

Rev Prof D. W. D. Shaw:

A reflection

George Russell Barr

Very Rev Dr Russell Barr was a student and friend of the late Rev Prof Bill Shaw, a founding member of the Editorial Board of Theology in Scotland, and for 20 years his minister. Here we share the introduction he gave on the occasion of the first D. W. D. Shaw memorial lecture which was delivered by Prof Paul S. Fiddes on 9 February 2022, and is published in this issue.



As an introduction to this, the first lecture in memory of the Reverend Professor Bill Shaw, I have been asked to say something about what I thought might be Bill's enduring intellectual and theological legacy.

I could say something about Bill's intellectual commitment to reason. As is evident from his two books and his many shorter essays and publications – and don't we all wish Bill had written and published much more – as someone born and educated in Edinburgh, Bill stood very much in his home city's Enlightenment tradition.

Reason mattered to Bill, the human capacity to think and express well-considered and philosophically coherent arguments, in support of, or justification for, a particular proposition. And for those of us who attended his lectures, or his masterly tutorials on John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*, a reasoned argument was evident in all he said and wrote, not least his approach to theodicy, the theological attempt to reconcile the experience of evil with a belief in divine love.

I could say something about Bill championing the cause of process theology. Inspired by the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, this was a branch of theology which Bill acknowledged was something of a minority sport among his immediate academic colleagues, but a theological endeavour with reason at its heart.

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I could say something about transcendence being one of Bill's important theological concepts. The Ascension hymn "Blessing and Honour and Glory and Power" was one of Bill's favourites; Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* with its exploration of the *mysterium tremendum* was one of the formative texts in his own spiritual and theological journey; and it was fitting the Festschrift published in his honour was entitled *The Presumption of Presence*.

However, in the short time available to me, I am going to say something about Bill's understanding of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, an understanding which I believe was at the heart of his theological thinking, and will suggest one of the ways in which this particular understanding was evident in Bill's life.

In one of his essays, Bill wrote of how 'the Christian doctrine of incarnation recognises that the most profound aspect of God's love is the idea of God's identification with the human condition.'¹

Bill argued that however difficult it is for human beings to really get to know and understand one another – to walk in another's shoes – what Christians recognise in the life and ministry of Jesus, is just that,

God himself, coming the whole way, treading the path of identification with stupid, struggling humanity, with no holds barred, no guarantees, no hotline of rescue or defence: a path of identification which does not end, even at the Cross.²

This understanding of the incarnation expressed as identification – the coming alongside of God in Christ with stupid, struggling humanity – was, I believe, Bill's central theological conviction.

It was also a conviction which found its expression in Bill's life through his wonderful gift of friendship. I don't remember many sermons from over forty years ago, but I do remember the sermon Bill preached in July 1979 on the Sunday he 'preached me in' to my first charge in Garthamlock and Craigend East in the east end of Glasgow. Bill preached on the theme of friendship, the friendships he enjoyed with so many of his

¹ D. W. D. Shaw, "A Kind of Christianity", <https://web.archive.org/web/20191228221134/http://www.dwdshaw.co.uk/chapter-4/4550597565>.

² Shaw, chapter 4.

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students, the friendships he enjoyed with his colleagues, the friendships he enjoyed as part of the community of the church, the friendships he enjoyed with people from all walks of life, and the friendship he enjoyed with God in Christ.

Friendship mattered to Bill – it mattered to him biblically, the incarnate God declaring to his disciples they were no longer his servants but his friends (John 15:15). It mattered to him theologically, God’s identification with humanity expressed in the life and teaching of Jesus.

It mattered to him personally. A reminiscence of his life entitled *Much Ado*, which Bill gave me a few months before he died, ends with a chapter entitled “Concluding Confessions”. Here Bill describes friendship as being the most important relationship in his life. And in what he says it is evident friendship – his capacity to come alongside people from all walks of life – was as much an expression of Bill’s faith, and his understanding of the incarnation as identification, as it was of his personality.

And so to his intellectual and theological legacy. Will it be in his commitment to reason and the integrity of philosophical argument in theological discourse? Will it be in his advocacy of process theology? Will it be in his profound sense of transcendence? Or will it be in his understanding of the doctrine of incarnation as identification, God’s identifying fully with the human condition through the life of Jesus, an identification expressed in different ways, but especially in his own life through the concept and experience of friendship? Only time will tell.

Meanwhile, on the occasion of this first memorial lecture, as someone who was one of his students, one of his Church of Scotland colleagues, and for the last twenty years of his life his minister, in knowing Bill as a friend, I know myself to have been blessed – a blessing quite beautifully expressed in words attributed to St Augustine:

All shall be Amen and Alleluia.
We shall rest and we shall see.
We shall see and we shall know.
We shall know and we shall love.
We shall love and we shall praise.
Behold our end which is no end.