to resist the dis-appearance of the human'.

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<sup>1</sup> Pattison is here introducing the book to the Centre for Medical Humanities in Durham  
<<http://centreformedicalhumanities.org/stephen-pattison-introduces-his-new-book-saving-face-enfacement-shame-theology/>> [Accessed 8/06/17]

## *Saving Face* and Pastoral Practice

**Review by:** Manon Ceridwen James, Director of Ministry, Diocese of St Asaph, UK.

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This is a remarkable book, a companion in some ways to Pattison's challenging and perceptive *Shame*. Pattison himself is too modest about what his exploration can achieve – he claims he is offering only 'some theological horizons' (148) in order to challenge church and society to more meaningful engagement with faciality. However, there are rich resources here for those involved in pastoral and liturgical ministry, as well as those who want to think more deeply about identity, God and faith.

From a pastoral perspective, it is perhaps surprising that Pattison has not engaged more with attractiveness and consumerism, however the effect of engaging with this only briefly is that there is more space for a deeper and more nuanced reflection on the role of the face in terms of interpersonal relationships and identity. There is a call here for us to be more attentive to the faces of others and in so doing embodying the belief that each person is made in God's image. How we look at each other, Pattison notes, is socially constructed in terms of what is acceptable and what is uncomfortable. However, a gaze rather than a glance can be appropriately a form of valuing each person. For example, he recounts the story of a priest who consciously looks at each member of his congregation before the service starts in order to affirm and cherish them.

Another key insight is his exploration of the phrase 'the face of God'. As he points out, this trips off the tongue easily. But what does it mean? He reminds us that the face of God is a key liturgical as well as theological concept (as in the Aaronic blessing). He humorously comments that instead of 'May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh let his face shine on you and be gracious to you' what we really are thinking is 'May you sometimes have a sense that a benevolent invisible being is quite close to you; May this vague sense of invisible presence feel comforting, so you enjoy some inner tranquillity' (86). There is a challenge here to take seriously an embodied and real engagement with human experience and to see the face of God in each other in a concrete way. God is not just experienced as presence in a contemplative sense, but in human faces in all their diversity.

An important theme from a pastoral perspective is Pattison's reflection on those who live with shame or exclusion because of disfigurement, strokes, and various facial syndromes, or who cannot 'read' faces or physically see them. There are important insights here about how the face plays a very important part in both conveying, and beginning to heal, the experience of shame. There is also a challenge to the churches to attend to issues of stereotyping and exclusion as well as pastoral resources for those who work amongst those with physical, neurological and emotional issues with the face: 'Faces need to be valued, but people should not be taken at face value' (171).

Like *Shame* this is a book which merits re-reading and deep reflection, full of insights which will remain with the reader for a long time.

## *Saving Face*: Between Correlation and Contemplation

**Review by:** Andrew Todd, Coordinator for the Centre for Contemporary Spirituality and Programme Leader for the MA in Christian Spirituality, Sarum College. [atodd@sarum.ac.uk](mailto:atodd@sarum.ac.uk)

This is a book that is correlational in the richest sense, and which shines within the tradition of critical correlation of Browning, Tracy and Tillich. One of Pattison's own words for this is 'thickness', in the sense of Geertz's 'thick description'. Indeed, in engaging with the book's multi-layered approach, and its sensitivity to a very wide range of cultural perspectives, I began to have a sense of seeing faces in a way that was simultaneously and inextricably anthropological and theological – and these were not the only disciplines at work in the exploration of historic and contemporary understandings of face. This being correlational, drawing different disciplines into conversation, is one aspect of Pattison's practical theology.

A further aspect of the practical theological method, that stimulates and challenges the reader, is that this is not, and avowedly not, a systematic theology of face, but rather a theology that is more about seeing, than thinking. This allows for the rehabilitation and reworking of theologies and ways of seeing (as well as not seeing) the faces of God and humanity (and their interrelation); where those theologies and ways have been eclipsed, as Pattison argues, since the Reformation – so that we find enormous difficulty with seeing the face of God physically as well as metaphorically. As part of this dimension, I felt almost re-enabled to see the faces of God in those kinds of ways that Pattison identified as belonging to earlier cultures, but which have been disabled in our own, not least by our persistent Cartesian perspective. Or at least those ways of seeing felt tangible, almost sensible, as Pattison shined up the faces of God and humanity.

Being not systematic, however, is about more than offering 'a variety of insights' (161); it is about the book's clearly practical intent. In the tradition of practical theology, it theorises in order to re-enable practice and also to emancipate. The concern with those who have lost face and been shamed, and with how their faces might be saved, is core to the book. So also is the search for renewed ways of seeing faces, including seeing the face of God through the faces of others – what Pattison calls the practical hermeneutics of face. The continuing engagement with shame (building on Pattison's earlier work) is enormously powerful. It ranges from the anthropo-theological interpretation of the way in which Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, worked not outside contemporary structures of honour and shame, but with alternative structures, reversing 'the flow of shame onto the visually socially respected', redirecting it 'in favour of the poor...' (104). It ranges to consideration of contemporary practices of mutual recognition, including recognition of physical difference; and of 'difficult seeing' that has the potential to transform our relationality and our seeing of how together we are the *imago Dei*.

*Saving Face* is, then, a remarkable and generative work of practical theology. As someone working as a practical theologian in the field of spirituality, one of the areas where I would value further conversation and correlation than is offered by the book, is in relation to the inner contemplative journey, which Pattison rather sets on one side. For example, contemporary Ignatian spirituality, in its use of the imagination in meditation on Bible passages, is capable of stimulating responses to the other and to God, that might well focus on both seeing imaginatively and the faces of those encountered in meditation. Such encounters, involving imagining through the senses, are also as much physical as metaphorical. And other paths of contemplation and 'inner' seeing also have the potential to enrich our 'outer' seeing, including our seeing face; just as the unitive experience of such practice is not unconnected with the contemplative's everyday relationality. This is perhaps suggested by an inter-religious example of face-seeing – Thomas Merton's response to the giant Buddhas of Polonnaruwa:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything – *without refutation* – without establishing some other argument (1973:233).

Seeing 'without refutation' connects particularly with Pattison's work. For this is Merton's seeing, as well as the Buddhas' – it is the contemplative's inner and outer seeing, insight and extra-sight, that recognises, but also transcends difference.

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## Washing Faces and Saving God: New Directions for Protestant Theology

**Review by:** Graeme Smith, Professor of Public Theology and Head of the Department of Theology, Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Chichester, UK. [g.smith@chi.ac.uk](mailto:g.smith@chi.ac.uk)

I took up Stephen Pattison's innovative, stimulating and excellent book expecting to be fascinated by his analysis of the place and function of faces in contemporary society. Pattison is a thorough scholar who I knew would unearth the most important aspects of this neglected, but significant, topic. However, in the end, what engrossed me most was his analysis of the crisis in the Western Christian theology, and his proposals for addressing this crisis. Pattison offers an analysis of the emergence of secularism in the West, how God, if not dead, is at least missing in action, and how theologians are largely responsible for this divine absence because of the way in which they talk about salvation. He also suggests what must be done, by humans, to save God. Pattison could not write a dull book should he ever wish to try and, with its surprising byways and challenging propositions, this is perhaps his most creative yet. It is a work rich in theological ideas.

There are two types of salvation explored by Pattison in *Saving Faces*. The first is salvation from shame and although this is very important for the book it is not the idea I wish to explore here. Instead my intention is to discuss a second discourse in which Pattison speaks, more daringly, of the need for God to be saved by humanity. One of the most interesting chapters in the book is chapter 5, 'Seeing the Face of God in the Bible'. The chapter discusses the materiality of God, the reality of God's face, and the concreteness of God's presence. Pattison argues that 'for centuries, the whole aim of Christian life was ultimately to see God's face' (86). This was not, as tends to be thought now, a mystical or metaphorical 'seeing', it had a concrete materiality, an immediate, earthly, reality. The origins of this theology are in Judaism. Pattison writes that, 'it seems early Hebrew society did not make the same kind of absolute distinctions between human and non-human aspects of existence that are made in the modern West' (90). There was a fluidity between what we now think of as two realms: '[w]hile the place that the gods inhabited, heaven, could be distinguished from the place where humans dwelt, there was no absolute fixed boundary between heaven and earth' (90). The focus for the presence of God was the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the place 'where God was taken to dwell and to be permanently accessible'; where people could come 'to enjoy face-to-face

communion with the divine presence in a richly visual environment' (95). This did not mean that God was fully exposed. Pattison writes that in the Old Testament there is a simultaneous presence and absence of God. 'To see the face of God is to experience God's presence directly, but, as with human faces and persons, there is something beyond what is seen; thus humans cannot comprehend or control the divine. God is both known (revelatus) and unknown (absconditus)' (98). However, the point is not to emphasise the hiddenness of God, that has been over-stressed, but to explore the visible, material reality of God.

The significance of this Jewish theology for Christianity is apparent in the self-understanding of Jesus and the early Church. Pattison writes that 'Jesus (then) saw himself and his followers as the place where the eschatological Temple was coming into being in the Kingdom of God, the place where God would be present and could be encountered and worshipped' (101). The 'early Christians' understanding of Jesus' life and work was expressed in terms of Temple theology, so that they conceived of themselves as parts of the Temple, angels on earth, holy ones who have seen and reflect the glory of God (2 Cor. 3:18), sons of God like the Temple priests, 'sons of light' (1 Thess. 5:5) (101). And in this divine / human world Jesus was the High Priest. Pattison spends time exploring the importance of this theology of interconnected worlds, which lasts until the end of the first Christian millennium. In the second things start to change.

Pattison argues that 'from Aquinas onwards' theologians changed emphasis and those defending Christianity 'bracketed out the lived experience of the religious community, the personal, the experiential and the importance of Jesus, to create a philosophically acceptable God' (131). What this meant was that 'God was objectified philosophically, then found not to be either knowable or interesting' (131). The living, real face of God was confined to a book, albeit the (face) Book. In a rebuff to Milbank and the Radical Orthodox, Pattison is arguing that the philosophical project of defending the idea of God to Modernity has led to the very thing it was meant to avoid, namely the absence of God. Instead Pattison wants to propose that 'it is time to write God's face back into theology' (133).

What does a theology of God's face look like? How can theologians talk about the material presence and reality of God? Surprisingly, Pattison goes to the place in which God is most frequently described as absent to find his answer, Auschwitz. He turns to the work of Melissa Raphael and her description of how women in Auschwitz would clean away the faeces and dirt on each other's faces; 'women cared for and enfaced each other by small acts of washing and care using dirty cloths, spittle and other means' (142). The women restored the presence, the glory, of God. Where God was hidden by defilement and impurity, the women made God visible again, allowing God to be seen in each other. As Pattison notes, what is striking here is that God and the women are partners, each with a role to play in the economy of God's presence (143).

To Protestant theological ears this all sounds very dangerous. It seems to, at best, minimize, at worst, ignore any notion of human sinfulness. People cannot be God's partners, agents of God's visibility and glory, because people are sinful. Karl Barth has taught us as much. In fact, is not the other side of Auschwitz the absence of sin in the ideology of Nazism? Without sin we give glory, not to God, but to all too human ideologies, making idols of temporal politics with the obvious and apparent evil consequences. I suspect Pattison would respond to this critique by emphasizing the excluded nature of the new Temple community founded in Christ, how its members are shamed and dishonoured. This is not to say they are without sin, but that they are visible signs of injustice and

oppression. I would add that Pattison's advocacy of human agency in the divine economy is a much needed corrective to the Barthian captivity of twentieth century theology. Theology's imprisonment has coincided with the dominance of secularism, the invisibility of God. It is time to heed Pattison's call to prioritise a theology of practice, a practical theology, in which God is a real, material, visible presence, recognized and celebrated in the porous boundaries between heaven and earth. It is time to speak of our encounter with God face to face.

## Jewish and Christian Theology Saving the Idolised Female Face

**Review by:** Melissa Raphael, Professor of Jewish Theology, University of Gloucestershire, UK.  
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In a time of 'cultural blindness', *Saving Face* could not be a more timely induction into seeing 'the faces of God and of humans better'; into re-learning the face as a "'deep, but dazzling darkness'", whose mystery is that of 'what might be seen of God in the external perceptual world' (14, 151). Pattison's book is, I think, one of the three great contemporary Christian works on the sanctity of the face – the other two being by Roger Scruton (2012) and Claudia Welz (2016).

All three books are necessarily indebted to, if not finally defined by, a Hebrew theological anthropology. A Jewish theology of the face, which I regard as a visual, phenomenological one, can be traced from the first chapter of Genesis onto, say, R. Ben Azzai who claimed that the creation of the human in the image of God is the *klal gadol* (great principle) of the Torah (JT Nedarim 9:4), and on into the modern period where Franz Rosenzweig approached the face as 'a vessel for receiving and expressing God's truth' (1985:423). Most notable among the post-Holocaust philosophers who bore witness to the sanctity of the face after the dispersion of the face of European Jewry into smoke and ash was Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas affirmed that the dimension of the divine, the not-yet, filters through the pathos of the open face as an 'obscure light coming from beyond the face' (1995:78, 254).<sup>2</sup> Yitz Greenberg and myself also understood the Nazis' savage assault on the divine image in the human as an assault not only on the meaning but also on the very flesh of the human face.

My contribution to this roundtable is no more than a feminist supplement to Pattison's own insights (quite literally) into the crisis of the face, especially as discussed in the fourth chapter of his book, 'Face, Presence, and the 'Face behind Face''. I want to draw on the distinctively counter-idolatrous Jewish theology of the face, at once hidden and manifest, as a site of (anti)-revelation in order to suggest that a symptom and cause of our contemporary cultural blindness to the 'dazzling darkness' – the image of God - in the human face is, as it has ever been, idolatry.

Twenty-first century false images are produced by technologies of which Jewish scriptures could have no inkling. But the rabbis' understanding of the Second Commandment as a means by which to stabilise the image of God in the face is as, or more, pertinent than ever. *Halakhot* tabled principally

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<sup>2</sup> On the aesthetic implications of this theology of the face, see Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow' in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. and ed. by Seàn Hand. Oxford, Blackwell, 1989 and 'The Prohibition against Representation and "The Rights of Man"' and *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael Smith, London, Athlone Press, 1999.



by Maimonides and Joseph Caro require any representation of the human face to be undertaken idoloclastically, that is, in ways that avoid or criticise its idolisation. An image of a face must neither alienate its humanity nor its divinity. It must remain one made in the image of its own Creator, not a strange god created by 'man' (Raphael 2009, 2013 & 2016). Both the rabbis and later Jewish philosophers recognised that idolatry (*avodah zara*, literally, service to strange things) is not a local religious misdemeanour. It is a pervasive sin of estrangement to which none of us is immune: the appropriation and transference of absolute value from that which is a true, orative, mobile image of the original – whether divine or human - to its copy: a substitutive, unmoving mimetic idea.

One of the most prevalent of contemporary culture's manifold estrangements is its idolisation of the female face. This is a cosmetically reimagined, hyper-visual, fixed and homogenised face whose perfection shames and obviates (to use a term helpfully introduced by Pattison, 167) natural, diverse female faces into sub-visibility. The needs of women who lack the power of youth, health or money; who have nothing to sell or to buy, are culturally unregarded and therefore unmet. Set against the exaggerated features of faces that are pornologised as objects of desire (at the most dystopian end of the spectrum, dead-eyed faces are now being spray-painted onto robotic silicone sex dolls) a naturally ageing face begins to look strange, and its amortised copy begins to look normal. As Buber would have put it, seeming (*Schein*) is displacing being (*Sein*) (1966:72-88).

Hubristic technology's capacity to reverse God's created order has relational consequences that are only now becoming apparent. One of *Saving Face's* most significant cameos is that of the woman who could no longer respond facially to others after suffering a stroke. With a 'wooden' face, she felt herself fade away as a person (7). Pattison notes that 'if you cannot see a person's real face and associate it with their identity, then relationships of openness and trust become very problematic' (46). Just as a guest would feel ill at ease arriving for dinner at an unlit home, a dialogical encounter with the otherness of the other is a facially as well as linguistically expressive moment of hospitality. The cosmetic arrest of a face, which Pattison properly describes as 'the prime living expression or manifestation of the self' (20) is a cancellation of both self and other. The meaning of a face is in its relationality: that it turns, lit-up, to face what faces it. Its 'I' is impossible without its 'Thou'.

The facial individuation of women has probably never been less valued than it is today, when ideology deploys technology to market a standard, mass-produced model of the patriarchal feminine ideal (as I write, American cosmetic surgeons are being asked by women to make them look like Ivanka Trump). Yet the use of needles and blades to correct the difference, namely the self, of a female face into the sameness of everyone else is an act of violence against its incommensurability: the *imago dei* itself.

In so far as the idolised female face is one that has been frozen and carved into bad art or propaganda, it is opaque to its singular history and futurity. Far from offering a secular eternal life of unending youth, the idolised face is, thereby, in captivity to death because what cannot die has not yet lived. *Saving Face* presents a practical theology for the resurrection, as it were, of the face. Not all of the book is theologically available to Jews. But in so far as his book is grounded in biblical monotheism's prophetic criticism of culture, Pattison has more than laid the foundations for a Jewish-Christian theological coalition by which to resist the dis-appearance of the human.

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