

Signs of the Times

The newsletter of Modern Church

January 2015 Issue 56

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Editorial: Finding a voice

Anthony Woollard

A rather short editorial this time! Not because I have nothing to say (regular readers know me better than that), but because so many others in Modern Church have so much to say. This is as it should be.

Carla Grosch-Miller, in her workshop at last July's Annual Conference on re-imagining the Psalms (see Mary Roe's book review below), spoke of the importance of 'finding our voice' as Christians, and not being simply constrained by the voices of others (such as the Psalmists and their translators), however much those other voices may provide a springboard for our own meditations. This issue, like the last, includes the odd new voice as well as many familiar ones. Book reviews feature particularly largely, and some authors (and two reviewers) are new to these pages though not to Modern Church. It is especially welcome to have reviews of books both by Carla and by Emma Percy, two impressive contributors to the Conference.

Many of our members are clergy, Readers or academics. They have a public voice, from pulpit or lecture-desk, and often in print also. I do not envy the struggle which many of them must face in reconciling 'speaking what they feel' with 'what they ought to say' (*King Lear*). We have no doubt all heard preachers or lecturers who appear constrained by what they think their parishioners or their superiors will tolerate - and maybe, conversely, others who are a bit self-indulgent! But at least they do have a ▶

Modern Church

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Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology.

Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England, we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

Signs of the Times

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Signs of the Times is published in January, April, July and October.

It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying graphics. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective - in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard. Send material to the editor by 13th December, 20th March, 20th June or 20th September. Articles should not normally exceed 1,000 words. We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).

voice. For the rest of us, some will feel the freedom to find their voice in the context of their churches, perhaps in their PCC or in home groups; some will certainly not. For all of us, this newsletter can be a valuable outlet, where we can find a voice with a degree of confidence that we will neither threaten nor be threatened. That is what Modern Church has stood for from the beginning.

I hope that members will spread the word that this way of finding a voice, in a liberal Christian context, is wide open. We continue to acknowledge the voice of our older members, including those who have gone before us – and it is fitting that this edition should include an obituary by Rosalind Lund of her mother, because she and her husband did so much to keep the flame of Modern Church alive, and so they, being dead, yet speak to us. We have not, so far, been as successful as we might in giving a voice to *younger* students and academics. *Signs of the Times* may well be more accessible to younger writers, as well as readers, than *Modern Believing*, despite our attempts, has so far proved to be. We gained one new young voice in the last edition (and she is now one of the growing register of contributors to the blog on our new website), and there are surely many others, in our colleges and faculties of theology as well as in parishes and elsewhere, who would be enabled to grow in faith, and possibly be led to commit to Modern Church membership, through such an opportunity. Spread the word! ■

Pick your way through the marshes

Graham Hellier

Michael Wright gives us an attractive account of Quaker liberalism (*Directions for Liberal Theology, Signs of the Times* July 2014) but he separates things that are better kept together. The first of these is belief and practice. Belief does not always mean orthodoxy; it need not be dogmatic in the modern pejorative sense, and it need not be imposed by any authority. Setting belief over against practice simply will not do. Examine any practice and you will find certain beliefs underlying it.

Consider the references that Michael makes to the Quaker approach in general and *Quaker Faith and Practice* in particular. The emphasis may well be towards orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy but the

underlying beliefs are evident - in equality, in openness, in the value of the meeting as a place of discernment, in Jesus' life and teaching as a source of inspiration, in the revelatory nature of the world around us, in the spirit of God at work in ordinary life and in the value of a Way to be followed.

This same weakness marks Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*. Michael gives us a quotation from the book:

Religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle.

Yet religion is more than practice - it wrestles with the meaning of life, even as it strives to live it out. Speculations are perfectly in order and can lead to insights derived from (abstracted from) our whole experience. These are then tested by practical discipline. Far from abstract speculation being idle fantasising, it can be a way of subjecting our experience to careful thought in the manner widely practised in science and philosophy.

Michael is 'puzzled by the wide variety of explanations of divine being' - thank God! It is not the variety that is the problem. Who would dare propose that one explanation was sufficient? Nor are they explanations at all but rather intimations. What they do not give us is a reason for sounding a retreat.

**Do not hastily concede this territory, do not retreat immediately,
Pass over the slender bridges, pick your road quickly through the marshes,
Observe the frail planks left by your predecessors, the stones gained only by leaping;
Pass on to the higher ground, to the great hills and the mountains.***

We come to another separation - that of the natural and the supernatural. Michael re-interprets what he thought was a God experience in order to classify it as a natural phenomenon. Are these exclusive? Need we be tempted to follow Richard Dawkins and others in defining the 'natural' as the real and the 'supernatural' as the unreal - opposing the verifiable and reliable to the realm of demons and goblins?

If we must use the terms, it would be wise to listen to John Oman's words in his book *The Natural and the Supernatural*:

We cannot distinguish the natural as the mechanical and the supernatural as the free, for we do not know how much freedom there is in the natural or how much law in the supernatural; nor can it be divided as between the ordinary and the miraculous, for the natural is sometimes the more miraculous and the supernatural the common stuff of our daily experience. ... Nor can we so easily separate the reality of the natural world from the reality of the supernatural as we imagine. The reality of the former is not proved merely by the violence of its assault upon our senses. The difference between us who take it to be the most solid reality and the Indian to whom it is 'maya' (illusion) is no mere matter of the senses, for the witness of the senses is the same for him as for us. The difference concerns a different evaluation of the world.

Do we therefore know the natural? Is not the very nature of things the arena in which God reveals himself? It is the most fundamental of mistakes to recognise the divine only in the extraordinary and the miraculous, for the ordinary is extraordinary and miracles lie around us in abundance.

Gretta Vosper, as quoted by Michael, finds another way of separation that does not hold up to scrutiny:

Out of the multitude of understandings of religion, spirituality and faith... may be distilled a core that, very simply put, is love.

Well, yes and no. It is very appealing to crawl out from underneath all the din of words and to hold to love alone. But love can be elusive, misinterpreted, corrupted and even unattainable. Is it mere sentiment or a phantom of the imagination? What is its nature and why should we respond to its claim? Do we manage to practise it?

The Christian case is that love lies at the heart of all things. It calls us and claims us. Yet love is not an entity. It cannot exist in a vacuum. It is the very nature of God him/herself. It summoned us into being and invites us to fulfilment. It endures through suffering, renews us when we fail and is triumphant over death. Gretta says that it

needs no doctrine to validate it, no external expert or supernatural authority to tell us it is right.

Yes - we can see what she means, but its authority lies in the One who loves us and gives Him/Herself for us. This is where to abandon theism can be an abdication.

Of course God is not as we are - fumbling, fragile, scarce lifted out of our primeval origins and decking ourselves with such pretension. Yet we have personality, intelligence, a measure of freedom and boundless aspiration. No greater intimations of the divine are available to us than those to be found within our own being. God is not a person as we are but he is not less than personal. God is not intelligent in the same way but he is not less than intelligent. He is not an impression, an idea or a vague presence. He is the mind that illuminates all minds and the love that defines all love.

Do not compare him with yourself, nor suppose your human love to be an example to shame him. He is not greater than Plato or Lincoln, nor superior to Shakespeare and Beethoven He is their God, their powers and gifts proceeded from him, In infinite darkness they pored with their fingers over the first word of the Book of his Knowledge.*

* Alan Paton, *Meditation for a Young Boy Confirmed*. ■

Speaking about God in a Parish of Many Faiths - Part 3 of 3: Pluralism

Guy Elsmore

In the Parish of St Luke in the City, Liverpool, I regularly meet followers of other faiths. Life together brings opportunities and invitations to work alongside one another.

How should I relate to people of other faiths? Should I be trying to convert them to Christianity? Should I refuse or welcome acts of worship which involve other faiths? How should the Churches in the St Luke's Team relate in mission to multi-faith neighbourhoods?

- In the first article in this series, I explored advice from 'classic' and a 'contemporary' theological voices advocating an exclusivist approach.
- In the second, I looked at the advice which might be offered by those who speak for Christian inclusivism.

- In this final article, I am considering the arguments put forward by those whose approach has been called Pluralist.

Theocentric Pluralism:

Pluralist theologies maintain that all ways to God are equivalent and that Christianity is not privileged as a special revelation any more than are Islam, Hinduism or any other of the world's faiths.

Famously, **John Hick** argued for a new 'Copernican revolution' by which Christianity should come to realise that it is not at the centre of the theological solar system, but rather that God at the centre. The religions of the world revolve around and derive life and light from God, who is source and axis of them all. Programmatic for Hick is a citation from the Hindu Scriptures: *'Whatever path men choose is mine.'*

Hick's anti-Christocentrism is based upon

- (i) an interpretation of the incarnation as mythological
- (ii) his embracing of relativism with regard to all religious truth claims, and
- (iii) the positing of a divine being, latterly termed as 'the real', as the true source and goal of religious faith, always and everywhere *'pressing in upon the human spirit.'*

Were he still alive to offer his advice, I think John Hick would certainly not wish me or the people of the St Luke's Team to abandon our own faith. Hick remained committed to his own religious experience and would wish all believers to be free to maintain such personal convictions, while being free from the danger of heavy-handed evangelism. Hick would encourage me to talk with those of other faiths about our faith experiences but to try to do so without a feeling of competition or superiority on either side. In speaking of our experiences we should be open to the revelation of the God who is the author and source of all faiths, and thus be open to the potential enrichment of one another.

There is much to commend Hick's approach as a basis for toleration and understanding, but there is no escaping the 'relativist paradox' (how can you say anything is true when everything is true?) Hick's statement that there is a divine reality behind all faiths is an assertion of faith which logically cannot be said to be prior to or superior to any other religious

truth claim. How is it possible to both fully embrace relativism and make any statement, no matter how minimal, about God?

The location of ultimate truth is one starting point in the thinking of **Paul Knitter**, a theologian whose thought has evolved, like Hick's, from an originally exclusivist position. Knitter argues that truth should not and cannot be seen as propositional, definite and eternal. Rather, even a 'scientific' truth is now recognised to be a proposition on the way to fuller understanding. Truth is a fundamentally relational concept:

what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to relate to these other expressions of truth and to grow through these relationships.

Religious language for Knitter is not like propositional or scientific language, it is more like 'love language'. He offers a helpful parallel between language about and commitment toward God and the language one might use to, or about, a loved one:

one can be totally and faithfully committed to one's spouse, even though one well knows that there are other persons in this world equally as good, intelligent, beautiful...

Where Hick is philosophical and propositional, Knitter seeks to be practical and relational. He seeks to avoid the philosophical dead end of Hick's appeal to 'the real' by grounding his picture of God in the lived experience and liberation struggle of the powerless. Knitter's canon is simply a religion's capacity to offer liberation from all that enslaves people in the world today.

Knitter would not wish me and my friends of other faiths to become tied up in abstract religious arguments about the superiority of our different ways but rather, in some ways echoing the suggestion of Newbigin, discussed in the first article, he would urge us to find unity and fellowship rooted in liberating social and environmental action. Furthermore, Knitter's liberation ethic would require me to ask hard questions about some Islamic attitudes to women, just as it would require my Muslim friends to ask hard questions about the political and military involvement of Christian countries in the Middle East.

Standing on the steps of St Luke's (Liverpool's 'bombed out church' and memorial to the Blitz) alongside Rebecca, from Jews for Justice and Amjad, a local Imam, sharing a silent ▶

vigil during the invasion of Gaza, we all felt both a common sense of grief at the unfolding tragedy and a shared sense that in our solidarity we were standing on holy ground.

Series conclusion:

Having, in these three articles, explored a representative and broad range of thought, I find that both strict exclusivism and strict pluralism seem to violate the reality I find myself working with. To pass judgement against other faiths, as if they were competing scientific hypotheses, as strict exclusivism demands, seems as blinkered an exercise as refusing to accept the reality of religious knowledge, as extreme pluralism demands. Furthermore, I find myself agreeing with the criticism of strict inclusivism's tendency to end up seeing other faiths as franchises of the 'real thing'. In short, each 'classic' approach seems flawed when held up against experience.

The three contemporary theologians considered in these articles, Newbigin, D'Costa and Knitter each present different yet powerful cases. Yet in one respect, all of them tend in a similar direction in supporting shared praxis as foundational for a Christian approach to people of other faiths.

In the end, in my own context, I find myself most drawn to Knitter. To put it bluntly, might not 'Speaking about God to people of other faiths' be said to be rather a luxury when there are questions about poverty, injustice and ecology for all of us to address together? It may be that growing together in community through shared action for the peace and justice is a far better place to begin dialogue than speaking words alone.

On a Christian Aid visit to the Dogon Plateau in Mali, I asked why some villages appeared much poorer than others. I was told one factor was the influence of extremist, exclusivist missionaries (Wahhabi Islamists from Saudi Arabia and Southern Baptists from the USA). In those villages, sectarianism, new to Dogon culture had been introduced. For many years, Dogon villages have survived in one of the most inhospitable environments on earth because of close cooperation between Animists, Christians and Muslims but when the whole village ceases working together, the village begins to fail. ■

Christianity and other faiths: a brief afterthought

John Goodchild

If we believe God is a dangerous character from whose wrath we have to be saved by a special relationship with Jesus, then contact with other faiths will be problematic. If we believe God wills the greatest fullness of life for all whatever the cost to himself and that Jesus grew into this God's embodiment thanks to the correction of the Syro-Phoenecian woman, it will be easier to rejoice in finding this God in others – though we will want to reject as fallible human constructions tribal religions employing violence such as we find in parts of Judaism and Islam, and sadly some versions of Christianity. ■

God and Mammon

Tim Belben

It is easy for most of us to dismiss the dominical prohibition - regarding the impossibility of trying to serve God and mammon - as if applying only to extreme examples of mammon (banking, for instance), but the impossibility of service to both, or the un-wisdom of attempting it, applies, I think, more to states of mind. If your mind is filled with some pending or recent acquisition, nor investment, or a new car, kitchen - or a planned holiday, for instance (or even a new potato peeler or a new kitchen mixer), it is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve that space of mind (and space is needed for peace: the space, or do I mean peace?) necessary for contemplative prayer. To be able to fill the mind with the infinite takes all the space (or peace) possible.

Peaceful contemplation is difficult enough without competition from mammon - and mammon will always compete, except perhaps for those few, favoured, people - ascetics, or religious, maybe, so practised in self-denial and in denial of worldly distractions, that mental prayer or contemplation is their default state of consciousness. That happy band, whose absence of mind is rewarded by peace of mind, rather than (as for most of us) with the distractions of the world 'where thorns grow up and choke', to change the metaphor. And to function as contemplation ought, it should be a default mode, the state of mind into which one falls naturally, not ▶

merely from the result of the struggle of a set period of prayer. Readiness, strength from the struggle of such a set period, is a grace that often, it is hoped, rewards the struggle of prayer: but it is seldom attained by accident, and mammon will fight back with new distractions - drawn, it must be admitted, from the ready storehouse of our own sub-conscious.

A form of words can be a help - a mantra repeated mainly with the intention of excluding distractions. Some use the 'Jesus' prayer:

***O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,
have mercy on me, a sinner***

which can be extended by dwelling on each word, as 'O' for worship, 'Lord' for obedience, 'Jesus' for healing, 'Christ' for the Kingdom, 'Son of God' for our link to the infinite - try repeating the phrase, and find for yourself the meaning of each word to you - at least you will have less space for distractions! ■



God and the Big Bang
Christine Alker

Much has been written about the relationship between science and faith, not least by the early founders of Modern Church over 100 years ago. The discussion and argument is, of course, on-going, not least amongst our young people.

The project, *God and the Big Bang*, promoting discussion about science and faith in the sixth forms of our schools has been trialled in the Manchester Diocese and was launched by the Rt Rev David Walker, Bishop of Manchester and science graduate of Cambridge University, in September.

If you work in education or know teachers who might be interested in this project, take a look at the website: www.gatbb.co.uk for more information. ■

Christina Mary Tebbutt 1919-2014

Rosalind Lund

Christina Tebbutt, who died on 2nd July 2014, was a long serving member of Modern Church. Her parents, Mary and Herbert Pettit, joined the Modern Churchmen's Union (as it then was) sometime in the 1920s, so Christina was brought up in a liberal and free thinking Christian home. Her mother had been brought up a Congregationalist, but by the time Christina was born, they were living in the Northamptonshire village of Boughton and had joined the village parish church.

By the 1950s Mary had become quite frail, and Christina and her husband Simon were delighted to attend the MCU conferences initially to support Herbert. They became keen members themselves and Simon was eventually elected to the Council and later became Vice Chairman, a position he held for many years.

Christina herself loved attending conferences, both for the friends she made there and for the intellectual stimulation of the lectures. She and Simon continued going to conferences for many years, latterly with the support of their daughter Rosalind, and it was a great disappointment when health problems meant she was no longer well enough to go to High Leigh.

After the tragedy of her brother's early death in a road accident in 1951, and the birth of two daughters, Christina was persuaded to take a more active role in church life herself. In the 1940s she was elected to the Peterborough Diocesan Conference and in about 1956 the Archdeacon suggested that she should stand for election to the General Assembly of the Church of England. In 1970 when the General Synod replaced the General Assembly and the laity were enabled to play a full role in the governance of the Church of England, Christina was again elected to represent the lay members of Peterborough Diocese. In fact she was the only woman among four lay representatives and five clergy, and she worked hard not only to represent the views of lay people but also to battle the cause of women priests. She would have been thrilled to know of the final General Synod decision on women as bishops (the news came through just after her death). She was a force to be reckoned with in the diocese and although this was not always a comfortable place to be she was determined to stand up both for women and the laity. ▶

When Simon retired from the leather trade in 1987 he offered himself for ministry. Christina threw herself fully into his new life and gave up all her own commitments to support him. This involved a rather lonely year while he studied at Queens College Birmingham and was away from home during the week. They shared the joys and sorrows of his ministry first at St Matthew's Church, Northampton and later at Duston before going to the Houghtons, and they made many new friends. They were very involved with the fund-raising campaign for Holy Sepulchre Church and both were long-time supporters of the Royal British Legion.

In addition to a full life with family and church, Christina always found time to build and share in community in the village in which she had grown up and where she lived most of her life. She and Simon finally left the village in 2009 when they moved to a retirement flat in Northampton. Sadly, only six months after they moved, her beloved partner of nearly 60 years died. She stayed on in the flat for another year, but found it increasingly lonely without Simon and, in 2010, moved to Cambridge to live with her daughter and son in law where she was able to enjoy seeing the wider family and especially her two great grand-daughters.

Her funeral service was held at Great Warley church just outside Brentwood when, in addition to family memories, former General Secretary of Modern Church, Nick Henderson enlivened proceedings with his memories of Christina at Modern Church conferences. It was a happy occasion and an opportunity to celebrate a faithful life well lived. ■

2015 Conference reminder:

Modern Church members need to **book by 31st March 2015** to qualify for the £15 discount for our Annual Conference.

The conference flier is included with this newsletter, and is available to download from modernchurch.org.uk
Alternatively, phone 0845 345 1909 and we will post a booking form to you.

Book reviews

What clergy do, especially when it looks like nothing

Emma Percy, SPCK 2014

David Driscoll

When going on retreat I invariably packed *The Christian Priest Today* by Archbishop Michael Ramsey, which is full of spiritual wisdom and common sense. I only wished I'd been able to take Emma Percy's book too because, by a long way, it's the best description I have come across of a vicar's ministry. I vividly recall, in my first incumbency during the early 1980s, doing lots of things by trial and error. If I'd had the chance to read this book then I'm sure I'd have avoided many mistakes I made. I was always grateful for a very understanding congregation when they happened.

Throughout her book Percy uses the analogy of motherhood, describing a variety of activities and qualities mothers need for bringing up children which have obvious parallels with the ordained ministry. She carefully avoids overplaying the analogy, however, and I found her examples extremely helpful. This was partly because I became a father shortly after becoming a vicar. Most important of all, Percy clearly points out the danger of creating an immature dependency on the part of the congregation, just as children have to grow up. However painful this might become, the purpose of motherhood, eventually, is to enable children to be able to leave the nest.

Percy has her gurus, to whom she frequently refers:

- Naomi Stadlen, 'What mothers do: especially when it looks like nothing' (London 2014), hence the title of Percy's book;
- Sara Ruddick, 'Maternal Thinking' (Boston 1989);
- Hannah Arendt, 'The Human Condition' (Chicago 1958, 2nd ed 1998);
- Bruce Reed, 'The Dynamics of Worship' (London 1978).

I should also include in this list her husband Martyn, former Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon and now Dean of Christ Church Oxford, who clearly has influenced her thinking. ▶

She covers an enormous amount of ground in such a relatively short book, for example the need to maintain the right balance between serving and leading, giving proper attention to the congregation by cherishing their gifts, attending to the needs of the stranger, especially taking proper care in the ministry of baptism, marriage and conducting funerals. She also points out the necessity of understanding the parish context, collaborative ministry with the congregation and other clergy, the management of time with constant interruptions, and importantly the art of managing change. There's such a wealth of wisdom in her book.

Percy is well aware of the contemporary pressures that are placed on clergy with church discussions on reaching targets and ticking boxes, and shows that ideas borrowed from business aren't always appropriate when applied to the ordained ministry. I also like her description of being a 'good enough vicar', just as it's perfectly OK to be a 'good enough mother'. Percy clearly knows all about the danger of mothers competing with each other, and like her I've also had plenty of experience of competing clergy!

That's why the phrase 'when it looks like nothing', when referring to ministry, is so significant. At the end of the day ministry is much more about the people we are than the things we do. Percy rightly stresses the importance of prayer and spirituality undergirding every activity of ministry.

Do buy this book; if you are an interested lay person you will learn much about ministry, especially the parish context in which vicars live and work, and the pressures they face each day. But after reading it, you must lend it to your vicar in case they haven't yet got round to buying a copy. The only problem is they might not want to give the book back! ■

Psalms redux: poems and prayers

Carla Grosch-Miller, Canterbury Press 2014

Mary Roe

I am grateful for the opportunity to review this book as it is always good to have one's horizons broadened. I am also glad that I heard Carla Grosch-Miller's explanation of why she called it *Psalms Redux*. From the earliest times of Christian worship, the Hebrew psalms have been felt to express every aspect of our human relationship with God. At different times and in different cultures new translations and paraphrases

have appeared which were thought to be capable of expressing an individual's or a community's hopes, fears and emotions. These poems are neither translation nor paraphrase but a personal response to each psalm as the author read and meditated upon it.

Because they are personal, it is inevitable that some will strike a strong chord with the reader while others may be a little perplexing, and it would be interesting to know that much depended upon Carla's mood and circumstances as she composed her reflection (with the result that on some occasions she realized that she had written on the same psalm previously and come up with something entirely different).

The Psalms reflect the whole range of human experience: joy, praise, lamentation, anger, fear, and depression not only as they affect an individual such as our author but also the corporate emotions of the people of God. It must be very challenging for someone who is meditating in solitude to experience the surging mass emotions of anger, joy or grief that we find in the Psalms of the Temple or of the Exile. Perhaps this is why the moving Psalm 137 is omitted from this collection. In fact, we have Carla's response to only 55 Psalms (some in part only) out of the 150 in the Old Testament and our Christian service books. Or perhaps she shied away from the violent ending to Psalm 137 which relishes bashing the heads of the enemies' children against the rocks.

Throughout the book, the sunny side of the original psalm is reflected while the curses and cries for vengeance (usually at the end) are left out. This could be because Carla, the individual, has a naturally sunny nature, despite being aware of and full of compassion for the suffering which is so prevalent in our world, or she may be the product of our politically correct approach to Scripture more than she realises. There are many examples of this trend but Psalms 47, 51, 139 and 141 are typical.

Another area in which the spirit of our age may have influenced Carla's creative response is in the emphasis on the individual's communication with God: several of the people's songs find expression in the first person singular. (In my church's booklet of 138 'worship songs', 78 are all about me – 'I really want to praise your name...', 'It's me, Lord...' and so on.) But there is a bonus to this personal, individual approach: I loved Carla's heartfelt opening to Psalm 3, 'The sins of religion have gone public – rigidity, hypocrisy, intolerance, and worse' – and we can all contribute our own *betes noires* from our own churchy

experiences, no doubt. This may not be one of the clearest reflections of the original psalm, but I am very glad it has found its place in the collection.

Another observation overall is that often when the original psalm extols God as Creator of 'all that is, seen and unseen', the poem which it inspires addresses and refers to God as 'the Holy' or 'Divine' and even in psalm 148 the 'All'; 'Praise the All – the Soil, the Source, the Power, the Pulse...' often becoming a hymn of praise to the creation itself - at times coming rather too close to nature worship, reminiscent of William Wordsworth rather than of William Blake.

It would be beyond the bounds of coincidence if two people responded to a particular psalm with very similar poems. Whereas one can usually tune in to Carla's interpretation, there are one or two where it is hard to see any connection. Psalm 90 is better known to many of us in its metrical form as the hymn *O God our help in ages past*, which is the first adult hymn I learnt, at the age of four, at my grandfather's knee. As a soldier who had fought in two wars, that hymn meant a great deal to him. Carla has not lived through a war, as I have, and she may not even know many people who have; her poetic vision has no echo of times in life which strike terror to the heart of those who have no faith.

Her poem, which in itself is beautiful, begins, 'I stand beneath a canopy of stars and marvel...' and goes on to express her awe at the wonder of the moment when the world sprang into being 'in a swirl of dust and gas that shimmers...' though 'You would still be greater'. Her next image is a hoed garden bed with soft, scented rose-petals... 'Still You would be more beautiful'. Then, 'I hold my love in my arms, my breath a thanksgiving... 'Still Your love would be larger.'

I am not looking for a translation or paraphrase, but I find myself expecting a poem which captures the ethos of the psalm and which gives rise to the images and emotions which that inspired.

On the other hand, there are many which really show us a familiar psalm as a restored painting in which the colours glow more brightly and the shadows draw us into their depths. Among these I would place psalms 36, 104, 107, 126, 128, 130, 133 and 145. Other readers will no doubt add to this list.

I confess that I have a rather low pain threshold with regard to English grammar, especially in the I/me and we/us confusion which seems to trip up so many people nowadays. Psalm 62 was spoilt for me when I got to the words 'So it is for we who trust...' and I get a bit twitchy when the verb, *to lie*, is confused with the transitive verb, *to lay*" as in psalm 121, 'my eyes are drawn beyond - beyond the ruins that *lay* around me,' when the tense of the whole verse is the present. I also find it rather clumsy when a noun is used as a verb although we hear it all the time when people promise to *action* a proposal or, in the case of Psalm 71, 'Your clear horizon *orients me* to renewing hope.'

To sum up *Psalms Redux* (I will come to the prayers at the end later), I have benefited from reading these timeless songs in the context of the here and now. But saying that reminds me of the disappointment I felt when I sought a particular psalm which seems to resonate with the present moment, only to discover that it is not included in this collection. I began reviewing the book as the onslaught on Gaza was reaching its peak, our relationship with Russia was starting to look precarious and minority groups in Iraq were being slaughtered. So I looked for Psalm 2, 'Why do the nations (heathen) so furiously rage together...?' but that is one of those which have not, so far, inspired a meditation. There are others which will be very significant for many Christians, such as Psalm 22, which I looked up at the beginning in the hope of getting a flavour of the whole book, but that, too is not there.

Some of the best loved psalms which have continued to help Christians in an idiom suited to their own day, such as Psalm 42 which many people know as either 'As pants the hart for cooling streams...' or 'As the deer pants for the water' have not inspired Carla and this may well be because it was too difficult for her to rid her mind of these versions, in the same way as, when we were studying Isaiah, our lecturer earnestly begged us to try to rid our minds of Handel's *Messiah*. And perhaps there will be a second volume to fill some of the gaps?

I would stress again that this is not a book of new translations or paraphrases of the Psalms, so the reader need not fear the banal phrases and trendy idioms which bedevil so much of the 'literature' that is deemed suitable for a new generation. There are many ways in which this book may be enjoyed but I think it should not be regarded as an accompaniment to the reading of the original psalms analogous to the

side plate of salad beside the main course but it is more like a good wine which can transform an everyday menu into a celebration (even if some of the time it is a dessert wine that is most suitable). It is not even necessary, in my view, to read the Psalms and *Psalms Redux* together in whichever order one prefers: there are times when it may be more profitable to read a poem neither before nor after its parent psalm but instead of it.

But Carla has, like the bridegroom in Cana, kept the best till last. Her prayers for different seasons, occasions and days of the week are wonderful. In the days to come I shall mark the *Psalms Redux*, which I plan to read and reread, and from time to time revisit those which have not resonated with me so well on first reading.. But those final prayers and original psalms will be my constant companion from now on. Thank you, Carla. ■

Reconciliation: the journey of a lifetime

Brian Castle, SPCK 2014

Lorraine Cavanagh

This book is a clear and timely contribution to the reconciliation debate, a debate which is not only intensifying, given the current world political climate, but becoming ever more nuanced and complex. Brian Castle responds to this complexity with a nuance which is hidden in the title itself.

Reconciliation is a life changing event, but also a journey. There are two vital pieces of wisdom to be drawn from his writing and which are pivotal to the book itself. The first, that reconciliation is an ongoing process which does not depend on the cessation of conflict. Conflict is therefore a potential for good. The second, that life is in itself a reconciling process from the start.

To these ends, the author draws our attention to the various 'drivers' of reconciliation, and, building on the 'marks' of reconciliation, to the different and quite separate contexts in which reconciliation can take place. Taken together, these are positive ways of looking at this difficult problem. They suggest, first of all, that reconciliation does not happen overnight. Neither is it necessarily a once and for all event. Grounding his argument in the Christian tradition, and with a number of illuminating examples taken from stories pertaining to the lives of individuals, as well as to the world stage, Brian Castle gives substance to

what can otherwise be an abstract idea, longed for but, given the limitations of human nature, impossible to achieve.

He also sharpens and focuses reconciliation theology through examples taken from real life. We read of the healing work of Korean *minjung* theology which was developed in South Korea in the aftermath of the Japanese occupation and of the Cold War. One of the writer's central concerns, and which makes the book of particular value to the Church, is the difference he makes between the idea of being a victim and victimhood itself. Victimhood is something which people who have suffered at the hands of others will often hold on to. This traps them in such a way as to make it impossible for them to embark on the process of reconciliation and so arrive at forgiveness. Interest groups within the Church have much to learn from this important distinction.

This is a book which many will find helpful. Each chapter ends with questions for general discussion and personal reflection, grouped accordingly, along with a short liturgy specifically designed for the areas of reconciliation under consideration. It would be an excellent resource for a Lent or Advent course, as well as for use in more general contexts. ■

Bread not stones: the autobiography of an eventful life

Una Kroll, Christian Alternative 2014

Trevor Pitt

The title of this significant and inspiring book echoes the author's famous angry protest at the Church of England's General Synod in 1978, when the motion supporting the ordination of women priests was rejected. Now half a lifetime ago, the author here reflects on the personal nature of that particular struggle and the outcome in terms of her own subsequent faith journey.

Writing towards the end of a long and eventful life, her profound spiritual autobiography is quite slim and will not take much reading, but that's only because it is so wonderfully written and conceived with utmost personal and intellectual honesty.

The book will seriously engage anyone's humanity because it is an immensely human project, critically examining the extreme highs and lows of the human condition as experienced and understood by ▶

someone who is a doctor, missionary, contemplative nun, wife and mother, Anglican priest and, latterly, lay woman in the Roman Catholic Church. She raises incisive questions indicating how little is either settled or understood when it comes to the issues to which she has devoted her life - justice for the poor and oppressed, protection of the natural environment, discrimination against women and homosexuals - in short, the healing of all our relationships for the common good. All she once believed has been put to the test - and she believes it is still too early to judge the outcome.

Her journey has been a long and unconventional one, and many of its vicissitudes are recounted here through the personal details of her early memories, developing as a liberated woman at Cambridge, training as a doctor below the glass ceilings of professional medicine, finding outlets as a missionary nun in Africa, marrying a monk, early widowhood, and returning to a celibate life under simple vows in Wales. This fast moving and oft-changing context provides the background to what lies at the heart of her latest book - the long term clarifying of all her thinking and beliefs in an evolving understanding of the reality of God.

At times this feels very confessional, and very private. Her practice as a counsellor shows through at several levels and in the many examples she provides of others who have dealt with transitions and breakdowns in their lives. Throughout, discrimination against women is a common theme - in education, medicine and, of course, in the Church. Recounting these episodes helps towards her own holistic and religious development, as so many of the people and stories in which she became involved have 'stayed with her', and she hints the same is true for all of us.

She relates how God entered her life early as a weird 'mysterious force' without identity or name, an energy which seems at times to override choice but which draws her into one life-change after another until it eventually becomes 'known' - though not understood. Imbued with traditional Anglican ideals her course followed an increasingly radical path towards feminist socio-political activism until a sudden and bewildering breakdown in 1980. Despair eventually turned into blind faith, and subsequent ordination, but even this was little more than a holding operation until her loss of trust in the church she had trusted too readily led to resignation. She describes this period as 'doubt and darkness', leading to the realisation that darkness itself can embody the

dynamic creative energy that is God's 'unconditional love', and in which she now finds a faith she can believe and live with integrity.

In some ways this is a story of a traditional believer facing the need to strip away doctrinal and institutional restrictions in order to live fully in the present moment - 'agnosticism in the full sense of that word'. She thinks such changes in perception and belief are common to many as they grow older, though few speak of it openly. She clearly sees it as 'gift from Love itself'. She still thinks that church leaders have lost their ability to be honest in this way.

In sum, quoting Desmond Tutu, she sees herself as a prisoner of hope for the future. She is sustained at the end of her life, she tells us, by a desire to see religious faith as a positive contribution to the survival of humanity, harnessed for peace, not violence. This means change that can never come from the powerful ones who are as oppressed by their wealth and position as those they oppress. It requires resistance from the world's ordinary people. In this sincere belief she took the seemingly perverse (but unsurprising in her own terms) decision in 2008 to become a Roman Catholic, to be an ordinary lay woman in a church which still confuses *auctoritas* (authority) with *potestas* (power) and where she can complete her pilgrimage in prayer without any power or position whatsoever.

Her final chapter offers a remarkable reflection on the pressing importance of dreaming dreams, embracing motivational vision in a time for action. I commend this book warmly - and its passionate call for the necessary change our world so desperately needs. ■

The reluctant patient

Ian G. Wallis, Circle Books 2014

Helen Burnett

In this deeply personal and eminently readable slim volume, Ian Wallis reflects upon his experience as he is thrown suddenly upon the expertise of the medical profession.

In his new found and unwelcome role of patient he observes in close detail both his physical surroundings and his own reactions to being incapacitated. From this particular he expands his argument to a wider canvas and draws conclusions within the context of a Christian faith perspective. ▶

Clearly a consolidation of diaries and musings kept during a protracted and life threatening illness, the narrative is idiosyncratic, perhaps unintentionally reflecting the nature of disease and the unpredictable consequences of illness.

Wallis weaves elements of his own sojourn in hospital and his subsequent languishing at home in and out of innumerable metaphors and ponders the implications of enforced passivity upon an otherwise active person.

Themes of trust and patience in adversity and in prolonged periods of waiting thread their way through the book. Looking outwards for the wider implications of his experience of illness, Wallis observes the reactions of others to his position,

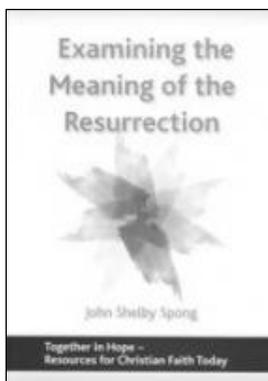
including the impact of his own physical limitations upon his family, his friends and his beloved dog. Wallis makes some interesting observations, contrasting a contemporary enthusiasm for 'wholeness' with a counter-cultural suggestion that illness or 'dis-ease' is integral to life rather than detrimental to it. As hard as many of us will fight to ward off this idea, Wallis's reflections on living with incapacity as an essential part of life should appeal to those for whom this is a very present experience and to those who accompany the reluctant patient on their journey. It is a part of life's journey which confronts us with our vulnerability and compels us to embrace the knowledge that healing does not necessitate cure, and that the faithfulness of trust can open up unexpected horizons. ■

Looking for material for a Lent group?

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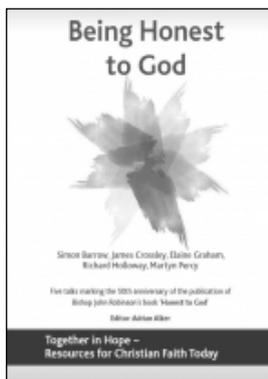


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