

ANOTHER WAY TO GOD

REGNAULTY

THE FOUR WAYS to God identified by Hinduism are now fairly well known. They are the way of knowledge, *eg.*, the five ways of Aquinas, the way of devotion or prayer, the way of meditation as practised by yogis, and which finds its way into the Neo-Platonic tradition in the West, and the way of good works.

And there is another, mentioned by two high profile Australians in their autobiographies, the way of art. Thus Robert Hughes

Art was the symbolic discourse that truly reached into me...It wasn't a question of confusing art with religion, or trying to make a religion out of art. As some people are tone deaf, I was religion deaf...But I was beginning, at last, to derive from art, from architecture, and even from the beauty of organised landscape, a sense of transcendence that organized religion had offered me—but that I had never received.¹

The number of religion - deaf people whom we now encounter is immense. It is not easy to know how to help them. For Hughes, however, 'hammered gold and gold enamelling' worked wonders. 'Tears would roll down my face, he writes.

And he wasn't the only one. The late historian, Manning Clark, is another. For him, it was the Madonna in Cologne Cathedral which reached deep within:

The sight of that face worked a great miracle within me. The tempest within subsided, the ghosts from the past stopped tormenting me...I will read of many men and women who have known a moment of grace while contemplating the Madonna in Cologne Cathedral...Many years later when I risked talking about the experience my whole body shook.²

There are the 'transcendentals'—truth, beauty and goodness. Solzhenitsyn

speculated that if truth were too obscure, and goodness too confused by conflicting opinions, then perhaps beauty could do duty for all three. But for Hughes and Clark, what opened the door was more specific than beauty. It was works of art.

Opening the door is not yet stepping into the room. Something more must be done. Hughes was not interested enough to do any more. But Clark was. He was a deeply religious man, a genuine seeker if ever there was one, but he doesn't seem to have got into the room either. What happened? One can make an educated guess. He seemed to have been ... misguided. He never expected to get closer to God. Indeed, his concept of God ruled it out. If God is conceived as infinite in power and goodness, and nothing like the sinful, ignorant beings we are, then getting close to God is not a prospect.

Clark wrote that he never wanted union with God. And that is something not uncommonly said by writers in this field. Antony Flew, the eminent philosopher who wrote a couple of books against God, and who came to accept God in a book at the end of his life, *There Is A God*, says the same thing. H. H. Price, like Flew, a philosophy professor, and a creative and luminous writer, makes it clear, between the lines, in his book *Essays In The Philosophy Of Religion*, that he found the desire for union with God, distinctly odd. There are simply some concepts of God and humanity which preclude it.

What is to be done here? More friendly persuasion? That may help, but the best remedy of all is conspicuous sanctity. Isn't that vanishingly rare? It is not as rare as most people appear to think. Here it is apposite to mention the saintly nun mentioned by the philosopher Raymond Gaita. It is surprising

to find her reported in his writing, since he is an atheist, but his report is sufficiently well known to have made it into the literature.

At some time in his life, Gaita had worked as an assistant in a ward where there were patients with advanced dementia. He noticed that the specialists who treated the patients did so with condescension, as he himself did, but a saintly nun, who worked on a different roster, did not. The nun's sanctity was sufficient to make it noticeable, and that should be enough to make it apparent that closeness between human beings and God happens. Seeing instances of conspicuous sanctity, should, I suggest, have settled the doubts of people like Clark, Flew, and Price.

Of course, such people cannot be

produced on demand, but most religious traditions have them in their records. Thus in the Church, it is written of St. Dominic 'from his brow and eyes there emanated a certain radiant splendour which won the admiration and veneration of all.'³ Perhaps the most famous instance of this is in the Jewish tradition when Moses brought the ten commandments down from Mt. Sinai. In the Russian tradition, there is St. Seraphim of Sarov, and in Protestantism, George Fox. At times like ours, we should look backwards as well as forwards.

We have discussed writers for whom art opened a door on the transcendent. This door is opened to others by literature, and to others by music. They are all potential contributors to a new synthesis.

NOTES

1. Robert Hughes. *Things I Didn't Know. A Memoir*. Random House. Sydney. 2006. isbn 978 1 74166 475 1 [pbk] 513p. p.348.
2. Manning Clark. *The Quest For Grace*. Penguin

Australia.1990. isbn 0 14 014335 1 p.221.P75.

3. Richard Woods OP. *Mysticism And Prophecy. The Dominican Tradition*. Darton Longman and Todd. London. 1998. P. 71.

Richard Holloway. A Little History Of Religion. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. 2016. p.244. \$35.95 isbn 9780300208832.

For a book about religion, this is most unusual. It is very entertaining. It is also instructive. It is a history of religion - they are all sketched one after the other. Some of the sketches are masterful eg., the one on Hinduism, some are questionable, for example, Holloway has Buddha's enlightenment dependent on a realisation, ie., an act of cognition. Given their suspicion of the thinking mind, that would surprise Buddhists. But on the whole, the sketches are of high quality.

Holloway is at his best writing about the social and political dimensions of religion. Less impressive is his psychological insight. He

sees the origins of religion residing in prophecy, which he glosses as a voice heard in the head, and in visions. By the end of the book, one's confidence in these origins has worn very thin. For example, Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church in Korea, at the age of 16, had a vision of Jesus appointing him to complete his mission. When Moon died in 2012, it is said he was worth \$900 million. One can't help wondering about him.

Holloway does not appreciate the quandary that even genuine prophecy puts its possessor in. 'What is happening to me?' one can imagine them asking. 'Am I going out of my mind?' As it happens, that is exactly what Muhammed asked himself after the angel Gabriel commanded him to recite. Muhammed

answered the question in the affirmative, and ran to the nearest cliff in order to commit suicide at once. On his way, he saw a figure astride the horizon which hailed him as a messenger from God. That gave him the assurance he needed.

It not only the prophets who need confirmation. Depending on the circumstances, their followers do too. Thus after Joan of Arc's voices became insistent, she went to visit her local military commander. He only took her seriously because he realised that she knew of a recent French defeat before he did, and he didn't see how she could.

The religion which impresses Holloway most is The Society of Friends[Quakers]. He very nearly gets them right:

'All they had to do was sit in silence with each other and wait for the Holy Spirit to speak in their hearts. God's light already burned in each of them.' [p.187]

He acknowledges that the experience of the shared light can support proposals put before it ie., give guidance. The guidance which interests him most was that slavery is wrong:

'But the Quakers had done more than bring about the end of slavery. They had also ended a childish reading of the Bible. By asserting their conscience against it they made it possible to study it like any other book and not as an untouchable idol.' [p.190]

The Society Of Friends, writes Holloway, remains Christianity's conscience. Nevertheless, there is a fine but important point which he misses, which is that the light which burns within each provides corroboration for the others on the issue about which they are seeking guidance. Prophecy need not be as arbitrary as it seems from his presentation.

Even so, the book is full of things one would like to have known earlier. For example,

Abraham, the beginning of the Jewish story, is dated about 2000 B.C. But the Old Testament in which he features, was not written down until about 550 B.C., which is a long time in the oral form. And the book of Daniel, in which most of the prophecies about the Messiah occur, was written about 150 B.C. The Sadducees who tried Jesus were conservatives who recognised only the first five books of the Old Testament, so they were unlikely to have any sympathy for messianic aspirations.

Most interesting, perhaps, are the pages about religions made in America. The Second Coming of Christ has held a tenacious grip on the American religious mind. William Miller in NY State predicted that Christ would arrive on 21 March 1844. When that didn't happen, he decided that he had made an erroneous calculation, and that Christ would get here on 22 October 1844. When that failed, he withdrew, but others took up his cause, and the Seventh Day Adventists were born.

They weren't the only ones. Charles Taize Russell, a Pittsburgh shopkeeper, put together the books of Daniel and Revelation, and found his ultimate text in the latter 'Behold I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth...' In 1879 he started the Watchtower movement for those on the lookout for the Second Coming. It was the first stirrings of Jehovah's Witnesses. The expectation lives on. Tim La Haye, an Evangelical minister, described as the most influential American of the last forty years, has written a series of novels presenting the case that The End is nigh. The great deceiver, the foretold Anti-Christ, is here right now. He is the Secretary General of the United Nations. La Hayes' novels have sold more than 65 million copies.

This engaging book reminds that the mutually stimulating debate between reason and religion, begun by Socrates so long ago, is still taking place.

—Reg Naulty.