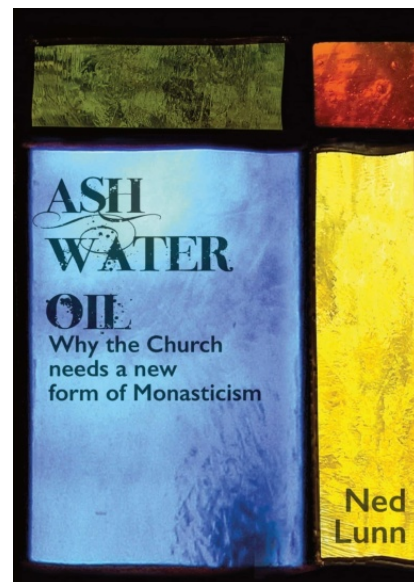


Review: Ash Water Oil: Why the Church needs a new form of Monasticism

A common experience of being involved in church life is a *collision*, between vision and aspiration, and the hard reality of what church is actually like. It can come as some sort of crisis (e.g. being on the wrong end of hypocrisy or abuse) or simply a nagging sense that something is “off,” an “I don’t think we’re being who we’re called to be.”



I mention this, not because this is the primary topic of Ned Lunn’s, *Ash Water Oil*, but because those who have had that experience may find particular solace and even inspiration in its pages.

You see, the collision I speak of is not necessarily a bad thing. I often find it in the clash between the joyous *ecclesiological* reality of church (the Spirit-filled, Jesus-led, worshipful people of God seeking to make disciples of all nations) and the *ecclesiastical* reality (institutions filled with politics, anachronisms, and corruptible personalities). I find that the collision exists *within* myself more often than not.

It is a *creative* collision. It’s where we wrestle with God to lay hold of his blessing, clarify his promise, and pursue our shared vocation as real people in a real time and place. It is where we move past faith and church as mere expressions of the pleasure principle, and lay hold of what being a Jesus-shaped

community is all about.

For that creative task, *Ash Water Oil*, is an excellent resource. It is the work of an author who clearly loves the church, and he has used his significant intellect and passion to lay out a vision of what might be.

Lunn draws upon “monasticism” as his defining guide, in both its ancient and newer forms.

We are used to examining monasticism through the lens of avowed “poverty, chastity, and obedience.” We understand these words but they are somewhat inaccessible to the life of the ordinary church. Lunn’s distillate is much more helpful. He prefers the principles of “stability, conversion, and obedience.” This is what he explores, carrying them across the liturgical lessons of Ash Wednesday, Easter, and Pentecost (hence “Ash, Water, Oil”), and a matrix of trinitarian themes (“Creation, Redemption, Sanctification”) and practices (“Prayer, Study, Service”).

What I want to propose... is a set of virtues to seek to inhabit... I wonder what would emerge if we acknowledged together, a sense that the New Monastic call is, like our brothers and sisters of the religious life, a commitment to ‘stability, conversion and obedience’. To explicitly seek to live a life rooted somewhere or with someone no matter what the spiritual weather is like, no matter what temptations afflict you. To respond to the call to stay and remain faithful. [i.e. ‘Stability’] Secondly, to continually engage in the work of personal change; to turn away, step by step, from the things of this world to the Kingdom of God; to intentionally become, in different circumstances and in different ways, more and more Christ-like, poor and dependent on God. [i.e. ‘Conversion’] And, thirdly, to desire to place yourself the decisions of something or someone else; to curb that deeply human temptation to be in control of ourselves and our decisions; to hold onto the power of our own lives.

[i.e. 'Obedience'] (Pages 12-13, [with my annotations])

For Gill and I, this resonates at the creative collision point. When we think of ourselves and our church (both local and wide), it explains our frustration. We are so often fickle and fleeting, comfort-driven, and not *stable*; we are so often self-secure, sin-denying, and grace-defying, and *unconverted*; we are so often individualistic, consumeristic, and voyeuristic, and *disobedient* to the way of Christ and *unaccountable* to each other. The monastic path expresses a counter-cultural path, in the best sense of it. The Church *needs* a new form of monasticism.

At the beginning, in **creation**, the monastic way reminds us that we are but dust. It speaks to our fundamental identity.

We are not, despite the depth in which we feel it, the main part in our story... Without Him above us we become drunk on our own achievements as a species. We begin to tell ourselves that we can do anything, be anything, form the world into our own dreams and fantasies; we are the main protagonists and will drive the story. To remind ourselves of our creation, of our createdness, is to place ourselves into the right role in the true story and the story begins with some earth. (Page 35)

We are called to embed ourselves solely in the reality of the love of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and taught to us through the lives of the saints, which provokes us to see ourselves and others not as different in gender, sexuality, race or class but as equal under the authority of God. We are to receive our identity in Him and Him alone. In this way we no longer need to fear abandonment or rejection of others because our roots are entwined with the one who gives us life and brings us to our true self. (Page 59)

The image of the monastic life speaks of a sense of

devotedness, of having one's entire self set apart for divine purposes. If there is an opposite descriptor, it is of the "secular" life. There is a creative collision when the church *secularises* even as we maintain a religious aesthetic. There is invariably a rub point focused on identity and autonomy. On whose terms do I live my life? On whose terms do we manifest our shared identity as church? Control collides with childlikeness. Self-definition collides with the numbering of the hairs of our head. Life as a self-made construct collides with life received as gift.

The way through it is to to rediscover our createdness. We need to know this truly religious path.

In **redemption** we remember we are Christ's. We belong to him now, and this is *life* to us.

In his grace, He lifts us out of our world of transaction, karma and Fate, washes us and places us back in the garden of His delight. He can, if we allow Him, birth us anew through the water of baptism. He begins, from the moment we see the Father in His Son, Jesus, shaping the dirt and mud of our lives into new life. He recalibrates our journeys (page 98)

If we are called to continual conversion into the likeness of Christ, then we should follow Him into His rich life of kenosis and empty ourselves so that others may become rich by God's grace. Our conversion is an emptying of that which we possess and which possesses us. (page 104)

I have come to say in recent years that my church growth strategy can be boiled down to one principle: those who seek to save their own life will lose it. The creative collision is real, particularly in my evangelical world, where we tend to default back to mechanistic approaches to strengthening and empowering our organisations at the expense of worship, mortification, and more mystical devotion. At one point Lunn confronts the narrative in which we "must secure our inner

identity", and make "our autonomy... a thing to be protected and sustained. The life of poverty and kenosis, however, demands that we follow Christ in dying to self in order that we can be raised with Him in new life" (page 105). It includes acquiescence to the "shared narrative" of Scripture that "gives shape to our interpretation of existence" and without which "we are forced to make up our own narrative and return to the masks that hide us from truly knowing ourselves." (page 127).

Whilst we, as God's people, continue to focus on our own survival, perpetuating our own, albeit noble and good activities and arguments, we fail to witness to the power of grace... God does come and meet us where we are, but He comes to turn us around, to recalibrate us and for our whole lives to be changed. (Page 113).

Finally in **sanctification**, we remember we are called to be *moved* towards him.

A sacred community is one that is defined, not by an exoskeleton, a cast around a limb, but, rather, an endoskeleton; a form around which we gather. Sanctification, the redefinition of our being, occurs when we are in pure communion with the divine source of holiness and true life. (page 155)

That imitation of Jesus, of course, is where we have creative collisions, it is the painful process of *becoming*.

A pertinent case in Lunn's consideration is the question of leadership in the church. As ministers of the gospel, we want to serve as Jesus did, and *lead* as he did. We want to give ourselves, and receive others as he has received. We want to live in the knowledge of his *power*. All of this gets expressed within community dynamics, including the necessities of hierarchy and the exercise of authority, and it often goes wrong. No wonder the monastics had to wrestle with the concept

of *obedience* in their walk of holiness.

Gill and I have observed a tendency to resolve this process by a form of avoidance: A falling back of how we see leadership, not into some form of accountability in community, but into a form of nihilism that renders anything other than the unboundaried inclusion as inherently violent and abusive. Leadership is anathema, not aspiration. Community is merely the gathering of individuals, because personhood will inevitably collide with any sense of moving together; it is best to keep the collective impotent and stationary and allow each one their own self-adventure. In the end, such a mode denies that Christ is present in our (often flawed, but very real) ways of being, and would rather embrace a painless vacuum in which the Body of Christ is close to meaningless.

I would argue that, for a society to function, authority must remain external to the self. Narcisissistic tribalism is not a healthy way to exist but there are elements of it that should be encouraged; togetherness, sociality, loyalty... (page 164)

There is a generalized view that 'millenials', the generation who grew up straddling the millennium, have no respect for authority. In reality I think we do respect authority, but we do not acknowledge them, as an acknowledgement of them would insist that we were not totally independent and 'free'. These more subtle authorities hold sway over their subjects and coerce an unconscious obedience from them. They maintain this power by continuing to challenge the very idea of authority which they freely exert on people in order that any alternative that challenges their influence can be undermined swiftly and easily. This leads to the dangerous tendency to dismiss clear, transparent authority whilst allowing deceptive and sycophantic forms to hold power over us. (page 160-161)

And there it is: the mantra for the Church at the present

time. No one can tell anyone what is right or wrong. All must be accepted and placed as equally authoritative and by so doing authority is displaced and no longer shared. (Page 163)

The alternative monastic vision of leadership is more worthy. Gill and I have attempted to encapsulate it as “church as family.” The focus is on person rather than program, discipleship shaped by devotion to God. We echo Soul Survivor’s Mike Pilavachi who has spoken of a desire to “raise up sons and daughters” rather than “hire and fire employees.” We have become aware of the critiques, e.g. the dangers of heavy shepherding and the avoidance of objective accountability. But this is exactly the value of looking to the long traditions; they can assist and enable the life-giving modes of leadership to be pursued healthily. When, for instance, Lunn desires for bishops to learn the ways of the abbot, he’s calling them to a vocation with a substantial legacy of knowing what it is to be both released and bounded by the way of Christ.

“It is within this captialist context that leaders have begun to be more obedient to plans, initiatives and strategies than to people. It is after this shift that we being to experience the degradation and humiliation that comes with abuse of power. We become pawns in a game rather than treasured companions in a journey. St. Benedict wants the abbot to model his leadership on Christ who, as we saw... was ‘self-determined and self-limited’ (page 168)

In conclusion, I agree with Lunn, the Church needs a new form of monasticism. The more Gill and I read, the more we realise that this is why we answered the call so many years ago. If we are to be anything more than cogs in a Western World machinery of self-actualisation, or competitors in the marketplace of feelgoods and flourishing, we need to return to some ancient roads. We need a rediscovery of the way of Christ.

Being sent somewhere to tell our story is easy. Being sent to live a life dependent on God, to be stripped of all our identities, comfort, power and influence; that's mission. We are looking not to interrupt our lives with acts of service but to find that our life with God is a perpetual life of servanthood to God, with God and by God. (page 181)

The Church needs to recapture a vision for a shared life, bound together by a shared narrative, shared principles and shared practices. (page 177)

We wholeheartedly agree that “this living out of discipleship in a community distinct by its core will draw others towards the Church” (page 180). At the moment, we are wrestling with what this means in practice.

During the pandemic lockdown we have attempted monastic rhythms within our large vicarage household. We have stumbled in our little community as I'm sure many communities have struggled. Yet we are more convinced than ever that a more monastic mode of life is a vital part of bridging the gospel into upcoming generations. In the midst of our experiment, Lunn's book is a resource as it gives words to the questions we were asking, but not voicing: As our context turned us inwards into introspection, we were encouraged to realise that “...as we seek a theological framework for the sustainable life of community, we must start with our shared, a-contextual story” (Page 57). We remembered to worship. Surrounded by the expectation to do and perform, we became grounded in the monastic balance of “the prayerful and devoted... and the more overtly missional, serving mendicant” (page 62).

As we come out of pandemic into the season ahead, we ponder, with Lunn, a crucial question: “Could an Anglican parish church create and adopt a Rule of Life? I, myself, have asked the same question and came to the conclusion: no” (page 200) His answer looks to the incompatibility of statutory

responsibilities and the devoted way of life.

I think I agree. In the pandemic lockdown, much of the parochial responsibilities were suspended, and we could operate more monastically. Now we are coming back out, the creative collisions resurface. An Anglican parish, as an *ecclesiastical* unit, is barely fit for purpose as an expression of *ecclesiological* reality. Yet it can, I think, offer a place of harmony: A village around the monastery, the community around the community, intertwined, served and blessed.

The collisions will continue. But so will the creativity.

Review: Metavista



Metavista, written by Colin Greene & Martin Robinson is a socio-philosophical, cultural, ecclesiological and missiological commentary. “Our context in the twenty-first century... is radically different,” they say in the introduction (page xiv), and continue:

We shall argue that it is post-Christendom, post-secular, post-colonial and post-individualistic, in no particular order of priority, and therefore post-postmodern. And that “postist” reality requires an entirely new mission agenda that will not be adequately understood through adherence solely to church-planting strategies.

Those who know me will understand my engagement with this book. I share a frustration with typical church-

plant/growth/renewal strategies. I resonate with the authors' premise which is later on expressed thusly: "the technology of mission... we are dealing here [is] art, not science" (page 187)... "an organic process rather than a ready-to-go formula" (page 197) and of "tension" between "a more sophisticated recalibration of the church" to "a deeply postmodern context" and those who look, rather, for a "**fundamental reimagining.**" (page 180)

I'm one of those seeking a reimagining. But what are the whys and wherefores, where is the framework, what gives it life, how is it found? The value of this book is that it helps to remove the blinkers to the Holy Spirit at work.

Greene spends the first part of the book considering the cultural and sociological landscape. He unpacks the powerful narrative of modernity and secularisation from the 19th century – looking at it not just in philosophical academic terms but with regard to how it all engaged with the people's imagination.

At this moment in history... these creative ideas came together to form a stirring emancipation narrative that caught the public imagination and led irrevocably to fundamental changes in the way people experienced the world. To "indwell the world" no longer meant to be bound inevitably to the accepted social order instituted by God and maintained by the authority of the aristocracy. Neither did it mean to accept one's appointed lot in life which, for most, was one of grueling poverty, hardship and suffering. Nor did it mean to view religion and the church as the only safe refuge from a harsh and mercurial world that did not appear to operate according to any particular inbuilt order... The sociological achievement of the Enlightenment was the rise of the new bourgeoisie, and it was among this new class of rich merchants, bankers and industrialists that the narrative of emancipation was most venerated. (page 14)

He then unpacks postmodernity in the normal terms – touching on the “incredulity towards metanarratives,” the rejection of absolutes and “fiduciary frameworks”, and the “preference for individualized spirituality over and against organized religion” (page 42).

Greene wants “a way out of the postmodern impasse of no legitimating foundations to knowledge, ethical and political practice and, indeed, religious belief.” (page 42). Indeed:

To date postmodernity has been unable to provide us with a satisfying or legitimating account of why local stories are any more credible and authentic than the universal theories and archetypal myths we once found determinative of human existence and therefore believable. (page 50)

And so the “cultural transition we are presently experiencing, that which we have called ‘metavista,’ the age of imagination” is introduced. And at it’s heart lies not just subjective postmodern mininarrative, or imposed modernistic metanarrative, but the **“power of retold stories.”** (page 51)

This framework imperative to “retell the story” resonates with current experience. The ills of the First World can be seen in the loss of a defining story. What does it mean to be Australian, or British, for instance? Modernity reduces us to economic units, postmodernity reduces us to individual characters in our own self-centred fantasy. How do I fit in the larger whole, what gives me purpose and reason-for-being?

I watched the inauguration of President Obama last night and recognised within his speech the ability to retell the American Story – spinning phrases such as “Yes, we can” that are not mere words but reimaginings, calls, echoes of longing that seems to be speaking to Americans and giving them a metanarrative that is not imposed but to which they run. **Similarly, the church story, the Jesus story needs retelling.**

And so Greene tackles the main locus of that story – the Bible. He critiques the historical-critical hermeneutical and exegetical approach that modernistically asserts that the Word of God is reserved to the domain of the educated and academic. He suggests a return towards allegorical or typological reading – certainly not to the level of medieval excess but, dare I say it, with the same heart as biblical theologians such as Goldsworthy, and in the same vein as “many of the biblical writers [who] linked the two testaments into one unified story” (page 106):

Now it is very interesting that while the typological and the allegorical meaning was what the Reformers must distrusted... it is precisely this convention... figuration, that allows the Bible to be perceived as a unified narrative. (page 105)

And so **Greene and Robinson place the Bible at the heart of the story that needs retelling in a metavista age.** They identify, in particular, the “four subplots” of the Bible – The creation story, The Israel story, The Jesus story, and The church’s story. The gospel as theological assertion – you sinned, Jesus died – is replaced by gospel with flesh and bones – no less centred on the death and resurrection of the Messiah – but well-rooted, flourishing, bearing fruit in the reality of history and the imagination of today – a perichoresis of narratives that reveals Christ to us.

A crucial aspect of this perichoresis is the story of God at work in the church. **The Church is no longer relegated to the epilogue** of Christ’s passion but is caught up in the gospel dance itself. This is no heresy, and no surprise. After all, even Bill Hybels holds to the vision of “The local church is the hope of the world”!

Greene finishes his contribution by considering the church in this respect, retelling the church story particularly in terms of political engagement against the modernistic relegation of

the church to the merely private.

Here, at times amidst the fleshpots of Babylon, at others under the oppressive strictures and tyranny of empires, where the mission of the church is curtailed or controlled, the church must, nevertheless, fulfill her task to image the kingdom of God, proclaim judgment, and actively resist the idolatry of the oppressors. (page 149)

Robinson then completes the book delivering one of the best overviews of nineteenth and twentieth century church history I have ever read.

In recent year

s, observing my own church – Anglican in Tasmania – I have noted how the vigour (and orthodoxy) of nineteenth century Anglo-Catholicism seemed to have collapsed across the world wars to a generation who ended up retaining the tradition but not its content. Having ministered in congregations defined by this generation I can testify to the contemporary echoes of the death-throes of Christendom which crescended, as Robinson states, in the 1960's.

Robinson continues the story through the 70's, considering the Lausanne evangelical resurgence of mission. He helpfully notes what many often ignore – the transition in Pentecostal churches from sect to mainstream, and, in the 80's from what I call "classical pentecostalism" focussing on the work of the Holy Spirit to "new-style pentecostalism" focussing on entertainment techniques and management programs.

It had become apparent by the 1980s that the revivalist hopes of the charismatic movement were misplaced. However much some individual charismatic and Pentecostal congregations had grown, the hoped for scenario in which a renewed church would see hundreds of thousands clamoring to become Christians in the context of signs and wonders came to be seen as a false hope... New solutions would need to be found. The 1980s and

1990s saw a succession of solutions presented... programs of one kind or another. (pages 176-177)

All of this provides the background for the necessity of a “fundamental reimagining” of the church. Robinson picks up on contemporary concepts of Emerging Church and offers some critique and balance while working towards a presentation of a “Missional Community” at the heart of his reimagining. **He tells a counter-cultural story of church** “constituted not for itself, nor even for the world in an abstract sense, but towards the remaking of human communities as deeply incarnational expressions of the church in mission.” (pages 188-189).

His comments provide a helpful balance that has been missing in contemporary urgings to be more missional. We don't always realise that the dying Christendom story can express itself outwardly as well as inwardly in activities that look like mission but are no longer missional. In my own experience I have heard a call to mission answered by yet another round of people volunteering for charitable programs or “doing their bit” for the “work of the church.” Why did I find such goodness frustrating? Because such “mission” would not retell the story or reimagine the church and live out the gospel. Robinson provides an excellent quote from Robert Jenson:

*All that talk a few years ago about the world setting the agenda, about seeing where God was at work in the world and jumping in to help, etc., was just **a last gasp of the church's establishment in the West, of its erstwhile ability to suppose that what the culture nurtured as good had to be congruent with the good the church had to bring.** (page 189)*

Even the best intentions can fail to resonate when they either merge with culture, or find no point of connection. Robinson, rather, calls for a reimagination of a counter-cultural life. “To live counter-culturally will mean to confront rival

ideologies and not to be subverted by them.” (page 189).

Again, I find this resonates with my own kerygma in recent times to bring to the church the eschatological impetus to actively, passionately, “do life well” all the more as the Day approaches – for each to know their place in the story so that they can retell it in their living.

This lies at the heart of the difference between “attractional” models of church and missional models of church that happen to be “attractive.” Such attractive communities “are that way partly because they have a high threshold of expectation in terms of what members will do” (page 195). **Participation is expected – but not a simple volunteerism for programs, rather a participation in counter-cultural life itself.**

There are many other gems in Robinson’s thoughts – comments on leadership for instance and citations of a book by Alan Roxburgh that I have bought and will review at some point.

I will finish with one final quotation. Like most of the book it gives voice to my heart that I hear echoing in others. In this case let me note a congruence with Mark Driscoll’s theory of “reformation” in the collision of the three “narratives” of Gospel, Church and Culture where the church has to “live adventurously”:

To live this kind of counter-cultural life the church has to “risk” living at the interface of the collision of all three narratives... It has never been a safe option to live a genuinely counter-cultural Christian life, because such a life deconstructs old cultural verities and ignites new habits of the heart. It invites old men to dream dreams and young men to have visions. (pages 226-227)

Amen.

