

BOOK REVIEW

Hugh Mackay. *Beyond Belief*. Pan Macmillan. Australia. 2016. p.280. \$32.99

This book contains much interesting information about the current state of religion in Australia *eg.*, that only about 8% of the population go to church each week, about 20% go occasionally, and that 70% or so of all marriage ceremonies do not take place in church. As well, Mackay is very strongly concerned to recommend a faith to live by, and that is, well, Love, actually:

Beyond the cool, rational dictates of Reason, every healthy society, like every healthy relationship, also needs the civilizing, humanizing power of Love.[p.257]

He usually writes 'love' as the 'compassionate mind.' The addition of mind is essential, since compassion needs intelligence to work out what to do. Mackay makes a powerful case for the compassionate mind as a national objective. In Japan, the great aim of education is to turn pupils into team players. Here, it could be the development of the compassionate mind.

Mackay doesn't show much interest in bringing God into the picture. Instead, he advocates Christian agnosticism:

I was neither a believer nor an unbeliever when it came to the existence of a supernatural God...but my view of the world was sympathetic to Christianity and its values. [p.127]

Mackay makes it clear that he does not support atheism; that requires a leap of faith, just like religion, he says.

And Stern Reason plays a rather large part in the book. It attacks the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. What about life after death? That, writes Mackay, is

the ultimate example of our willingness to believe in untestable propositions."[p.231]

Some people believe in it, reports Mackay, and some don't. You can take your pick.

God is dispensable, but, argues Mackay, we have to have faith in something larger than ourselves to give life meaning, and we can

have faith in loving kindness, which will ennoble us all. Thus we can have faith without belief, hence the title of the book.

One wonders whether God is as dismissable as all that. Perhaps reason can help here. Referring to one of the old arguments for the existence of God, Mackay asserts that The Uncaused Cause has been discredited philosophically. Well, the late Bob Meier of the ANU, a logician of international renown, published a paper in a learned journal arguing for an Uncaused Cause. Whether that was successful is controversial, but such arguments are unlikely to go away, simply because the world we live in seems too wonderful to be an accident.

Moreover, when nature is examined minutely, it is found to contain relationships of mathematical exactitude, of which there are plenty. That prompts the question of whether nature is the product of a great mind.

Can anything support a positive answer to that question? How about mystical experience? Not reliable, says Mackay. But he doesn't get mystical experiences right. He claims

The central message of the mystics of every age is that we surrender to the imperatives of love and kindness.[p208]

That is not their central message. Thus John Woolman:

being inwardly united to the fountain of universal love and bliss enlarges the heart towards mankind universally.

What comes first, is the inward experience of union with God, and, as a consequence, mystics turn to others with love and kindness. Mackay picks up the latter, but misses the former. It is a very large omission. The inner experience of God provides spiritual fulfilment.

What about life after death? Belief in that is unlikely to go away either, for the reason that there are enough visitations from the other side to keep it in business. Mackay obviously has not had one, but the great day may yet come.

—Reg Naulty.