

Editor's Notes

First, I want to welcome Dan Strange as the new associate editor. Dan has been working with theological students for UCCF and moves in the autumn to lecture on theology and culture at Oak Hill College. We look forward to his contribution in the future. Secondly, it should have been noted in the last issue that Garry Williams's article on evangelicalism was originally given as the DM Lloyd-Jones Memorial Lecture at the John Owen Centre. The John Owen Centre was established several years ago by the board of the London Theological Seminary in order to encourage theological study by pastors, missionaries and other serious students. Currently it runs day seminars, a reading group, Hebrew and Greek refresher courses and a biennial conference. Mark Johnston's article in this issue was first delivered at the 2004 conference that explored the past and present state of evangelical Nonconformity in England and Wales. The centre has also been conducting a post-graduate degree course (ThM) in historical theology with Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. On September 3 of this year Paul Negruts of Oradea will be preaching at the first graduation service for those who have completed the course. Later on the same day Carl Trueman will deliver the 2005 Lloyd-Jones lecture. The centre also has facilities for individual study. Thirdly, a word of apology is due to you. For various reasons the survey of literature in the field of systematic theology is not included in this issue. I will try to have that put right in the next issue.

If you haven't read it yet I highly recommend Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Reformation*.¹ This is without doubt one of the best modern histories of the Reformation. First, MucCulloch's account is

both wide in scope and deep in insight. I was amazed at how much he gets in. He is a master of succinctly summarising a complex episode in clear and elegant prose. The period covered, 1490 to 1700, goes beyond that covered in many other histories of the Reformation. This allows the author to follow through the developments in both Protestantism and Catholicism where there was much more of a symbiotic relationship than is often acknowledged. But it is in his treatment of Protestantism that MacCulloch excels. One commendation on the cover calls the book 'a triumph of human sympathy' and that is surely what it is. MacCulloch enables us to enter the world of the Reformation, both through the power of his narrative as well as by his analysis. Without losing the narrative thread the author explores all sorts of incidents and byways of the Reformation that illuminate the whole story. I found the material on Eastern Europe particularly fascinating, but anecdotes about those involved in the English Reformation are just as helpful. As a student of the latter MacCulloch is dazzling. He treats the Reformed or Calvinist strand of the Reformation with much more sympathy and understanding than many others. Not least he shows that Calvinism in some places was a genuinely popular movement. The final chapters of the book deal with social aspects of the Reformation. The chapter on marriage and family is particularly good. The inclusion of a whole section on homosexuality is a mistake but not unexpected today. There are of course a number of points where one disagrees with his interpretation. However overall this is a book to make the Reformation come alive 'warts and all' as one of its sons famously said.

Also worth reading in the same area is *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* by **William Dyrness**² For many the subtitle – ‘The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards’ – will bring a wry smile. For many, classical Protestantism has suffered for much of its history from a lack of imagination. Often this is associated with a lack of emphasis on the arts in public worship. However Dyrness disputes this. For sure there was a suspicion of the visual in worship which manifested itself in the iconoclasm of the Reformation period. Exploring the thinking of Calvin and others Dyrness shows how this was rooted in their critique of the role of images in the Roman church and their understanding of the nature of idolatry. In contrast to the Lutherans, the Reformed saw idolatry as not only worshipping another god than the true God, but also worshipping the true God in the wrong way. The Reformers privileged the ear over the eye which they saw as particularly susceptible to temptation. As the interior of churches were simplified, as were services which now centred on the preaching of the word, the Protestant imagination expressed itself in other ways. The sermon itself became an exercise in the imagination, particularly as biblical images were used and developed in communicating the truth. This had a profound effect in Britain in the development of literature. The interior of churches, as witnessed by those in the Netherlands and New England, exhibited an aesthetic simplicity that I for one find more beautiful than anything else on offer. What Dyrness detects among the Reformed was a new appreciation of the beauty of the whole of God’s creation, what Calvin called the ‘theatre of God’s glory’. This liberated Christians to explore the beauty of creation through painting (think of the

17th century Dutch masters), music, architecture (the French Huguenots were the best architects in France and in the case of Bernard Palissy consciously biblical ones), literature (Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Bunyan) and science. It is not surprising to find that beauty is a major theme for Jonathan Edwards. Contemporary Reformed Evangelicals need to rediscover something of this part of their heritage. Incidentally, for a short introduction to the idea of beauty in the Christian life read **Sam Storm’s** *One Thing, Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God*.³ In some ways this book is John Piper simplified and condensed to 188 pages. Many of Piper’s key themes are here but with a particular stress on seeing and being transformed by the beauty of God. The relevant chapters get us to the heart of the Protestant imagination that is only satisfied in God himself as revealed in Jesus Christ.

I wish that **Alister McGrath** had taken some of this on board in *The Twilight of Atheism*.⁴ McGrath is excellent in his account of how atheism has arisen and begun to fall. For sure-footed and accessible intellectual history he is to be highly commended. He covers all the key players and movements from the 18th century to the present. Compared to similar treatments by Blanchard and Zacharias, McGrath is more sensitive to the post-modern milieu and questioning of confused pagans. With the fall of atheism there is certainly an evangelistic and apologetic opportunity. However I think McGrath is weaker in his treatment of orthodox Protestantism and particularly on this matter of the imagination. He seems to suggest that the down-playing of the visual in devotion and public worship has put Protestants at a disadvantage. By desacralising

the world the Reformers unintentionally opened the way for the secularism we know today. There is some truth in that, but the answer is not to resacralise the world, but to see it again as the theatre of God's glory and to be celebrated as such. My other quibble is with the place in all this McGrath gives to Pentecostalism. He sees the Pentecostal emphasis on experience as redressing the cerebral nature of classical Protestantism and thereby countering atheistic secularism. The growth of Pentecostalism since 1900 is indeed remarkable and one of the major developments in church history. However there are some darker aspects of Pentecostalism that McGrath does not mention and that could seriously undermine orthodox faith in the future. Certainly in the west it could lead to increased unbelief as some of its more extravagant claims are proved empty. Nor is his picture of evangelical Protestantism recognisable to those who, like Jonathan Edwards, see a more experiential and affective dimension to their faith. There is a form of cerebral evangelicalism, but at best that is less than the real thing. When the tide of faith turns again the answer to secular atheism will be the historic evangelical faith that satisfies the emotions as well as the intellect just as it did for many when it countered the rationalism of the 18th century.

In the last issue I had intended to include in my survey of historical literature some books on contemporary Christianity. Let me take this opportunity to do so now. One of the most interesting sociologists of religion in Britain today is **Grace Davie** who devised the expression 'believing without belonging' to sum up the attitude of most British people to Christianity. In *Europe: The*

*Exceptional Case*⁵ Davie examines European Christianity in the context of global Christianity. As anyone who reads the Guardian or Independent will appreciate, cultural progressives see Europe in the vanguard of secularism. Here on the western and especially north-western edge of the Eurasian land mass we have met the future where religion in general and Christianity in particular has been banished from the central cultural space. In fact the opposite is the case according to Davie. Around the world Christianity is growing and other societies, including the United States, show no signs of following the European pattern. Europe is the exceptional case (as are to a lesser extent Canada, Australia and New Zealand). Even in Europe there is evidence of strong religion, especially among immigrant groups. The exceptional nature of European religion or lack of it needs to be born in mind when thinking about the mission of our churches. While our immediate context may not be that encouraging our wider context is. Our approaches to evangelism and discipleship need to adapt to this exceptional context. A book to read along with Davie's is **Philip Jenkins's** *The Next Christendom*.⁶ Jenkins chronicles and analyses the massive expansion of Christianity in the 20th century that shows no sign of abating in the 21st. He is particularly good at looking at how evangelicalism in the developing world may affect the shape of Christianity in the future. It will be much more doctrinally and morally conservative, but also more apocalyptic and given to excessive claims to the miraculous. While the former will hearten conservative evangelicals the latter will dismay them. The next few decades should be very interesting indeed.

One of the ways that churches have adapted their approaches to evangelism is that of courses for inquirers. As I argued in an article a few years ago such courses are really a revival of the ancient practise of catechising. By far the best known and most widely used course is the Alpha Course. In *The Alpha Enterprise* Stephen Hunt⁷ subjects Alpha to a pretty rigorous academic sociological critique. After giving an account of Alpha's origins at Holy Trinity Brompton he places it within its context in post-modernity and the charismatic movement. Each of the components of the course is examined after which he assesses its effectiveness and then takes up a number of issues such as its attitude to homosexuality and its charismatic orientation. This is not a theological critique of the course, but it does make some telling hits in its criticisms. Alpha is an attempt to market an essentially orthodox understanding of Christianity in a world of religious consumerism and to that extent it is quite successful. However it also suffers as a result, not least in the attempt to package the gospel and export it with the cultural baggage of its original context in upper middle class English Anglicanism. Hunt believes that while big claims are made for Alpha the reality on the ground is often far less impressive. Nevertheless Alpha is a remarkable development in late 20th century Christianity. In one section Hunt deals with critiques of the course from conservative evangelicals among others and mentions the FIEC in particular. To my knowledge FIEC does not have an official position on Alpha, although I suspect that most churches if not against it do have reservations about some aspects of it. Unfortunately Hunt says that no real alternatives have challenged Alpha's position and though he does not mention it, that

must include All Souls' Christianity Explored course. Those of us who are critical of Alpha need to do some more work here. My feeling is that all these courses begin at the wrong place. They start with Jesus when it would be better to start with God as the creator. Jesus makes no sense except within the context of the biblical framework of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. In his catechising Augustine of Hippo understood this and we need to do as well. Incidentally, Hunt's book is not only a helpful critique of Alpha, but also a good introduction to up-to-date sociology of religion as helpfully applied to a notable religious phenomenon.

Let me mention three books, two of them reference works, that help us understand religion today. *A Brief Guide to Beliefs*⁸ by Linda Edwards is a very helpful survey of religion in the world today. The first chapters look at various common themes and aspects of all religions such as ethics, science, the problem of evil and so on. The rest of the book is a chapter by chapter account of all the major religions as well as a vast array of religious movements, cults and new age spirituality. Christianity receives the most attention and Edwards is very balanced and fair in what she says. Without noticeable bias she details the differences between liberals and conservatives in a number of areas. Inevitably some things are left out (I could not find reference to Alevi Muslims when my newsagent said he was one) and there are some things that should have been included. *The Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World*⁹ is a very useful addition to the IVP Reference Collection. The book falls in two parts. The first takes up a wide range of contemporary religious issues – politics, the arts, technology,

human rights, etc. The second section takes up the individual religions, cults and movements. Christianity is dealt with in separate articles on its evangelical, Pentecostal/charismatic, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant forms. Strangely there is not a chapter on liberal Christianity which is left for Carl Trueman to deal with in his chapter on Protestantism. While not a reference work as such, **Harold Netland's** *Encountering Religious Pluralism*¹⁰ is a book to be referred to often. In the book he attempts to develop an evangelical theology of religions. Living as we do in an increasingly pluralistic religious environment we must deal with other religions in a biblical way. Netland helps us to do this, first by surveying the cultural, philosophical and theological landscape with particular reference to the thinking of John Hick. The latter part of the book develops an evangelical theology of religion that upholds the uniqueness of Christ and the exclusivity of salvation in him while recognising the reality of general revelation reflected in other religions.

Any history of Christianity in Britain in the latter part of the 20th century has to take account of the impact of the welfare state. I think it can be argued that the welfare state has effectively become the national church. In fact a few years ago Polly Toynbee said as much about the NHS in an article. The impact on the churches has not only been the way their social ministries have largely been taken over by the state, but even more how the state has nurtured a culture of dependency on itself. An interesting and thought-provoking read is *The Welfare State We're In*¹¹ by **James Bartholomew**. Bartholomew may overstate his case that the British

welfare state is a bad thing, but he makes some valid points as he surveys health care, education, housing, social benefit and so on. Interestingly Thomas Chalmers emerges as a hero who in developing social ministries for the poor in Glasgow sought not to undermine personal responsibility. On this score Chalmers has not generally been honoured by evangelicals in Britain, many of whom seem to think that some form of state collectivism is the only way to achieve social justice. Perhaps we need to recover something of the voluntary spirit of our Victorian forebears. Certainly it would improve education and civic life in general in Hackney where I live. In this regard I recommend **Tristram Hunt's** superb *Building Jerusalem*.¹² As a Labour supporting academic historian Hunt would not agree with Bartholomew, but he does show the remarkable achievement of the Victorians in transforming British cities. Nonconformists played a key role in this. Sadly today evangelicals, Nonconformist or Anglican, are more likely than not to be found in the suburbs and beyond rather than in the cities where they need to be.

There is no doubt that the late Pope John Paul II was one of the great figures in the 20th century and certainly one of the most remarkable popes in history. However there is something strange about the massive coverage of his death in the media not unlike that surrounding the death of Diana. Perhaps because he was a celebrity pope albeit with more gravitas than is common in the world today his death, like that of Diana, affects people personally in the way that that of other notable figures doesn't. Interestingly the Guardian on 5 April ran two articles that highlighted something of the real

religious significance of the pope's death for Britain. One by Mark Almond was entitled 'The strange death of Protestant England' and the other article by Martin Kettle was entitled 'It's as if the Reformation had never happened'. Kettle's concern was not religious, but cultural and political. Noting how the Prime Minister and others were intent to be at the funeral, he wrote, 'The real dynamic of this new pragmatic comes from the severe modern erosion of commitment and confidence handed down to us by history, notably by the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution'. However the consequences are not only the political and cultural ones Kettle notes, but even more the spiritual consequences of which most evangelicals today seem totally oblivious. However much we might admire the late Pope's stance on matters of human life and justice he was sadly wrong when it came to salvation though faith alone in Christ alone and by grace alone. What is desperately needed today is a revival of evangelical Protestantism that is richly doctrinal, deeply experiential, passionately evangelistic, culturally engaged, intellectually robust, socially involved and practically relevant to the lives of Christians in a very complex world. With the expansion of Protestant Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America it is especially important that the evangelical faith of the Reformers is not forgotten, but rather preached, understood and lived out in a way that is both culturally appropriate and biblically faithful.

Two books have come to hand that can help to inspire and sharpen our thinking in this area. **Terry Johnson's** *The Case for Traditional Protestantism*¹³ is the more polemical of the two books as it makes its

case for evangelicalism in its Reformed expression. Organising his book around the classic solas of the Reformation Johnson expounds the evangelical Reformed faith in a fresh and lively way. A benefit of the book is the plethora of excellent quotes from a wide range of authors. He engages among others with Rome and recent controversies within evangelicalism on justification. In his discussion of the reformation of worship and church government he is clearly Presbyterian in ecclesiology without much acknowledgement that not all Calvinists would agree. For a book like this he seems to go on unnecessarily about the connectional nature of the church and infant baptism. Towards the end of the book Johnson briefly outlines the relevance of the Protestant faith to education, politics, economics and the arts. He ends by reminding us of Abraham Kuyper's vision of all of life under the lordship of Christ. Overall the book is very good, but I suppose my problem with it is that Johnson has not so much made the case for traditional Protestantism as for traditional Calvinistic Protestantism of the Presbyterian variety. No doubt the case needs to be made for that position, but traditional Protestantism is much broader and the case needs to be made for that as well. Surely Calvinistic Baptists and Congregationalists, classic Pentecostals, conservative Arminians and moderate dispensationalists are traditional Protestants.

In *Truth in all its glory*¹⁴ **William Edgar** doesn't try to make the case for classic Protestantism in general but for the Reformed faith in particular and does so in a fresh and attractive way. Of the two books this is the one that I would give to someone wanting an introduction to the Reformed faith. The book falls

References

into three sections. In the first, Edgar introduces the substance of Calvinism and gives a brief history of its development. Here he argues that knowing God involves knowing him in the fullness of what he has revealed to us in Scripture. The second and longest section is an exposition of the Reformed faith. In the third section Edgar outlines how the Reformed faith applies today in the church and the world. Like Johnson, Edgar is Presbyterian in his convictions, but does acknowledge that Reformed Baptists differ from him. Also like Johnson he rightly emphasises the central importance of the church in the Christian life and the continuing obligation of the 'cultural mandate'. Towards the end of the book Edgar outlines what he thinks needs to be done today. He mentions three theological issues that merit reflection: interpreting Scripture, relating union with Christ to other doctrines and developing the doctrine of the Trinity. The latter is particularly important in our evangelistic engagement with, on the one hand, post-modernity with its emphasis on the many and, on the other hand, Islam with its emphasis on the one. Like Johnson, Edgar reminds us how the faith has to be applied to every sphere of life and is indeed the answer to many of the issues facing humanity. Particularly urgent is the importance of discipleship in those areas of the world where Christianity is growing. As he says in his last paragraph: 'The agenda is more than full. Our God is more than able'.

1. D MacCulloch, *Reformation, Europe's House Divided*, 1490-1700 (London, Penguin Books, 2004)
2. WA Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture, The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2004).
3. S Storms, *One Thing, Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God* (Fearn: Christian Focus 2004).
4. A McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism, The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider 2004).
5. G Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd 2002)
6. P Jenkins, *The Next Christendom – The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).
7. S Hunt, *The Alpha Course – Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2004).
8. L. Edwards, *A Brief Guide to Beliefs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001).
9. C Partridge, ed., *The Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World* (Leicester: IVP 2002).
10. H Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism – The Challenge of Christian Faith and Mission* (Leicester: IVP 2001).
11. J Bartholomew, *The Welfare State We're In* (London: Politico's 2004).
12. T Hunt, *Building Jerusalem – The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2004).
13. TL Johnson, *The Case for Traditional Protestantism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust 2004).
14. W Edgar, *Truth in all its glory* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed 2004).