HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Reviews

The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God, Sarah Coakley (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 149 pp, £14.99 pbk

Coakley believes that traditional Christian asceticism – moral training – rooted as it was in an obsessive aversion to the body, has failed both sacred and secular society as a credible tool for achieving social restraint. Yet surely some agreed measure of moral restraint is a social and spiritual necessity? In the face of a secular society that views all restraint of desire as an offence against freedom, she seeks a new Christian asceticism that begins by embracing sexuality rather than denying it. One cannot but applaud the objective.

To read this collection of essays is, in part, to eavesdrop on anguished conversations within the Anglo- and Roman Catholic tradition. The trespass is deeply rewarding, if at times bizarre. Coakley wants a specifically Anglican treatment, and, accordingly, she trawls the Fathers and the Anglican Divines for precious, rare seeds from which to grow her new, sensual ascetic.

Chapter Two focuses on the particular difficulties of the Catholic tradition as regards women priests. Who apart from Coakley, one wonders, while attending a Eucharist, ponders how, as the male priest turns from altar to congregation, he enacts, in von Balthasar's expression, 'an endless act of fruitful outpouring of his whole flesh, such as a man can only achieve for a moment with a limited organ of his body' (p. 71)? Yet here, as she ponders how this image is creatively 'destabilized' by the female priest, is Coakley's path towards a sensual ascetic.

Chapter Three is about the inescapability of sensuality as we pray the Trinity. Coakley remarks, 'To speak thus of the trinitarian nature of sexual love at its best is a far remove from the grimy world of pornography and abuse from which Christian feminism has emerged to make its rightful protest' (p. 99).

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HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 3 (Holiness & Contemporary Culture): pp. 429–30
ISSN 2058-5969

Chapter Four explores the relationship between Christian desire, sensuality and gender. The Trinity simply is 'the goal of a life animated from the start by *desire* for Christ' (p. 126).

In Chapter Five Coakley declares, 'The key issue in the ascetic "training of desire" … is a lifelong commitment to personal, erotic transformation, and thereby of reflection on the final significance of all our desires before God' (p. 141).

Here, then, are five beautifully written, scholarly essays about Christian spirituality and desire. They do not add up to a coherent whole, but they all contribute to the topic, and they contain much that is rewarding to the non-Catholic reader. What is intensely frustrating to this reviewer is that at no point does Coakley begin the task that she identifies as urgent – the building of a new Christian theology embracing sensual desire. She makes no reference to the erotic theology that James Nelson built upon the Wesleyan tradition. But then, she wishes above all to be Anglican.

Michael Wilson

***Scars across Humanity**: Understanding and Overcoming Violence against Women,* Elaine Storkey (London: SPCK, 2015), 276 pp, £9.99 pbk

Scars across Humanity stayed on my desk for several weeks before I read it, even with the deadline for this review coming closer. I anticipated this being a difficult read.

Storkey's first chapter describes gender-based violence as a global pandemic which cannot be tackled with earnest pronouncements or legislation alone. Eight chapters then discuss, respectively, female infanticide in India, female genital mutilation, early and forced marriage, so-called 'honour' killings, intimate-partner violence, rape, and sexual violence in war.

Each chapter is written with careful attention to research, including brief stories and statistics. Each explores multiple strands in that particular example of violence against women: cultural beliefs and practices, changes in approach and legislation in recent years, issues of law enforcement. Storkey focuses on the ongoing impact of violence rather than telling numerous horror stories of violent actions.

I read *Scars across Humanity* remembering Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1979), which dealt with similar subject matter. Daly's book was angry, polemical and deliberately shocking. Storkey's tone is much more measured and reasoned. She concentrates on giving information, careful documentation and attempts to keep the focus on the global nature of gender-based violence. Her analysis is strong in outlining the complexity of cultural factors. Her account remains sickening, because of its subject, especially depressing on sexual violence in war and conflict as she traces how the danger for women and children continues in refugee camps and post-conflict. There are glimpses of similar crimes committed against men, particularly 'honour' killings and domestic violence (though not what is coming to light about sexual violence in war perpetrated against men), but always with the reminder that violence bears differently on women and men because of their different social location.

In two further chapters, Storkey discusses why such violence appears endemic, first examining the answers of evolutionary biologists, then social scientists, outlining why she believes feminist social-scientific theories offer better

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness ISSN 2058-5969
Holiness The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge

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analysis. Her final two chapters discuss the role of religion, focusing on Islam and the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The final pages are Storkey's testimony to the power of the gospel to promote healing and hope.

The publisher and the endorsements suggest this book is aimed at a Christian audience. Most of the chapters are informative without overt Christian analysis or theological reflection. Presumably, then, it is aimed at Christians who do not know, or have not recognised, the impact of what Storkey has discovered in her years as a scholar, educator, campaigner and in her role at Tearfund. I would judge that Storkey has written a book that such an audience could receive, even given the horrors she writes about.

Anyone searching for a deeper analysis may be a little disappointed. The final four chapters are relatively brief and skate the surface for anyone familiar with this subject. Nevertheless this is an important, up-to-date contribution that recognises gender-based violence is very much part of contemporary contexts. It enables the reader to celebrate moves towards change, even as it recognises the complexity of cultural patterns, institutional systems and individual choices that leave gender-based violence horrifyingly entrenched.

Jane Craske

Music and Transcendence, ed. Ferdia J. Stone-Davis (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 247 pp, £65.00 hbk

Here's a remarkable and deeply challenging book, not for the faint-hearted!

At first blush, this collection of 15 essays looks like another obscure, academic, dry and unapproachable intellectual exercise, albeit handsomely and expensively produced. However, even though it is assumed that the reader will have some basic knowledge of 'philosophy', 'theology' and 'musicology', there are unexpectedly rich and precious treasures waiting to be uncovered.

As someone with a passion for theological honesty, I have long held a fascination for the idea that musical expression and performance is less an interesting pastime standing 'alongside' theology and philosophy (a sort-of-useful metaphor or a comparable 'illustration'), and more an equally valid way of pursuing truth in its own right. This book is unique because it confirms this latter conviction. Far too many approaches to a theological understanding of music regard music essentially as emotional 'entertainment' which may or may not point to the 'Other', without taking seriously the possibility that musicology can 'hold its own' in the spiritual quest.

'Transcendence' is a very complex concept, and the two-part selection of essays draws attention to the contrasts between 'absolute' transcendence and 'immanent' transcendence, while recognising that

> Music has the capacity to take us outside of ourselves and place us in relation to that which is 'Other'. This 'other' can be conceived in an 'absolute' sense, insofar as music can be thought to place the self in relation to a divine 'other' beyond the human frame of existence. However, the 'other' can equally well be conceived in an 'immanent' (or secular) sense, as music is a human activity that relates to other cultural practices. (from the back cover)

Roger Scruton's paper 'Music and the Transcendental' and Jeremy S. Begbie's 'Negotiating Musical Transcendence' are particularly helpful in identifying the scope and the depth of this notion of transcendence and how music and the arts relate to it.

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In Part 1 ('Music and Absolute Transcendence'), there are two essays which jump out of the page: first, 'Music and the Beyond in the Later Middle Ages' by Christopher Page, and, second, '*Creatio ex improvisatione*' by Bruce Ellis Benson.

Page's essay takes us through previously unchartered waters revealing important insights, especially in relation to Gregorian chant in the Middle Ages and the way its liturgical nature was part and parcel of everyday European consciousness for everyone. We are introduced to the significance of the proximity of persons in the act of singing at worship, and how the liturgical rhythm of the Church's chant and music-making breathed as one unified body creates the possibility of resonance with the breath of God.

Benson's paper, although a summary of his book *Liturgy as a Way of Life* (2013), raises the fascinating question of 'creativity'. How does God create out of nothing, as traditionally understood? Could it be, as we recognise how musical creativity develops and grows neither as a bolt from the blue nor without substantial dependence or connection to other previously worked material, that the creativity of God is essentially an act of improvisation?

Other papers in this Part 1 include an appreciation of the composer Ferruccio Busoni and his thought, the philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher (sometimes admired by Methodists with an emphasis upon experience and subjectivity), and an intriguing essay about sound, spirituality and sensuality in a non-Western, Indian context. Russell Re Manning's paper, 'Unwritten Theology', exposes the attraction of some of the strands of Paul Tillich's theology and George Steiner's influential aesthetic essay, *Real Presences* (1989). As we, in these ecumenically challenging days, still wrestle with the significance of 'The Ministry of the Word', this quotation from Manning's essay stimulates us: 'Music as unwritten theology is not simply a theology-in-waiting, but it is a theology without writing.'

Part 2 ('Music and Immanent Transcendence') has a more specific musical and theological focus. Joshua A. Waggener places Rudolf Otto's one-time famous *The Idea of the Holy* alongside C. P. E. Bach's anthem 'Heilig' (words from Isaiah 6), and compellingly leads us into the realm of holiness (a topic dear to the hearts of Methodists, albeit with a distinct flavour from the past).

Likewise, essays relating to Haydn's String Quartet Op. 33, no. 2, and the significance of the 1902 Beethoven Exhibition held at the Vienna Secession building, and E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kreisleriana*, give us fascinating insights into nineteenth-century 'absolute music' and the language it can express, but we

are conscious of the limitations when exploring just one short and narrow historical period.

In this regard, it is a little surprising that there are no specific references, in either Part 1 or Part 2, to the spiritual and transcendental quest in the musical works of contemporary avant-garde composers such as Arvo Paart, John Tavener, Giacinto Scelsi, Jonathan Harvey, Tommie Haglund, Gerard Pape, Bo Holten, Judith Bingham, Maeve Louise Heaney, and others.

However, the thirteenth essay in this collection, 'Religious Music as Child's Play' by Oane Reitsma, tackles the spellbinding work of H.-G. Gadamer and his highly influential hermeneutics. This paper held a particular attraction mainly because it convincingly expresses the power and importance of the concept of 'play' for both musical performance and biblical interpretation.

All in all, this splendidly rich book can be compared to 'a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old' (Matthew 13:52, RSV). Realising that many of the essays presented here were originally produced for a university conference, there is no doubt that the reader needs to take time and care to draw out the rich rewards offered by these treasures. On more than one occasion, while reading, I had to rummage through both my bookshelves and my CD collection!

Harvey Richardson

Not Eden: Spiritual Life Writing for this World, Heather Walton (London: SCM Press, 2015), 142 pp, £16.99 pbk

Heather Walton is one of Britain's leading practical theologians whose writing ranges widely around multiple themes and genres and is always intensely engaging. Muscular, intricate, fiercely intelligent even when it is at its most sensuous, her prose demands alert attention on the part of the reader at the same time as it excites and awakens. Her writing is never naive or innocent – a key trope of this book, which seeks to entice readers out of Eden into the fallen yet glorious world in which the Spirit is fully present and at work, seeding, growing, twining, ripening and entangling.

It is a book of two distinct parts and many more voices. Part 1 consists of three short chapters examining the history, nature and craft of what is now called spiritual life writing and might once have been termed spiritual autobiography. Here, Walton traces in bare outline the Western tradition of spiritual autobiography from Augustine onwards and reflects on the nature of such narratives as artful fictions, bringing to bear upon the discussion a fascinating range of authors from theology, philosophy, literary criticism, gender studies and more. She explores tensions in spiritual life writing between embrace and escape of this world, in all its bodiliness and materiality, as well as different aspects of the writer's craft, particularly as they pertain to 'writing the divine'. There is an enormous amount of wit and wisdom packed into these short chapters which will be of great use to theological teachers, students, preachers and writers.

But the heart and germ of the book, the part which will haunt me, is Part 2 – a breathtaking, original and absorbing instance of life writing itself. Given all she says about fictive narration in Part 1, we should be wary of taking this narrative as a straightforward account of Walton's own childhood, adolescence and growth into adulthood. Nevertheless, it is clearly rooted in her own history. It is both a coming-of-age memoir, a lament for innocence lost and a celebration of the body's hungers and pains as well as a coming to terms with the wild unpredictability of the Spirit's fecundity which manifests in blight as well as blossom, waste as well as abundance. Intense childhood friendships, secret play in sheds and gardens, absorption in books and the inner life of the

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 3 (Holiness & Contemporary Culture): pp. 436–437
ISSN 2058-5969

imagination entwine with religious conversion and revival, radical politics, sex, travel, danger, fertility and childlessness. It is artfully and beautifully written in a voice that is all Walton's own and compelled me to read it at one sitting and to want to begin over again. Think *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* meets *Autobiography of a Soul* meets *Snow White*. There is a mythic, fairytale quality to the writing which gets under the skin; at the same time, *Not Eden* is a tender affirmation of this-worldly spirituality and politics which call us to 'live by [our] wits in the savage garden' (p. 136).

Nicola Slee

The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory. Report of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church, soon to be available from the World Methodist Council website: http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/resources/ecumenical-dialogues/

This report has considerable significance ecumenically. Formally, it is the fruit of a quinquennium of study. It also marks a key stage in what a lay Catholic member of the Commission has called an *affective* relationship, based on the joint recognition that the two communions share an emphasis upon the universal call to holiness, the mission to all nations and the interdependence of all local churches within that context. Despite differences on some points of doctrine, ethos and worship, the two communions increasingly recognise that they have the same calling to travel on parallel paths, which should become increasingly convergent as they come closer to that unity which, together, they recognise as intrinsically linked to the call to holiness. Since 1986, the goal of the dialogue has been 'full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life'.[1] The Commission, however, has never fudged difficulties, but has always committed itself to further work on them, however long it may take.

This is the first international bilateral dialogue report devoted to the call to holiness, a key commitment for both churches. The Report appears just as the new President and Vice-President of the Methodist Conference take 'Holiness and Justice' as their theme for the next year. Pope Francis, whose teaching and example (if rarely directly cited) naturally influenced the dialogue, continues with the year of mercy. Catholics and Methodists involved in these programmes will find the Report provides them with valuable material for additional reflection.

The Report states that holiness is 'relational, dynamic and holistic'.[2] It is 'practical as well as spiritual … expressed socially in the pursuit of justice and in acts of mercy'.[3] Some might feel the more purely spiritual, even mystical, side of it is under-developed in this report in comparison with Roger Walton's recent presidential address.[4] The traditional Wesleyan stress on the social nature of holiness is linked to Francis' threefold stress on right relationship with God, neighbour and nature.[5]

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The Report has four main chapters, dealing, respectively, with the 'Mystery of Being Human', created for communion with God, 'God's Work of Re-Creating Humankind', which takes up issues of grace, justification and, briefly, the Catholic concept of merit, 'The Saints Below' and 'The Saints Above'. Continuing difficulties, felt by many Methodists over some Catholic devotional practices, are treated with great sensitivity, being balanced by a consideration of how some Methodists have come to appreciate particular elements in Catholic devotion.[6] The Catholics offer Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi* as shedding light on the doctrine of purgatory in a manner which might help Methodists.[7]

Chapter 5 assesses how far Methodists and Catholics have travelled on their shared pilgrim journey. This is followed by lists of agreements and of continuing differences registered in the main chapters. For each chapter, suggestions are made of questions for local or regional discussion and practical co-operation. The Commission is aware that reception is the key problem of the ecumenical movement in general (and of dialogue reports in particular). They are determined to assist the widest possible reception of this rich and fruitful conversation. They deserve success in that.

David Carter

Notes

1. Report, para 5.
2. Report, para 3.
3. Report, para 121.
4. *Methodist Recorder*, 8 July 2016.
5. Report, paras 17–22; *Laudato Si'*, para 66.
6. Report, paras 123–124.
7. Report, para 153.