

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 – H<sub>2</sub>O – which is an unchanging reality. Without that molecular



structure, we have something other than water. So it is, Frost claims, with Christian mission: 'The inherent nature of Christian mission, like the inherent nature of water, never changes. The mission of God's people has always been to alert others to the universal reign of God through Christ' (p. xi). There might be some who wish to challenge this missional premise, but they would, I surmise, be in the minority. So far, the metaphor holds. Now, for the other shape of water: its container. Or, in missional terms, the context. Just as water adapts its shape to the river or pot or bottle in which it finds itself, 'the words we use, and how we demonstrate God's reign, are situation specific; the exact contours of the mission of God's people are fluid' (p. xiii). To say otherwise is to have too narrow a view of Christian mission. Frost concedes that this is indeed the view of mission that people hold, focussing either on the earliest apostles or the big names in living memory. Such examples are not irrelevant, but they are not the whole story. Moreover, Frost draws on Plato's claim 'that water takes the shape of the icosahedron', which is a twenty-faced polygon (p. xv). Attracted by this description, Frost reminds us that each Christian brings a different 'face' to mission and that 'being a missionary could look like becoming an explorer or a governor or a prisoner or a student activist' (p. xvi). And so, we have the rationale for this historical offering: in order to contemplate what mission might look like now we must expand our imaginations by appreciating the numerous shapes and faces of Christian mission over the centuries past.

The watery metaphor does not stop there, however. We are taken to the streets of Hong Kong where pro-democracy protesters adopted as a rallying cry the actor and martial artist Bruce Lee's mantra 'Be water' (p. xviii). This refers to the ability of protestors to 'flow' and 'crash' at will, confounding the authorities' efforts to stop them. Frost plays with this metaphor, considering how water behaves differently in different situations, often making an impact beyond what would seem possible. He goes on to make the assertion that 'the world is rarely changed by single heroic figures' (p. xix). This is a bold claim, given that we are about to read about many individuals, rather than the 'thousands of nameless, faceless' people who have made up the vast majority of Christians throughout history. And yet, Frost seems to manage this tension well, perhaps because he acknowledges from the start that his book is not about just the people whose stories he tells. He also regularly alludes to the 'nameless, faceless Christians' who are part of these stories, and keeps on



using them to invite his readers into a similar adventure of faith: most of us ‘will be called, like droplets in a mighty river, to play our small part in contributing to the surge of love and grace throughout the world. If only we are willing’ (p. xx).

Finally, it is important to say that Frost does not shy away from the negative impact of some Christian missionaries throughout history, be that intentional or inadvertent. In an era of decolonisation, this feels particularly important, though Frost states explicitly that his approach will be nuanced: he will share the positives where he finds them. I am sure many will say the balance is skewed too far one way or the other; but there is, at least, a willingness to engage with the problems and dangers of mission as well as a desire to celebrate accomplishments.

The main chapters of *MITLOW* are each assigned a particular ‘shape’; as a way of collating the missional approaches of specific periods or groups. This is always going to feel tenuous in parts as every metaphor breaks down eventually. The trick, perhaps, is not to get hung up on these chapter headings but to be immersed in the unfolding narrative. It begins with Frost’s interpretation of the actions of the earliest apostles, and his take has some merit. After exploring the given shape of ‘God Slaying’, and what that looked like for Paul, the Twelve, and others, we are invited to consider the implications for us today. Frost posits that slaying gods might be something to replicate, only it would be ‘the secular gods of our age—such as consumerism, materialism, systemic racism, and sexism’ (p. 18) rather than the pagan gods of first-century polytheism. Something we are cautioned against is the triumphalist attitude of those early apostles. This is a wisely sensitive piece of advice and is indicative of how Frost will approach each of his chapters: we are invited to look, notice, ponder, and learn before wondering how we must change a previous shape of mission for our contemporary context.

And so, Frost takes us on a historical and geographical journey, introducing readers to people and stories, some of which will be familiar, others less so. Indeed, I was quite embarrassed to realise quite how little I knew about the missional history of the worldwide church, and I am grateful for the generous way in which Frost takes time to educate his readers at every turn, without assuming a lack of intelligence. As well as offering these personal stories and his own interpretation of the missional shapes, Frost also offers cautionary tales on a regular basis. Amongst my favourites, both for its wit and sadly all-too-familiar resonances, are his



remarks on the tussles between Celtic and Roman Christianity in the seventh and eighth centuries: 'It's heartbreaking to think that in the midst of the revival of Christianity in Europe, Christians were fighting about calendars and hairstyles' (p. 35).

As previously stated, Frost seeks to be nuanced in his consideration of European missionaries working elsewhere in the world, beginning with the Jesuits. I do not know enough of the actual history involved to know if the balance is appropriate but, overall, it does feel like Frost is at least genuine and persistent in his aims. For example, he acknowledges that 'colonialism certainly helped Protestant mission to survive and thrive' (p. 92), but shows how the relationship was not always cosy. In the sixth chapter particularly, Frost shares the stories of missionaries who resisted the abuses of empires and colonialisms, with varying degrees of success. From Chapter Four onwards, there are also many stories of indigenous mission work, which I found particularly interesting. Frost's own cultural water is that of white Western Christianity, but he consistently calls on those from a similar background 'to unshackle ourselves from our cultural blind spots to see where God is at work in the world, even if its forms and expressions are different from what we might imagine' (p. 141). Humility is both evidenced and encouraged throughout.

If you are not much of a historian, Chapters Eight to Ten plus the Epilogue are where it feels as though the rubber really hits the road. I do not encourage you to skip Chapters One to Seven as there are many and varied nuggets of wisdom to be found there alongside fascinating stories of faithful Christians. Even so, it is from Chapter Eight onwards that the applicability of historic mission lessons become more immediate. In the realm of 'Contextualisation' Frost unpacks the fine 'line between deep contextualization and syncretism' (p. 153). Examples are given from around the globe, as well as theoretical models, and offer much to ponder. Some may well disagree with where Frost draws the line, and I confess to finding myself a little uncomfortable with hearing echoes of 'love the sinner, hate the sin', but the approach is clear and engaging enough to elicit responses and (one hopes) civil discussion.

'Remissioning' in a post-Enlightenment, post-Christendom and post-colonialial era sees home soil becoming the new mission field. Frost draws on the work of Stuart Murray to highlight all the signs of the churches' position, and it resonates strongly in 2020s Scotland. Frost, however, broadens our horizons and gives examples of what is happening across



parts of the world that had once known the yolk of colonisation, including the phenomenon of reverse-missionaries. It underlines just how much the church in the UK needs to rethink its position and just how difficult it will be to do. Which brings us to the proffered shape for today: ‘Unearthing’.

It is perhaps unsurprising that this is the chapter where I have done most of my highlighting and marginal note-writing. Some of facts presented to the reader will not be new to a Scottish audience – author Steve Aisthorpe brought us *The Invisible Church* in 2016 – but the image of unearthing a long-buried gospel message alongside an acknowledgement that our missional water is currently a trickle is enlighteningly helpful. Then, in an Epilogue that is as diligently considered as every previous chapter, Frost seeks to securely ground his readers in their core identity in Christ, from whence he outlines what he considers the future shape of Christianity might look like. He envisages that it will be non-white; declericalised; culturally literate; devoted to holiness, justice and evangelism; moral but not moralising; spiritually rich; local and connected; hybrid and inter-connected. Each of these shapes are explored and unfurled so that readers are left with a vision and a sense of hope to propel them ever onwards.

In so many ways, I wish I had this book three years ago, as the Church of Scotland embarked on its Presbytery Mission Planning endeavours. Too many of us felt like lone voices trying to articulate something amidst great anxiety and waves of existential crises (from pandemic to climate chaos to institutional disintegration). This book would have given me stories to share. As a meaning-making species, shaped by narratives, we need stories to spark wonder, excitement, and holy imagination. Here are stories that could be shared as part of worship or in book groups or with leadership teams. In every chapter, there are many sparks to ignite conversation and take the concept of mission – a concept with which too many in the Western church are uncomfortable – beyond the Anglican Five Marks of Mission (adopted by the Church of Scotland) or written plans. From there, we might just be able to step out in faith, hope and love, knowing that the future will be completely different from anything we have experienced before. And, in that, we are not alone.

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