

FAIRACRES CHRONICLE

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COMMUNITY NOTES

THERE is a corner of Kent where the twisting lanes look alike and, regardless of where you are really going, the odds are that you will land up in Marden. Despite this hazard, over the years a great many people have found their way to Bede House, and returned there like homing pigeons. It is not only Sisters of the Love of God for whom Bede House has become at once home and a holy place, and it is not lightly that the Community is now considering leaving.

Before I explain, let me recall the first thing I remember hearing about Bede House. Early on, when SLG Sisters first went to live in the farmhouse, a visiting priest asked curiously, ‘Sister, are you happy?’ They were in the sitting room, the Sister was laying the fire, she sat back on her heels and laughed. Obviously she was happy! I learned that Bede House was a place where one could be happy, and where one could ask such a question, and face what lay behind it. The steady prayer of those living the solitary life, the simplicity of the Eucharist and the Office in the oast house chapel, the freedom to *just be* in the huts, and the homely scale of the place affirm all that is good and human and of God. One of the original hermit Sisters at Bede House jotted in her notebook in 1966, ‘Coming out of Night Office, sense of being immersed in His Peace. No plans but to be with Him and to listen.’ And in 1983, ‘Seven weeks of retreat after giving up charge of the garden. Made no plans except to take the hymn “Come thou Holy Paraclete” as a background.’

I hope that it is in a similar spirit that we are making changes at Bede House now, and going into the new year with great trust and openness. We do not have the resources to maintain all our houses in the way that we have done in the past; there are already only two Sisters in the house at Bede House. The Chapter has not yet made a decision about the future of Bede House, but from the first week of January there will be just three Sisters on the site, all living a more or less solitary life. The Chaplain, Fr John Scott, will still be there, and the Eucharist will be celebrated, but the Office will not be said

in chapel. There might be the opportunity for someone to stay for two or three months in one of the huts, on condition that he or she is entirely self-sufficient for catering, laundry, and transport. We will be holding a Eucharist of thanksgiving for the cenobitic life before the Sisters leave, and some of the Sisters who have lived at Bede House in the past will be able to attend, as well as local people from our regular Sunday congregation. If this news about Bede House awakens in anybody a thought about how the life there might continue once SLG has left, please write to me at Fairacres about it.

MOTHER ROSEMARY SLG

As Mother Rosemary is away on holiday at the time of preparing these Notes for printing, we summarise below the recent events in our Community life.

In October Sister Susan ended her term of Office as Novice Guardian and will be joining the sisters at St Isaac's in December, Sister Christine having returned to be at Boxmoor. Sister Clare was installed as Novice Guardian on 20 October. Two postulants have been received into the Novitiate: Christine Johnson on 3 September and Andrea Kastner on 3 November.

After six years as Sister in charge at Boxmoor, Sister Patricia Thomas has returned to Fairacres. Sister Tessa was blessed as Sister in Charge on Advent Sunday. Please pray for all these Sisters in this time of transition and for Sister Patricia Clare who made her First Profession in Annual Vows at Mass on Sunday 8 December

For our Oblate sisters too there have been many moments of transition; and for Oblate Sister Margaret of the Cross the passage through death into fullness of life was made on 28 July. Peggy Somerset-Ward was born on 12 November 1915 and began her exploration into Oblature in the 1980s, making her Life Promises in 1990. Increasing age and frailty gradually made visits to Fairacres impossible, but she remained present in spirit. As the Reverend Richard Eckersley said in his funeral address, 'she became more and more beautiful in the autumn of her life, honed by suffering cheerfully borne, undergirded by hard-won faith, loved and supported by a host of family and friends.' Surrounded by her

family and by the prayers of those friends, she died in great peace and we join them in giving thanks for her.

Several Sisters have been welcomed into new stages of Oblature. Debbie Davies and Sue Hudspith were admitted as postulants on 5 August and 1 September respectively. Novice Oblate Dot of the Glory of God received the habit on 3 September and Novice Oblate Trish on 15 October. Two Oblate Sisters have made their first Annual Promises: Vera of the Patience of God on St Luke's Day and Gill on All Saints' Day,

We welcome each new life as it is led into the Community, thankful for the continuing vitality of which it is a sign. With this encouragement, we know that the pruning of our outward resources, however painful, can be undertaken in a spirit of adventure and hope.

HOMILY ON THE FEAST OF THE DEDICATION

PETER DOLL

Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive. I Kings 8: 30.

BEFORE I ever came to know Fairacres for myself, I first learned something about it, as many of you must have done, from Peter Anson's monumental study, *The Call of the Cloister*. He was obviously quite smitten with the community, and he had these memorable words to say about your chapel:

The chapel is in the Spanish baroque style of architecture—so alien to this Oxford suburb, with its trim little red-brick villas, and to the mid-Victorian mansion which served as the original convent—that one almost expects to be told that, like the Holy House of Loreto, it was transported by the hands of angels! The Fairacres chapel might have been brought from Andalusia, Castile, Mexico, or California. The illusion of being in Spain or in Spanish America is intensified when gazing round the interior, which is far more expressive of the Counter-Reformation in Southern Europe than of English spirituality, whether before or after the Reformation. ... Few Anglican religious communities possess such an exquisite place of worship.

Now, I have the highest respect for Peter Anson as an historian and architectural authority. I can see what he means about the Spanish architectural influence at work here, but, as one of your neighbours who inhabits one of those trim, little red-brick suburban villas, I must say that I've never been conscious of Fairacres as an alien presence in the neighbourhood. Nor, since I've also had the privilege of sharing in your offering of worship, have I had any sense at all of a Counter-Reformation spirituality at work here. But Anson is surely right in saying that few communities, Anglican or otherwise I think, possess such an exquisite place of worship. For me the specialness of this place is summed up in three characteristics: simplicity, hiddenness, the Crown of Thorns. The chapel, through these signs, reveals the nature of the life you lead.

Simplicity: My experience of Counter-Reformation architecture has been of a straining for effect, of an emphatic desire to overwhelm the beholder with decorative richness and to assert with dogmatic certainty the power of Roman Christianity. Here there is no straining, but a simple lightness and airiness; no dogmatic certainty, but a quiet, faithful confidence. Everywhere there is an understated simplicity but with a great, unfussy richness as its primary focus. 'This is the bread of heaven which came down from heaven.' The space inspires worship that is likewise unfussy and unhurried, but with a quiet and spacious dignity that gives room to focus on that mystery at the heart of our faith. The religious life is a life that rigorously simplifies, excluding the clutter at the heart of life in order to make more room for God there. It is a gift that you give to visitors to the community, to give them space even when they feel they have no space in their lives.

Hiddenness: Although you make no secret of your presence within the neighbourhood, there is nevertheless a hiddenness about your life here. We hear your bell, and occasionally we see you come and go, but there is a secrecy about it like the secrecy of a child in the womb. You know that the child is there, growing, but without seeing and knowing the details. I was struck by what Archbishop Rowan says in his new book, *Ponder these Things*, in his reflection on the icon of the Virgin of the Sign, with Christ encircled in the breast of his Mother. He writes, 'We are pointed towards one of the most mysterious bits of our belief in God's coming in flesh among us; for nine months God was incarnate on earth, God was human, in a completely hidden way, as a foetus growing in Mary's womb.' God was present, not in action or speech, but in secrecy. Your presence here, too, is an icon of the way that God works mysteriously and secretly in our lives, always at work even when we are not conscious of his presence or are convinced of his absence. That is the power of a contemplative community as well, to offer for the world lives given over to waiting upon God, to praying for and suffering with the needs of the world. That hiddenness can come at the cost of loneliness and a lack of appreciation and understanding on the part of the world, and even of

the church, for whom you are praying. But that is a cost that you share with Christ, who is the living centre of your life and of this chapel in which you come together to pray.

And it is that vocation to pray for and suffer with the needs of the world that brings me to that final symbol. Your altar is not decorated with rich hangings or elaborate statues. It focuses on a single symbol, that of the Crown of Thorns. It is the crown of a king—not of a king who lords it over his people but one who is prepared to suffer and die for them. It speaks of ‘Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and [of] the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.’ In following the way of Christ in the religious life, you have been espoused to him. Like our sisters in the Orthodox tradition, you have been given a wedding crown, but this crown is a share in Christ’s crown of thorns. To live lives of prayer is rather to live on the edge, on the threshold between the world and heaven, exposed both to the pain and suffering of the world and to the awesome power and the all-consuming love of the living God. Because your crown is the crown of the death of Christ, so it is also the crown of his resurrection and of all life.

On the great days of festival that our psalm today (Ps. 122) reflects, the Hebrew people would go in procession up Mount Zion to the Temple to give thanks for the place where God dwelt among them. This house of prayer is your great processional way ‘to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem’. We come together to journey to his true and living presence; we do so hidden from the world, and in all simplicity, but we come as fellow-citizens of the heavenly city, crowned with the crown of life and rejoicing that the God who dwells in secret hears and heeds our prayers.

The Revd Dr Peter Doll was recently licensed as Team Vicar of St Michael’s and St Nicholas’, Abingdon, within the Abingdon Team Ministry.

THE LIVING PRESENCE OF THE SAINTS

Aspects of the Encounter of Evelyn Underhill with Sorella Maria

A. M. ALLCHIN

I

IN TWO earlier articles I have written about the discovery of Sorella Maria of Campello, something which came about through my first visit to the Community of Bose in September 2000, and then again through the visit I made to Campello itself in the following April. I want in this third article to see a little more of the relationship between Sorella Maria and Evelyn Underhill, in particular through making use of a few of Evelyn Underhill's unpublished letters to Maria which are kept at Campello. It was, after all, in the context of Evelyn Underhill's life, and in being introduced to the selection of her letters, published in 1943 by Charles Williams, that I first encountered this elusive Italian Franciscan sister.

Evelyn Underhill died on 15 June 1941. I first heard her name some five or six years later when I was at school at Westminster, and when for one year, 1946-7, Father Robert Llewellyn came to be our school chaplain. Getting to know Father Robert was an important stage in my own life, and it was he who introduced me to this book of Underhill's letters. From the outset it fascinated and puzzled me. On the one side Evelyn so evidently belonged to the world I knew, her photograph opposite the title page of the book might almost have been that of an elder member of my own family. But on the other side the book opened a door onto a whole new world of life and thought and experience, a world full of people with names like Ruysbroeck, Jacopone da Todi, de Caussade and Von Hügel. How did these worlds fit together?

One of the intriguing features of the book was to be found in Evelyn's insistent references to 'my Italian saint', a person with whom she seemed to be in fairly regular contact, but about whose

actual whereabouts and identity she was strangely reticent. She was clearly much impressed by her, but who in the end was she?

Perhaps the best way of introducing Maria is through a published letter of Evelyn's own, written in September 1925, on the occasion of her first and only visit to Maria's community. It is a letter written to an invalid friend living in north Kensington, a woman of much prayer who had herself already been in touch with Maria. Evelyn writes:

... Maria is all we felt. I got to the little station at five yesterday evening: it was just getting lovely after the heat; and then drove in the little village cab through the most beautiful country, olive woods and vineyards to the hills beyond; and just as we neared the Rifugio, Miss Turton and Maria met me and I walked up with them. Maria and the Sisters have white cotton frocks, grey linen aprons, the cord of St Francis and sandals on their bare feet. In chapel they have white aprons and white veils. Maria has the most beautiful expression, strong and humble, and a gentle voice. I got quite a good deal of talk with her; it was wonderful to find how exactly she and my Old Man [von Hügel] agree, in spite of great differences in mind and language, in all the deep things of the spiritual life. We talked a lot about X ... Maria said her soul was 'always very present to her'. I told her X had been asking me to increase the time she might give to prayer and asked her whether she would give her more. She said at once, with surprising decision and authority, that instead of giving her more time, *she* would rather make her reduce the time—that X was 'an immoderate soul' though very good and humble, and had to 'learn the way of simplicity' and make her whole life a prayer instead of wanting long special times for it. I said I felt less and less confident to direct her and was afraid of holding her back—but Maria said my holding her back was 'not only useful but necessary to X'. It was just the same bracing treatment that I have long been used to! Though coming with such gentleness. After we had said a good deal more I asked her for something for myself and she said, 'In torment and effort to serve the brethren.'

They have a little shrine of Our Lady on the staircase and yesterday evening we all said the rosary there. Maria used your rosary as I felt sure you would like that and Miss Turton mine and I hers. There was an Italian priest there too, who came to meet me

because he knew my Old Man and years ago had been helped by him and owed him everything, so wanted to hear his latest news, and this morning he said Mass in their tiny chapel, and Maria served, and she and the Little Sisters made their communions. ... They put in 'our father St Francis', in the confession, etc., and have special Franciscan collects, and the Mass was for the unity of the whole Church.

There is much that might be said about this passage from Evelyn's letter, particularly about the fact that so large a part is taken up with a question about spiritual direction, but I note here just one small detail, the use of one another's rosary, a kind of coinherence or perhaps perichoresis in prayer, certainly a simple but moving expression of their unity in God's presence.

In another letter, written at the same time, to her friend Lucy Menzies, Evelyn gives us a vivid glimpse of the end of her stay with the Sisters, when her husband, Hubert Moore, came to collect her.

Hubert stayed at Assisi while I was at the Rifugio, and picked me up by motor ... A bit astonished, I think, to come in for saying the Angelus on the stairs, and to see me passionately kissed by all the Sorellini on my departure. Maria gave me, at my request, a 'word' to take away with me, and a very ferocious one it was.

This, as we have said, was Evelyn's first and only visit to the Community, but it is clear that she had already been in touch with them first through mutual friends, and then through direct correspondence, for some years. Amy Turton (being some twenty years older than Evelyn and Maria, she is always 'Miss Turton' in Evelyn's references to her), an Englishwoman who had lived for many years at Siena, an Anglican devoted to prayer and work for Christian unity and reconciliation, had been one of the first links between Evelyn and Lucy and Maria and the Sisters. Like Evelyn, Lucy Menzies was a student of the Medieval mystics, a Scotswoman who had already written a life of St Columba. It is she who is the over-zealous X who is mentioned at length in Evelyn's letter, and she had already visited the Rifugio in the Lent of the previous year, 1924.

Evelyn wrote to her on Palm Sunday that year:

Thank you so much for your letters. I have so enjoyed them, especially your account of Maria. I felt sure she was wonderful but you have made me see her quite vividly and now I feel I know her much better than before. ... No! I don't know any of them except via prayers and paper; and haven't really done anything particular for the Entente—but it's becoming a curiously strong little organisation and the members of its inner circle do seem to be in actual spiritual touch. Your whole account makes me simply long to get out to them and bathe in that atmosphere. ...

The last lines of the letter are particularly revealing of the quality of the bonds which were already linking this group of friends together. Evelyn says she doesn't know them 'except via prayers and paper'. They have never met and yet the members of the inner circle 'do seem to be in actual spiritual touch'. It is evident that they were people who not only believed that prayer for Christian reconciliation and unity was important and vital, but people who were in fact coming to know this in their own experience. How real and how important the relationships which were growing between them were we can see if we look at one or two extracts from Evelyn Underhill's *Green Notebook*, 1923-24, a private record of her thoughts and prayers which was only published in 1993, more than fifty years after her death.

There, at the very time when Lucy Menzies is visiting Italy, we read:

March 18, 1924 Conducting My First Retreat at Pleshey. Had a tremendous circle praying for it. Maria, in Rome, prepared her soul with me. The Baron told me to concentrate on knowing and entering into each individual soul and its needs, even while giving addresses—not just imparting information, but caring for and understanding each angle of approach. ... As soon as it began I lost my own prayer utterly—recollection or realisation of *any* kind impossible. But was surrounded and supported by *something* which carried me steadily right through it without a quaver or anxiety. ...

Here we have a very striking instance of the reality of the spiritual contact that comes through prayer. This first retreat at Pleshey was the beginning of Evelyn's work as a retreat conductor,

one of the most remarkable and creative of her lines of activity during the twenties and thirties. It was a development of great significance in the life of the Church of England as a whole, and in the wider Christian world, and it is moving to know that it was being upheld both by her deeply loved spiritual father and by this new spiritual friend and companion, Sorella Maria. The hidden and unrecognised communion of Rome with Canterbury was being affirmed and deepened in ways which at that time would have astounded and dismayed many representatives of the Churches on both sides of the divide. The spread of the retreat movement among lay people as well as clergy in the Anglican world, was rooted in this deeply committed ecumenical relationship.

The phrase which Evelyn uses about Maria is particularly striking. 'She prepared her soul with me.' Maria stood alongside the English friend she had not yet met, who was about to enter into a way of ministry which had scarcely yet been followed by women. And she identified herself with her wholly, preparing her soul with hers.

This time in 1924 was a period of great and rapid growth in Evelyn's inner life, as is evident from the material in the *Green Notebook*. Only a few weeks later, for instance, she records:

Going to communion this morning I saw so clearly all the suffering of the world and the self-giving of Christ to heal it—and the communion and the life of union mean and involve taking one's own share in that—not *being* rescued and consoled, but being made into part of his rescuing and ever sacrificed body. And in the sacramental life one accepts that obligation—joins the redeeming spirit-element of the universe.

How central this insight was to Evelyn's prayer at that time we shall see as we go on.

II

Since my first awareness of the friendship between Evelyn and Sorella Maria had come through my reading about it in Evelyn's published letters, it was perhaps natural that I should have looked forward with special eagerness to being able to see the letters of

Evelyn Underhill to Maria, which I knew were kept at Campello. As so often happens in life, things don't work out quite as one expected. I was at first disconcerted, even to some extent disappointed by what I found.

First there were not so many letters of Evelyn Underhill as I had hoped. Those that there were, were not always dated, though they seemed to date from between about 1928 and 1935. Had there perhaps been earlier and later letters which had gone astray? The letters were mostly shorter than I had expected, sometimes only two sides of an ordinary piece of notepaper. Then I discovered that the letters were altogether in Italian. With my very imperfect knowledge of that language reading them was going to take longer than I had realised.

Then I noticed another thing. Close by, in the Community's Papers, was a much larger bundle of letters written by Lucy Menzies, dating from the early 1920s until a time well after World War II. These were longer, more closely written, more carefully dated; but these too were entirely in Italian. Seeing their length, the thought came that perhaps Lucy wrote Italian more easily than Evelyn did. Certainly she came from an eminent academic family in St Andrews, where her father had been a Professor and had himself taken charge of the education of his daughters. Whereas I was reasonably well acquainted with Evelyn's handwriting, Lucy's was new to me. It was clear that both the limitations of time and the limitations of my Italian made it necessary for me to leave these letters of Lucy Menzies' on one side. They remain as a precious treasure for someone else to explore.

But when I began to look more closely at the letters of Evelyn Underhill with which I had begun, I began to see them more truly than I had done at first. It seemed to me above all that they were working letters, letters exchanged between two people for whom prayer and growth in the life of prayer, were the principal business of life. All the letters contain requests for prayer and thanks for prayer: prayer for friends, prayer for people who are ill, prayer for people who are facing difficulties in their own inner life. The question of spiritual guidance constantly recurs. Evelyn in these

letters is asking for prayers for herself and for the people she is trying to help, and also for particular pieces of work which she has been asked to do.

Thus it became clear that the letters told us much about Evelyn's sense of a certain loneliness, and also of her sense of living under pressure. It is true that she had many friends and admirers at this time, but most of them were in some degree dependent on her. She needed someone with whom she could speak in the complete equality of friendship, and also someone on whom she could wholly rely, to whom indeed she could look up. Margaret Cropper notes with quiet discernment: 'Maria was a sustaining and loving friend through Evelyn's working life. ... She confided to her, I know, much of the pain that came from her own periods of darkness.' How true this is we shall shortly see. And then, Margaret Cropper adds, 'later they saw each other face to face, one of those creative meetings that need not be repeated to bear their own fruit.'

Among Evelyn's letters we may begin with one that dates from February 1928, in which we see clearly the kind of pressures under which she was living. After initial greetings, she writes:

Thank you for your prayers for the day of retreat for Free Church ministers [the Italian is *sacerdoti liberi* and I suppose this is the correct translation]; we had more than forty; very worthy and rewarding people, but not much used to silence! Also six priests of the Anglican Church. It was for me a real honour to be their conductor. The meditations were on Adoration, Communion and the Co-operation of the Soul with God.

We see at once the ecumenical spirit of Evelyn's activity and we observe that the practice of retreats was at that time very little known in Free Church circles. Evelyn goes on to speak of a further lecture and a time of worship which is to be held in the Cathedral in Bristol, and then of the retreat at Pleshey which will last from March 23rd to 26th.

Only at the end of the letter does she allow herself to expand a little and give some news, and to comment on two writers on whom Maria has clearly asked her opinion: 'As for Tagore and Edward Carpenter, I like the first very much, he is a great poet, the other

doesn't please me so much. True he has a sense for life, and is a man with an ideal, but he is not in any way a Christian.' We are perhaps amused to see Evelyn being more cautious than her correspondent.

Quite often Evelyn seems to have written in December, beginning with thanks for the greetings which have come to her for her birthday on the 6th, and sending greetings in return to the Sisters for the coming feast of Christmas. A short but substantial example is dated 16 December 1933.

Thank you so much for your dear letter for my feast. A letter from the Eremo is for me like a little message from the little poor man, and brings joy and blessing.

Without your help I do not know what I should do in my work, because I don't have in myself the purity of soul and the burning charity which is able to carry the activity of God to others.

I am often in darkness and desolation, sometimes in sorrow, sometimes searching for God, but always seeking to bring consolation, to give a light and a strength which I do not have in myself, to all who ask for it. Therefore, dearest Sister, I beg for the powerful and invisible help of your prayer.

Perhaps the most moving of the letters is the briefest of all. It refers to an incident in Evelyn's life which occurred in 1929, a change which she found it very difficult to accept and live with. One of her closest friends and associates, someone who had at times acted as her secretary, Clara Smith, became a Roman Catholic. Evelyn could only feel this move as a moment of personal betrayal, a moment of loss. We know from notes which she made during her own retreat in the summer of that year, how much she was troubled by it. She speaks of her 'immoderate longing to retain Clara's full affection and devotedness...'. 'To the question whether I could give up C. entirely, my whole nature answers NO.' But she knows that she has to do it and so she prays for the grace of detachment.

What is striking is that to Maria, Evelyn can write a letter of total frankness, a letter which is a simple cry of pain. Perhaps the fact that she was writing in Italian made it easier for her to express

her feelings so simply and directly, without any of the irony or defensiveness which might have come into a statement in English.

Now I ask your help because I have altogether lost peace. And the cause is the entry of my dear Clara into the Roman Church—happiness for her, for me the sorrow of an absolute spiritual separation—and I thought her my faithful companion for life. I know well that this cross should be a very salutary suffering; but it is too heavy for my weakness and I am afraid of failing. I ask you to help me. With much love ...

As a matter of fact the break seems to have been less complete than Evelyn had feared, Clara continued as a friend, even if a slightly more distant friend, and in later years was again to be a great help in secretarial matters.

The vehemence of Evelyn's temperament, her temptation to become possessive about her friends, were things with which she constantly had to struggle. The vehemence comes out also in a striking letter of June 1932. This refers to an incident which took place in a retreat when for the first time she was giving the addresses in a chapel where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. Here is Evelyn's description of the retreat in a letter to Margaret Cropper.

For the first time in a retreat of mine we had the Blessed Sacrament on the altar all the time. I thought, poor fool that I am, how lovely it would be! But as it went on, the awful power of that white eternity seemed more and more overwhelming: it seemed to make noisy nonsense of everything I was trying to say; and I ended feeling like a cross between a monkey and a parrot. Everyone else seemed quite calm and happy, so it was evidently all right for them. But I felt like Angela when she kept saying to her secretary, 'Brother, I blaspheme, I blaspheme'.

In her letter to Maria Evelyn speaks with even more emphasis describing,

A shattering experience such as I had never known before, an ever clearer view of the profound abyss, the absolute difference between the Holy white Eternity and everything I could say, the

wretchedness and unworthiness of my words in the face of that silence. In the end I hardly dared to speak; I seemed like a parrot.

It is particularly striking that Maria seems to have been aware that something strange was happening in this retreat, even before Evelyn had written to tell her. In another letter to Margaret Cropper Evelyn writes:

Last week I got a letter from Sorella Maria, my Italian saint, asking specially how the retreat had gone, as those three days, and especially the last evening, she had suffered so greatly—‘far more than usual’, and how deeply thankful she would be ‘if this suffering had availed for a blessing’.

Here again we see how intimately Evelyn and Maria were united at moments of particular tension or spiritual stress.

There is certainly more to be found in these letters, more than I had time to discover in a brief visit. It would be wrong to give the impression that they were always reflecting moments of tension and inner struggle. They also contain moments for the expression of simple friendship and news of interesting events. As an example I quote simply from a letter where Evelyn tells of a meeting which she had had with Gandhi in London.

I spoke with Gandhi for ten minutes. He made an impression of great simplicity, a childlike soul, candid—a little like a bird. The spiritual freedom of the poor is in his heart.

III

Those who have written with most perception about Evelyn Underhill’s early development have recognised the great importance of the journeys to Italy which she made from 1898 onwards nearly every year. She was travelling mostly in company with her mother, sometimes alone. As for many people from northern Europe, to cross the Alps and enter Italy was to discover a new world. Later in life Evelyn was to write, ‘Italy, the Holy Land of Europe, the only place left, I suppose, that is really medicinal to the soul ... There is a type of mind which must go there to find itself.’

Another person who came to Italy later and found it a place of healing in the years after World War II, after a particular stressful time in Prague as the Communist tide overwhelmed it, was Edwin Muir. Travelling on lecture tours through the cities of Tuscany and Umbria, he and his wife were ‘astonished again and again by the prodigious energy which had created in a few centuries such a wealth of beautiful forms in painting and stone’. Muir says of the hilltop cities of that region, ‘they looked like new incarnations sprung from the inexhaustible source of metaphysical felicity, and though they had witnessed violence and crime, they rose from it into their own world and their own light. Christendom was still young there’. Evelyn Underhill had a similar sense of the sacred beauty of that landscape and of those cities. She was to write in one of her novels, ‘In Umbria, clothed with the olive woods where Francis walked ... there is a peace of God eternally established.’ For her above all there was a presence in Assisi which seemed to sum this up.

There is something in the quiet spaces of her streets, in the wonderful way in which she hangs on the slope of the mountain and turns a sheer face to look out over the valley, and the contrast of her pale but warm stones with the prevailing blues and greens of Umbria, which very perfectly expresses the heart of Italy.

In Italy as a young woman, in rebellion against the rather dry and formal religion in which she had been brought up, Evelyn became aware of at least three major ways in which she felt led into the inner meaning of the world and began to find a way towards its Creator. There was first the sense of the divine beauty present in the world of nature itself and above all in Umbria. Then there was a sense of that same beauty manifesting itself again in some of the most marvellous creations of human arts and architecture, the discovery of the great gifts which a historic tradition of sacred art and meditation is able to embody. Thirdly there was the sense that all this was recapitulated in this part of Italy in the person and presence of Francis himself, in the little poor man of Assisi in whom joy and grief, suffering and love, were woven together in an altogether unrepeatable way. It need not surprise us how much the meeting with Maria meant to her when in the end it came. In Maria

Evelyn found the life and spirit of Francis present and at work. For her in her house in Campden Hill Square ‘a letter from the Eremo is like a message from the little poor man, and it brings joy and blessing.’ She felt in direct contact with the original spirit of St Francis.

In the article about Maria which she published in *The Spectator* in 1929, Evelyn Underhill had written, ‘Those who recognise her type will discover without surprise that her delicate courtesy and wide-spreading love conceal a Teresian inflexibility of purpose; a profound sense of the pain and need of the world, and a passionate desire to help it.’ And Evelyn goes on to remind us of the words which Maria had given her as her own special message, ‘In torment and effort to serve the brethren.’ There is joy and there is beauty; there is suffering and sacrificial pain.

In that same article Evelyn records some other words of Maria which bring out in a very characteristic way the all-inclusive down to earth way in which Maria recognised the presence of the divine wisdom and love in all our relations with the world around us.

We receive good from the experience which each soul brings to us; from an example, from a fraternal warning, from the gaze with which we follow any creature in reverence of heart, learning to love, venerate, help and pray.

Maria loves to bring together creation in all its God-given aspects, uniting what theologians have called grace with what they have called nature in a single penetrating gaze.

How much I believe in the Communion of Saints. For me it is a certainty which I have from experience, not only from faith. I also believe in a mysterious possibility of communion with all creatures. For example, those I love; a star, a bird, a flower, a butterfly; they enrich my life, and make me gentle like the saints who are my friends.

In seeing these things and keeping them together, Maria was reaffirming some of the deepest of von Hügel’s convictions and intuitions. For him life in the Spirit must be both this worldly and other worldly, natural and spiritual, human and divine. ‘A polarity, a tension, a friction, a one thing at work in distinctly another thing—

this was for him a fundamental and inevitable character of our spiritual life.’ Life in the Spirit for him was never discarnate.

‘The mystic sense flies straight to God and *thinks* it finds all its delight in him alone. But a careful examination always discovers many sensible, institutional and historical contributions to this supposed ineffable experience,’ he writes.

So Evelyn says of von Hügel:

I cannot but think that this intense consciousness of the close-knit texture of our experience—the interpenetration of the realities within which we live and move—will come to be recognised as von Hügel’s ruling intuition and one of the chief contributions made by him to religious thought.

And she continues to quote him:

We all need one another ... souls, all souls, are deeply interconnected. The Church at its best and deepest is just that—that interdependence of all the broken and meek, all the self-oblivion, all the reaching out to God and souls ... nothing is more real than this interconnection. We can suffer for one another—no soul is saved alone and by its own effort.

In one of the greatest of her essays, on the subject, ‘St Francis and Franciscan Spirituality’, originally a lecture given at University College London in 1933, Evelyn speaks of these things in particular by working out the apparently unlikely comparison between the fundamental insights of the twelfth century Italian Friar and the nineteenth century Anglo-German philosopher and theologian. Sorella Maria is nowhere mentioned in this text. I think one can feel her presence everywhere in it.

Evelyn Underhill writes:

All readers of the letters of Baron von Hügel will remember the penetrating and unconventional sayings of his director, the saintly Abbé Huvelin: and among them one that strikes us on first reading as a paradox. Huvelin said to the Baron on one occasion, in answer to a question, which is not reported to us, ‘Yes, there have been saints, and even great saints of your type. St Francis of Assisi—I don’t mean the Franciscans!—*there* is a Saint wholly cast in the mould of life and movement, light and warmth!’

Those who knew the great scholar saint or know him from his profound and often difficult teaching, and those who think they know the spirit of St Francis will feel baffled by this judgement.

What can there be in common between two so almost comically different human beings? But Evelyn will not allow us to escape from the question. She has too much respect for St Francis and von Hügel, too much respect for Huvelin himself for that. She insists:

This is the opinion of a saint, a realist, for whom God was everything—about two other saints, also realists, for whom God was everything; and neither of whom were able to exclude any aspect of his creation from the sphere of their interest and their love.

To the question of what they had in common she replies:

Both the medieval Friar and the modern scholar were penetrated by a sense of the realness, more the sacredness, of the natural as well as the supernatural order; something which was not to be fled from, but to be loved without possessiveness, with an unlimited and humble tenderness, cleansed of all desire. This is not the outlook of the pious naturalist or the higher pantheist. It is the outlook of the genuine Christian supernaturalist who places nature where it belongs—in the heart of God—and is conscious of his supporting presence through and in the web of life. ‘God’, said Von Hügel, ‘is a stupendously rich reality; he is the God of nature as well as the God of supernature.’ St Francis would have understood and welcomed that. Every movement of his life declares its truth. Hence comes the Franciscan attitude of reverence and delight towards the finite world in which we live; and the humble and friendly love of all those creatures whom von Hügel, in terms St Francis would surely have echoed, called ‘Our little relations, the lesser children of God’.

Evelyn Underhill continues with a long and searching consideration of the nature of holiness as we see it in St Francis, which brings her in the end to a consideration of two of the great turning points in the life of the saint.

The first point would be that in which it seemed to him that a voice spoke from the crucifix of San Damiano, and demanded his

total dedication to its purposes. The second point would be that in which the seraph on La Verna, with its reminiscence of Isaiah's mighty vision of reality, baptised into Christianity and mysteriously united with the suffering of the cross, completed his initiation into the deep secrets of the redemptive order. That overwhelming illumination ruled the last two years of his life ... This was the supreme thing which Francis saw, loved and believed; and that with such intensity, that the love and belief took physical form. Here he found the clue to the meaning of his own life, as a servant and agent of the unseen.

His whole career as I see it is poised on these two strange events. The first drew him out towards the visible world, to help, mend, and serve it. The second made him the mysterious partner of an invisible rescuing love. Wherever we get him really speaking his mind he is never far from the cross; the underlying tension of life. 'Yes there it is; no need to go further,' said Huvelin. 'Sanctity and suffering are the same thing. You will do no good to others save in suffering and through suffering.' We draw very near the real Francis, though not very near the popular notion of Francis, when we meditate on these words ... The entire growth of Francis was towards the point at which, as that strange phrase in his legend says, 'He was transformed by the kindling of his mind into the image of the crucified', embracing and harmonising in one movement of self-abandoned love, the splendour of God and the deep suffering of man. That is charity, the outpouring passion of generous love, at its full height, depth, breadth, and width; a passion which is the earnest of eternal life, and reflects back to a metaphysical source. St Francis, says the Fioretti, in a famous passage, offered his followers 'the chalice of life', and those who had the courage to drink it 'saw in profound contemplation the abyss of the infinite divine light'.

Summing up her whole consideration Evelyn Underhill makes in the end a remarkable claim. What his contemporaries saw in him was, she says:

A reincarnation as it were of the whole evangelical life in its completeness, its riches and poverty, suffering and beauty, the crib and the cross. He was one in whom, as Jacopone da Todi said plainly, 'Christ was felt to live again', and show in its perfection the right relation of man to God.

We have already remarked on the fact that there is no mention of *Sorella Maria* in the pages of this essay, but surely her presence may be felt silently, discreetly, throughout. As Dana Greene remarks in her study of Evelyn Underhill's life and work, in the period to which this essay belongs, Evelyn's 'early preference for Ruysbroeck seems to have diminished and been replaced by the Italian Franciscans, beginning with St Francis of Assisi.'

Of course Dana Greene recognises that Evelyn continued to value greatly not only Ruysbroeck but the medieval English mystics and the French spiritual writers of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

But Angela of Foligno, Jacopone da Todi, and her own contemporary *Sorella Maria* held a special place. All of them were imbued with the spirit of St Francis. She saw in Francis, as she did in the Orthodox tradition, a sense of the sacred in the natural world and a love and delight in the senses. Francis' creaturely simplicity and awestruck sense of God were also the same characteristics that she found so dominant in her own beloved von Hügel. But the real greatness of Francis she wrote: 'is the same as the greatness of the Christian religion when fully understood. It is one thing to be a believer in Christianity or even a courageous practitioner of its hard demands, another thing to be sensitised to all its mysterious implications: and it is just these mysterious implications which the poetic intuition and intrepid love of Francis seized and expressed in terms of human life.'

In the pages of her essay we see Evelyn Underhill at her most impressive, reflecting, in the light both of her profound knowledge of the Christian tradition as a whole and of her own deep experience of the life of prayer and contemplation, on the deepest truths of the Christian revelation; and in her own characteristic way carrying on a remarkable work of integration, a truly esemplastic activity. She is drawing together the different aspects of the many-sided mystery of God's love, and in doing so she is showing the unifying power of the original Franciscan vision to hold together in one, lines of thought and experience which are often thought of as distinctly western and Catholic on the one side, with lines of thought and experience which are thought distinctly eastern and Orthodox on the

other. Bringing us in the end to a profoundly hesychastic theme, the contemplation of ‘the abyss of the uncreated light of God’.

This fuller realisation and articulation of the original Franciscan vision in its depth and richness, as well as in its immediate radiance and directness, was made possible for Evelyn Underhill by her direct contact with Sorella Maria and with the life and experience of the community which she had founded. For Maria was a woman in whom, with a wonderful clarity and strength, something of the original life-giving vision of Francis became real and creative in a way altogether appropriate to the twentieth century. The life of Campello was a life which not only gathered up the past and was open to the future; it was also a life vividly aware of the needs and possibilities of the present. Not for nothing did Maria enter into correspondence with people whom she believed had some privileged understanding of the way in which the Spirit was guiding the history of her own time, Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Friedrich Heiler, Giovanni Vannucci, among others.

We are reminded that Maria, like Evelyn and von Hügel, had been closely linked with aspects of the movement of Catholic modernism. Perhaps we can see in Maria’s eagerness to discern the signs of her own times, some of the most positive and creative elements within that movement. Thus there is a powerfully prophetic quality in her vision and in her encounter with Evelyn’s different but complementary way of seeing things. Their meeting with one another opens for us, I believe, the hope and vision of a more courageous prayer and work for unity, certainly within the family of all who confess Christ, but also more widely through the whole human family and through the whole of the world which God has created. For Anglicans in particular, I believe, the encounter with Sorella Maria could open up a possibility of re-appropriating central elements of the work of Evelyn Underhill, in a way which is directly relevant to some of the urgent needs of our own new and turbulent century.

Afterword

In the first of these three articles we have seen some of the difficulties which Sorella Maria had in the 1920s and 30s with her diocesan Bishop. For many years the Community of Campello had to live without the full approval and blessing of the local Church. It was undoubtedly this fact which made Evelyn Underhill so reticent about who exactly Maria was and where the Community was situated, when she published her article about the Community in *The Spectator* in 1929.

The situation today, not only at Campello but throughout the Christian world, is of course vastly different. In this article we have been thinking of the reality of the communion of prayer which even now binds Christians of different Churches and different traditions together. That is an interchange of prayer which is not broken by death. In the Communion of Saints, St Francis, St Clare, Friedrich von Hügel, Evelyn Underhill, Sorella Maria, Amy Turton, continue to pray with us and for us. This sense of the unbroken Communion of Saints in heaven and on earth, in which already the wounds of division are being healed, is beautifully expressed by Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter of 1995, *Ut Unum Sint*. These texts are not so well known as they should be, but they are so relevant to the subject of these articles, that it seems appropriate to quote a little from them here.

In a theocentric vision, we Christians already have a common Martyrology. This also includes the martyrs of our own century ... and it shows how, at a profound level, God preserves communion among the baptised in the supreme demand of faith, manifested in the sacrifice of life itself ...

While for all Christian communities the martyrs are the proof of the power of grace, they are not the only ones to bear witness to that power. Albeit in an invisible way, the communion between our Communities, even if still incomplete, is truly and solidly grounded in the full communion of the Saints—those who, at the end of a life faithful to grace, are in Communion with Christ in glory. These Saints come from all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities which gave them entrance into the communion of salvation ...

This universal presence of the Saints is in fact a proof of the transcendent power of the Spirit. It is the sign and proof of God's victory over the forces of evil which divide humanity. As the liturgies sing: 'You are glorified in your Saints, but their glory is the crowning of your gifts'. Where there is a sincere desire to follow Christ, the Spirit is often able to pour out his grace in extraordinary ways. The experience of ecumenism has enabled us to understand this better ...

From the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, paragraph 84.

WHENCE AND WHITHER ?

KENNETH CRAGG

BOTH QUESTIONS lie deep in the dark event of September 11th 2001, with Americans enquiring in bewilderment, 'Why do they hate us so?' and resolving to go after them with a simplistic formula of 'war on terrorism'. But who are 'they', and where are we to find 'them'? Muslims were certainly involved, but was their deed Islamic? The perpetrators left behind in taxis at Boston well-thumbed copies of the Qur'an and diaries brooding on suicidal Jihad. Yet, in their own Qur'an, there is that which rebukes their zealotry. Consider Surah 100, with its description of criminal surprise attack in the idiom of the Qur'an's own time and place in 7th century Arabia.

By the snorting war-horses that strike fire with their hoofs as they storm forward at dawn, a single host in the midst of their dust-cloud. Man is indeed ungrateful to his Lord. He himself is surest witness to the fact. He is violent in his passion for what is good in his own eyes. Is he not aware that their Lord knows them through and through on that Day when the tombs yield up their dead and all men's private thoughts are public knowledge?

The denunciation of such barbarous cunning and deceptive zealotry is clear enough. The evil conspiracy, the demonic lust for prey, stand condemned. In the Qur'an also—as in the Talmud—is that

ancient dictum of Semitic faith: ‘He who kills a single soul is as if he slew all mankind, and whoever saves a single soul as if he saved all humankind.’ (Surah 5. 32.) When, after his emigration to Medina, militarism came into Muhammad’s story, could it override that supreme rubric? How could a faith in its defining Meccan terms ever conceivably belong with such cunning and brazen violence as the attack on the World Trade Centre towers and the walls of the Washington Pentagon? Faith would then itself be suicidal.

Yet there were Muslims ardent and passionate enough to conceive of their Jihad in the desperate terms that brought a proud icon of the West plunging down in fiery collapse into a ‘Ground Zero’ that would burn and glower for six telling months. The ferocity it revealed vows never to be extinguished. The tragic irony is only deepened by the realisation that the ‘raids’ of a sunlit morning had their physical origin in the poorest and remotest of Asian territories.

In one of his grimmest poems called ‘The Convergence of the Twain’, old Thomas Hardy mused on the collision in which a massive iceberg sank another icon of western exuberance, the ill-fated *Titanic*, its captain insufficiently vigilant among ocean hazards. Its human population, some in high luxury, others the poor below decks, were unaware of danger to the ‘unsinkable’. Meanwhile the iceberg drifted ominously out of its engineering yard in the silent Arctic wastes. The rest, Hardy mused, was mindless fate, or—by his philosophy—a malevolence toying with human playthings. The poem ends with ‘moon-eyed fishes’ surveying the sunken vessel and asking, ‘What does all this vain-gloriousness down here?’ A similar ironist might wonder in the same way about the awesome ruin in Lower Manhattan.

Coincidence can readily frustrate interpretation. Symbols in situations are the stuff of historical perplexity. How should realism read the three collisions, the four hijacks of September 11th? Inevitable confrontation of ‘*an* Islam and *a* West’ (as formulated by some in the U.S.A. without the vital indefinite article) is a counsel of despair to be resisted at all costs. That there is a legitimate Asian, African and human indictment of the West, and of America—its

ultimate expression—is not in doubt. There is a perceived arrogance in the preening of the supreme super-power, seemingly isolated in that role and crudely buoyed by it to a sort of explicit hegemony too readily oblivious of its own disturbing image, the chronic burden it imposes on realms of human poverty and deprivation. Its reaction to September 11th goes with a bland indifference to concerns of the United Nations for the rest of humanity, for example in the Middle East, the treaties on ballistic missiles, global warming and world population. All of these have vital consequences for the world at large which ought not to be at the mercy of one hemispheric interest centred on the U.S.A., a nation at odds with its own best traditions of wisdom and magnanimity as symbolised, for example, by Adlai Stevenson and George Marshall in the late fifties.

Furthermore the world, not least the Islamic one, has some reason to resent the invasion of social mores by the inexorable penetration of western media, of Hollywood and its morals, of ‘pepsi-colonisation’ and fast-food ‘Macdonaldism’. Cultures feel themselves undone, in their ‘native’ quality, by factors they can in no way resist but which nevertheless blight or demean their perception of themselves. While the technologies are avidly desired and are vital to competitive survival, the mind-sets that they too often demand remain alien and corrosive. The psychic strain of adjusting to western-induced change is taxing on old and proud identities to a degree which western thought has all too little appreciated and western attitudes often harshly ignored.

The Muslim shape of this ‘the West/the others’ tension has its own special animus. Islamic zealotry resents the U.S. military presence on the sacred soil of *Jazirat al-‘Arab*, ‘the Arab peninsula’. It denies the assumptions of the ‘terrorism’ label as hypocritical, and it falls back on one reading of the basic concept of Jihad as militant struggle against all that does not submit to the faith and régime of Islam.

It would be naïve to think that such Muslim characteristics of what Islam is and demands of its faithful were not validly in its soul and story. Both the Qur’an and Muhammad’s prophetic *Sirah*, or ‘career as *Rasul-Allah*’, turn on the Hijrah, the migration from

Mecca to Medina, in which armed power was sought and found and successfully wielded to bring the prior city round to faith. From that pivotal event the Islamic calendar begins. ‘Seek ye first the political kingdom and all will be added’ could be a Muslim adaptation of Matthew 6: 23. The *religio/regio*, the *Din* and *Dawlah*, faith and régime, as one, was *al-fauz al-mubin*, ‘the evident victory’ of Muhammad’s achievement as both prophet and ruler. Subsequent Islamic history, its Caliphate and its political mind, confirmed the founding pattern. Islamic faith should always be expressed in and corroborated by Islamic rule, so that Muslims should always be ruled by Muslims.

This inner perception of a militancy always due from, and proper to, Islam could, under certain mentalities, be held to warrant what—on the receiving end—would be criminal violence in its name. That pattern *might* be further under-written, on the part of Muslims minded to it, by many other considerations. Among them would be the sense of Islam as the last revelation, the final religion confirming and renewing all that was valid in other, earlier, faiths, and of Islam as—according to Surah 30. 30—divinely suited to, and right for, human nature, the religion that derived from and belonged with Allah himself.

However, there are other considerations, deep in Islam itself, set to call this belligerent, assertive reading of its quality into honest question. Take that defining Hijrah out of Mecca. The campaign that followed was no mere brigandage. It was highly purposive and—only so—self-justified. What was its purpose? To promote the message of the Meccan years when Muhammad was only and imperatively ‘the prophet’. Repeatedly the Qur’an told him then: ‘Your sole responsibility is the message, the word you preach.’ If what ensued in Medina was so manifestly for the sake of the Meccan word, there can be no doubting the priority of Mecca inside the double character of historic Islam.

Furthermore, whither does the pilgrimage go? Pilgrims may well take in Medina, to or fro, but not in ritual *Hajji* terms. They go uniquely to Mecca. On which *Qiblah*, or direction of Prayer, is every mosque meticulously oriented so that Prayer is there in focus?

The question is unnecessary; there is no alternative to Mecca. Like the spokes of a bicycle wheel all thoughts turn to Mecca as the *qutb*, the hub of Islam's meaning. (The analogy has to note that the spokes lead from innumerable perimeters across the human globe, all concentrically bound to Mecca.)

It is this priority of Mecca underwriting Islam as 'essentially a religion' which may admit the argument that its 'depoliticisation' is properly conceivable, if it is now seen that global world conditions urgently propose (if they do not require) it. Perhaps Muslims should rethink the Hijrah—not as wrong *then* (when Arabian paganism urgently needed the monotheism with which Islam unified its tribes and healed its feuds), but wrong now, fourteen centuries on, in a quite contrasted milieu in which a *world* in cohesion can only be had by the co-existence of hitherto divisive religions. This would mean that statehoods everywhere should, ideally, hold the national ring equally cognisant of diverse beliefs (in due law and order) with none improperly advantaged. (This need in no way mean a total secularity.)

This time factor in the reckoning of religions with themselves, it could be argued, is deeply Islamic. For it has always been a principle of Qur'an exegesis that the local time and place in which its serial revelations came are vital to understanding what it means. These 'occasions of the sending' (as they are called) must be ever in mind in exegesis. Then moving centuries must also be relevant to the way the hallowed text should be read, as well as immediate incidental times of long ago. For is not Islam 'the final revelation', meant for 'all the worlds' of which Allah is Lord? If the Scripture is not to go into a museum, its community must know and tell its relevance in present time and place. The notable Cairo historian, Ahmad Amin, wrote that if Muhammad had received the Qur'an in the 20th century different contents would have been given to him.

May it then be that the fact of Muslim dispersion across the world means that, both physically and symbolically, Hijrah for them has been reversed? Without benefit of statehood that is exclusively Islamic, they are back in Mecca where the defining message (and community) of Islam was bravely powerless and not, then, thirsting

to be politically empowered. What is wrong with that Meccan situation now—happily, as for the most part it is—without that original persecution and hardship?

The situation has many precedents. When in the India of Queen Victoria, Indian Muslims were feeling bereft under the British Raj and brooding on their sorry plight, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, in founding what became the great Aligarh University, told them to galvanise themselves and cease repining. Mosques are open, Ramadan observed, pilgrimage available, prayer performed—what lacks of Islam? By strictly religious tests Islam obtains.

To be sure, zealots and others disagreed. Decades later, that part of Indian Islam which could claim majority population opted to create Pakistan as an ‘Islamic State’—vital, in their view, to the very survival of Islam. That decision was a supreme historic testimony to the view of Islam that makes Islamic statehood indispensable to a right Islamicity. But Muslims survive in India in deeply religious terms. Moreover, that Pakistan solution is not available to Muslims after their new Hijrah into the West, into Europe and the Americas. These lack the over-all ‘umbrella’ of the Caliphate which the Turks (in the name of a ‘secular’ version of Islam as ‘Turkism-culture’) abolished in 1924. Much as some Muslims yearn for it, it has not been re-established. For good or ill, the nation state seems to have come to stay and, with very few exceptions, it is not unilaterally peopled by one religion. Everywhere civil community is imperative.

It is calculated that at least 25 per cent of all Muslims are now living in a diaspora where, short of the tragic violence which some would angrily deploy—witness September 11th 2001—Muslim statehood is permanently absent from their options. Their being Muslims has to be ‘simply religious’. Otherwise their presence, and their sharing in democratic process, would have to be seen as inherently subversive. That, in turn, would jeopardise the *bona fides* of Muslims genuinely participatory in their adopted societies where all legal amenities sustain them in a pacific Islam, even if prejudices beset their social reception. Even that adversity can be taken in the

stride of a spiritually self-confident faith and can paradoxically strengthen its spiritual fibre.

This analysis only serves to underline the self-definition Muslims face, whether in Saudi Arabia or Finland, Pakistan or Chicago, Mali or Durban. Recriminations and suspicions dog the story. Enmities and misreadings drift down from history. Mutual distortions claim too long a life. But there are many inner resources in Islam for the temper the current situation requires. Faiths, in the end, are the liability of their faithful, the faithful in trust with their faiths. A gentle, self-searching Sufism developed in the very bosom of the most stringent orthodoxy. Islam, almost from the beginning, knew inward challenges to its own identity, its due system of authority, its proper disciplines in Schools of Law. Sunni Islam contains the principle of *Ijma'*, or 'consensus', as a fourth source of *Shari'ah*—'the mind of the community' as a referent for the mind of Allah, as this might be 'legalised' in a way consistent with the prior sources in the Qur'an and Tradition—primary sources which anyway are less than inflexible when rightly held in corporate trust.

To be sure, there is a battle around who is warranted to 'pioneer' the ideas that might evolve into law revised. This right of *Ijtihad* (as the term goes) has been held restricted to '*ulama*' and pundits. Or all that needs 'pioneering' has long ago been done. Defensive mechanisms (and habits) are always a feature of religious loyalty. But the concept is there and admits of an increasing 'laicisation' of the mind of Islam. For it is evident that many of the issues that call for moral deliberation in the contemporary scene stem more from the sciences than from the *zawiyas* (corners) of mosque discourse.

To encourage such inward thinking across the whole range of Islamic life, the Qur'an itself is always calling. It reiterates the plea: 'Perhaps you may use your mind ...' 'Perhaps you may consider ... be thankful ...' Its cry is: 'Will you not reflect on the Qur'an, or do your hearts have locks upon them?' (Exactly an accusation of the hidebound mind that fears to think disturbing thoughts.) Believers—if they would be truly such—can never shed responsibility for what they believe or for how their belief behaves and how, freely or

harshly, it belongs in the community it guides and reminds and informs.

It must follow that contemporary Islam is in perennial determination of its own meaning, its proper self-direction in the world. On that abiding destiny *Al-Qa'idah* has no private veto. It represents the direst, ugliest face of one version of Jihad—the Jihad which other Muslims read as the struggle against precisely such enmity of heart towards a world one should do better than hate. Given this ambiguity, this poised potential in the very fabric of Islam, it would be tragic and imbecilic for non-Muslims to visualise, still more concert, some scenario of 'Islam and the West' fated to dark and devastating encounter.

Rather, as least as far as intelligent Christians are concerned, the clear vocation must be to help serve and foster all from within Islam that can actualise the sort of gentle, patient Islam everyone of 'honest and good heart' would wish to see. That—if we can call it such—would be a 'mission', calling for perceptive discretion, neither patronising nor compromising—a ministry of mind and heart that would obviate bigotries and prejudices and enable, as far as outsiders may, the essentially 'religious' nature of its first message, echoed from the Meccan scene into the realms of current co-existence and the 'peace of nations'. If there is an Islamic resolving of Islam to which Christians might be, discerningly, a party, they have much to amend and accuse, to discipline and denounce, in the West—not least the threatening naïveté that sees only a Pentagon making 'war on terrorism'.

Bishop Kenneth Cragg, is Assistant Bishop of Oxford. He has been Warden of St Augustine's College Canterbury, Assistant Bishop in Jerusalem and has held other appointments, both parochial and academic. His many books reveal an understanding of Islam and knowledge of the Middle East which are probably unrivalled in the Church of England. Bishop Cragg's latest book, Am I Not Your Lord? Human Meaning in Divine Question will be reviewed in the next issue of the Chronicle, Spring 2003. The above article is substantially the text of a talk given to the Community at Fairacres, Epiphany 2002.

ST THÉRÈSE AND PRAYER

*Extracts from Talks to the Fellowship of St Thérèse
on Pilgrimage to Lisieux 2002*

SISTER STEPHANIE THÉRÈSE SLG

Thérèse's Childhood Environment and Prayer

IT SEEMS fitting that we should look to Thérèse herself to guide us in our prayer. But there is no specific Thérésian school or method of prayer. So where can we look for guidance? To her writings, of course! Right on the very first page of her autobiography she tells us:

Before taking up my pen, I knelt down before our Lady's statue ... My prayer was that she would guide my hand, and never let my pen write a single line which wasn't as she wanted it to be. And after that, I opened the gospels at random, and the words my eyes fell on were these: 'Then he went up on to the mountain side, and called to him those whom it pleased him to call; so these came to him.'

The elements of Thérèse's prayer are pretty much all there: recourse to Mary and the company of heaven for support; recourse to Scripture; the concept of God's pleasure, and also God's mercy freely given. Thérèse does not *tell* us much about prayer, but she does *show* us, by the way she lived prayer. For that was what prayer was to Thérèse—not something done, but something lived in response to God.

She was raised in a pious and devout Catholic household, with God as its focus and with daily family prayers. From a very early age she was aware of the Church's Sacraments. Too young to attend Sunday Mass, she would eagerly await the return of her family who brought with them her 'little sacrament' of blessed bread. She would listen for the gate to squeak as 'the signal for an outburst of delirious joy'. Joy was a theme running through her childhood piety. After her first confession—and here joy is again linked with a Sacrament—she writes, 'I came out so pleased with life, so light-hearted! Never before had my soul known such happiness.' Note

that she was so pleased with *life*, not pleased with herself. Thérèse was an attentive child and as ready to receive God in his creation as she was to see Him in the people and the sacraments which surrounded her: she and Céline used to have long conversations in the attic room at Les Buissonnets in the evenings, talking about the moon and the clouds and the sky.

Thérèse also *thought* about God in relation to what she observed. When she was still very young, her father took her along on his fishing trips into the countryside. ‘My thoughts went deep at such times’, she recollects, ‘and although I knew nothing about meditation, my soul did sink into a state of genuine prayer.’ Later when she was ten years old, she would have liked to know about mental (or contemplative) prayer. She reflects about an episode: ‘I was practising mental prayer without realising what I was doing; God was teaching me the art in some secret way of his own.’

It would be too simplistic to say that Thérèse’s environment alone shaped her spirituality and prayer. She obviously had a natural inclination for the holy. Thérèse seems to have been given from a very early age eyes to see God in her surroundings and the grace to seek him out. But don’t forget that Thérèse lavishly prepared to meet God. Whatever God gave was to her liking, whether nothing or everything. Even though in her prayer for most of her religious life she experienced ‘dryness’, which feels as if you have received nothing, she still prepared herself to receive all.

Prayer in the Environment of Carmel

Thérèse said that ‘the Carmelite vocation which God had marked out for [her] meant evangelising, by prayer and acts of sacrifice, the Church’s evangelists’ (presumably priests). Her prayer was an active ministry though a hidden one, and she remarks: ‘It’s only through prayer and sacrifice that we [Carmelites] can be useful to the Church’. There are aspects of Carmelite life which are integral to Thérèse’s prayer: the desert, solitude and silence; other aspects are the Scriptures, the Divine Office, and the Eucharist. All these are means of uniting ourselves with the Lord—in other words, these are means of prayer. The concepts of the desert and exile are

externally represented by the enclosure and the cell, and internally by an emptiness or openness to God. Disciplines which nurture this include solitude and silence. Thérèse's pleasure in being alone with her thoughts as a child opened up to her the way of contemplation. Once in the convent, the stark simplicity of the cell reflected the starkness of the desert. If this world is an exile from heaven, then Carmel is surely a desert and an exile within this world. Going into the desert strips you—empties you. This voluntary emptying is *kenosis* (Phil. 2: 7). As Christ was 'exiled' from heaven, so Thérèse was exiled from the world she grew up in when she entered Carmel. The desert is the place where God is encountered, as in the Book of Exodus.

Thérèse herself does not really use the term 'emptiness', but she lived it within herself through her Little Way which is essentially an emptying of selfish desires and preferences, and a filling with the desire to please God. Silence is an emptiness that God can fill. It is a sacred space to listen to and meet God, just as solitude in the cell is a sacred space to meet God. In one of her letters Thérèse writes, 'this Beloved [Jesus] instructs my soul. He speaks to it in silence.' So silence is a form of communication as well as a preparation for encounter.

Another place where Thérèse encountered God and learned from him was in the Scriptures. Her Novice Mistress recalled her 'keen understanding of Sacred Scripture'. There was understanding because she spent *time* with the Gospels—attentive reading over time would focus her thoughts and enable her to understand, to receive 'lights' as she would say. But this wasn't just studying the Bible, it was absorbing and assimilating the Scriptures. Thérèse does not just *quote* Scripture, she *incorporates* it in all her writings. She would also use the words of Scripture as her own prayers.

These disciplines are done alone, by oneself. The other half of conventual life is that of the corporate, things done together, the Divine Office and the Eucharist. The Office is so taken for granted that it is only mentioned in passing in a lot of writing about Thérèse. But consider, the nuns spent about eight hours in chapel at prayer together, spread throughout the day. Céline says about her sister:

I asked her one day about her interior dispositions in choir and she replied that she had no fixed method of prayer at that time. She went on to say that often she transported herself in spirit, during the Office, to some desert-cliff high above the earth. There alone with Jesus, with the world at her feet, she would forget that creatures existed, and would simply tell Him over and over again how much she loved Him. True she did not always understand the language she was using to express her love, but, she added, it was enough for her to realise that she was making Him happy.’

Thérèse undertook to say the Office not simply as an obedience but as a way of pleasing God. Even in the Eucharist, Thérèse sought to please only God who would come to meet her in the sacred host. ‘I have offered myself to Jesus [at communion] not as one desirous of her own consolation in His visit but simply to please Him who is giving Himself to me.’

The cell, solitude, silence, the Scriptures, the Divine Office, the Eucharist are all means of uniting oneself with our Lord. It is the path of the Little Way that will lead us to our destination, which is God. Jesus says *be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect*. But what is perfect? Thérèse puts it beautifully, ‘Perfection consists simply in doing his will, and being just what he wants us to be.’

Thérèse's Prayer

Thérèse never prayed in isolation, but always as part of the whole company of heaven. The saints and angels were very real to her, and she had recourse to them as she would to those ‘good examples’ she knew on earth. She turned in prayer to her dead siblings; and before the pilgrimage to Rome she prayed to the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph for help in obtaining what she desired so much, an early entrance into Carmel. Thérèse was devoted to Our Lady. She lost her real mother at four, then her ‘adopted mother’, her sister Pauline, left a few years later to enter Carmel (an event traumatic enough to bring on her mysterious illness which was cured by none other than Our Lady). Then Marie, her Godmother and spiritual confidante, also left and entered Carmel. But Mary never abandoned Thérèse, nor did Thérèse abandon Mary. And Thérèse would have

been aware that to love the Blessed Virgin so completely would please Jesus, which was ultimately Thérèse's intention in all things.

She can teach us about perseverance and expectation in prayer. Anticipating a community retreat in the year after her profession which she wanted to go well, she made a novena beforehand, and 'prayed hard over it'. She remembered for years her commitments to pray for others, for a crippled man, for an inconstant school-fellow. Thérèse's prayer was based not on feelings but choice—the choice to remain faithful. A final aspect of Thérèse's intercessory prayer is the openness with which she received the answers or non-answers to her prayers. In fact, one gets the sense that by and large Thérèse wasn't as interested in the 'answers' as in the actual act of praying: probably because she saw the praying itself as what pleased God, not getting the satisfaction of the answer she wanted.

Another development in Thérèse's prayer was her understanding of *love responding to Love*, the core of the Little Way. Her prayer was simply to love, to love God beyond all measure. 'I have found my vocation, my vocation is LOVE!' The starting point for all prayer is not method but LOVE, not the *how* we pray but *why* we pray. We pray because we love Jesus, and in praying we love, and in loving we unite ourselves ever more closely to Him. In her final months when Thérèse was no longer able to say the Divine Office or to attend the Eucharist or even read the Scriptures, she could still love. Once she said to Céline who was sitting with her in the infirmary, 'I can't sleep, I'm suffering too much, so I'm praying.' Céline asked, 'And what are you praying?' Thérèse replied, 'I say nothing to Him, I love Him!'

Thérèse's enthusiasm and overflowing love came from a place of faith not feelings—for most of the time she was in the convent and especially the last months of her life, Thérèse felt NOTHING. 'I felt, to be sure, a great sense of peace deep down in my heart; I had done everything to satisfy God's claim on me. But on the surface I felt only disappointment; our Lord made no sign, it was *as if* he had withdrawn his presence altogether.' Sometimes what Thérèse is talking about in her dryness is accessible to us. But in her last months, she suffered to an extent that few of us will ever know. She

was brought to the point of claiming she could no longer pray: ‘I can only look at the Blessed Virgin and say, Jesus! How necessary is that prayer at Compline: Deliver us from the phantoms of the night.’

Thérèse never lost sight of the reason of her being, her life—JESUS. Whatever that life presented her, whether sorrow or happiness, sufferings or peace, she always sought to unite herself to her Lord, her Beloved, to love Him to folly. And every act of love, whether word or deed or heartbeat, was prayer because it deepened her relationship with the One she loved.

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BOOKS

LOVE'S REDEEMING WORK, The Anglican Quest for Holiness. An anthology compiled by Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth Stevenson and Rowan Williams. OUP, 2001. £40.00.

Most spiritual anthologies are devised to illustrate a single approach to the practice of faith or to reflect the mind and affections of a single compiler. Here we have not only three anthologists but the whole diverse field of post-Reformation Anglicanism to be surveyed. All that Anglicanism has sought to comprehend within itself, all the varieties of practice that have seen themselves as 'loyal Church of England', and others beside, find their place in this splendid collection. So, in close proximity, you will find William Perkins, that systematic Calvinist, Lancelot Andrewes with his patristic temper, and the judicious Richard Hooker. Archdeacon (later Cardinal) Manning writes scornfully of people who give only ninety minutes a day to exercises of devotion, W. E. Gladstone as a busy statesman politely shows him why he is wrong, while W. E. O'Brien SSJE, admittedly speaking only of contemplative prayer, says 'half an hour is enough'. J. A. T. Robinson and David Watson, each writing about his own expected death from cancer, come to similar conclusions though they start from quite different articulations of faith. Benjamin Hoadly and Daniel Waterland face one another across a single page-opening with opposed views on the Eucharist. And among many writings which speak with a ringing and convincing confidence in Christian tradition, we also find testimony to the liberal mind which questions 'the wonderful earnestness with which the most incomplete solutions of the universe are thrust upon us as complete and satisfying'.

This can be very stimulating for those who are knowledgeable about the relativities of history, but those who come to this material for the first time might find it confusing. For them, perhaps, as well as to explain their selection, the three compilers have provided four introductory essays which set the diversities in historical context and show also in what ways they reflect a common approach.

Nevertheless, much of the value of this material may turn out to be its avoidance of common denominators and its illustration of Stephen Sykes' idea that the identity of Christianity is carried by the continuity of its controversies; or in T. S. Eliot's words that those opposed to one another in the past can be 'folded in a single party' and leave us 'a symbol perfected in death'.

One theme which seemed to me to stand out, without any contrivance on the part of the editors, is the way Anglicanism has been locked, from the sixteenth century, into a dialectical struggle with its own inherent moralism. In later years, it must have seemed to many—of whatever party—that the English Reformation, as a celebration of God's grace, had nevertheless produced a Prayer Book astonishingly niggardly in conveying the grace of forgiveness. It is not that the desire for forgiveness is discouraged—rather the contrary—but the conditions attached are so stringent that it is not clear that it can be satisfied. Christ's comfort is addressed to those who *truly* turn to him. Repentance is expected to be *true, earnest, and hearty*. At Morning and Evening Prayer it is declared that God absolves 'all who *truly* repent and *unfeignedly* believe his holy gospel', but the same declaration goes on to say, in effect, this does not mean you: you must now 'pray for true repentance'. The effect of this insistence that we must somehow match God's truth with a truth of our own could bring sensitive people to exactly that despair which Luther experienced before his conversion to justifying faith. It is as though the major breakthrough of the Reformation had never happened.

Indeed, on the evidence gathered here, it appears that the change of consciousness that produced the Prayer Book was largely a recovery of certain dualisms—of spiritual against carnal, inward against outward, truth and clarity against obscurity and deceit, sincerity against fudging and dodging. There was nothing new in this, but the new movements in Europe gave people courage to engage with them more vigorously. This results in that temper in the Prayer Book that one of the editors describes as its 'pilgrim' spirit, but which might better be described as probationary, since the goal proposed always lies ahead and depends on conditions yet to be

provided. To call this temper graceless would not be fair, but it is often expressed as a grace called in to assist a moralistic task. It is a long way from Paul's explosive 'in Christ is a new creation'. Luther saw that a gospel of free grace could lead on to 'the fine art of abusing liberty', but there is no fear of that here.

That this mood of grace-assisted moralism should be found in some sixteenth-century writers like Cranmer and Coverdale, and the influential manuals of John Wootton and John and Richard Day, is sad but perhaps comprehensible. Tyndale had grasped the radicality of grace, but his Lutheran approach was found inopportune in England. It is more sad to find this mood in some worthies of later times. William Law interprets Christ's saying, 'I am the Way', to mean a way to be imitated; and J. H. Newman in his celebrated sermon, 'Holiness necessary for future blessedness', makes this necessity almost unobtainable with his dictum, 'To obtain the gift of holiness is the task of *a life*' (his emphasis). Happily, as the author of *Gerontius*, he comes to take a longer and more merciful view.

But when Henry Venn sought to win people away from 'the tiresome round of duties as a penance enjoined of God to escape damnation', or Evelyn Underhill spoke of 'the maze of self-occupation', they were deploring something that everyday Anglicanism tended to encourage. Over time two ways out of the maze presented themselves. One was faith understood as the way we are grasped by present assurance—whether this be seen Calvinistically as a conviction of personal election, or in the Wesleyan manner as a simple perception that Christ died 'for me, even me'. The other was to find in the sacraments the immediate and objective guarantee of our incorporation into Christ. Some people saw these two approaches as opposed, as a true and a false alternative, but others perceived the unity between them—Charles Wesley, Handley Moule, Arthur Stanton, E. B. Pusey and many more whose writings are included here.

And what of holiness, the theme that the compilers see as guiding all their choices? As might be expected, some early references tend to associate it with righteousness, its distinguishing mark being the wholehoggedness with which it is pursued. But there

are exceptions, as when Thomas Becon (Cranmer's chaplain) says, 'we are made holy, pure and blameless by the free grace of God through faith for Christ's sake', and this sense of holiness as something bestowed, given before we respond to it, even imposed, increases as we read through the collection towards our own time. Dean Inge recalls that originally holiness meant simply separation to God, a condition 'fraught with danger'. George Body draws out the link between holiness and beauty; Handley Moule the link with adoration; Gilbert Shaw provides the startling metaphor, 'the iron is in the fire, and the fire is in the iron', while T. S. Eliot speaks of 'a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything'. Michael Ramsey says, 'there are people who make God near', and R. E. C. Browne tells us that we 'are called not to godness, but to greatness'.

Writings like these may persuade us, so far as writings can, that Anglicanism is not only in quest of holiness but has a vocation to it, and in many of its children has powerfully encountered it. If such words and sentences serve to remind us of holy people we ourselves have known—in all their diversity, for every saint is a distinct creation—and of the ways in which holiness itself has attracted us personally by its beauty, this collection will have abundantly justified itself.

The Reformation dualities have it in them to promote a stern and blinkered sectarianism, especially when the assurance of faith is held nervously as a dogma rather than experienced as a living reality. That the Anglican tradition has avoided this, even though some have tried to steer it that way, can be attributed to several factors. The Reformation allied itself to learning, which sometimes gives authority to enlightened common sense. It did not follow Plato and send the poets into exile. Above all, the Reformation church accepted that it was responsible for and to an entire nation, and could not draw the defining boundaries too narrowly. The fruit of this was present from very early in the process, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the harvest became abundant, as concepts of objective and subjective truth became more accurately subtle, the complexity of personal and social psychology was

acknowledged, and the nature of doctrine came to be seen less as ‘the plain teaching of God’s word’ and more as the comprehension of the incomprehensible.

Rowan Williams (whom I, like Archbishop Carey, suppose to have written the General Introduction) finds the unifying characteristic of Anglican writing in a quality of humble reticence and self-questioning, a scepticism that never becomes agnosticism. This is finely argued in passages that are worthy to stand beside some of the most memorable in the anthology itself, and which draw attention to this same quality; in, for example, Alec Vidler’s words on the intellectual cross of the theological liberal, or R. E. C. Browne’s saying, ‘Doctrine is not held by the suppression of thoughts that challenge its truth, but by their proper development.’ At the same time, the way that Dr Williams fits so well into this relatively modern company may lead us to wonder whether his idea is applicable over the whole field. He supports his argument by repeated reference to certain people, notably to Hooker and George Herbert. But Hooker was famously eirenical, and Herbert was a poet for whom verse was a constant invitation to playfulness and complexity of meaning, who nevertheless could express doubts, as in the ‘Jordan’ poems, about these qualities as applied to divinity. Perhaps we can say that this reticence has always been there in Anglicanism, but not always for the same reason, not always acknowledged or owned, and not until more recent times articulated systematically.

This way of humble reticence, if pursued with integrity, is not a way of avoiding meaning when meaning is to be had. It pursues definition, while recognising that definition always lies beyond us in God. It is not at all the same as that kind of fluffy rhetoric which deliberately cultivates ambiguity, proposing meanings that it fails on inspection to affirm. Here definition is pursuing us and we are avoiding it. For that reason I am sorry that the anthology should conclude with the post-communion prayer, ‘Father of all, we give you thanks and praise’, even though it may be the most memorable piece of liturgical writing in modern times. Here the two pursuits, towards and away from meaning, seem to me to be too evenly balanced.

K. S. MASON

NEARER THAN BREATHING by Melvyn Matthews, SPCK, 2002. £7.99.

Sarah Siddons, the tragic actress, once went into a shop to buy material and asked, in a voice that could carry to the very back of the gallery in Drury Lane, 'WILL IT WASH?' The shop assistant fainted. It is, however, a fair question to ask of any theology, Will it preach? Melvyn Matthews, having previously written on the quest for holiness and the rediscovery of the mystical way, has now risked publishing a book of sermons. Will his theology preach? The answer is decidedly 'yes'. Those of us privileged to have heard him know that he has something to say and knows how to say it in a striking and memorable way. He is honest enough to admit to the moment in writing a sermon when one asks oneself, 'Do I really believe all this?' The result of facing that question is an avoidance of religious cliché and an exploration both of the riches of the Christian tradition and of the best in contemporary literature and the arts, in order to find nourishment for himself and for us, his hearers and readers.

Any preacher faces his greatest challenges on Good Friday and Trinity Sunday. Canon Matthews does not shirk these challenges. He does not attempt to 'explain' the Trinity or Atonement, and clearly rejects explanations that drive a wedge between the Father and the Son. He insists on the unity of God and warns against putting too much emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Persons. In considering the Passion, he selects a series of incidents in St Mark's narrative which show Jesus steadily more and more isolated and abandoned—even, apparently, by God—and sees this as a process of self-emptying which makes room for the total indwelling of God. He regards Jesus not as the great exception but as the great example: not doing for us what we cannot be expected to do for ourselves, but showing us a way to live in which we stop clinging to our individual selfhood and lay ourselves open to God. However, since one young male Jew of two millenia ago cannot possibly be a role-model for all the infinite variety of human beings in all the situations in which they find themselves, Matthews puts great emphasis on the

Communion of Saints as demonstrating an immense variety of ways of responding to God. The central paradox of his theology, of which he is fully aware, is that while on the one hand God is ‘nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet’, yet he is also the hidden God. It is, as Francis Thompson put it, ‘our estrangéd faces that miss the many-splendoured thing’ which is all the time around us; and yet if we are to encounter God we need to make a leap into the dark. If we do, all that it has cost us will be given back with interest, but unless we do we shall remain estranged from God, the true source and centre of our being.

This is not a book to be read at a sitting, as I have done in order to review it; it is a book intended to be read slowly, section by section. I shall keep it by me, and read it again as it is meant to be read.

MICHAEL PATERNOSTER

WRITING IN THE DUST, by Rowan Williams, Hodder & Stoughton, 2002. £3.99.

Here Rowan Williams has given us a brief exposition and synthesis of some of his reflections in the aftermath of the events of September 11 2001; yet somehow its eighty-odd pages convey far more than that description suggests. His presence that morning at Trinity Church Wall Street, a few blocks from the World Trade Centre, where he was part of a group preparing to tape a lengthy discussion on spiritual matters, put him perilously close to the disaster perpetrated by a group whose rhetoric of violence was framed in the language of religion, and many of whose victims used their last words to phone loved ones and express their love and gratefulness as their own death overtook them. *Writing in the Dust* begins by recognising this paradox: ‘The religious words are, in the cold light of day, the words that murderers are saying to themselves to make a martyr’s drama out of a crime. The non-religious words are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about—the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged. It should give us pause, especially if we think we are religious. You don’t have to be Richard Dawkins to notice there is a problem.’

In his first chapter, ‘Last Words’, Williams explores the religious use of secular language and the secular use of religious language, pointing out that those last phone calls weren’t ‘pious’: ‘it isn’t language about God; it’s simply language that brings into the world something other than self-defensiveness. It’s a breathing space in the asthmatic climate of self-concern and competition; a breathing space that religious language doesn’t often manage to create by or for itself.’ He reminds us, ‘God always has to be rediscovered. Which means God always has to be heard or seen where there aren’t yet words for him.’

His concept of ‘breathing space’ is one of the organising principles of this book. Williams invites us to make space between our thoughts and our actions, our assumptions and our opinions, our reactions and our language, our perceptions and our understanding. Space to clear our thinking; space to accurately observe, examine our biases, broaden our horizons; space to allow the Spirit to enter and illumine our hearts and minds; space for the silence of God. He conveys multi-layered ideas by inviting us into his process, showing us his efforts at careful self-observation and principled self-censure, dealing frankly with uncertainty and ambiguity, and trying always to avoid superficial conclusions and shallow, saccharine piety. He knows our human tendency for avoidance and self-delusion, and confronts it directly in passages such as the following:

We have the freedom to think what we actually want, to probe our desires for some kind of outcome that is more than just mirroring what we have experienced. The trouble is that means work of the kind we are least eager for, work that will help us so to understand one another that we begin to find some sense of what they and we together might recognise as good. It means putting on hold our most immediate feelings—or at least making them objects of reflection; it means trying to pull apart the longing to re-establish the sense of being in control and the longing to find a security that is shared. In plainer English, it means being very suspicious of any action that brings a sense of release, irrespective of what it achieves; very wary of doing something so that it looks as if something is getting done.

It means acknowledging and using the breathing spaces; and acknowledging and using the rage and vengefulness as a way of sensing a little of where the violence comes from. I'd better say it again: this is nothing to do with excusing decisions to murder, threaten and torment, nor is it a recommendation to be passive. It is about trying to act so that something might possibly change, as opposed to acting so as to persuade ourselves we're not powerless.

Much has already been written about the events of September 11th, and doubtless there will be much yet to come. While not pretending to have the definitive explanation of anything, this little book grasps many of the central issues and gives its readers a way to approach them thoughtfully and prayerfully. The clarity of Williams' language in his courageous analysis of complex and subtle psychological, cultural and spiritual dimensions of experience, together with the unfailingly constructive nature of his thinking, are probably what has caused this book to be on best-seller lists in the UK and the US since its publication.

It is rare to find this many issues discussed in a meaningful way in such a short book. A good example of the author's approach is the epilogue, where he concisely and eloquently explains the title of the book. There are three dimensions, one alluding to the choking dust of lower Manhattan on the day itself; one recalling writing that is meant to change, to fade away, as a sand mandala; and one reminding us of the passage in John 8 where, rather than condemn the woman taken in adultery, Jesus leans over and writes with his finger in the dust. As if to confirm Williams' observations, two seminarians recently returned from assisting the rescuers at Ground Zero, noted, 'When I come back from overseas, I usually have a hundred things to say, but I really don't know how to talk about this trip. I don't even know what it means yet', and 'It was a visceral experience—I'm still processing all the feelings. It requires not simply interpretation but time to approach the experience, and the issues, with a careful, contemplating manner. There are no quick solutions.' (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Spring 2002.). For all its brevity, *Writing in the Dust* is a comprehensive and open-ended first step.

SISTER HELEN SLG

THE CONCEPT OF NATURE by John Habgood, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002. £10.95.

When in the eighteen-eighties Lord Gifford endowed the lectures that bear his name, he stipulated that lecturers should concern themselves with natural religion ‘in the widest sense of the term’. At the time, a distinction between natural and revealed religion was widely recognised, and theologians had a fair idea of the possibilities and limitations of natural theology. The twentieth century undermined old certainties, and fifty years on from the first series of lectures Karl Barth could devote his Gifford lectures to the thesis that there is no such thing as natural theology: without revelation, we know nothing of God. The only Gifford lecturer I have actually heard myself, J. Z. Young, went a long way towards proving Barth right by telling us a great deal about the structure and workings of the brain and almost nothing about religion.

John Habgood tells us that one of the first theological books he read was William Temple’s Gifford lectures, *Nature, Man and God*. Re-reading it in preparation for his own series, he was struck by the huge differences in outlook between the nineteen-thirties and today, and also, worryingly, by Temple’s failure to make clear what he meant by ‘Nature’. Consequently, Habgood devotes a substantial part of this book to teasing out the various senses in which we speak of things as ‘natural’, and the various concepts with which such things have been contrasted—artificial, unnatural, supernatural:

A common thread running through all these contrasts is that they represent a departure from some kind of normality. Despite its variety of uses and its potential for misunderstanding, the concept of nature seems to do its work by pointing to a quality of givenness, whether in the way things are, the way they used to be, or in the way they ought to be.

He argues, however, that ‘by itself givenness is too static a quality to convey the dynamism in nature as commonly experienced’.

Evolution impresses by its creative potential, but ... it has no predetermined goal. In its most comprehensive sense nature is not a thing but a system, a vast bundle of possibilities.

He concludes, therefore, ‘both insights are needed, givenness and potentiality’.

How, then, can one argue from nature to nature’s God? Notoriously, attempts to prove the existence of God fail to carry conviction. Habgood is much more cautious than a fellow scientist turned theologian, Arthur Peacocke, who, in *Paths from Science Towards God*, proposes theism as the best explanation of the known facts—an inference which goes beyond the evidence but takes it all into account. Peacocke, to my mind, tries to press his thesis too far in suggesting that ‘best explanation’ includes such attributes of God as omniscience and omnipotence. For Habgood, there is a crucial distinction between proving God’s existence and recognising it: ‘we know more than we can prove’. Granted that our perceptions of nature and of God are very largely culturally conditioned, both science and theology are not simply human constructs with no anchorage in reality but are attempts to describe that reality as accurately as possible: they both rest on the conviction that although a full and complete grasp of ultimate truth is not within our reach, what we can properly say does have validity and reliability.

Even if we cannot prove God’s existence, recognising it makes a difference to the way we look at a whole range of issues which Habgood discusses under the headings ‘Studying Nature’, ‘Respecting Nature’, ‘Following Nature’ and ‘Improving Nature’:

To perceive the world as a gift of God should in no way inhibit the proper use of scientific knowledge. God is to be understood as the source of nature’s potential for change, as well as the source of its fundamental being. The recognition of God as the ultimate giver does, however, make a difference. It entails an acknowledgement of our own creatureliness and responsibility towards what is not ultimately ours.

Habgood recognises the theological ambivalence of the world, particularly the burden of suffering that makes belief in God problematical. He does not, however, regard the element of chance in the process of evolution as an argument against the existence of a Creator: ‘Far from being a theological problem, chance can be seen

as a vital part of the means whereby God allows his creation itself to be creative.’

I am conscious of having done less than justice to a book which clarifies so many of the contentious issues facing our world by patiently unravelling some of the confused and conflicting ways in which we use the concept of nature. Archbishops today have little opportunity of writing serious and weighty books while in office. Here is a former archbishop who, unlike Temple, has been granted time in retirement to distil a lifetime’s experience and reflection into writing that puts all thinking Christians greatly in his debt.

MICHAEL PATERNOSTER

THE SONG OF HOPE by Judith Pinhey, Bible Reading Fellowship, 2002. £6.99.

As I pondered over this seasonal collection of meditative poems from Judith Pinhey—and it is a pleasure to note that she is a member of the Fellowship of the Love of God—I found myself increasingly captivated by the sense of her cheerful contentment and confidence in God. There is real exuberance, and keen observation, in her appreciation and recognition of the wonder in what is near at hand. For instance, the ‘few specks’ of flower seeds for spring planting are ‘lighter than grains of sand, and as gritty as crumbs of dry bread’, and hold ‘the promise of unknown glory’ of summer colour and scent. One autumn afternoon, she sees ‘eight goldfinches within inches of my window, like a string of beads on the lavender seeds that I had forgotten to prune.’ The poems are a response of praise, simplicity and gratitude, to the amazing giftedness of God’s creation. There is gentle humour and playfulness, as when she asks: ‘What’s wrong with goats, /I should like to know? /Is it something to do with their coats /which are less white than snow ... Why are sheep always commended? /Isn’t it time their smugness was ended?’ Nonetheless, such delight is tempered and shot through with a recognition of our vulnerability and human frailty. A Christmas poem, bearing the title ‘A Bombshell’, begins: ‘Peace fell/last night like a bombshell’, and goes on to liken the crib to a font ‘rougheast, cold,/ hollowed out like a hard bed’. In her

meditations, Judith Pinhey is clearly rooted in Scripture and in the faithful round of parish worship. There is an index of biblical references for the main themes of her poems. The pen-and-ink illustrations by Ray Burrows have an unpretentious charm and are entirely in keeping with the character of the book and an enhancement to it. This collection of 'psalms and meditations for today' could well belong either within a reader's regular 'quiet time', or simply be an occasional friendly accompaniment. Judith Pinhey's work is a blessing in helping us to sharpen our senses and to grow in appreciation of the glory of the daily ordinariness in life.

SISTER DIANA SLG

Sacred Tongues: The Golden Age of Spiritual Writing by David Scott, SPCK, 2001. £10.99.

In 1837, J. H. Newman, then Vicar of St Mary's Oxford, wrote in his lectures on the 'Prophetic Office of the Church': 'We (that is, the Church of England) have a vast inheritance, but no inventory of our treasures. All is given in profusion: it remains for us to catalogue, sort, distribute, select, harmonise, and complete.' Over a century later, Thomas Merton in his *Journals (1963-65, Vol. 5)* wrote: 'What is important is the recognition of the deep worth of the Anglican writings and of the elements of mysticism which Anglicans themselves ignore.'

In the last year, two books have been published which address these statements. *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (the comprehensive anthology reviewed above) contains extracts from Anglican writers from the Reformation to the present day. In *Sacred Tongues*, David Scott, introduces us more specifically to five Anglican writers and poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

If you were asked to name five areas of difficulty and doubt for the sincere Christian seeker—one who also happened to be an Anglican—at the beginning of the Third Millennium, would you agree with the following observations? Firstly, that there is a genuine and acknowledged ignorance of the theological teaching

relating to the Creed, Scriptures and Book of Common Prayer; and of leaders in the faith. And that along with this, there is puzzlement in the face of diverse and even contradictory books, comments and media representations of the faith in the twentieth century. Next, we lack opportunities for finding ‘space’ (both time and place), and for silence, both inside and outside ourselves. Thirdly, we sense the attractions of beauty, goodness and truth in nature and art, but nowadays these are not necessarily avenues which are leading us into a growing relationship with God. Moreover, the education of the late twentieth century lacks a historical sense, and so the past is not seen as relevant to the present or the future. Finally, contemporary culture is pervaded by an underlying, unacknowledged, and only half-conscious fear of death and dying. We will come back to these dilemmas, by way of David Scott’s chosen ‘sacred tongues’.

Sacred Tongues brings us into the company of a ‘family of writers who please’: namely, Lancelot Andrewes, George Herbert, John Donne, Henry Vaughan, and Thomas Traherne, writers who span a critical period of English and European history—an age of civil wars and of intellectual, scientific and literary development. Through these chosen writers, David Scott has given a very clear and simple, because deeply spiritual, aid to facing and entering the spiritual warfare, through grace.

The Introduction is more than a formal preliminary; it is more as if a friend were introducing you to five of his friends! A distance of three hundred years makes no difference to knowing a person. The author tells us of his delight at seeing the ‘wonderful spiral squiggle’ at the end of a manuscript of Herbert’s poems, and says: ‘On such memories I feed in the lean times’. For each of the writers, we are given a brief but comprehensive sketch of their background and circumstances, interspersed with selections from their writings. David Scott deftly interweaves a running commentary to illustrate how each individual grows into a living relationship with God through prayer and contemplation, responding in their turn to God’s answer to their need. It is a case of balancing the despair bred of

sinfulness with trust and hope in the redeeming love of God. George Herbert's poem 'Bitter-Sweet' is a good example:

Ah my dear angry Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve:
And all my sour-sweet days
I will lament, and love.

In each essay, we are given detailed examples of how to interpret their writings, and so there is a generous allowance of quotations. This is a real aid to the reader, who may either have no former knowledge, nor access, to a complete edition of the writer's works. However, most literary anthologies are likely to contain *some* extracts, which can be a beginning. If the examples available to you, are 'speaking to you', then you will want to go further, and David Scott offers helpful bibliographical details of editions and references at the end of each essay. Another way in which we are helped in getting to know the writer is by means of what the author calls an 'interlude'—such as a charming letter from George Herbert writing as a young man to Bishop Lancelot Andrewes: 'Most holy father, I came back from Cambridge, straight from the comfort of your presence . . . and spiritually the more fulfilled, from sheer joy.'

Without going into detail, it may be helpful at this point to suggest how the contemporary problems and difficulties mentioned above may be answered by reference to a particular writer. Anglican teaching is given by Lancelot Andrewes; the struggle to find 'space' is voiced by George Herbert; the attractiveness of creation is illustrated by Thomas Traherne; historical context is David Scott's milieu in his Introduction; awareness of mortality and darkness, and our need and desire for God, are conveyed by John Donne and Henry Vaughan.

If prayer, in all its varied practice, is the way a soul grows into a mutual relationship with God, and God with a soul, then this book

of *Sacred Tongues* can be of great value—especially if you wish to lessen your spiritual reading and use the time and space for prayer.

SISTER MARY MAGDALENE SLG

Editor's Note: David Scott is editor of the series, The Golden Age of Spiritual Writing, published by SPCK, which is bringing together a series of books of English 'spiritual' poetry and prose, particularly from the seventeenth century.

Turning the Diamond: Exploring George Herbert's Images of Prayer by Dennis Lennon, SPCK, 2002. £9.99.

This book, a commentary on George Herbert's sonnet 'Prayer', is a striking example of the way in which the seventeenth century spiritual writers of our tradition seem to be coming to life again at the present time. The author, whose early Christian nurture was in a conservative evangelical milieu, tells us that at a moment in his life when 'my attempts to make a "go" of the Christian life were floundering and I was struggling to stay connected', a sudden and quite unplanned meeting with the poetry of George Herbert proved of decisive significance. New connections were made:

I had not realised before that biblical orthodoxy was allowed to be so beautiful, luminous with love and delight in God ... Neither had I been aware that a person's relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ could be this robust, sincere and transparent as between two dear friends.

Clearly, in the course of time, George Herbert has himself become an old friend of this writer. While his book centres on the one poem on Prayer, it reveals a penetrating knowledge of George Herbert's work as a whole. One finds, for instance, a striking exposition of 'Aaron,' a poem about the Christian priesthood which Dennis Lennon finds to be Herbert's 'most profound poem'. It is interesting to see how, in his comment on the poems, the writer makes use of a number of classical Catholic theologians—Anglican as well as Roman—among others, Austin Farrer, Eric Mascall and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Dennis Lennon is himself a writer with an original turn of phrase and a delight in finding new and unexpected ways of stating old and eternal truths. He is also a man vividly aware of the deeply ingrained tendency to cynicism, denigration and despair which seems to characterise much of our time. He finds in Herbert's imaginative and creative exposition of the Scriptures a wonderful antidote to this temptation towards deadly darkness. Commenting on the words 'God's breath in Man returning to his birth', he says:

Prayer is the agent of rejuvenation because it puts the one who prays into communion with the risen Christ, the lord of life... What is to come and is already at work among us is the continual feast of resurrection life. To be a Christian means to be always young, in a sense far more profound than mere biological youthfulness. In the risen Christ, the Christian is always at the beginning of life.

No less striking is his insistence on the place of praise within the Christian life. He sees it as something all-encompassing and re-integrating.

We will honour the world as a sacred theophany, teeming with God's self-revelations. 'The whole earth is full of his glory.' (Is.6:3.) It is in our priestly responsibility in creation to protect its integrity as a God-praising order. To argue for the symbolic and sacramental nature of the world as a place luminous with the love and power of God. To alert all who will listen to creation's canticle.

In this book, which is itself a remarkable fusion of Catholic and Evangelical understanding, this note of life-giving praise recurs again and again. It is a book which one will want to read not just once, but constantly go back to.

A.M. ALLCHIN

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