VINTAGE

Journey

Peter France

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About the Book

In *Journey*, Peter France looks at the various stages of his own spiritual odyssey and talks intimately of his long search for knowledge and enlightenment. Warm, lucid, humerous, *Journey* is grounded in France's own life and experience. He takes us from the beginning of his journey in a small Methodist chapel in Yorkshire, and his first perception of Christianity, through Oxford where he rejected Christianity and became a humanist and a career as a colonial administrative officer in Fiji, to his later position as an investigative reporter for BBC religious television. Finally – and movingly – he writes about his conversion to the Greek Orthodox Church, and describes his baptism at the age of 57 on the Greek island of Patmos by total immersion in a 44 gallon oil drum of lukewarm water. Illuminated by personal anecdote and information by a broad knowledge of different religions and religious experiences, *Journey* is both immensely engaging, and studded with powerful spiritual insight.

About the Author

Peter France was educated at New College, Oxford. He gave up his academic work as a research historian to write and present the BBC religious television series *Everyman* and *Heart of the Matter*. After fifteen years investigating religious subjects he was received into the Eastern Orthodox church and currently divides his time between Devon and the island of Patmos. He is the author of three books: *The Rape of Egypt, Greek as a Treat* and *Hermits* which is published by Pimlico.

Also by Peter France

HERMITS

To Felicia
who,
having watched me spend so much time
and energy
in scaling the battlements,
quietly
found the front door
and opened it

JOURNEY

A Spiritual Odyssey

PETER FRANCE

Chapter One

Father Christmas was not a Wise Man. You could see from his shape that he spent more hours at his table than at his telescope, and his face had the open, cheerful expression of somebody who doesn't waste a lot of time thinking. He was a dumpy figure in a short red tunic with a hood; the Magi were tall, gaunt and serious, with striped turbans and long sepia robes. But Father Christmas stood with them on a brass tray in front of the chapel pulpit; and he looked, with them, at the baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying on a handful of hay. I think there were shepherds as well. I remember a few sheep. And definitely cattle, whose lowing, we sang, woke the baby.

Christmas in the village of Clifton, near Brighouse, Yorkshire, when I was a small boy, was a time of wonder. It was the season for the suspension of disbelief. Just for a few days, once a year, the village would unite in a benign conspiracy to celebrate fantasy. As children, we were its focus. The world of fantasy was our territory, and we were a bit surprised when the grown-ups came to join us there once a year. We always forgot that they would go back to their own world when the season was over.

At the age of around eight or nine, some of us colluded with them in keeping secret the identity of the man behind the false white whiskers at the Co-op. But I could never quite get a straight answer about the shepherds and the wise men who stood with Father Christmas on the brass tray in the chapel. I did notice that quite a lot of the people who joined us on the village green before Christmas and sang enthusiastically about shepherds watching their flocks

by night, or three kings of Orient following yonder star, didn't show up at chapel for the rest of the year. And it didn't take long to work out that they too were part of the conspiracy. Father Christmas with his reindeer, shepherds with their little lambs, wise men and their gifts – all these were part of the fantasy world the grown-ups came together to pretend to believe in once a year for the sake of the kids. But what about the Little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay?

Well, at Sunday school we sang that there's a friend for little children above the bright blue sky, and that Jesus wants me for a sunbeam to shine for him each day. We couldn't imagine that he would pick out as a sunbeam middle-aged spinsters like Nelly Ramsbottom or Violet Nobbs, or even the local squire, Sir George Armytage. So any shining that was called for would have to be done by us kids. Jesus, too, along with the other figures on the brass tray, was strictly for the children.

But there was a problem here: quite a few of the grown-ups went on singing about Jesus all the year round, as if he were somehow different. As if they even believed that he really had existed. Some of them even spoke as if he still did exist, that we had such a friend in Jesus – all our pains and griefs to bear. But I couldn't help noticing that they weren't the cleverest or most successful people in the village. Perhaps Jesus was only a reality for the failures, the people who needed his help. I noticed that these people seemed to be the ones with the most pain and grief to bear. Their faces were tight and drawn as they sat on the chapel benches in uncomfortable clothes. There was no laughter in chapel. It seemed to me that these people were trying so very hard to be good; and being good took such a lot out of them.

I also decided that they must be not very intelligent. I had read somewhere that intelligence is the ability to learn from experience. These people would pray every Sunday

for something that didn’t happen: they would ask for the recovery of sick people, who then died; they would pray to God to help and protect our troops in, battle, and they lost; they would ask in summer for seasonable weather, and it poured.

I don’t remember, as a child, having a great problem with unanswered prayer. Jesus had told us that if we really believed that he could move a mountain, and we asked him, he would do it. But I knew that I could never convince myself that he could. I did try, just once. We didn’t have any mountains around Clifton, but there were the ‘pit hills’ – slag heaps overgrown with grass where we used to play. And I once knelt in the grass and closed my eyes and asked him to slide them a couple of yards nearer to the fence to prove to me that he meant what he said. But when I opened my eyes again the pit hills had stayed where they were. Just as I expected. And I had to admit to myself that I never really believed they would move. So I accepted that my prayers would never be answered because I could never truly believe. And I supposed that applied to everybody who prayed.

I was sent to Sunday school to get me out of the house. I remember reading some social historian who revealed that the only way working-class couples could reproduce themselves in their cramped and overcrowded dwellings was by sending the kids off to Sunday school so they had a brief time on their own. There were five of us – four boys and a girl – and I was the middle one. We all had a taste of Sunday school.

My dad was not a religious man. He was born in 1900 – a bad time to arrive if you wanted to hold fast to the idea of a loving God and a Christian society. At eighteen he was driving a team of mules through the mud of the battlefields of France; in his early thirties he was stuck in the recession and handing out bread and dripping to the Jarrow

marchers. He was getting properly on his feet and looking forward to a peaceful and prosperous future only by 1939.

Dad had little formal education. He had been taught at the village school by Mr Tomlinson, himself not a scholar but a long-distance runner who had done a crash course to become a teacher when the laws on compulsory education were changed and there was a national shortage of teachers. Dad left school at twelve years old and got a job, first as an 'oiler and takker off' in a cotton mill at Brighouse and then, following the family tradition, at Hartshead pit. His job as a fourteen-year-old was to sort the coal 'on t'shakker', which meant standing by a conveyor belt and picking out the shale and stones from the pieces of coal as they passed along. His ambition was to work with his dad down the pit as a 'ripper': to crouch up against the coalface and hack away at the seam with a short-handled pick. It helped to be compact if you were a 'ripper'. Short arms and legs with a broad chest. The France genes had supplied these.

But it was not to be. The pit manager was keen to have another France down the mine but grandad objected. There was a row in the manager's office. 'The day I see *thy* son working at t'coal face,' said grandad to the boss, 'I'll let my lad down to work alongside 'im.' So they were both given their cards and sent down the fields back home. Dad got a job apprenticed to a butcher, a trade he then followed for the rest of his life. He rented a smallholding from Sir George Armytage; on this he planted potatoes, grazed a house cow and brought up five children. He had been promoted, though he never realized it to the end of his days, in the eyes of the Registrar General from the working-class to the lower middle.

Dad would never have accepted the classification. To be working-class was a matter of social loyalty, not of employment. He called himself working-class all his life, and had the clearest vision of the eternal conflict of class

interests. Quite simply, what was good for the bosses was bad for the workers: the one fought for longer hours and shorter wages; the other for the opposite. And this basic conflict was reflected in life as a whole. There were men with soft hands and posh voices who had to be treated with respect if they had power over us. But their interests were not ours. Things which operated to their benefit were on that account harmful to us, no matter how they tried to conceal this. To be unaware of this – to vote Tory, for example – was to show stupidity. To join the soft-handed was to be a class traitor.

He never discussed religion with us, but I know he had a passion for the truth and felt that Christianity was unacceptable because parsons told lies in the interest of maintaining the inequalities of a social system in which they had a comfortable place. His attachment to truth was so strong that he hated baby talk. A horse was a horse and not a gee-gee. It was wrong to corrupt a child's mind with untruth, so the books he bought us were encyclopaedias and not fairy tales.

He felt the chapel was for the working-class and the church for the others. And he criticized both – as did, and do, outsiders – for being hypocritical: for claiming virtues they didn't practise. He followed Marxist economic doctrine in accepting that the basic injustice in society was caused by the bosses misappropriating the economic surplus to their benefit. So he probably also accepted Marx's idea that the bosses fed religion to the people like opium to keep them quiet. The only comment of his I can remember on the subject was that it seemed strange, when Christians claimed we were all equal in the sight of God, that they should reserve in church a special pew for Sir George Armytage in which other members of the congregation were not allowed to pray.

Whatever distaste he felt for religion, it didn't stop him sending us off to Sunday school every week. At the

Methodist chapel we were part of the institution that had been the seedbed of the Labour Party. The text painted on the wall read BLESSED ARE THE MEEK FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH. And we were taught that Jesus loved the poor. Our life on earth, we learned, is harsh; but if we go short in this life we shall rejoice in the next. We took no small pleasure from the reassurance that the well-to-do were in for a hard time. Our favourite biblical text was the Magnificat: 'He hath filled the hungry with good things; *and the rich he hath sent empty away*.'

We felt a bit smug about the middle-classes who went to the Church of England across the road, and I enjoyed picturing them in the afterlife as a crowd of camels bumping against the needle's eye. Chapel made us secure on the bottom rung. The preacher, Dad pointed out, had muck under his fingernails. He knew about real life. He had worked for a living.

I was taken to Clifton Chapel before I could walk, by a devout spinster called Ada Hopper. Ada was a living demonstration of the principle that the strength of belief in the goodness of God is in inverse proportion to the evidence. She was always poor. Her father had died when she was a child – on Christmas Eve. Her betrothed was killed in the First World War, and she decided to give her life to Jesus. She worked every day in the dust and grime and among the clattering machinery of a cotton mill; she spent her evenings reading the Bible or teaching it to children. She loved children.

Ada had what we called in the village 'religious mania'. By that we meant that she tried to live her life like a disciple of Jesus, in humility and with love for everybody. She would not have been out of place in an enclosed religious order. In the industrial North she seemed simple-minded. You couldn't cope with real life without craft and the assertion of self-interest. These were the qualities we admired. The so-called 'Christian' virtues of self-sacrifice,

humility and love for your neighbour – and even more incredibly for your enemy – were fine for the parsons who didn't have to work for a living. The rest of us could not afford them.

For some reason, Ada had a particular affection for me. It could have been because, as a small boy, I looked particularly angelic, with blue eyes and a bubbly mass of light-yellow curly hair. Appearances in small boys can be especially deceptive. She would pick me up from home and take me to the chapel, where I sat on the back steps and crushed the stems of daffodils as she arranged the flowers for the glory of God and told me if I would only take Jesus into my heart it would be filled with joy. The word 'joy' she would whisper close to my face, drawing back her lips from her teeth with her eyes shining earnestly. She spoke the word with an ardour that approached ferocity, and I was embarrassed. Whatever 'joy' meant to her, I could see there was little comfort in it and no pleasure. I shrank away from the invitation: my sights were set on getting as much as I could of both.

So I crossed the road to the Anglican church where the environment was plusher. Members of the congregation there lived in clean stone semis instead of soot-stained back-to-back cottages. They had pianos in the front room and antimacassars on the armchairs. Their newspapers were (I knew because I did the paper round) the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express.* One even took *The Times.* Not a *Daily Herald* or a *Daily Worker* among them. And I knew this meant they were content with their lot and keen to preserve it against the ambitions of the less fortunate. The vicar's name was painted in gold letters on a black noticeboard outside the church followed by '(M.A. Oxon)'. I remember my dad once pointing to this and cautioning, 'That shows he's not one of us.' But the vicar lived in a big house with sweeping lawns; he spoke like a BBC announcer; he had soft white hands; he had plenty of

money and had clearly never done a day's work in his life. He was a man I could learn things from.

There was another attraction. In the porch of the church hung a notice listing all the archbishops of Canterbury since the foundation of the see by St Augustine, via Taetwine, Breogwine and Joenbehrt right down to Cosmo Gordon Lang, who held the position when I joined his Church in 1941. It claimed that St Augustine was in direct line from the Apostles, and so Cosmo Gordon Lang was too – an impressive historical connection. This had to be the real thing.

The final draw was the promise of cash – for the first time in my life I discovered that it was possible to earn money without getting physically tired. On offer at the Church of St John was sixpence a week for boys who sang in the choir. The money was written against your name every Sunday so long as you had turned up for Friday choir practice and put in your stint at matins and evensong. But there was a shrewd condition attached to the pay-out: choirboys would receive their accumulated sixpences only if they stayed with the choir until their voices broke. By the time this happened, of course, adolescence had struck and boys had better things to do with their Friday evenings than attend choir practice. As I remember, nobody ever stayed on to collect the cash.

The question of confirmation came up. I had decided that no sane and intelligent person would ever consent to be confirmed, because so long as you could dodge the ceremony you were not responsible to God for your behaviour: all your sins fell on your godparents. Out of a cautious self-interest and under threat from the recording angel, I had already begun a tentative reading of theology and I discovered that my godparents had, at baptism, promised that I would 'renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same and the carnal desires of the flesh'.

They had done this on my behalf when I was in no position to speak for myself. *I* had made no such promise. To be confirmed was to take over the responsibility for an undertaking which, even in my preadolescent years, I sensed might be foolhardy.

How I was expected, at the age of ten, to have come to the conclusion that a being called God had made me and the world, with not a jot of evidence for either supposition, I found hard to understand. Yet, if I consented to be confirmed, I had to declare my belief in this before a bishop and witnesses, and undertake that I would not allow my manservant nor my maidservant nor my cattle nor the stranger that is within my gates to do any manner of work on Sundays. There was plenty to talk about. I decided that intellectual honesty forced me to delay acceptance of confirmation until I could be convinced that affirmations I was expected to make in public were true. In the meantime the recording angel would have to stay his pencil or write up my misdeeds in somebody else's ledger.

In 1942, when I was eleven, I passed 'for the grammar'. That is, I had managed enough marks in a county minor scholarship to be allotted a place at Rastrick Grammar School, a seventeenth-century foundation in a village four miles away with an enrolment of 150 boys and a staff of twelve teachers. This meant that I travelled on the morning bus at 8.22 each day, wearing a red and black cap which I had persuaded my eldest brother to run over several times on his motor bike so it would not look new. I always tried for the seat three up from the back, because it sat over the axle and alongside the wheelbox. So it was a single seat. I could read undisturbed.

I really can't remember how much of my reading at the time was slaking a thirst for knowledge and how much was a pose. I had heard friends of the family telling my mother that they thought my brain would be turned soft if she wasn't careful because 'he always has his nose in a book'.

Because I had a habit of cleaning my teeth, which was thought to be an unmanly concern with personal appearance, they already suspected that I might be developing into a homosexual. Families often create roles for the children to act out. There were five of us, and from the age of about ten I was ‘the Prof’: a bit soft in the head, never knows what day it is, forgetful, ‘would lose his head if it were loiss [not fixed on]’. So I acted out the role and would never appear in public without a book. When I did the shopping at the local Co-op, about quarter of a mile away, I would walk there and back with a shopping basket in one hand and a book in the other. And I wouldn’t raise my eyes from the page except to fill the basket at the shop and empty it at home.

Much of what I read at the time I couldn’t understand. I followed two rules in the choice of book: (1) it must be ‘true’, that is, factual – I could not abide fiction, since there was no point in cramming a developing brain with lies – and (2) it must be adult, since children’s books were for children and I was at grammar school. The rich world of the child’s imagination was closed to me. I wanted to know things which were so, and had no concern with things which were not.

I was for a time mildly frustrated at not looking like a professor. Professors were tall and gaunt from much studying and always had thick glasses. I was rather short and thick-set, and my eyesight was fine. I was intimidated, I remember, by boys with glasses at the grammar school, because I thought that they must have read a great deal more than I. But when the examination results placed bespectacled scholars below me, I grew in self-confidence.

About this time I discovered the classical Greeks. They were, I understood, clever and had laid the foundations of intellectual life in Europe. But they were also physically fit. They took a pride in their bodies. They even had muscles which showed. And it occurred to me that, if I couldn’t

aspire to the wilting physique of the intellectuals I admired – Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, Bernard Shaw – then I would try to be a classical Greek and cultivate a sane mind in a healthy body. I read the account of Milon, the most famous wrestler at the Olympic games, who built up his strength by lifting a newborn calf on to his shoulders and then picking up the animal each day as it grew until he was able to march around the Olympic stadium with a fully grown bull on his shoulders. He then killed it and ate it in a single day. I did not believe the last bit of the story, but I had no weight-training equipment and my dad had started to rear calves so I picked up one of them one morning and tried to sling it across my shoulders. It kicked me in the eye and made a mess down my shirt, so my mother told me not to try again.

Then I discovered, from the magazine *Health and Strength*, that there was a weightlifting club in a pub called the Rising Sun at Scholes, about three miles away. I began training three times a week, pedalling furiously there and back on my bike to strengthen heart and lungs, and working seriously through a programme of exercises to reduce or enlarge different bits of me so that I would end up physically perfect. There were at the time two different schools of thought in the bodybuilding world. One, led by the Americans, believed that more is better and concentrated on building bigger bodies, so that the winners of their competitions were the ones who clocked up most inches on the tape-measure. The other school, led by the French, taught that we should aim at balance and proportion: twice round the wrist is once round the neck; twice round the neck is once round the waist; and so on. They published the vital statistics of Greek statues, and urged us to imitate them. I attached myself to the French school.

It was while bicycling to and from the Rising Sun that twin ambitions formed in my mind. I wanted above all

things to be clever and I was excited at the prospect of looking like a Greek god, so I decided to aim at being appointed a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and winning the Mr Universe contest in the same year. In furtherance of the first ambition I decided to commit to memory the contents of the *Everyman Encyclopaedia*, which we had in the school library. I looked at the spines every morning: A to BAD; BAD to BRI; BRI to CHU; CHU to DEN; DEN to FIL etc. I was a fast reader and had a good memory, so could see no reason why, in the course of my five years at Rastrick Grammar School, I should not learn the lot and then nobody could deny me a scholarship to Oxford and the rest was easy. I was reasonably certain that the three sessions a week pumping iron over the public bar of the Rising Sun would make me swell in all the right places. Life seemed set fair for a career as an intellectual Adonis.

The first doubts struck when I reached the Bayeux Tapestry, which had a crisp entry in Volume 2 of the *Everyman.* To astonish any future examiner, I had tucked away in the back of my brain the fact that it is 231 feet long and 20 inches wide when I realized I no longer knew who Aaron's wife was nor whether the aardvark was confined to Africa or India. I could read at great speed, I could hold in my brain a large number of facts; but the understanding dawned that they didn't hang around in there. This was a revelation. I had never thought that if I once knew something I could cease to know it just through the passage of time. All Souls began to recede.

The body seemed to be swelling satisfactorily towards perfection. I had sent away to *Health and Strength* my vital statistics, including wrist and ankle size, height and weight, with a full-frontal snap of me in bathing trunks with my belly sucked in so they could tell whether I was an endomorph (wide chest, long abdomen, short legs) or an ectomorph (long chest, short abdomen, long legs). In return

I had received a chart telling me the various measurements I should aim at on my way to becoming Mr Universe. My weekly sessions with the tape-measure were encouraging, and I was having serious thoughts about competing for the junior Mr Yorkshire contest, or perhaps junior Mr West Riding of Yorkshire, when I was called to the headmaster's office one morning. It had come to his attention that I was spending my evenings at a public house. Worse, that I was taking off my clothes and striding about half-naked in a room over the public bar. Did I really think this behaviour gentlemanly? I had no idea at the time of how gentlemen behaved, but supposed that I should be making some attempts to find out. The headmaster said something about the honour of the school and his duty to shape character as well as train minds and let his disapproval of the Rising Sun Weight Lifting and Body Building Club hang in the air without being shaped into specific words. It was enough. I gave up thoughts of rippling my well-oiled muscles on a spotlit podium and spent more time on my homework.

Religion was not on the curriculum and I had no time for it, since all the hours I had were given to subjects that would be examined. Religious writings seemed to me to be entertainments, like novels, indulging in fantasies – relaxations for those with time to spare. I had none. I was specially keen on the sciences: chemistry, physics, biology and mathematics – all pandering to the lust for certainty, for understanding the world as it was, rather than as some people imagined it to be. I was particularly keen on nuclear physics, which it seemed to me was the one discipline that dealt with ultimate reality. As we sat down at the kitchen table, there was something thrilling about realizing that the table wasn't really made of solid wood but of billions of tiny atoms, each with a positively charged nucleus round which were spinning negatively charged electrons like microscopic billiard balls. And I was the only person sitting at the table to know this. More than anything else I wanted