**LIVING WORDS**

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**BOOK REVIEW**

I have had the pleasure of reading two recently published books written by members of our Fellowship: *A world turned upside down* by Rosemary Radley, and *A sense of more than* by Tony Martin (details below). It was a curious experience, reading these books one after the other. They could hardly be more different: yet they are remarkably coincidental. They are like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Their interlocking edges amount to a common and truly sincere desire to share with the reader the author’s deeply-felt spiritual experiences. Rosemary’s book is subtitled “A spiritual pilgrimage”. Tony’s book has no subtitle, but could be described in precisely the same terms. Both books are autobiographical. Rosemary actually calls hers an autobiography, and she uses a sequential structure. Tony occasionally gives us a vivid glimpse of his life-story to make a point, but the episodes are fragmentary and he leaves the reader to join up the dots.

Both authors give a strong sense of being grasped by the transcendent, by that which is mysteriously beyond themselves. It is in this respect that I became aware of the raggedy edges of the jigsaw pieces, and compelled to say that the two books and their authors could hardly be more different. To begin with, Rosemary lives in London suburbia, Tony is an expatriate Englishman in New Zealand. Neither author is a professional writer, but whereas Rosemary’s working life (outside housekeeping and home-making) has been unremarkably secretarial, Tony has been a doctor, physician and surgeon, a specialist in head and brain, and a practitioner in London’s leading hospitals.

Both authors share common ground in having had to cope with times of severe physical and emotional setbacks and stress, and both describe uplifting moments of inspiration, vision and restoration. Rosemary links all this spiritual experience with an ever-growing and deepening attachment to the Christian religion, particularly within the High Church Anglican tradition. Tony, on the other hand, as far as possible studiously avoids any mention of God, church or religion. Instead he is at pains to link his obvious spirituality with scientific thought and insights. He strives to be taken seriously by intelligent religious sceptics. Rosemary’s scenario is domestic, churchy and familiar. Tony’s canvas is enormous, ranging from prehistoric cave paintings to modern brain research, from metaphysics to forensic psychiatry, from London parks to theories of evolution.

Both writers are deeply sincere, and each has a gift of vivid expression. Rosemary writes more or less as she speaks. Her style is anecdotal, with a good deal of dialogue and (sadly) rather too many common clichés. Tony alternates between personal stories told with lucid simplicity, and high-flying reflection on the state of the world, touching on philosophy, psychology and emotional analysis.

Where both writers converge is in the realm of spiritual illumination. The symbol of light is common to both. The covers of their books bear witness to this, although, as may be expected, in very different ways. Rosemary’s book-cover depicts a sort of pre-Raphaelite maiden in an off-the-shoulder flowing white gown. She stands among trees with hand upraised, in ecstatic pose, gazing at the sunlight filtered through the branches. Tony’s cover is a clever artistic picture of wave-rounded pebbles and shoreline vegetation, taken by a photographer using a pinhole camera on a New Zealand beach, sunlit against a dark sky background.

I am glad to have read these two books, even though I remain partly puzzled by them. I am left wondering whether the spiritual message which each book seeks to convey really merits, in Rosemary’s case, so much of the minutiae of family history: and, in Tony’s case, those intellectual flights into the realms of scientific and prehistoric analysis.

***‘A world turned upside down’*** by Rosemary E. Radley. Published by Erlanger Press, Surrey. Available by sending a cheque for £12.50 to Rosemary Radley, 4 Beechwood Road, Sanderstead, South Croydon CR2 0AA.

***‘A sense of more than’*** by Tony Michael Martin. Published in New Zealand by Makaro Press. This book is not available in the UK. As the cost of getting a copy from New Zealand could be as much as £19, anyone who would like to read it is welcome to borrow my copy by sending me £2.80 for postage (2nd class price as at Feb. 2016).

THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

*The book by Aldous Huxley which bears this title was written in the nineteen forties, yet it is remarkably prophetic in its analysis of the state of modern Western civilization. The term “perennial philosophy” was coined by the philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716), but Huxley reminds us in the introduction to his book that the thing itself is “immemorial and universal”. His brief definition describes the perennial philosophy as “the metaphysic that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being . . . Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of this Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago, and since that time the inexhaustible theme has been treated again and again, from the standpoint of every religious tradition and in all the principal languages of Asia and Europe”.*

*Fuelled by scientific advance, Western philosophy since 1700 has had very little time for metaphysics. The general decline of religious practise and spiritual understanding is a consequence of this, as is the intensification of global conflict and violence since the ending of the 19th century. The current ecological crisis also has its roots in the abandonment of metaphysical doctrines in favour of materialistic philosophies.*

*The acceptance in academic circles of a received corpus of spiritual wisdom from the past which runs like a golden thread through all the principal human cultures and religions all but disappeared during the 20th century. Aldous Huxley is among a small number of notable Western thinkers who have held on to the concept of the perennial philosophy. Other names from the mid-20th century of scholars who are also expositors of this traditional wisdom, such as Coomaraswamy, Guénon, and Schuon, and nearer our own time, Corbin and Nasr, are relatively unknown.*

*Huxley’s book is a small compendium of extracts from the writings of sages as far apart in distance as China and Spain, in time as the Sanskrit scriptures and Thomas Traherne, and in culture as Plutarch and William Law. Many of the quotations are from works that are relatively inaccessible except in other compilations such as Perry’s Treasury of Traditional Wisdom. Huxley’s personal contribution is a generous commentary with such chapter headings as That art Thou; God in the World; Truth; Self-knowledge; Good and Evil; Time and Eternity; Prayer; Contemplation, Action and Social Utility. Some allowances have to be made for the passing of sixty years since the book was published, which means that a good deal of the author’s thinking on the subject must pre-date the second world war. The style and some of the concepts occasionally appear rather dated. Having said that, Huxley’s writing is clear and powerful and his ideas still have a remarkable relevance. The small anthology that he has carefully selected from the received wisdom of past ages is, of course, as timeless as it is instructive.*

*The following extract comes from his chapter on Silence. All through the book, Huxley is very affirming of the spiritual life and the pursuit of holiness, as he is critical of the destructive restlessness of the 20th century and the superficial nature of so much of contemporary life. Reading this chapter on Silence, one wonders what he would have made of twenty-four hour multi-channel broadcasting on radio and television, the proliferation of motorways and airports, cell phones and smart phones, I-pads, house and car alarms, and ubiquitous pop music!*

The twentieth century is, among other things, the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire ⎯ we hold history’s record for all of them. And no wonder; for all the resources of our almost miraculous technology have been thrown into the current assault against silence. That most popular and influential of all recent inventions, the radio, is nothing but a conduit through which pre-fabricated din can flow into our homes. And this din goes far deeper, of course, than the ear-drums. It penetrates the mind, filling it with a babel of distractions ⎯ news items, mutually irrelevant bits of information, blasts of corybantic or sentimental music, continually repeated doses of drama that bring no catharsis, but merely create a craving for daily or even hourly emotional enemas. And where, as in most countries, the broadcasting stations support themselves by selling time to advertisers, the noise is carried from the ears, through the realms of phantasy, knowledge and feeling to the ego’s central core of wish and desire. Spoken or printed, broadcast over the ether or on wood-pulp, all advertising copy has but one purpose ⎯ to prevent the will from ever achieving silence. Desirelessness is the condition of deliverance and illumination. The condition of an expanding and technologically progressive system of mass-production is universal craving. Advertising is the organised effort to extend and intensify craving ⎯ to extend and intensify, that is to say, the working of that force, which (as all the saints and teachers of all the higher religions have always taught) is the principal cause of suffering and wrong-doing and the greatest obstacle between the human soul and its divine Ground.

*Living Words appears under the direction of the FCP Council, but I am entirely responsible for the contents. Any comments or any queries, please feel free to write or email me: tunnicliffe@tmartin7.orangehome.co.uk*

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