

Book Reviews

The Contemplative Response: Leadership and Ministry in a Distracted Culture

Ian Cowley

Forward by Rowan Williams

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That we live in a distracted culture seems almost too obvious to say. Walk down a street, or sit in a railway carriage, and see how many people have their eyes glued to their phones or tablets. Sit in a restaurant and there are almost certainly fellow diners who, though sitting together, seem not to be interested in each other but only in their devices, as these things have come to be called.

The mobile phone is a symbol of our present age, where old patterns of living and working, where old moralities have, in so many ways, been torn to shreds. This pattern of change is not only to be found in the affluent 'west' but increasingly across the whole world. Even though there are many people who have not yet caught up or who are neglected, oppressed and set aside, those with power have now found a new means to enforce it. But it is worth noting, too, that the downtrodden are also finding ways of making themselves felt, using new technology to coordinate their protests. The symbol is set in the midst of an affluent culture that seems to set its values as being about how much one has, how successful one is in terms of work, position or social status, and how much luxury and comfort a person can grasp, because therein the objectives of life seem to be set.

Where, in this maze, do we set our compass bearings? How do we distinguish what is false about ourselves and our milieu, and find a direction that connects with the truth of who we are as human beings? How do we meet God in the middle of all this noise? These are the vital questions which this book poses and to which it gives possible answers.

Ian Cowley¹ is an Anglican priest who was born and grew up in South

Africa during the years when apartheid was at its most appalling. He has served as a parish priest in Natal and in England. Before retiring from full time ministry he spent eight years as the Vocations and Spirituality Coordinator of the Diocese of Salisbury. He has travelled widely, and soaked himself in the wisdom of Thomas Merton. He finds that by opening ourselves to the presence of God in a way that is discovered through contemplative prayer we can reset our lives to eternal, true and fundamental reality.

The subject matter of this book is of importance for anyone who is trying to follow the Christian way. It is timely, tackling essential problems of discipleship. Primarily, it is written with clergy in mind, and though written from Anglican experience, the quandaries and potential for despair that it addresses are common to clergy of all denominations. Cowley looks the problems in the face, examining them from his own personal context, as he has been:

led to reflect on my own inner life, and the ways in which I tend to respond to the demands and pressures of public ministry. In recent years I have been increasingly aware of my own desires for power and control, for safety and security and for esteem and significance, and of the ways in which these desires are able to rule my heart.

Go in peace, I found myself muttering, and pray for me, a sinner, too. His approach gives the book strength, turning it from a self-help manual into a long walk of discussion and suggestion.

Cowley looks at how we — I speak, also, from my life as an Anglican priest — who are in positions of leadership, prominence and pastoral care in the Church, can so easily, and maybe willingly, become submerged into the crowd and be swept along in the currents of the day. It seems to me, moreover, that the book applies beyond the ordained ministry and will be equally helpful to lay people, the committed laity who are desperately concerned to live a life of faith in this age of distraction. He compares our situation to that of the swimmer who is caught in the surf. We find ourselves in an ocean of change, where new technology and inventions come along every day, making life into a perpetual catch-up, where the idea of Sabbath rest has gone out of the window. Sabbath rest, he says, is, in fact, a lifesaving self discipline which is part of the answer.

He then talks of how, from out of this falseness which so easily infects us, we can discover God as real. He writes movingly of how, as a young white from a farming background in South Africa, who had never met black people other than as servants and farm labourers, he was confronted in his

first year at university by huge questions of the relationship between God and justice. He joined the University Christian Movement — a body which was later proscribed — and mixed face to face, for the first time, with students of different racial backgrounds, who were asking very searching questions and proposing very radical answers.

From here grows a repeating theme of the book, the division between the false self and the real self. The false self is the one that conforms to the culture of the world and succumbs to all its lures and ambitions. The real self is the woman or man who is naked before God, brought to an understanding of their true identity, then clothed with the love of God in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Once we begin to know ourselves we can grow into who we are created to be.

Cowley discusses the blind alleys the false self can lead us into, such as the need to acquire, to achieve success and position, and to be self indulgent. He suggests remedies, like contentment, detachment and self-control. Fine — we can make resolutions but how do we keep to them? It is here, in the last section of the book, that Cowley truly shines, as he deals with how to build up our strength in God. The last four chapters are an excellent introduction to meeting God in contemplation, based on Merton's teachings. I, for whom the understanding of contemplative prayer has been difficult and who am barely at the kindergarten stage, found them enormously helpful, especially in his relating contemplation to action.

I am not being adversely critical in any way when I say the book is incomplete. It strikes me, rather, as the second part of a trilogy, following on from Cowley's earlier book *The Contemplative Minister: Learning to lead from the still centre*. He helps those already grounded in their faith to recover their real selves. I wonder if the next step is to ask how we may begin to bring the riches and insights shown, even in our diminutive knowing of God, to those, the majority in the west, who have lost almost all knowledge of God and many of whom are aggressively anti-Christian. Where and how do we meet? I recently read a passage written by a leading particle physicist:

To have a scientific mind is to respect the consensus of fact ... while maintaining an open mind to the still unknown. It helps to have a humble sense of the essential mystery of the world, for the aspects that are known become even more mysterious when we examine them further. ... There is not a thing in nature so ordinary that its contemplation cannot be a route to a wordless sense of wonder and gratitude just to be a part of it all.²

Is this a meeting point that needs to be developed, a contemplative approach to all knowledge, leading to an undreamed of unity? Fr. Cowley, please write further.

Notes:

1. See his review in *The Merton Journal*, Advent 2018, of *A Course in Christian Mysticism*.
2. Lee Smolin: *Einstein's Unfinished Revolution: the Search for what Lies Beyond the Quantum* (London: Penguin, 2019), Preface.

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On Thomas Merton

Mary Gordon

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What kind of writer was Merton? Award-winning writer and teacher Mary Gordon addresses the question directly in the first of four chapters which make up this small and refreshingly personal book. The second and third chapters each focus on a particular Merton book, and the final one a genre, his personal journals. Gordon tells us that Merton wrote to make sense of the world, and of himself as a writer (p.82). His doing so was a purposeful public vocation: he had 'a clearly imagined audience' in mind (p.83). And he would address them only ever as writer-monk.

Gordon empathises with the tensions implicit in what some have described as Merton's dual vocation - the 'conflicted anguish' (p.4) which she interprets as 'an intensified form of the conflict that strikes every artist, between artistic solitude and being a human in the world', between witness and aesthetic achievement (p.5). Gordon shows how another aspect of the underlying, generative tension comes through Merton's correspondence with Evelyn Waugh, which, amongst other things, illustrates contrasting approaches to the question of how the inexpressible - 'the mystical vision, the experience of God' (p.13) - can ever be communicated in language.

Merton's epistolary relationships with Waugh on the one hand and, on the other, with Czesław Miłosz, frame a section of Gordon's first chapter, in