



Reviews

Methodists and their Missionary Societies 1760–1900, John Pritchard
(Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 293 pp, £74.00 hbk

Methodists and their Missionary Societies 1900–1996, John Pritchard
(Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 333 pp, £75.00 hbk

John Pritchard, the last General Secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society prior to its being wound up in 1996 and its activities and interests absorbed into the wider compass of the British Methodist Church, has undertaken an impossible task. Were he to have said everything about his subject worthy of mention he would have written the history of the British Empire and more, so diverse was British Methodist activity over his period. These two volumes chart the astonishing achievements of a denomination that never numbered much over a million in Britain but that, virtually from its inception, was passionately committed to the propagation of its brand of Christianity wherever the opportunity arose in the world. As with all European denominations, those opportunities came hard on the heels of trade and empire, both for good and ill. Few could read Pritchard's 600 pages without significant benefit and enrichment, yet few will reach the end without some sense of disappointment, a sense that Pritchard shares. For though he says a little of most things, in the vast majority of cases he only says sufficient to whet the appetite for more. His method is to paint his picture in outline only, but to illumine it liberally with anecdotes of the deeds of particular heroes by way of illustrating the general tenor of their colleagues' work.

The scale of the achievements of the European missions taken as a whole is almost beyond belief. In the first volume, Pritchard maps the slow, painful, faithful, often foolish and misguided work of the first century and a half, in

which the yield was tiny in proportion to the cost in terms of funds and workers. In the second, he records the absolute explosion of Christianity in China prior to 1950, and how 'in 1900 one African in ten was Christian, by the year 2000 one in two'. To this he adds an astonishing testimony to autonomy and indigenisation: 'Whereas the Protestant community in China was estimated at a million or less in 1950, at the turn of the millennium there were 20 million at the very least.'

In the first volume we read about the collisions between Western Christian missions and slavery, caste, cannibalism, polygamy, nakedness, tribal warfare, apartheid, opium, and Western commercial and military interests. Should missionaries engage in commerce (set up a printing press), interest themselves in education, health and local economy? Should the Bible be translated? Christianity met the other great religions of the world and, in general, did not clothe itself in glory. Pritchard charts all these collisions, setting contemporary liberal voices against conservative where he can. He does not shield us from the folly and pig-headedness, but neither does he overindulge the wisdom of hindsight.

In the second volume we read about the reverse struggles – the struggle for political independence matched by the local Methodist struggles for autonomy, the anguish of Methodists at home and abroad where independence movements were at war with the British, and the struggle to find a theological vocabulary to cope with newly independent churches generating newly independent indigenous theologies. Where, for instance, does 'indigenous Christian theology' end and syncretism begin? But, as Pritchard observes, this is a problem as old as Christianity itself, but in a new garb. Pritchard charts how newly independent churches often found their European denominational heritage utterly irrelevant. Chinese ex-Methodists, he reports, were proud of their Methodism but even more of their 'ex-'. Pritchard reports for us the contortions of a declining home denomination to cope with all that was being asked of it. All this makes deeply provocative reading.

The titles of these volumes mislead. These are not histories of Methodism but histories of *British* Methodism. Whenever Pritchard's tale reaches the point where an overseas district turns into an autonomous body, the narrative ceases. There is barely an aside about the deeds of American Methodism, for instance. Further, in the first volume especially, virtually all Pritchard's attention is given to the activities of the *Wesleyans*. Without doubt, the Wesleyans were the first to venture abroad, and their activities were more extensive than any other, but

not in proportion to the 250 pages devoted to their activities and the 20 afforded to what Pritchard calls 'Parallel Missions'. These few pages do no justice at all to British Methodist work (by Primitive Methodists, Bible Christians, United Methodists etc) in Canada, Australia, colonial New York and Philadelphia, New Zealand, South Africa, West Africa, East Africa, Fernando Po, Cameroon, Jamaica, Tasmania, Nova Scotia and great swathes of China. Perhaps the greater blame for this lies with the editors at Ashgate. Pritchard admits in his Preface that he has not attempted parallel accounts. The reason he gives is that the written histories of these denominations do not yet exist. His is secondary research, collating from a twenty-first-century viewpoint the work of others. His primary sources for the Wesleyans are the annual reports of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the now-outmoded published histories. For the other Methodist denominations, neither the societies, nor the reports, nor published histories exist. Thus the title is technically correct. The *only* British Missionary Society before 1932 was Wesleyan. But that nicety does not completely absolve the editors (and the title) of the charge of misrepresentation, surely?

This criticism applies far more to the first volume than the second. After the union of 1932 the activities of United Methodists and Primitives were caught up into the work of the united denomination, and the achievements of each became the achievements of all. Thus, in particular, the twentieth-century part of what was originally Bible Christian and then United Methodist work in China gets far more extensive and appropriate treatment in the second volume than in the first. The same is true of Primitive Methodist work in Africa.

The level of citation is disappointing. This is not produced as a scholarly work. Far too often one looks in vain for a footnote revealing a source. Anyone wishing to build on Pritchard's work would have first to retrace Pritchard's footsteps. There is a further difficulty, not of Pritchard's making, and which he himself laments: materials over half a century old are still locked away in the vaults of Methodist Church House, uncatalogued and not available for scholarly research. Pritchard was given access, but was not free to cite as he would have liked. Perhaps a valuable additional fruit of Pritchard's monumental labour will be the freeing up of late twentieth-century Methodist archival material to further scholarly research.

Michael Wilson

Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence, Karen Armstrong
(London: Bodley Head, 2014), 499pp, £25.00 hbk

A prolific author on a range of faith issues, particularly concerning the monotheistic religions, Karen Armstrong has produced another 'big story' text that engages across the sweep of world history and religion to challenge the lazy academic linkage between religion and violence. There is a connection, but Armstrong mounts a very well-argued case to discredit the view that religion and violence are inevitably and intrinsically linked.

Some of Armstrong's best work has been in telling these big stories. Her *A History of God* and *The Great Transformation* are such, and *Fields of Blood* adds to this. Starting in prehistory, and working through the development of the nation state to modernity and into contemporary life, Armstrong very cogently argues that violence is related to the establishment and development of agriculture, which enabled settled populations to develop that could have a surplus of production and so become attractive to raiders and theft. As populations expand, war is caused by the battle for scarce resources, not religion. That religion at times has underpinned a claim for legitimacy for violence is clear, but religion is not the main cause of violence.

In the sweep across history, individual chapters work very well as church history, Islamic history and so on. For example, the argument that, post Constantine, Christianity was imperialised rather than the empire Christianised is well put. Reasons why rulers acted in the way they did are clearly articulated, with violence consistently caused by the desire to accumulate wealth, power, influence and prestige. While not always being the opponent of state violence, Armstrong ably demonstrates that when religion has supported violence it has normally acted contrary to its own teachings.

I think Armstrong is very sharp until she reaches the twentieth century. I thought she missed some opportunities to discuss further the secular causes of violence, with many of the genocides of the past 100 years being motivated by factors other than religion, such as those perpetrated by Stalin, Pol Pot, the Nazis, etc. At times the book is focused on formal history, and so read through the eyes of the leaders of society and those that recorded history, normally of course the victors. While this text covers Europe, Asia and to some extent North

America, I think at least some attention could have been given to sub-Saharan Africa, and more to the South American civilisations. Engaging in argument with more recent forms of primal religion might have added to the work, although a 500-page book is likely reaching the maximum.

Overall, this is a sharply argued and very well-referenced challenge to the misconception that there is an inevitable link between religion, especially monotheistic religion, and violence. We live in a world where some who claim to be people of faith act in terribly violent ways, citing religious justification. *Fields of Blood* is an important resource in this current debate and is highly recommended.

Stephen Skuce

Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening, Jeremy Begbie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 216 pp, £35.00 hbk

Jeremy Begbie's latest book gives added value to his high reputation and growing list of publications dealing with the expanding interest in the relationship between theology and music.

Music, Modernity and God is a collection of essays representing Begbie's unique and engaging ideas. These essays are, he says, 'to a large extent, the result of numerous conversations, debates ... exchanges ...', which have taken place over a number of years. Consequently, some of the thoughts expressed in this volume will be familiar to those who have read his *Voicing Creation's Praise*, *Theology, Music and Time* and *Resounding Truth*.

The introductory essay sets the scene by stressing the importance of 'listening' correctly in the modern world and helps us to consider seeing (and hearing) musical dimensions in contemporary universal social, political and theological issues. Begbie here addresses the difficulty of defining the word 'modernity', included in the book's title, explaining that he intends to discern that which 'has flowed into the postmodern ... [rather] than an account of the postmodern itself' (p. 5). This is helpful not only for clarity's sake but also because so much of Begbie's earlier work, especially from a musicological position, appears to avoid the advances and challenges of many twentieth- and twenty-first-century innovations.

The first main chapter launches into the period of the Reformation with an enlightening view of Calvin (1509–1564) and his changing views about music in worship. This is a welcome positive approach which is often found to be quite the opposite. Then follows an in-depth study of J. S. Bach (1685–1750), working through a vast array of contemporary, 'modern' work in this area. He highlights the tension between 'reason' and 'revelation' which will resonate in many Wesleyan ears.

We then move to a consideration of 'natural theology', as reflected in the differences of Enlightenment thinking in the work of the philosopher Rousseau (1712–1778) and the composer Rameau (1683–1764). Again, this is useful material for those who listen for background notes to Wesley's theological position in the same period.

The chapter 'Early German Romanticism' is profound and fascinating, especially in the way Begbie explains the nineteenth-century movement towards the emancipation of 'absolute music' (ie solely instrumental and orchestral music), and how the 'thorny' question of how, and if, music without words can express itself as its own language capable of sounding (or standing) alongside the all-important written and spoken word.

The remaining chapters address this complex matter of the validity of a 'musical language' and how this relates to the pursuit of truth. Begbie refers a little to Wittgenstein and his exploration of 'language games'. This could be taken further, as a way of elucidating the significance of the inflections, resonances and fine-tuning of all that surrounds the experience of meaningful language-making. However, Begbie's references to Schoenberg's unfinished opera *Moses und Aron*, with its agonised cry 'O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt' ('O word, thou word, that I lack'), provides a powerful springboard for this crucial discussion.

Music, Modernity, and God is, as Roger Lundin writes on the book cover, a 'deep, sparkling book [placing] music at centre stage in the drama of late modernity'. Our careful concentration on Begbie's essays, along with our dedicated listening skills, will bring us great rewards and fresh sounds to explore.

Harvey Richardson

The Edge of Words, Rowan Williams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 204 pp, £20.00 hbk

The Edge of Words is based on Rowan Williams' Gifford Lectures, which he delivered in 2014. When Adam Lord Gifford endowed this esteemed lecture series in the late nineteenth century, he wanted to promote the study of 'natural theology'. As Williams carefully notes in his lectures, the approach with which Gifford was familiar is exemplified by the work of William Paley, who attempted to build rational arguments for the existence of God from observation of the natural world. Natural theology posits a form of religion stripped of necessity for divine revelation. Williams resists this historic approach and, instead, redefines natural theology through a sophisticated argument about the significance of the created world and the habits of human (and sometimes not only human) communication within it.

Language and communication are natural parts of a world in which embodied creatures mediate, interpret and reinterpret what they encounter, and by doing so participate in a reality that they cannot quite capture fully in any form of language. Although the process of material evolution gives rise to speech, formation of language and its expression in speech is more than mechanistic, biologically determined response to environmental stimuli. Williams writes:

Rather than looking to material processes, understood in mechanical fashion, as the key to understanding what language is, it would be nearer the truth to say that we look to language to show us what matter is. That is, language exhibits a pattern of cooperative agency in which the structure of life or action in one medium is rendered afresh (translated) in another. (p. 102)

Recognition and expression of reality that is both form and motion, that is part of our experience and yet beyond full description, is 'represented' in the material process of speech. Through language we participate in 'a given quality in what we encounter, as if we are always catching up with a reality never seen as standing still enough to be absorbed or fully embraced or mastered' (p. 93).

Williams argues that there is much about the nature of language as 'representation' that opens us to the possibility of what is in, behind and

beyond language. Representation is a key term in the text, but Williams' understanding evades clear and concise definition. The most detailed explanation of 'representation' is in the Appendix. Williams acknowledges the view that theological language is metaphorical, but it would be simplistic to describe his use of representation as synonymous with metaphor. His version of 'representation' is an adaptation of Hegel's concepts of *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung*, which Williams translates roughly and respectively as 'imaginative deployment of sensuous depiction' and 'analogical objectification' (p. 193). 'Representation' includes language standing as a symbol for another reality that is active and interactive with us, mediated through our subjective experience as embodied creatures and intelligent beings. Yet, words are not only symbolic, as if they were standing in for some passive reality that is beyond us. Speech, and the intelligence required to formulate it, contain some essence of that reality.

The arguments developed by Williams are rich and complex. He respectfully engages with previous Gifford lecturers who countered natural theology with the need for separate divine revelation. A religious tradition that rests on divine revelation 'need not necessarily be appealing to a simple model of divine utterance – an otherworldly agent providing otherwise inaccessible information' (p. 176). Christianity, for instance, relies on the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian tradition owns that Jesus has a real physical body – a material revelation. Jesus' body, says Williams,

is an active and speaking body, then a helpless and suffering body, then a dead body, then a body that is both significantly absent and at the same time believed to be present in very diverse modes – as the community itself, as the food the community ritually shares, as the proclaimed narrative and instruction derived from the record of the literal flesh-and-blood body. (p. 176)

In a way that resembles the view of Thomas Aquinas of a material world participating in the ever-moving, continually generating divine reality on which it is dependent, Williams resists modernist tendencies to separate natural theology from revelation as if they had different sources.

The depth of Williams' thought is as rich and astounding as the range of sources from which he draws. *The Edge of Words* shows all of the theological and philosophical influences one normally expects to find in Williams' writings – Vladimir Lossky (and other contemporary strands of Orthodox theology),

Reviews

Origen, Thomas Aquinas and St John of the Cross. He also incorporates a host of material from philosophy of language, neuroscience, literature (both classical and contemporary) and (Welsh) poetry. It appears that Rowan Williams reads everything and remembers everything he reads. Similarly, there is no neglect of art, film, music and dance, since these are material and even embodied forms of 'representation'. When Williams is writing for a popular audience, he communicates Christian theology in plain language that requires no background in theology. *The Edge of Words* is of a different order. It is a complicated work that will appeal to those with an interest in the philosophy of language and current trends in the relationship between natural science and theology.

Cindy Wesley

The Book of Strange New Things, Michel Faber (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2014), 592 pp, £14.99 pbk

In the Richmond Room on the first floor of Methodist Church House in London are the boards that previously hung in the entrance hall of the now closed Richmond College. Here are listed Wesleyan missionaries who served overseas, for often all too brief periods before they died 'on station'. Each inscribed name and date of service is a powerful historical testimony to the faithfulness of our forebears, and behind each one is the hidden story of those who travelled with them, often at great personal cost, and of those family and friends they left behind.

In his second novel, *The Book of Strange New Things*, Michel Faber explores themes of loss and separation that would have been recognisable to those listed in the Richmond Room, as well as the challenge of enculturation faced in any age in bearing witness to Christ in a culture unfamiliar with the language or the conceptual framework of the gospel. This challenge is here faced literally in an alien culture: Peter, a sincere and dedicated missionary, is sent to a faraway planet at a time when natural disasters are bringing life as we know it on Earth to an end. There he tries to juggle the communication of the Christian message to the native Oasans, many of whom are keen to hear it despite the linguistic and cultural barriers, with communicating back home with his wife Bea, who through the tragic happenings around her is experiencing a growing sense of social and personal dislocation.

Faber himself was brought up as a Baptist and while in interviews he now describes himself as an atheist he has also expressed his desire to write about people of faith with empathy: in this novel he succeeds admirably. Peter's belief is portrayed as sincere throughout the book: here is neither naive untested fundamentalism, nor a reductionist faith that makes the demands of Christ easier to swallow. Rather, Peter's back-story of salvation from a life of drugs, drink and violence through meeting Bea is inseparably bound up with his understanding of salvation through meeting Jesus in her. At only one point does Faber's instinct fail to ring true: for an evangelist with such a heart to make faith relevant, Peter's attachment to the King James Version of the Bible ('the book of strange new things') seems more in keeping with a missionary journey through time than space.

Reviews

At nearly 600 pages Faber's book may seem daunting, but it is stylishly written, funny, poignant and moving. Sadly the tragic death of Faber's wife Eva from cancer as he wrote it informs both the tender understanding of loss and separation in the novel and his decision that he will not write one again. His final novel is a triumph which will offer especial enjoyment and insight to pioneers and mission partners, honouring as it does both those that make journeys for their faith and convictions and those they lose or leave behind in the process.

Tim R. Woolley

Making Nothing Happen: Five Poets Explore Faith and Spirituality, Gavin D'Costa, Eleanor Nesbitt, Mark Pryce, Ruth Shelton and Nicola Slee (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 209 pp, £19.99 pbk

The title of this book echoes Auden's paradoxical aphorism 'poetry makes nothing happen' and invites the reader to share in the intriguing adventure of describing life, God and meaning in a handful of carefully chosen words.

The authors are 'persons of Christian faith (generously understood), and theologians (of differing kinds) who seek to explore and reflect on the mysterious, graced potential of poetry to open up a space that some may describe as sacred, spiritual or religious'. They form a group called 'The Diviners' and have met for over twelve years, three times a year, to respond to and critique each other's writing. Each chapter of the book begins with an autobiographical theological reflection and leads to a short collection of poems by that writer. In each case I was left wanting more and found myself coming back to some poems a number of times to tease out meaning or to reflect on the use of language in a way that challenges or surprises. Each chapter stands alone, as does each poem, but there is value in the juxtaposing of these poets' offerings alongside each other. Mark Pryce's work as a male writer working out what it means to become a Christian poet takes the reader back to Nicola Slee's chapter, 'Writing as a woman', to find resonances and comparisons. Pryce's poems demonstrate an intimacy and compassion that cuts across gender stereotypes, particularly in 'Girl playing with a magic cloth' (p. 106). Slee's are deeply grounded in the feminist tradition that she inhabits, the graphic agony of 'A Mother's Rage' expressing Mary's experience in words that can only leave the reader standing before an imagined Pietà.

I'd give my life for that anger now,
when all that is left to me is weeping and grief
as I cradle his dead body on my lap. (p. 35)

Ruth Shelton's chapter draws on her Roman Catholic background and her experience of leading a charity working with homeless people in Nottingham. She is influenced by other writers, including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Michael Donaghy. Her work has an objective and observed quality. Occasionally,

as in 'Prime Time' (p. 73), her imagination takes flight and one glimpses the 'Holy' for which she is searching among the mundane.

Eleanor Nesbitt resists religious labels but draws on Quaker, Anglican, Sikh and Hindu influences. She reflects on 'Where Poems Come From: Spirituality, Emotion and Poiesis'. The second stanza of her short poem 'Examination Question' gets somewhere to the heart of the questions of mystery that she explores:

Does human tendency to anthropomorphise
initiate, inhibit or distort
theology? Discuss – while life allows –
but do not try too hard to understand. (p. 147)

Gavin D'Costa draws on his academic and Roman Catholic contexts as he explores 'The Miracle of Poetry: Divine and Human Creativity'. He teases out the idea that a poet is a 'miracle worker' because the poem has the ability to make you see things differently. His selection of poems has a strong death-related theme and explores the way that life continues around the edges of the experience of grief. This thread weaves in with some poems that challenge concepts of comfortable religion. This is sharpest in 'The Shadow of the Holy Innocents':

Did Gabriel realise that he initiated a blood bath?
Had this sublime angel missed Jeremiah's prophecy,
that Rachel's weeping in Ramah would turn into
a wailing that would never stop, not even to welcome
angels in that dung-rich Bethlehem stable? (p. 199)

The book offers a great deal to explore and casts light on a range of theological perspectives as well as offering an anthology of poems that can be dipped into again and again.

Michaela A. Youngson