

Reviews



Bridget Nichols and Nicholas Taylor, eds., *The End of the Church? Conversations with the Work of David Jasper* (Durham, UK: Sacristy Press, 2022), pp. xx + 264, ISBN 978-1789592528. £30.00

I have one small complaint about this lovely book, and will dispense with it now; why ‘The End of the Church?’ Debate over losing the religious institution is surely a very small part of David Jasper’s work. David is much more than an ecclesiologist. Apart from Elizabeth Jay’s and Heather Walton’s contributions, this is also not the concern of the essays within this collection. So a potential buyer of this book might be misled – unless, of course, they are familiar with David’s work. In that case, a subtle distinction might present itself where we are concerned, not with the *finem* of the Church, but rather with its *telos*. I am reminded of Jennifer Reek’s work on ‘poetic dwelling’,¹⁹⁵ to the extent where the poetic actually becomes Church. This book is, in that sense, itself a kind of Church. Or perhaps a seminar room or comfortable lounge – where David’s friends contribute to the conversation, each in turn.

It is a diverse yet unified collection of essays from those who have benefited from David’s wisdom; a wisdom which created and nurtured the movement of Literature, Theology and the Arts (LTA) in the UK and beyond. As David Fergusson’s Foreword states, this is indeed a tribute to David’s ‘extraordinary achievements’ (p. xv). Editors Bridget Nichols and Nicholas Taylor open the conversation with a biographical sketch of David, taking in both his written work and the work he has done in community-building, such that artists, academic theologians and representatives of the Church are able to sit down and learn from each other.

Michael Fuller asks, in a very Jasperian way, whether the boundary between Church and non-Church might be ‘where a dynamic and genuinely mutual engagement and enrichment can take place.’ Here, Fuller advocates for ‘the arts, rather than straightforward verbal dialogue’ (p. 3) and celebrates the role of the twentieth-century cleric Walter Hussey in commissioning a spectacular array of art and music for the Church. He

¹⁹⁵ See Jennifer Reek, *A Poetics of Church: Reading and Writing Sacred Spaces of Poetic Dwelling* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).



gives a heart-warming insight into the friendship which developed between Hussey and Benjamin Britten; and friendship across boundaries is surely a hallmark of David and his wife Alison.

Donald Orr explores aporias of whiteness and darkness, performing a close reading of four paintings as (quoting David) ‘a sacred space, in which the task of theology may be challenged and renewed’ (p. 21). Thomas Altizer’s apocalyptic abyss is invoked in Orr’s reading of Matisse, and it is good to see radical theology in action, as David would surely agree. Orr is close to the heart of David’s work when he quotes the artist Robert Motherwell: ‘It is the artists who guard the spiritual in the modern world’ (p. 30), and Orr’s dense and rewarding prose is that of himself as artist commenting on art.

Heather Walton grasps the paradox in David’s thought where the end of Church is also its beginning, in ruins and betrayal. She produces a moving meditation on the artist Anselm Kiefer, and her rich text converses with David’s ‘most churchy’ book (p. 38), *The Sacred Community*. The list of David’s published works at the end of this book impresses with David’s tireless creativity and scholarship but, as Walton alerts the reader, a deep ethical commitment shines through his life too. So I wonder whether Tibor Fabiny’s essay is an oblique tribute to David. Fabiny argues against the Romantic doctrine of Satan as Milton’s true hero, instead focusing on the quiet determination of the angel Abdiel to advocate for true righteousness, not to mention humility. In any case, Fabiny’s close reading of the text to discern spiritual import is a faithfulness modelled by David’s varied and invariably engaged work.

Vassiliki Kolocotroni enters into the spirit of David’s work, too, by exploring how the novelist Muriel Spark engages with the work of Marcel Proust in her own personal theological journey. Spark describes Proust as an ‘inspired pagan’ (p. 76), in that his secular vision yet mediates the sacred, in a profoundly creative engagement for Spark, for Kolocotroni, and potentially for us as readers.

Alison Jack focuses on David’s commitment to teaching in a nurturing capacity, sensitive to poetry as vocation where words are, in David’s own words, ‘in all their poetic mystery, an end in themselves’ (p. 94). There are many grateful recipients of David’s vision of the ‘sacramental power’ of words, and Jack unpacks this impeccably in her comparison of David with Seamus Heaney; both men are ‘Poets, Professors and Priests’ in this sense (p. 92).



It is Elizabeth Jay who meets the challenge of ‘The End of the Church’ head on, in a self-confessed ‘diatribe’ against the Church of England’s leadership’s managerial style of operating (p. 105). Yet Jay offers hope that the Church might still ‘save itself [...] by opening its doors wide’ (p. 113), and she discerns in the poetic vision of Larkin, Herbert, Hardy, and Eliot’s *Adam Bede* something of the need and longing which the Church can yet meet. So again, the poetic carries sacramental power. All is not lost; but things must change. And this book itself embodies part of that change, as envisioned by David.

Margaret Masson pays tribute to David’s work in 1980s Durham where he was ‘the strategist, the host, the curator, the enthusiast’ of an emerging Literature and Theology movement (p. 115). Masson interprets the end of the Church, at least implicitly, as both *finem* and *telos*. As Principal of St Chad’s College in Durham, she sees an increasing secularisation not as cause for alarm but as opportunity to re-envision its Christian ethos in a wider way. Referring to David’s thought in *Rhetoric, Power and Community* (1993), Masson flags up the danger implicit in all rhetoric and offers us her discernment that ‘co-creation’ is ‘a continual exercise in hermeneutics and translation every bit as demanding of subtle intellect as more conventional scholarly vocations’ (p. 128); again, an oblique tribute to David’s work in fostering the LTA community as it has grown.

Lori A. Kanitz reflects on the prophetic nature of ‘brittle fantasies’, described by Salman Rushdie in the 1980s as ‘imaginary homelands’ (p. 139), not least ideologies, proposing instead an ‘amazing grace’ which loves the reality of our ‘mongrel selves’ (p. 131). Kanitz reads Rushdie in a wholeheartedly LTA way. I am slightly uneasy at her almost too even-handed criticism of the ideologies of the Right and the Left; as a Christian Socialist, I am not neutral; can one be? Kanitz takes us full circle, however, concluding with Rushdie’s essay “In God we Trust”, which alerts us to the need to forever deconstruct ‘religion’ in favour of, in Kanitz’s words, a ‘cruciform life’ (p. 148).

In an entirely different style, Anne Loades offers a biographical sketch of David’s career in the context of his contemporaries, David Brown and George Pattison. Anne was David’s doctoral supervisor, and sadly died as this book was coming to press; this lends a real poignancy to her contribution. What emerges from it is an interdisciplinary LTA landscape forged by these three theologians, and in particular the astonishing breadth and depth of David’s work; and Loades writes movingly that it is ‘with a



great sense of something learnt that [she has] written this essay in [David's] honour' (p. 175).

Trevor Hart makes a wonderful point, that perhaps the writers of the Bible have 'an intuitive grasp of the [...] poetic nature of our patterns of speech [...] about God' (p. 177). Hart then compares the work of three nineteenth-century theological thinkers: Anglo-Catholic Aubrey Moore, writer and Congregational minister George MacDonald, and Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice. The nuances of their thought are faithfully disclosed, distinguishing Moore's Hegelian Trinitarianism (in Hart's view mistaken) from Patristic Trinitarianism. With a particular emphasis on MacDonald's sacramentalism, quotations from him, surely an 'LTA thinker' ahead of his time, are scattered like gems in this essay.

Hannah Altorf uses David's 2004 *The Sacred Desert* as a starting point to explore disorientation surrounding the authorship of the Exodus desert narrative. Altorf then writes a creative-theological narrative, giving us the account of Moses' daughter Redel, who does not exist in the Hebrew Bible. Redel's voice is one of questioning and uncertainty, but with a real punch at the end where she challenges the reader to face the text as relic, irrevocably real; 'You think that none of it happened?' (p. 207).

Jeremy J. Smith considers the nature of writing as artefact, focusing on two very different historical texts of religious significance and arguing for their 'iconic power' (p. 210). The first, the Northumbrian Ruthwell Cross, is astonishing not least for surviving approximately 1500 years and being over 5 metres high, with Latin and Germanic runic inscriptions, the latter being a version of an Old English text. Smith ponders their significance. He then considers the import of a sixteenth-century printing of a tenth-century homily; for what theological agenda was it published? Smith turns to a geological 'uniformitarian hypothesis' as a tool for 'cracking the code' (p. 224).

John Reuben Davies turns to Kazuo Ishiguro's 2015 novel *The Buried Giant* to think through theological understandings of memory and forgetting; how can justice and peace alike be served when revenge perpetuates cycles of violence? Davies turns to Miroslav Volf's 2021 study *The End of Memory*. Volf sees Paschal liturgy as a vital collective *anamnesis*, to counter dangers of religiously sanctioned revenge; 'a fixation on memories of wrong (can) create a distorted remembrance of salvation history' (pp. 234–35). There is space for commemoration of suffering in the post-Reformation Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC) and



Anglican repentance of past evils and complicities. Davies points to Léon van Ommen's work on liturgical lament in the SEC. Similarly, Bruce Morrill's and Alexander Schmemmann's work on political theology calls for a radical breakthrough from worldly assumptions. I am intrigued by Davies' argument against an 'idolatry of ideology' (p. 240), and would have liked to hear John and David explore the concept directly!

The lack of an essay from David, in response to these articles, can feel like a real absence, until one reflects that he has been the teacher who has guided and inspired so much of the LTA practice ably demonstrated in this book. I would also have liked to see a contribution from the LTA community David fostered in China. But this is a worthy contribution to our understanding of LTA and David's foundational role in it.

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Michael Frost, *Mission Is the Shape of Water: Learning from the Past to Inform Our Role in the World Today* (Cody, WY: 100 Movements Publishing, 2023), pp. xxii + 254, ISBN 978-1955142403 (paperback) £13.99; ISBN 978-1955142410 (e-book) £8.99

The use of the word 'our' in the sub-title of this engaging new book locates Frost's work in the Christian confessional realm. As such, *Mission is the Shape of Water* (or *MITSOW* as it has become known on social media) will be of interest to church members in a variety of contexts, offering practical applications. Yet *MITSOW* has the capacity to appeal to a much wider audience, for it has the characteristics of many good books: an enthralling narrative, well-written, about the world in which we find ourselves today.

Before embarking on a ten-chapter voyage through the history of Christian mission, Frost outlines why he has chosen water, and the shape thereof, as his central metaphor. He begins with the molecular shape of water – H₂O – which is an unchanging reality. Without that molecular

