Reviews & Resources.

The Secular Experience of God

by Kenneth Cragg (Gracewing – Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series 1998; ISBN 1-56338-223-7; 74pp)

As a multi-linguist and most distinguished comparative theologian, Kenneth Cragg is well-placed to describe how the three major Abrahamic religions do and might accommodate themselves to "secularity" or "secularisation" – he uses both terms which are not entirely interchangeable since the former describes a state of affairs, the latter a process with all its built-in (and highly questionable) loading of inevitability.

"Secularity interrogates them", he writes. "It is a vast commonizer, searching and shattering their privacies and presenting them all, alike and differently, with duties to their populations, their demographic factors, their political forms, and their economic obligations." Yet, while Christianity has had to come to terms with "the negligibility of God" in those very societies for which it is particularly responsible, Islam on the other hand has the greatest problems. "What still remains mandatory to the Islamic mind is that this religious faith assumes, desires, and proceeds by state-and-power expression", he writes (p. 17).

He proceeds to wrestle with the co-existence of the different religio-political instincts within the modern context by helpfully separating out two different definitions of "secularity". He distinguishes between "secular" as describing a state or society in which religious allegiance might freely vary within a common citizenship and share common civil and political rights "equally", and secondly, "secular" denoting a condition or attitude of mind that rejects or ignores divine transcendent reference altogether.

He senses with the penetration of the long-practiced missionary the pathos and even the necessity of that denial, given the self-kenosis (a kind of denial, says Cragg) of God Himself. Yet, if the most deeply religious things – liberty, honesty and compassion – lead inevitably to privatisation, since they cannot be coerced, what becomes of society's cohesion, to those "norms, values and traditions by which alone bodies politic and social identify and know themselves?" (p. 6). The way the faiths answer this question will determine the future.

Cragg's answers are surprisingly unsatisfactory, given the enormity of what confronts him. And that is probably down to the unfamiliarity of the theologian with the disciplines of politics, sociology and law. To see with Berger the religions' role in "world-building" is not to be a religious militarist, as Cragg would have it, but to recognise the evidence that secular liberalism has already provided of its inability to safeguard both religious freedom and truth. (See *Faith and Power: Islam and Christianity in Secular Britain* by Newbigin, Sanneh and Taylor, SPCK 1998). Cragg's answer to the contest of faiths for political legitimacy lies in "state neutrality" – a term he leaves totally unexamined as indeed he does the term "equal rights".

Academic law has demonstrated that the state is not, nor can be "neutral in respect to freedom and faith-allegiance" as Cragg puts it. (See Adrien Bradney's *Religions, Rights and Laws*: University of Leicester). Cragg, however, side-steps the practical realities when he writes: "The case made here is that a single religion could properly continue to play the major role in the spirituality of secular statehood, on condition that it respected and recruited the contribution of faiths present in the body politic but not hitherto sharing its historic definition or its cultural assumptions ..." Yet what, without political and constitutional underpinning, does that actually amount to?

The Cross is the clue, as much for Cragg as for Newbigin. However, unlike Newbigin who sees the Cross as the symbol of a struggle that cannot resort to violence, Cragg finds in it a kind of self-abnegation that cannot resort to politics. Yet as Sanneh shows: "What is plain now is that society cannot be content with drawing on the reserves of Christian moral capital without attention to replenishing the source" (op.cit. p.71). And that demands political will.

Jenny Taylor

This review is based on a longer essay that can be found on http://debate.org.uk/topics/politics/home.htm

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Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory

by Craig G. Bartholomew (Analecta Biblia 139 Editice Pontifico Istituto Biblico, Roma 1998; ISBN 88-7653-139-4; 319pp)

This is a surprising book because it is much more than it seems. It is a splendid study of Ecclesiastes by a very qualified and imaginative Old Testament scholar that makes considerable advances in our understanding of the book. But that is not all. It is perhaps not the book's greatest value.

Greater than this is the contribution to hermeneutical theory which develops with Ecclesiastes as focus and case study. Bartholomew has given us a prolegomenon to any future biblical exegesis that is up-to-date but emphatically not "modern": The reason is that postmodernism which he sees as a development out of modernism has undermined the old post-Enlightenment modernity at every point.

The book is a readable doctoral thesis, but embraces many disciplines and shows extensive knowledge in all of them. It accepts a form of postmodern pluralism but extends and utilises it so that the plurality gives pride of place to a confessedly Christian hermeneutics.

The first chapter on philosophical hermeneutics sets the scene for all that follows, for, aware or unaware, all exegesis is done within some philosophical tradition. The second chapter reviews the history of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes and the influence of philosophy and hermeneutics upon it. Chapter three examines the origin of the historical critical method within modernity and its effect upon the reading of Ecclesiastes. Chapters four and five examine some of the important reactions to historical criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some of these arise from literary criticism and this leads on to "narrative poetics" in chapter five and then on to a weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of "postmodernism" which, despite its supposed "incredulity to metanarratives", actually has them but wears them concealed.

In chapter seven the author approaches Ecclesiastes with a Christian perspective mediated by "an integrated communication model".

The book is a gift to Old Testament scholarship and to all believers who struggle with the Bible in the present critical ferment.

It is also a gift to the Bible Society as it seeks the recovery of Scripture. Such a seeking needs bridges between the missionary work of recovery and the scholarship of academia. Craig Bartholomew has built a strong one.

Dan Beeby

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Who do you think you are?

by Nick Isbister and Martin Robinson (HarperCollins 1999; ISBN 0 551 03170 0; 184pp; £8.99)

The subtitle of this book is "Understanding your motives and maximising your abilities", which suggests the genre of popular management handbooks for improving your effectiveness. In the language of ancient wisdom it is about knowing yourself, in the language of personal development it is about self-understanding.

It is not so much a book to read as a tool to use. We can learn much by reflecting on our own personal experience and the book will guide us through the process. The method comes from SIMA, System for Identifying Motivated Abilities, which is a management consultancy specialising in helping people, as individuals and as organisations, to make better use of their strengths.

The main drift is to find the best fit between our personal giftedness and our working role to enhance the sense of personal satisfaction and personal fulfilment in life. We can discover more of our unique constellation of gifts and innate motivations by reflecting on eight of our past achievements, carefully selected and spread through different phases of our life. Writing down these achievements enables us to reflect by paying attention to ten aspects of our personal story: beginnings, contexts, actions, sequences, what interests me, results, supports, roles, meanings and how to tell my story.

"Meanings" focuses on the dominant type of motivation for a person: comparing and competing with others, satisfaction with the process, achieving specific purposes, influencing people, or gaining power and control. There is then the question of what to do about it: to make the job better, change the job, change the organisation worked for, or to strike out in a new direction, and there is the further question of how to handle these options.

The method is described with great care and thoroughness, which is not surprising since one of the authors is Managing Director of SIMA. The other is a theologian and this raised for me the hope that there might be signs of a creative dialogue between the two disciplines which the respective writers represented. This I did not find.

There is a recognition that in times of cultural transition and rapid change those who know who they are will be better equipped to cope with life and especially working life. For the readership of this journal, roles in the Church are changing and the method is certainly relevant. At a time when there is a growing interest in spirituality in management circles the lack of an exploration of how the method relates to spirituality is to be regretted.

Bryan Pettifer

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Theology: A Very Short Introduction

by David Ford
(Oxford University Press, 1999;
ISBN 0-19-285314-7; 128pp; £5.99)

There are a very small number of books that I come across which I wish I could have read before going to university to study theology. David Ford's book is one of that select band. An acquaintance with Ford's short introduction would have saved many puzzling hours for those who, like me, work best with the big picture before grappling with too much detail and who find it hard to ever see the larger whole by piecing together the parts.

Having said this, I am not sure that the sub-title, "a very short introduction" does justice to the contents. "A concise guide" might have been my choice to describe the way in which the subjects are overviewed. The book is divided into four unequal sections which deal with a broad introduction to the subject, the major thematic or doctrinal concerns of theology, the core methodology that is used by theologians (the tools available to them), and finally what theology might look like in the future.

I was fascinated to see how David Ford, Regis Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, was able to take extremely complex topics and offer a succinct explanation that not only covers the ground but is sufficiently well written to be extremely understandable. An imaginative use of models, illustrations and examples helps in this process. Ford's ability to summarise is well illustrated for me by a section on the historical doctrines of the atonement. It so happens that just before reading the book, I had been grappling with a number of other texts on this topic. His summary was a refreshingly clear and insightful way of speaking about matters that had appeared almost incomprehensible in the hands of some authors.

So is this book only for budding theological students? Certainly, as I have suggested, such potential students should regard it as essential reading. But I am also convinced that every member of the clergy would find this an invaluable reminder of all that they have learnt and could usefully rethink from time to time. More especially it is a book that I would want to give to thinking lay people, and even, on occasion, honest searchers who need to be convinced that Christians can and do take the big issues seriously and intelligently.

In this sense the book is not just an introduction to theology but also to intelligent faith.

Martin Robinson

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God for a Secular Society

by Jürgen Moltmann
(SCM Press, 1999:
ISBN 0-334-02751-9; 292pp; £14.95)

Jürgen Moltmann will be familiar to regular readers as one of this century's foremost systematic theologians. Ever since the publication of his *Theology of Hope* in 1967 and *The Crucified God* in 1974 we have come to expect from him a theology not distanced and detached from the everyday world of political and social realities, but one which informs, critiques and sustains the debate about the possibilities of a new world order.

In this latest book many of these familiar themes are taken up once again in an attempt to articulate a theology which is, "public, critical and prophetic complaint to God – public, critical and prophetic hope in God" (p 5).

The book is based on a series of lectures which Moltmann has delivered at a number of institutions over the last six years. This contributes to the uneven feel of the volume and a certain amount of tedious repetition.

The book can be roughly divided into two parts. The first takes up what he has referred to elsewhere as the contradictions of "scientific and technological civilisation" which in the context of the slide from modernity to sub-modernity (note the avoidance of the label postmodernity) has created a situation of unprecedented danger which threatens the very existence of us all. (cf *The Way of Jesus Christ* SCM: 1990) The bases of this universal predicament are the continued reality of nuclear catastrophe, the threat to the future presented by the ecological crisis and the growing economic and social disparity between the first world and the two-thirds world.

For those of us living in the first world this necessitates a fundamental reorientation away from Western anthropocentrism to a new chastened realism which accepts that the global economy and politics must become earth economy and politics. The domination and exploitation of nature must be replaced by the conservation and protection of nature. In similar vein Moltmann criticises the emphasis upon excessive and expressive individualism which destroys the basis of genuine community life and undermines the commitment to social justice. In its place we must reintroduce covenantal forms of social and political life, expressed in the federalisation of political life, a new social contract, a generation contract and a contract with nature.

In terms of our relationships with the two-thirds world we must resolutely resist the ideology of the free market in the name of social justice and solidarity with the many victims of market-driven capitalism. At the same time he notes the worrying rise of a new Eurocentricism which could bolster a fortress mentality just at a time when the globalisation of the economy is introducing a similar disparity between the haves and the have-nots which exists already in the two-thirds world. Liberation from violence, brutality and poverty must merge into an equal concern for equality and a radical re-emphasis of the inherent dignity and freedom of the individual in the face of an international capitalism which commodifies everything including the human person.

The second half of the book looks to an appropriate theological response to such issues. Again familiar themes emerge.

Theology must be post-Auschwitz. The radical embrace of the suffering of God in the midst of our inhumanity towards one another and in place of the worship of the heavenly potentate, who in his power and other worldliness cannot suffer with the despairing, the dying and the broken-hearted. We require a new ecumenism that unites the Protestant emphasis upon the justified individual and religious liberty, with the Catholic insistence on the reality of the Christian community and expresses itself in eucharistic fellowship. We must seek a prophetic, engaged faith that will mean we will not lose our nerve in the face of the collapse of the modernist dream nor degenerate into an apocalyptic fundamentalism which replaces one doomsday scenario with another. We must look to a new mature congregational life which allows for a greater diversity of participation and involvement; a

Church which does not merely ape the consumerist spirit of the age but which rediscovers its missionary mandate as the celebration of the recreation of all things.

Overall, I was disappointed at the level of theological generality and some major fudging of important theological debates. I would have liked a more trenchant appraisal of what political and social justice actually means in the context of Western democracy and a more realistic acknowledgement of both the opportunities and dangers of globalisation. But nevertheless we should be indebted to Moltmann's attempt to redefine the public dimensions of theology in a spirit of ecumenical co-operation.

Colin Greene

The Revd Dr Colin Greene is Head of Theology and Public Policy at Bible Society.

Journey: a personal exploration with Peter France

(Bible Society video, running time: 105 minutes, & discussion guide; £15.00, to be released mid-September 1999)

"It's a journey I never thought I'd make, through experiences I never dreamed I'd have, to a place I still can't quite believe I reached." Peter France, the former writer-presenter of the BBC *Everyman* series shares this confidence in the first of seven 15-minute episodes that trace his own spiritual journey, more recently to a convinced Christian faith.

Where the *Everyman* programme allowed France to voice the questions of interested but uncommitted observers, his own story will help Christians to see that those who seem to find faith unreasonable or to look for their spirituality in the oddest of places can become Christians. (France's TV quest took in Sioux medicine men and Eastern gurus). Those outside the Church will find him a sympathetic guide to enable them to take a fresh look at the Christian message and experience.

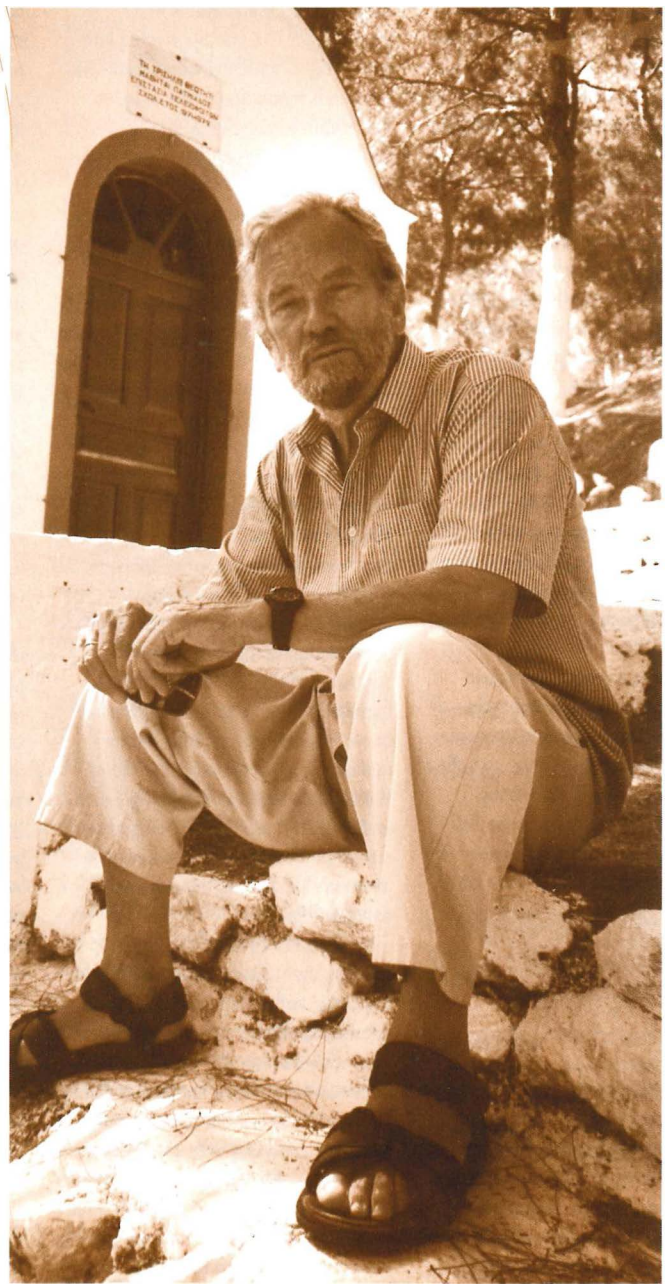
These seven programmes were commissioned by the BBC from the director Norman Stone (responsible for the BBC dramatisation of *Shadowlands*) and are being released on a single video by Bible Society in September. The Society co-produced the programmes and is making them available with a study guide designed for small group use.

Filmed on location in places as remote from each other as Fiji, Yorkshire and the Greek island of Patmos, the programmes move from childhood impressions of the church to the conversion and healing of France's wife, Felicia, and Peter's faltering attempts to follow in her steps. It's a story of twists and surprises and France, the consummate journalist, litters it with sharp observations and memorable phrases. Above all, he has the knack of switching from the wry to the deeply serious in a way that never allows interest to flag.

With its discussion guide, the video will provide material for a 90-minute session based around each episode. This includes suggested Bible passages and questions linked with one or two themes from each episode. Christians reviewing their own journey, and thinking about how they relate it to interested non-Christians, should find plenty of fuel here for discussion. Mixed groups of believers and uncommitted friends certainly will.

Lindsay Shaw

Lindsay Shaw is an editor, writer and resource development executive with Bible Society.



Journey's end: after a lifelong pilgrimage, Peter France recalls crossing the doorway into Christianity in an Orthodox chapel on the island of Patmos.

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