

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter Adam, *Ezra and Nehemiah. Walking in God's Words*, Aquila Press, Sydney, 2014. This is the latest book in the *Reading the Bible Today Series*.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the history of the restoration of the temple, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the repopulation of the city after the Babylonian exile. God's people learn to walk according to his word, trust in his promises and ultimately know and worship God.

They recognised the hand of God in their rescue and salvation. It was God who was inspiring and organising the leaders of the people, Ezra and Nehemiah, and also the pagan rulers Cyrus and Artaxerxes who authorised their return and promoted and assisted them, providing timber and other necessities. The requirement of the people and leaders was to know and obey God's commands. When they did what God commanded they and the enterprise of rebuilding the altar, temple and walls and restoring the worship prospered.

The author points out the lessons and challenges for us today in this story. It is very heartening for us in our struggles and efforts, in what we try to do for God and God's people, and when we meet opposition. We are to be builders; we benefit from others' efforts, and others will benefit from our efforts. He reflects on the need for ongoing hearing of the word of God, for vigilance and reform.

This is a study that is much more than exegesis: it is spiritual reading, sermon fodder, a text for study groups, a text that provides lessons for life, prayer and living with God. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are launching pads for profound meditations.

Here is a sample of the text:

All of God's goodness and all of his love was concentrated and poured out in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ in his incarnation, atoning death and resurrection. All of God's goodness and

enduring love is available and accessible to us as it is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. If we have committed major sins, as did God's people in the past, there is no room for self-punishment, self-banishment, self-segregation or self-imposed exile. There is free forgiveness, free grace, the embracing love of God, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ for our sins. There is the powerful intercession of Christ who is even now our great high priest in heaven, able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him (Hebrews 7:25). We can approach God with confidence and full assurance of faith, entering the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus. (p.51)

I highly recommend this book.

Peter Adam is vicar emeritus of St Jude's Anglican parish, Carlton and Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne. He has lectured at St John's College, Durham, U.K. and was principal of Ridley College Melbourne from 2002 till 2012.

Ezra and Nehemiah: Walking in God's Words is available from www.cepstore.com.au or (02) 8268 3344. RRP—\$19.95 (AUD).

—Barry Brundell MSC

Bishop Michael Putney, *My Ecumenical Journey*, ATF Ltd, P.O Box 504, Hindmarsh SA 5007.

This is a collection of essays, papers and articles that Bishop Michael wrote between 1991 and 2009. His interest and involvement in ecumenism dates from his seminary days. He participated in dialogues with Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, as well as Jews. He served as President of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and in the World Council of Churches, and was a member of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Bishop Michael, former bishop of Townsville, died before Easter this year, and his opening essay, 'One Man's Ecumenical

Journey' is a review of his involvement in the ecumenical movement down the years in which he expresses his gratitude to many people he has known and collaborated with, and his profound gratitude to God for what he believes was a vocation to be an ecumenist.

As Bishop Donald Bolen, Catholic Bishop of Saskatoon, Canada, writes in the opening page of the book: 'He is an ecumenical giant whose witness has inspired many to imagine in new ways what a healthy reconciled Church could look like'.

—Barry Brundell MSC

Timothy S. Lowe (Ed.), *Hope of Unity: Living Ecumenism Today, Celebrating 40 Years of the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur, Aphorism* Verlag, Berlin, 2013.

The Institute for advanced theological research, situated on the edge of Jerusalem, was established at the request of Pope Paul VI. Down the years many theologians from many religions have come with their families to engage in ecumenical research and dialogue.

This collection of essays studies among other things the significance of Vatican II for the Institute, the influence of Oscar Cullman in Biblical Theology and ecumenism, and the ecumenical movement today—Where are we?—as seen by Western Churches and by Eastern Churches.

—Barry Brundell MSC

Deepak Chopra, Leonard Mlodinow, *Is God An Illusion? The Great Debate Between Science and Spirituality*. Rider, London, 2012, ISBN 978184043055, pb. pp315. \$19.95.

The book takes the form of a debate between an atheist, Leonard Mlodinow, a physics professor, and a proponent of a spiritual view of the universe, the physician Deepak Chopra. Although the book is entitled *Is God an Illusion?*, Chopra is not arguing for the existence of God, exactly. 'We don't need God' he writes. He is arguing for 'Cosmic Consciousness', a term which survivors of the Sixties will recall, and which means that the uni-

verse is conscious. Every speck of matter has some form of consciousness in Chopra's view. It seems that he is arguing for a form of panpsychism, which looks like pantheism, *i.e.* there is a spiritual reality immanent in the universe.

However, Chopra quotes with approval from the Bhagavad Gita 'I am found in all creation. I am inside and outside all that exists' (p.267), which implies that God is both immanent and transcendent. That, of course, is the traditional Christian view.

Chopra does not seem to have made up his mind about the transcendence of God. Throughout the book it remains unclear whether what he says about cosmic consciousness is true of God as well. He writes at the end of the book that both spirituality and religion 'depend on a personal journey, leading in the end to the transformation of consciousness,' (p.301). Most of what he is defending a traditional theist would also defend, though the points of difference are never made explicit.

The contrast between the self-indulgent, wishful-thinking believer and the morally superior, stoical, self denying atheist, which is often in the background in such disputes, is here fully explicit. The atheist is 'brave', and the believer, according to Mlodinow, is not. Is she a coward? In Mlodinow's reckoning, probably.

The two antagonists appear to have different belief ethics. Chopra sometimes gives the impression of treating every proposition as innocent until proven guilty, *i.e.* as acceptable as long as there is no evidence against it, and on the other hand, Mlodinow treats every proposition as guilty until proven innocent, *i.e.* unless guaranteed by evidence. Consequently, Mlodinow is frequently able to dismiss Chopra's views by remarking that there is no evidence for them.

There is another difference in their approach. Chopra writes forcefully, but he does not nail his objections down. Mlodinow writes with great analytical skill and follows every argument through. Moreover, Chopra tends to

declaration and bluster, which Mlodinow disposes of with precision and good humour.

An example of a point which Chopra makes but does not develop, is his claim that observation does not tell the whole story. (Mlodinow repeats, endlessly, that one's beliefs must be supported by observation.) As well as the outer world, which is observed, Chopra reminds us urgently, there is the inner world.

Mlodinow does not do well on that one. Locke, it may be remembered, divided 'observation' into two kinds, perception and introspection. Introspection is commonly passed off by analytical philosophers as being of merely private personal interest. On the contrary, it is essential to several large scale industries, *e.g.* the discrimination of different flavours is part of the wine industry, the brewing industry, the confectionary industry and the food industry generally. Similarly, the discrimination of different scents is essential to the perfume industry. Apart from its importance in commerce, introspection delivers goods of religious interest *e.g.* in meditation. What is revealed there is too persistent and well documented to be written off as inconsequential aberrations of consciousness.

Perhaps Mlodinow's avoidance of introspection is linked to his abhorrence of 'the immaterial realm', which is surprising in a contemporary physicist. Is space time material? Is a gravitational field material? Of course, they are both physical, but as Bertrand Russell remarked, science has shown that physical nature is less material than people had thought. As it happens, Mlodinow does acknowledge 'the intangible force fields' (p.296), but, over the page he writes, 'What we observe in the real world has thus far necessitated our always rejecting ideas regarding the immaterial realm' (p.297).

What now of the intangible force fields? Perhaps they lack most of the properties of material objects, but not all. The brain is surrounded by an electromagnetic field. That would seem to make it an ideal instrument for the mind to act through to the brain.

Mlodinow argues that we are 'biological machines' (p.133), and cites numerous instances where brain abnormalities determine behaviour. But knowledge is a source of freedom. Once we learn about these determinants, we can take steps to remove them.

Mlodinow informs us that the brain contains 'more than a hundred billion neurons' (p.16). These work harmoniously in incredible intricacy. Despite the charge of out-of-dateness which Mlodinow levels at his opponent, it is hard to believe that such intricate interactions were produced by the crude mechanisms of evolution, 'the unguided and purposeless forces of nature' (p.61).

As one might have expected, Mlodinow is not impressed by metaphysics: 'Metaphysics is fixed and guided by personal belief and wish fulfilment' (p.299). Elsewhere, metaphysics is described as 'luxurious'. Mlodinow seems to have no appreciation of how scientific theories descended from metaphysical conjectures *e.g.*, Ancient Greek atomism started off as a philosophy and gradually became a science, and Faraday's thinking was influenced by Boscovic, whose re-casting of Newtonian physics resulted in a completely immaterial world of point masses and forces acting at a distance.

Metaphysics as a discipline in its own right yielding reliable information is foreign to Mlodinow's outlook. Is he a positivist? He comes close. 'Metaphysical, philosophical and mystical speculations... are not bound by constraint of evidence' (p.31). What counts as evidence according to him? 'Observational tests,' he writes (p.130). There is no disputing that such tests have disclosed much of reality, but the claim that only scientific methods reveal reality is not science but ideology *viz.*, a form of positivism.

The book is an interesting read. Both men, in their different ways, write very well. Chopra is a passionate believer, Mlodinow is a cool, clear thinking scientist. Chopra was not quite the right person to respond to him.

—Reg Naulty