

## BOOK REVIEW

*T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer*, Edited by Ashley Cocksworth & John C. McDowell. T & T Clark, London. 2023. ISBN 9780567703651. pp. 752. Hbk £130.000/Pbk.£28.99.

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In an earlier era, an expensive volume entitled ‘Handbook of Christian Prayer’ would conjure up images of a finely bound manual of prayers and devotions for various occasions. Like one I inherited from the deceased priest friend, it would be of a size to slip easily into a cassock pocket. The T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Prayer does not belong to this category. A weighty volume of over 700 pages, this is a manual which requires two hands. The publishing of handbooks or manuals on a variety of theological subjects is a growth industry these days, with the university presses of both Oxford and Cambridge involved. I already have a number on my shelves. This venerable Edinburgh theological imprint, now part of Bloomsbury, has entered the market with a long list of volumes either published or projected. Of the writing of books on prayer and spirituality, there seems to be no end, but this volume is not yet another ‘How-To’ guide to Christian prayer: an instruction manual on how to improve your prayer life. The editors have assembled an ecumenical and international group of theological and biblical scholars with a particular purpose in mind. Their agenda is to resist the assumptions that prayer is a means of escape from the harsh realities of the political, economic and social into a privatized world of ‘spirituality’ as self-improvement or self-insulation. It is to counter an understanding of prayer as technique to be manipulated to achieve a pre-conceived outcome. Instead, the shared aim of the editors and their contributors is to bring a theological critique to bear on prayer and spirituality; a *via negativa*, an ‘unknowing’ of what we think we know about them. This will, they hope, restore theology to its place in prayer, and prayer to its place in theology, ‘in the school of discipleship’, as an openness to the being and will of God. This task of restoring prayer is more than a negative critique. It seeks to strengthen the understanding of prayer as essential to Christian discipleship by examining the rich and varied tradition of Christian prayer and its theological underpinning.

The essays are grouped under four headings. The first of these is ‘Biblical Perspectives’, with articles on prayer in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the Psalms, the Lord’s Prayer and the Prayer of Jesus in John 17. Part 2

addresses prayer and doctrines of God, Creation, Christology, Pneumatology, Providence and Eschatology. The third section looks at the theology of schools of prayer spanning Christian history from the pre-Nicene period, through Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, and the Spanish mystics to 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Barth, Balthasar and Torrance. Part 4 consists of a variety of contemporary perspectives on prayer. Some are Church centred: liturgy and pastoral ministry, black theology, liberation theology and post-modern theology. Others are on the frontiers of theology: the natural sciences and philosophy, interfaith dialogue, conflict and peace-making. A number look at the relation of prayer and body. One, from Andrew Louth on Orthodoxy, might seem to sit more naturally in the previous section. The concluding chapter by Tina Beattie returns readers to the Psalter with a reflection on Psalm 139 as ‘A Prologue to Prayer’.

Most readers will be familiar with some of the authors and their themes, while others will be new to them. Those who, like me, have David Ford’s recently published commentary on John’s Gospel on their bookshelves will immediately recognize his treatment of the ‘high priestly prayer’. The chapter on Tom Torrance reminded me of studying Calvin and Barth under him at New College, Edinburgh. Others will be new to readers as they were to me and provide an introduction to treasures new. The editors’ manifesto suggests that this volume is intended to be not just a reference book to be dipped into as occasion requires but a sustained argument to be engaged with as a resource in a campaign to be waged. The necessity and urgency of such a campaign is signalled by several developments in Church and society. One is the increasing numbers that claim to be ‘spiritual but not religious’. This individualistic approach, supercharged by lives spent on-line rather than in face-to-face communities, undermines not just the Church but society as a whole. The rise of White Christian Nationalism in the USA and elsewhere needs to be recognized as a capitulation to the powers of this world. Forty years ago, Fr. Ken Leech, who worked at the interface of spiritual theology and politics, warned that those seeking spiritual experience and guidance would be unlikely to find it in churches in England. Even with the increasing focus on spirituality in churches, we might ask if the situation has improved much. If we think that both our prayer and our theology are not up to the challenges we face, then this book might help purify and strengthen both.

Those who might be put off by the £130 price tag of the hardback edition might take comfort that it is now available in paperback at a fraction of that price.

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