

Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow, *Give: Charity and the Art of Living Generously* (London: William Collins, 2020), pp. 256, ISBN 978-0008360016. £16.99

To Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow, charity will always smell of freshly-baked bread. Recalling the day back in 1985 when Live Aid was broadcast around the world, in his thoughtful and compassionate new book *Give: Charity and the Art of Living Generously*, the founder of Mary's Meals writes about the moment he first felt inspired to 'give':

At one point in the evening, David Bowie, having belted out 'We Can Be Heroes, Just For One Day', introduced a short video. [...] Suddenly in the room with us were emaciated children with protruding ribs and bloated stomachs, the piercing scream of a child, a tiny bandaged corpse. It was deeply shocking. (p. 2)

Distressed by the images, a teenage MacFarlane-Barrow and his friends took turns to use the house phone to make their pledges. Meanwhile in the background, his mother churned out loaf after loaf of freshly-baked bread for a local fundraising effort, also aimed at helping those who were hungry. 'As I hung up the phone, having shared my bank card details and very little of my summer job earnings, I was surprised by a fleeting, unfamiliar feeling: a stab of joy and a momentary yearning to be someone better – and for the world to be something better too' (p. 2).

A seed had been planted. Now, thirty-five years on, MacFarlane-Barrow oversees a global charity, based in Argyll, which aims to provide a daily school meal for more than 1.6 million of the world's poorest children. Through his work with Mary's Meals, he has had an audience with Pope Francis, lunch with the Queen, received an OBE and been named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World. It is a role which makes him uniquely placed to question just what charity is, and what it should be. In a book which is at points deeply personal and feels, during a period of global crisis, extremely timely, MacFarlane-Barrow reflects on what charity means in the twenty-first century. He examines how charities themselves have been scrutinised and, at times, fallen short of the mark we rightly expect of them, while thinking of ways to create a place where faith, hope and love can flourish, allowing the



impact of charitable efforts to ripple out and – if done right – change the world.

MacFarlane-Barrow has an easy, intimate style, drawing the reader in with personal anecdotes and twinkly-eyed, self-deprecating remarks. The book is grounded in his strong Catholic faith: where we see authentic charity, he argues, we see God. And yet MacFarlane-Barrow takes care to share stories of peoples of all faiths in his journey through twenty-first-century charity. In one anecdote he tells of the time he spent in war-torn Mogadishu, Somalia, in the company of Muslim doctors working to treat the sick and the injured: ‘We talked about how our faith, if it is sincere, must impel us to do works of charity. We talked too about our devotion to a Jewish woman, Mary the Mother of Jesus (who they call Miriam), mother of Christ’ (p. 28). His conclusion? ‘Once again it seemed to me that in each of our hearts something similar had been etched despite our very disparate backgrounds and beliefs.’

At times MacFarlane-Barrow focuses too much on his own travels (the reader is taken from the rubble of the Haiti earthquake to his own early missions to Bosnia, from schools in Malawi to the wreckage of a fishing village in Tamil Nadu in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami). But he is forensic in his search for what it is that makes us charitable. He tells us what charity actually means (an Old English word meaning ‘love of one’s fellows’), and how it has its roots in the Greek word *agape*. That some translations of the Bible into English have used the two words interchangeably is not, he argues, unimportant.

MacFarlane-Barrow traces the concept of charity to pre-Christian times and calls up the similar notion of *daana* in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Charity, he argues, is ancient, universal, and utterly human. MacFarlane-Barrow’s own arguments often lean on his own Scriptures however: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself’” (Luke 10:27, ESV) is just one example (p. 30). MacFarlane-Barrow’s own Christian faith, and its rock-like role through three decades in the charity sector, is his authentic guide.

Elsewhere MacFarlane-Barrow dissects the origins of modern charities, tracing them back to the Victorian concept of giving and the influence of such titans as Florence Nightingale. He worries about the many examples in recent times of charities with bulging overheads and overpaid executives, those with a dependence on government funding and



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the few who have hit the headlines as a result of damaging scandals. For MacFarlane-Barrow, however, the answer to such difficulties is simple: keep going, keep giving, and keep the faith; ‘We need to convince ourselves once again that the risk is worth taking. Because, make no mistake, every authentic act of charity – whether we make it as individuals or as an organisation – involves an element of risk’ (p. 55). This does not feel like a statement of naivety but of hope. And it is this, the persistence of hope – in each other, in ourselves and in the future – which shines through every page of this optimistic and at times searing exploration of what it means to give, and in times of need, to receive, and where we might find God in both: ‘Regardless [...] of our own particular faith tradition, [...] every freely given gift we make might acknowledge God as the creator of all things – the one who gave freely to us first of all’ (p. 221).

Taken as a whole, *Give* is a clarion call to our better natures, to the instinctive part of us which yearns to reach out, rather than turn inwards, and which calls upon faith to light up the way. As MacFarlane-Barrow points out: ‘charity is love. When we forget that, we horribly diminish this most noble human virtue’ (p. 70).

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Donald Macleod, *Therefore the Truth I Speak: Scottish Theology 1500–1700* (Fearn: Mentor, 2020), pp. 463, ISBN 978-1527102415. £24.99

When we read history today, we often just expect ‘to be told the history of ...’. However, in this work, Donald Macleod defies this expectation to bring us a brilliant work of historical theology which has contemporary application woven throughout. This work is both historical theology and instruction in theology.

In his work, Macleod does not seek to comprehensively cover Scottish theology from 1500–1700. Rather, he picks a few major names and themes, leaving time to delve deeper and have room for contemporary application. We see his concern for relevance from the first few paragraphs of his introduction when he asks: