



Reviews



Hospitable God: The Transformative Dream, George Newlands & Allen Smith, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, pp. xiii, 251, ISBN 978-0754665601. £55.00

For four decades now, Professor George Newlands has been holding the torch for a particular theological tradition which, once highly respected, has in recent years been almost completely shouted out by so-called Radical Orthodoxy, post-Barthianism and conservative evangelicalism. I refer to the liberal evangelical tradition typified particularly in Scotland by the works of John and Donald Baillie, and in more recent years by John McIntyre. This tradition seeks to remain faithful to the witness of the Church throughout the ages and to be sensitive to biblical exegesis, but at the same time takes account of contemporary thought-forms, experience and literature. Accordingly, Newlands has offered a whole range of works on theology, ecclesiology and ethics; perhaps his most original contribution being his important theological treatment of human rights (*Christ and Human Rights: The Transformative Human Engagement*, 2006; and with Richard Amesbury, *Faith and Human Rights: Christianity and the Global Struggle for Human Dignity*, 2008). Having previously written on the love of God (*Theology of the Love of God*, 1980) and the generosity of God (*Generosity and the Christian Future*, 1997), he now offers, along with Allen Smith, what might be called a companion volume on the hospitality of God.

In an opening blurb, the authors explain their intention as follows: ‘Exploring the hospitality of God, and its implications for human thought and action, this book examines the concepts of hospitality as cognitive tools for reframing our thinking about God, divine action, and human response in discipleship. Hospitality is imagined as an interactive symbol, changing perspectives and encouraging stable environments of compassionate construction in society.’

Hospitality can, of course, mean different things to different people but in affirming hospitality as a concept and reality vital to the flourishing of humane society, the authors expressly mean ‘hospitality

according to Christian faith, as central to God's purpose in creation and reconciliation, and to the flourishing of all humanity created in the divine image' (7). So the initial chapter is on "God the Hospitable in Christian Thought and Action". This is no rose-tinted account, and the abundant evidence of the inhospitality of the world to so many people is honestly faced. Yet so too is the 'concretising' of hospitality, illustrated historically and contemporaneously in its conventional and radical manifestations.

Given that hospitality does not begin and end with Christianity, a faith which wants to connect with its world has to explore hospitality across many religions and societies: and so there follows an exploration into the tradition of hospitality in society, religion and culture. This exploration ranges deep and wide, into all manner of authorities and examples ancient and modern; into the world religions and non-religious thought; and into literature, film, the arts and even architecture, with occasional diversions pointing out the relevance for Christian faith and action.

Conscious of the problem that evil and suffering must pose to any study of the hospitality of God, there follows an intriguing section on the inhospitable and the indifferent. The reader is spared neither uncomfortable illustrations, nor reasonable objections to traditional theodicies. Instead, new ground is offered 'on which to construct theological thinking from the standpoint of hospitality, an exercise in reconstructing theology for the perspective of relationships grounded in the love and, indeed hospitality of God' (67).

The first section of the book, "God the Hospitable" ends with the consideration of hospitality in an age of postmodern faith – indeed, 'postmodern everything' (77). This is a notoriously difficult area to deal with, in which neologisms abound and the English language takes a beating, but the authors successfully navigate through a bewildering number of contributions. Finally, they use their favoured concept to help expound a post-foundational theology which transcends the negativities of both sceptical and fundamentalist postmodernism.

The second section is entitled "Reframing Faith in the Hospitable God", and develops the 'shape of hospitable reality and the relation of faith to both meditation and action' (109). In chapters successively entitled "Unwrapping the Gift", "Convergent Hospitalitys –

Hospitable Community”, and “Hospitable Church”, the authors examine the implications of ‘the hospitable God’ for a vast variety of areas and issues theological, ethical, ecclesiological, political, and even economic. Human rights figure prominently, as one would expect, encompassing issues of poverty and inequality, relations to other faiths, racism, and feminism. Everywhere, the possible hospitable responses to the hospitality of God are sketched with both imagination and realism. The implications for the Church, its theology and practice, are particularly important and deserve and receive serious consideration.

What is particularly attractive about this is the refusal of the authors to ignore inconvenient and contrary evidence to their claims, as well as their openness to conflicting positions. Illustrations abound, drawn from many and often surprising sources, contemporary as well as classical. Attention is drawn to the history of ‘hospitable liberality’ with interesting examples, familiar and unfamiliar, being presented. One such is the work – quoted at length – of Henry Sloane Coffin, whom the authors particularly admire. The book concludes with an appendix consisting of “An Overview of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*”, which is recognised as being of special significance.

The authors claim that the theme of this book is ‘[h]ow to discern and respond positively to the overarching reality of divine hospitality in, with and under the modern world, equally in its religious and its secular manifestations’ (9). Despite a certain repetitiveness and the danger of over-illustration (the bibliography runs to thirteen packed pages), it is a pleasure to record that this theme has been most worthily and comprehensively treated. As well as being a highly original treatment of hospitality in all its aspects, full of wisdom, imagination and compassion, and not without the occasional shaft of humour, this work can also be recommended as a fine example of liberal evangelical theology. Perhaps this brand of theology should rightly be called ‘progressive orthodoxy’, for in its own way – and this is important – orthodox it is.

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