

Church Going Gone: a biography of religion, doubt and faith, Brian Mountford, Christian Alternative Books, 2021, pp. viii, 311.

This book contributes well to a gap in our understanding of life in the Church of England in the second half of the Twentieth Century. We have more than enough information about what senior clergy were doing, their initiatives, grand evangelistic programmes, and their misplaced spending. We are also well served with carefully collected data about what was going on. Urban and rural church life has been surveyed and analysed. What we do not have are personal accounts of what life was like for parish clergy in those years. In this respect Brian Mountford has set a bold trend.

This is personal biography with a great amount of honesty. Its title echoes and extends Philip Larkin's lament on the decline of churchgoing. Mountford places himself in the ranks of liberal, questioning and often sceptical clergy. He pursues these themes with self-effacing integrity. The book opens with a scene in a bishop's study where a curate is accused, without evidence, by his vicar of various trivial offences. The bishop takes the side of the vicar, and the curate is told to move on. It illustrates a theme of innuendo, gossip, and unfounded accusation, so typical of life in the Church of England and one which Mountford repeats with multiple instances throughout the book.

The accused in this scene is the young Brian whose vicar would not recommend him to go forward to ordination as priest after his one year as a deacon. That said, Mountford reflects on the experience and on how he internalises disappointment and mistrust in ways which will support him through the rest of his ministry. This alone will be of enormous value to many clergy. The accounts of his two curacies, at St Stephen's, Rochester Row and at Christ Church, Lancaster Gate, both in inner London are hilarious, captivating and engaging.

It is the pastoral parish priest who gives the life and meaning to his vocation. As a curate, as vicar of Christ Church, Southgate and for 30 years vicar of St Mary's, the 'University Church' in Oxford he describes with compassion and poignancy the many times he has sat with dying people and engaged in conversations which they needed and in which he often felt inadequate. 'I experienced a dazed sense of platitudinous incompetence, but maybe . . . an effective steward of the mysteries of God rarely knows themselves to be such at the time'. (p.135).

Chapters move back and forth from curacies back to theological training, on to a Cambridge college chaplaincy, and then back to early life and vocation. With each move he wonders if the right decision had been made and if a more decisive Brian could have emerged. There can be no doubt that he made the right marriage decision and his deeply personal account, unusual in a clerical biography, of his marriage and the substantial contribution of Annette makes for a more human book. Not able to have children themselves, the embracing of her sister's children after a family tragedy is stunning.

Much of what Mountford wants to convey is about his scepticism in the face of firm belief and his radicalism with origins in his Congregational origins and the austere biblical criticism experience of his Newcastle University theological degree. At Southgate and in Oxford he demonstrates how a good vicar with community engaging ideas can build a congregation. Such achievement might have set him up for preferment but, as he says, once Margaret Thatcher appointed George Carey as Archbishop of Canterbury the game was up. He is rightly scathing about the senior appointments process (he was interviewed on three separate occasions with only gossip as feedback) and about the amount of power concentrated in Appointments Secretaries.

Is this book a competent chronicle of the age which Mountford says he is describing? It is personal, it is accurate in describing the joys and pitfalls of parish life. It succeeds in attempting to chart an attractive way through theological liberalism to questioning belief. Mountford's literary excursions are illustrative and helpful. His statement that real spirituality is seen more in intelligent exploration than in evangelical certainty will ring true for many. His need to challenge conservatism and reactionary authority could hardly have found more fertile ground than the institutions of the University of Oxford.

The final sections lack cohesion and might have benefitted with fewer vignettes and reprints of publications. There are no photographs and there is no index, both for different reasons are to be regretted. The aim in the subtitle would have been furthered by weaving together his literary illustrations and his theological references to place this personal account within a context of ecclesiological and theological change. This extremely useful book provides a template which can assist other priests to describe and reflect on their own experience of parish life

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