

METHODIST RECORDER

BOOK REVIEW

by

Tom Stuckey

Timothy Keller is a compelling preacher and leading evangelist in Manhattan. His book on **Preaching** is one of the best I have read in recent years and his daily devotions on the Psalms, **My Rock; My Refuge**, is equally inspiring. My wife and I are using it in our daily devotions with considerable benefit.

I was therefore delighted when asked to review his latest: **Making Sense of God. An Invitation to the Sceptical** (Hodder & Stoughton 2016. Hardcover £16.99. Kindle £3.99). Here would be preached material founded not only on extensive theological knowledge but on rich practical experience. I have not been disappointed, though its contents have proved to be a little more formidable than I had anticipated.

The book is not only written to counter the attacks of sceptical persons who deny the credibility of Christianity but also addresses the concerns of those who once attended Church but who have since abandoned all belief in God. The author wants to show them that Christianity makes ‘the greatest possible sense; emotionally, culturally and rationally’ (p.54).

Part one sets the scene with two questions, ‘Isn’t religion going to disappear?’ and ‘Isn’t religion based on faith while secularism is based on evidence?’ The eight chapters of **part two** are a demonstration of Christian apologetics at their best.

As in all Keller’s books one is impressed by his encyclopaedic knowledge of writers, many of whom I have never heard of, such as the atheist Barbara Ehrenreich, David Sessions who was once a Christian but ‘deconverted’, Thomas Nagel, Atul Gawande, Jonathabn Haidt, and the atheist author Julian Baggini. In the extensive footnotes (70 pages of them) we discover even more. Keller not only draws from a wide range of Christian authorities like Augustine, C.S.Lewis, Stephen Evans, Alvin Planting and Langdon Gilkey (whose story is told in an impressive epilogue) but he also includes philosophers, film writers, novelists and poets. The text is further punctuated with personal stories and anecdotes. Some of this material has undoubtedly been preached to his vast congregation.

Keller's chapter on 'A meaning that suffering can't take from you' examines the public discourse between Christians who say 'life without God is pointless, bleak and unworkable' and secular persons who insist that 'they not only have meaning in their lives but have discovered a freedom which many religious people do not have.' The author boldly explores the issues before introducing the insights of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

'A satisfaction that is not based on circumstance' is the chapter in which St Augustine makes his appearance. Next we have a cluster of chapters on 'freedom', 'self' and 'identity'. I found his diagnosis of the 'modern self', which he describes as 'crushing', to be illuminating and his use of the apostle Paul's insights into human nature strangely relevant.

Chapter 8 looks at the absence of 'hope' in our death denying culture before we have two further penetrating chapters on morality and justice. I did not realise that A.N Wilson was a Christian who lost his faith and embraced atheism, much to the delight of Richard Dawkins, but then later recanted because he found 'materialist atheism to be irrational'. Atheism was not able to account for the love and altruism which Wilson saw displayed in the actions of many Christians.

Chapter Ten ends with Terry Eagleton confessing that religion not only gives supernatural support and motivation to morality but presents 'the grossly inconvenient news' that our contemporary way of life must undergo 'a radical dissolution' if we are again to become a just and compassionate society. (p.211)

The last two chapters, which constitute **part three**, examine the reasonableness of belief in God and Christianity. Although not 'proofs' in the strict sense they do re-present the case for God and add an extra argument for God from an examination of 'beauty'. I warmly commend this book

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