

Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, Michael Biehl and Knud Jørgensen (eds.), *Mission in Secularised Contexts of Europe: Contemporary Narratives and Experiences* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2018)

This is a very well produced book: despite there being 16 contributors and 3 editors, it is a fine example of “reconciled diversity”. Each essay derives from a different geographical/theological standpoint, yet all coming together as a readable logical unit.

The editorial introduction sets the scene, defining Secularism, pointing out that Secularism may be the unforeseen fruit of Christianity, religious ignorance having displaced religious knowledge, Christendom disappeared, a dramatic drop in church adherence being universal, and the separation of church and state now the norm.

The book’s aim is a sharing of experience in diverse contexts rather than providing glib answers. There is a brief survey of the internal church processes that have fuelled Secularisation, Bonhoeffer and his call for “Religionless Christianity”, the growth of scientific understanding meaning an end to the “God of the Gaps”, the Death of God process of the 1960’s, etc. Yet the paradox is noted that while Bonhoeffer spoke of “Religionless Christianity”, his *magnum opus* was *The Cost of Discipleship*, which had a seminal effect on this reviewer, among many others, with its stress on the need to avoid Cheap Grace and its call for total Discipleship at whatever cost. This written against a backcloth of being a faithful Christian in Nazi Germany.

The essays which follow tackle the issue in different ways, but each is written by one who has an inside knowledge of the area of being referred to. Some emerge from a background of culture where there had been deliberate attempts to eradicate religion, e.g. Romania, where there was declared to be “no room for God”, while others simply record a gradual decline in European Church affiliation. Since there is no “one size fits all” style of community, so there can be no single solution to the problem of growing Secularisation. Many issues are raised that made this reviewer think: religion was for centuries a means of identity, e.g. mediaeval Christendom, the post 30 Years War division of Germany, etc; we define ourselves differently now; we no longer gain identity by what we join or to whom we are related, even if we should. Individualism, to be oneself whatever that means, do what you like, etc., is now all pervasive.

Can we believe without belonging? Is there such a thing as solitary Christianity? After all, much of Evangelical Christianity lays great emphasis on Jesus Christ as personal saviour, i.e. what matters is the individual’s relationship with God not with his fellows. There has been a gradual decline of the influence of traditional guidelines; modern life is less vulnerable, chance and change are no longer feared. Life is no longer, in Hobbes’ words, “nasty brutish and short”, hence no place is left for superstition or a god of the gaps. The idea is advanced that we can have Christian ethic without the dogma; true, we have ditched the dogma, but it seems to me that we are now abandoning the ethics and values as well.

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Can we have the Christian ethic without worship and a congregation?

One minor quibble, the essay “from a British Perspective” is not only 100% about England, it is totally about the Church of England. The Church of England’s 5 Marks of Mission, which form the basis of the essay, may have had considerable influence in that denomination over the last 30 years, but other “English” churches are doing “exciting things” on the British Isles. Also, the Irish are discovering that you can indeed be Irish and proud of it without being a Roman Catholic. The Scottish “twa kingdoms idea” (the Church of England is state controlled) would have offered insight into one way of resolving the tension between church and state. So, a more British Perspective would have been beneficial.

Of value is the discussion of the conflict between Communism and religion, for the former also claims to be “the way the truth and the life”; Communism is for some almost a religion, being not just a political theory but a complete existential ideal. Yet it has proved all but impossible to eradicate religion; the Orthodox Churches have long had to live under a state unsympathetic to their faith but learned to adjust.

I was intrigued with the idea that God can be seen as creator and also as telos, the end to which we travel; this however leads to the absence of the influence of religion in the here and now, except that those who follow the faith may well be a seminal influence in the world around them. There is an acceptance of the vulnerability of religion in the modern world, and the final comments include the observation that we may well be in a similar situation to the churches of the book of Revelation, puny as an infant’s arm being confronted by the power of secular forces. Note is made of the considerable European growth of Islam and the fact that religions other than Christianity are playing a significant role in modern European society and thought.

The essays from Africa and India where religion is all pervasive were especially valuable. Members of the migrant churches cannot understand how folk can live without religion and the problem faced by second-generation migrants is how to be loyal to their native tradition and also good citizens of a secular society. The central issue is how do we live in a world that is so overwhelmingly materialist? I particularly warmed to the challenge - is our situation “graveyard or laboratory”, but even if it be a graveyard, Christianity was born out of a belief that new life follows death.

To sum up, there is indeed more than one narrative; and I could identify with the comment in the Epilogue about organised religion no longer being the custodian of a museum. For the church has not only a great past but has a real future, and reading this book will encourage

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us to believe that and to continue, as a prayer of the Iona Community puts it, to “find new ways to touch the hearts of all.”

This book will be of value not just to those interested in religion; the issues raised have had a great influence in politics, law, ethics and social policy. The changing attitudes to identity and the cult of individualism affect every area of life.

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