Ian Adams’ excellent book takes three elements of the historic monastic tradition and recasts them for the benefit both of individuals seeking a deeper walk with God and for the many emerging new monastic communities in the UK and beyond. Ian writes from his personal experience in the new monastic movement and his role in the Church Mission Society, itself recently recast as an acknowledged religious community of the Church of England, where he works alongside small missional communities.

Ian invites us to accompany him on a journey to three locations. The cave is the place of monastic withdrawal to be alone with God, held by him, and brought face to face with ourselves - not always an easy encounter. The refectory represents the powerful note of hospitality in the monastic tradition; here is where community is created and the needy served in immediate and practical ways. It is when he writes about his third place, the road, that Ian draws most strongly on the Franciscan tradition. Here we journey out to encounter the wider world rather than wait for it to come to us. And as we do so we are changed by it.

Having set up this threefold model Ian takes us on to interpret four traditional monastic vows: poverty, chastity, obedience and stability. Whilst these will not spring many surprises to those who are familiar with living the Franciscan Rule, they are set out simply, clearly and with a deep engagement with the present day.

This is an easy to read book, and at 99 pages not a long one. Each chapter begins with one of Ian’s own poems, and the book concludes with a short but valuable list of books and websites for those who want to read further. Read chapter by chapter it would provide excellent material for a series of Third Order small group meetings.

David Walker TSSF
Bishop of Dudley
'false' and 'true' self. In this book, Fr Richard builds on their work and makes accessible a decade's worth of his own teaching on the subject by inviting us 'to a further journey.'

He notes that both halves are necessary, but they are distinct. The first half is a container where we need secure boundaries within which to build our identities and master self control (but where we tend to measure our success and define ourselves by what we do). He calls this part of the journey the 'path of ascent'. The second half is where, with wisdom and discernment, we move on to the 'path of descent'. Here we are willing to 'lose' or 'let go' of control and power as we seek out and implement within our lives the contents that the container was meant to hold: the Gospel message of compassion, love, inclusion, forgiveness, justice and mercy, as well as our interconnectedness with the natural world and with people of all faiths and none.

Fr Richard notes that most institutional religion is concerned with the tasks of the first half of life - being a container - and ignores what tends to be far more challenging: addressing the contents. He suggests that much confusion, both personally and within the church, could be avoided by acknowledging the clear distinctions between the tasks of the two halves of life and the type of spiritual leadership and companionship which is required to nurture and then move us on from one half into the other. Part of the Franciscan charism is about being willing to "die to self"; this book enables us, not only to more fully understand the process and the implications for our own lives, but also how we can then more helpfully accompany others on their spiritual journeys.

Nancy Adams TSSF

Seamus Mulholland OFM
As we wing him home: A Collection of Poems and Meditations on the Life of St. Francis of Assisi
ISBN: 9780 9549 2728 8
Franciscan Centre for Christian Spirituality, 2011, 137pp, £9.95

Seamus Mulholland teaches at the Franciscan International Study Centre in Canterbury, and this book is the fruit of years of studying, meditating on and following the way of Francis, distilled into 33 poems, each about an incident or person in the life of Francis. Each poem is preceded by an historical introduction and followed by a meditation.

The introductions are based on and compare the sources for Francis' life (mainly 1 and 2 Celano, The Legend of the Three Companions and Bonaventure's Legenda Maior). The reader needs to have prior knowledge of Francis' life story; this book gives startling and stimulating insights into that story.

The earliest poems and meditations explore the impact on Francis of the battle of Collestrada between Assisi and Perugia in 1202 which (the author maintains) "may have been the defining moment in Francis' life", because of the trauma of battle, the slaughter of his friends and his subsequent imprisonment and illness. Francis' experience at Collestrada "interiorly destroyed him". The command to rebuild what was in ruins referred not just to the church of San Damiano but to Francis himself.
Another aspect of Francis' conversion often ignored but explored here is Francis receiving (at Poggio Bustone in 1208) assurance that his sins were forgiven - "forgiveness which he experienced within himself for the first time...in this little village".

The poems are not in the chronological order of the incidents they reflect on; most of them are in the voice of Francis himself. The layout of the book is excellent; each of the 33 sections occupies four pages - one for the title, one for the introduction, one for the poem and one for the meditation. But there are a surprising number of misprints.

Seamus Mulholland is already a published poet, and his poetic skill is apparent in each section. Like A Month with Saint Francis by Brother Ramon SSF (SPCK, 1999), this is a book to live and pray with, a day at a time. Each reading and re-reading will yield new insight, inspiration and guidance and encouragement to follow Jesus in the way of St. Francis of Assisi.

Cecil King
Salisbury

Ian S. Markham
Against Atheism
Why Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris are fundamentally wrong
ISBN: 9781 4051 8963 7 (pb)


Markham, Dean and President of Virginia Theological Seminary, USA, helps us to wake up to the challenge posed by three scientists of repute who have ventured boldly outside their fields of acknowledged expertise into the realms of philosophy and theology.

If we are to follow his example our awakening will be followed by a serious attempt to learn their arguments, and to take them seriously, even to read their books! This will leave the Christian reader with the feeling that she/he is not well prepared for 'giving an answer for the faith that is in you', as bidden in scripture.

Markham to the rescue! Having courteously demolished the case made by the trio largely on grounds of faulty philosophy, he proceeds to advance an apology for theism, in particular for a catholic Anglican Christianity which is at once clear, passionate, convincing - and inclusive of Judaism and Islam, allies in the cause of theism.

Anselm SSF

Gregory Collins OSB
Meeting Christ in his Mysteries:
A Benedictine vision of the spiritual life
ISBN: 9781 8560 7682 1

Gregory Collins is a monk of Glenstal Abbey in Ireland, and a former director of the Monastic Institute at the Benedictine University of Sant'Anselmo, Rome. His aim, in this marvellous book, is to help Christians to appropriate the heart
of our faith, and supremely the transforming mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, through liturgy, personal prayer, and a deeper understanding of, and participation in, the sacramental life of the Church. Though firmly (yet not uncritically) within the Roman Catholic monastic tradition (he acknowledges in particular his indebtedness to two great twentieth-century Benedictine theologians, Columba Marmion and Odo Casel, describing the latter as "one of the greatest Christian thinkers of all time"), he draws inspiration from a vast range of sources, as his extended notes and bibliography show. He is also profoundly and generously ecumenical in his thinking, frequently quoting Barth in particular, but drawing even more extensively on Orthodox theology, liturgy and spirituality, from St Gregory of Nyssa to Bulgakov and Zizioulas. Like Olivier Clément in his Roots of Christian Mysticism, Collins taps the deepest wellsprings of Christian truth and life and offers them to us in a profound but accessible way.

What Collins gives us is a theological vision to be lived and prayed, not just believed. Doctrines are constantly pressed into service in Christian life: thus he says that reading the Bible demands "a kind of kenosis, an emptying out of one's own plans, desires and ideas so as to become free and open to God's Word" (p70). It is, for him, no coincidence that the recovery (largely thanks to von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr) of the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell took place in the face of the horrendous evils that overshadowed the twentieth century. The ascension of Christ is "God's pledge and promise that the material world he created and loves so much is destined, not for dissolution and disappearance, but for transfiguration" (p151).

The book is full of wisdom: "there is nothing selfish about...sustained personal prayer, for it is really a kind of evangelization of the self" (p123). And Jesus' threefold interrogation of St Peter in John 21 reveals that Christ "is especially present when we are oppressed by the sense of our own unworthiness or failure. With infinite tenderness Jesus draws Peter out of his guilty self-obsession, making him focus not on what Peter imagines he wants or needs and not allowing him to sink back into the oblivion of immersion in the mere business of daily existence" (p147). If you long to see the "mere business of daily existence" transformed by a fresh encounter with the heart of what it means to be a Christian, you could not do better than to read this book.

Gordon Mursell
Kirkcudbright

Peter Tyler
St John of the Cross
ISBN: 9780 8264 7561 9 (pb)

The fundamental stance in this book is that John of the Cross is an outstanding Christian figure: "a psychologist, mystic, artist and someone who allows Christianity to dialogue with other faiths." Primary to understanding any of these aspects of John, though, is understanding him as a theologian and person of prayer, and setting this in the context of his key life experiences. Tyler therefore begins with a brief description of the religious climate of Spain at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and a life of John of the Cross, noting especially those aspects of his experience that will influence
his thinking in later years. Tyler also tells of the foundation of the Carmelite Order, and shows how this ethos is worked out in John's life. Various works of John of the Cross are referred to throughout the book, and the literary influences upon him, including that of the Spanish Franciscan, Francisco de Osuna. The different aspects of John as a Christian thinker are explored in relation to his Christian faith and show how these are integrated into his prayer.

This is book is an excellent introduction for anyone interested in understanding the spirituality of John of the Cross or the Carmelite way. It is scholarly but not academic in style, with a detailed bibliography to encourage further study.

Maureen CSF

David F. Ford
The Future of Christian Theology
ISBN 9781 4051 4273 1

This book, from the Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, is a manifesto - it bangs a drum and is written with passion and infectious enthusiasm.

In the words of David H. Kelsey, "it is…a vision of theology oriented as a search for wisdom, focused on the Spirit, in service to the Church, guided by Scripture construed above all as drama and explicitly read in an inter-religious context, and engaged with the struggles of its host society".

Those words tell us that this is not an easy book. It deserves to be read a page at a time and I think for most of us (certainly me) with a dictionary at hand. All Christians are challenged to follow the path of the apprentice theologian, and thus to find spiritual enrichment by including the mind in talents God has given them for God's glory and for God's service.

Anselm SSF