

The Australian novelist Christos Tsiolkas has created a brutal retelling of St Paul's life. Interview by **Sarah Meyrick**

*DAMASCUS*, the new book by the Australian novelist Christos Tsiolkas, is not for the faint-hearted. A vivid reimagining of the early years of Christianity, it is an ambitious project. Told from different perspectives, the narrative sweeps back and forth over several decades.

The scene-painting is unflinching: blood and guts, sex and violence. The result is what critics in the Australian press have called “a narrative of shock and awe, fear and trembling”, and “a hellish book full of poignant glimpses through a dark mirror — horrifying, disheartening and often rawly written”.

Tsiolkas is probably best known here for *The Slap*, an international bestseller that won the 2009 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and was longlisted for the Booker. It was adapted into a TV series that was shown on BBC4. *Damascus* is his sixth novel, and has already won the 2020 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction. It was released here in March.

Tsiolkas's work is generally known for its uncomfortable exposure of the underbelly of contemporary society, and his ability to spark strong reaction. (The swiftest glance at the Amazon reviews shows just how far he divides readers.) So why turn his attention to St Paul?

The explanation is very personal. Tsiolkas — the son of Greek immigrants — was brought up in the Greek Orthodox Church. As an adolescent, fearful of his sexuality, he fell in with a group of Evangelical Protestants at school. No amount of praying for a “cure” seemed to work. “At the age of 15, in the middle of a Bible study group, I realised I no longer believed in the Christian God,” he says. “I didn't believe in any god. I had become an atheist.”

Fast forward 12 years, and he hit the buffers. One day, he found himself slipping into a church to pray to a God he didn't believe in. To his surprise, he found solace. He picked up the New Testament, and started reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

“For the first time, I became aware of Paul as a man struggling to make sense of the world,” he says now. “I was reading the thoughts of a flesh-and-blood man, not a rarefied saint.” Tsiolkas was still an atheist, “But that day I abandoned my rage at God.”

Many years later, not long after the death of his father, he found himself talking to his mother about her pain when he came out. As a migrant woman, she lived in a community where discussions of sex and sexuality were considered shameful, and she had had nowhere to turn. He asked her how she'd got through. “She told me how it was reading Paul's letters in her Greek copy of the Bible that gave her both strength and understanding. She said, ‘I realised, through Paul's words, that God loves you.’”

This sparked the idea for *Damascus*. Paul has often been held responsible for sexual stigmatisation in



# Five years among the slaves

contemporary society. “For myself, and for my mother, encounters with Paul's words indicated that this is not the whole story,” Tsiolkas says. “I wanted to comprehend this man.”

It was the start of a five-year obsession, in which Paul dominated his dreams, his imagination, and his curiosity (“Seven long and tortuous drafts, and the first two were bloody awful”). He undertook a huge amount of research. “I made the choice of not writing for at least a year,” he says. “I read texts written between the fourth century BC and the first century AD: it was the most wonderful thing to disappear into that world. I also walked the places Paul walked. I needed to smell the vegetation.”

He discovered the Gnostic Gospels. “I became obsessed with the Gospel of Thomas,” he says. “What is astonishing . . . is that there is no reference or mention of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. For academics and theologians, [these] texts reveal that there were myriad currents to early Christianity, including an understanding of Jesus as a prophet rather than the incarnation of the Godhead itself.”

What were the other surprises? He says he was taken aback by how much the story of women had been erased as Christianity became the religion of empire. “I'd been having discussions and conversations for decades about sexism, but I was still shocked,” he says — this despite the astonishing statement that women and men and slaves and freeborn citizens and Gentiles and Jews were all equal. “I went into a cave in Antioch where a woman's image was scratched out. Their history was annihilated.”

Another shock was realising that

one of his own life struggles wasn't new. “Part of my struggle as the child of migrants was the shame element. You grow up thinking you will marry and have children, and, if you don't, you don't have meaning. I suddenly realised that none of these people had been married, and that felt revelatory. This has been a tension in the Church for 2000 years.”

I wondered whether the cruelty of the ancient world had shocked him, as it will almost certainly shock many readers. “We're taught about slave society in high school, but we don't think what that means,” he says. “It was [a society that was] incredibly brutal to most of its people. They lived without any dignity, any rights, and I wanted to give expression for that. You never normally hear the voice of the slave. The one place you do hear it is in the Gospels, and in Paul's writings. He says the slave is loved by God.”

This is why Jesus's teaching was so radical, as was the crucifixion. “I'd taken for granted the crucifixion. But the astonishing thing — the scandal — is that a person who was tortured and abused and violently destroyed in this shameful way should be treated as the Saviour. . . What does that say about where God resides?”

Tsiolkas says that he has been left with a greater respect for the teachings of Christianity. “There's no way of writing the story of Paul without coming to a reckoning with this man, Jesus. To love one's neighbour, to turn the other cheek, and to understand that none of us have the right to throw the first stone all remain fundamental to my ethics and to my being in the world.”

He refers to an incident when

some boys in his primary-school class called the mother of another classmate a slut, because the girl's parents were divorced. “My teacher, Miss Lunemann, told us the story about Jesus coming across the woman caught in adultery, and said, ‘If you are without sin, cast the first stone.’ She was a storyteller, and those words have never left me.”

It is only now, in his fifties, that Tsiolkas could write this novel, he says. “Christianity has been part of my life for decades. I wanted to understand and make sense of it, make my peace with it. It was something, when I was younger, that I was embarrassed to discuss, because I'm part of a literary world that is dismissive. Now I can say: ‘Do you want to talk about social justice? Do you want to talk about love and compassion?’”

He emphasises that *Damascus* is intended as a serious investigation, written in good faith, and not an attack on Christianity. So what has been the reaction to the novel so far? He says that he's been “pleasantly surprised” by the interest from people of faith. “Just a few months ago, I was invited by the University of Melbourne to have a conversation [about *Damascus*] with three Anglican priests.”

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“They were wanting to engage with me as a writer and a person, to talk about what is fiction and what is theology.”

No angry kneejerk responses, then? “One of the things I have done is decide not to be on social media, for my sanity. It's really different being in a room together: you're able to argue in a respectful manner.”

He admits to “a quizzical response” from some of his regular readers, but refers me to his 2005 novel, *Dead Europe*. “It's a book that came out of my being in Eastern Europe after the Velvet Revolution, and it's about faith, or the loss of faith, in Communism. You can have the same fundamentalism, whether religious or secular. That book also asks what faith is, and what is important.”

The book is yet to be published in the United States, because of the coronavirus, but he will be interested in the critical response in the US when that happens. Most of all, though, he would like it to be published in Greece, so that his mother — a woman of deep faith — can read it. This is looking precarious, because, in recent years, his Greek publishers have fallen victim to the economic crisis.

His partner, Wayne, believes that what Tsiolkas has learned through writing this book will never leave him. “I began this work wanting to understand Paul,” Tsiolkas says. “Of course, history can't be forgotten, and history's ghosts have also made their way into this novel. But I am not wrestling with Paul any longer. I'm walking alongside him.”

*Damascus* is published by Atlantic Books at £16.99 (Church Times Bookshop £15.30).