

BOOK REVIEWS

SHAPES OF THE CHURCH TO COME MICHAEL NAZIR-ALI

(Kingsway Publications, 2001; ISBN 0-85476-891-2; 287pp; £8.99)

To be “outward-looking” and “missionary-minded” are, for Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, two of the attitudes necessary for the Church in the twenty-first century. Beyond that, as this new, and very readable, book maintains, there can be no single shape of the Church. The shapes of the Church to come are many – some new and unfamiliar – with each one emerging in response to the different needs of the local community and the local congregation.

“Partnership” is another word of which the Bishop of Rochester is fond. The Church of the past fulfilled many of the welfare roles now undertaken by local authorities and the state. Looking to the future, the Church may well be welcomed more and more as a knowledgeable ally and partner in a range of settings.

But, whatever its shape, the Church needs to be firmly rooted, and those roots are to be found in Scripture, in Tradition (differentiated by Bishop Michael as ‘T’radition with a capital ‘T’) and Reason. These three “stools”, suggested by the Anglican theologian Hooker, underpin this book and the ideas it contains. It draws on the work of theologians from many ages, including our own, but always returns to Scripture for its authority.

If that makes it sound as though the book may be inimical to change, it would be a wrong impression. Bishop Michael allows himself to contemplate change of the most radical sort. That goes not only for the “institution” of the Church (and he includes the impact that disestablishment might have on the Church of England) but also for the whole question of unity and division, and for the nature of ministry, both clerical and lay.

Bishop Michael’s is, indeed, a far-reaching analysis and a realistic assessment of the shape of today’s Church. But he looks to the future with a sense of reality and hope, and asks questions that demand an answer. Answers, though, are not to be found in the book itself. That is for the reader, either alone or with others, to work out, and a study guide is included to help in the process of discernment.

As the Archbishop of York says in his foreword, “It is the whole church, at every level, that – under God – must share in shaping its future. Bishop Nazir Ali’s contribution to equipping us for this task is as timely as it is important.”

Chris Stone

THE DEATH OF CHRISTIAN BRITAIN CALLUM BROWN

(Routledge, 2000; ISBN 041 524 1847; 272pp; £12.99)

For anyone who is genuinely interested in the future and mission of the Christian Church at the start of a new millennium, Callum Brown’s new book should be essential reading. Callum Brown is Reader in History and co-Director of the Scottish Oral History Centre at the University of Strathclyde and *The Death of Christian Britain* is the latest addition to the significant series, *Christianity and Society in the Modern World*, edited by Hugh McLeod and published by Routledge.

Aimed at theologians, missiologists, church leaders and anyone with even a passing interest in the apparent unremitting decline of the influence of the Christian faith in contemporary society and culture, this is quite simply a remarkable, courageous and deeply illuminating book. And it is so for a number of crucial reasons.

First of all because Brown imagines what for many of us is the unthinkable, namely the

complete eradication of the Christian faith from our contemporary social habitat if the decline in religious practice and belief continues in this country unabated into the not too distant future.

Secondly because he breaks with the accepted thesis that this is due to an invidious process of secularisation that started some 200 years ago and introduces new insights from cultural theory and gender studies to throw new light on the role of public religion in contemporary society.

Thirdly because Brown claims, I believe quite rightly, that for too long we have accepted the analysis of social science that investigates only the roles or functions religion exercises in a democratic society. So as church leaders we have been mesmerised by statistics that measure only the declining influence of institutional Christianity. Or as theologians and intellectuals we have been equally dismayed by the apparent erosion of the intellectual core of Christianity that again measures only the success or otherwise of intellectual Christianity. Or as politicians and educators we have looked back, particularly over the last 50 years, at the decline in significance of civil religion or functional Christianity that actually shows some signs of achieving a bit of a contemporary renaissance. Or as evangelists and missiologists we think only of the importance or otherwise of diffusive Christianity in our varied attempts to find more effective means of evangelisation.

To all of this Brown introduces us to the importance of discursive Christianity pointing out that for any faith to gain popular support it must have a real basis in discursivity. In other words it must be discernible in the discourses and media that mediate to ordinary people a sense of belonging to a particular religious tradition and adhering to that tradition’s central religious narrative.

Fourthly because when Brown attends to the period 1800 to 1950 by looking at the tracts, literature and narrative structures of that period he discovers that the evangelical story of conversion and moral and spiritual regeneration was in fact a good fit with the social mores and aspirations of that period, particularly that of women. This had positive implications in terms of the maintenance of church attendance but also contributed adversely to the feminisation of the Christian faith with the attendant difficulty of adequately integrating masculinity into that particular version of the Christian story.

Fifthly this inevitably made the public significance of Christianity highly vulnerable to the lifestyle and moral revolutions of the 1960s and beyond when women were the first to liberate themselves from the remaining vestiges of this narrative of personal and spiritual improvement and belonging.

Consequently it is here that we must locate that disenchantment with the Christian faith and the continued importance of the Christian religion in the public life of contemporary culture that appears to have been a pervasive feature of the modern psyche.

While Brown sometimes makes too much of his discursivity thesis I found much of his argument and analysis persuasive and intriguing. It left me wondering much about three central concerns.

First of all the importance of finding forms of contemporary Christianity that are much more radically in touch with the other discourses and narratives whereby many people nowadays still seek to locate signals of transcendence.

Secondly, the theological task of constructing a much more broad-based version of the Christian story that can actually encompass the genuine hopes and aspirations of many who

are concerned about the future wellbeing of our democratic and multicultural society.

And finally, the need for Christianity to once again become a popular campaigning movement for change and innovation in a society that has all but lost the art of informed public debate.

Colin Greene

THE REVIEWERS

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