

BOOKS

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PIERS PLOWRIGHT is a former BBC radio producer

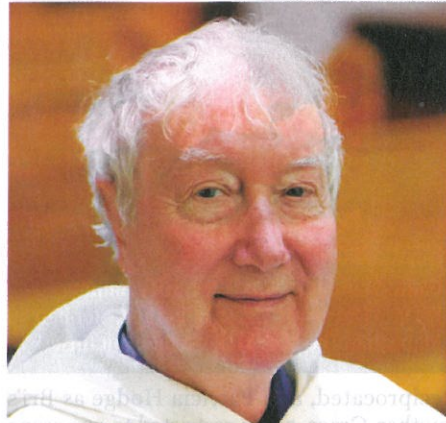
JANE THYNNE's latest novel is *Solitaire* • A.N. WILSON is a novelist, biographer, historian and columnist

An awfully big adventure

Only by living their faith with joy and passion can Christians touch the hearts of unbelievers

PIERS PLOWRIGHT

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Timothy Radcliffe

Alive in God: A Christian Imagination

TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

(BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM, 432 PP, £12.99)

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“THE GOSPELS summon us to flourish,” writes Timothy Radcliffe, former master of the Dominicans, early on in this stimulating gallop through literature, liturgy and life. When did you last read a book of Christian theology that accentuates the risky, the adventurous and the joyful in Christ’s astonishing message? It’s a book I’ve long been waiting for.

Timothy Radcliffe’s starting point is a question: how, in a largely post-Christian world, can believers engage the minds and imaginations of people, particularly the young, with a religion which has no meaning for them? Not necessarily to convert or even to convince them, but to challenge them to consider and debate something of vital intellectual and emotional power. Something which says yes to life and love.

It’s strange, on reflection, that so much discussion of Christianity is about guilt, sin, punishment and reparation. Think about some of the Bible’s greatest lines: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy); “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John); “For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’” (Paul to the Corinthians); “Behold I make all

things new” (Isaiah); and – my favourite – “Did not our hearts burn within us while we walked with him on the road and he opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke: the disciples who encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus.) A new fire has entered the world, one that purges and heals, rather than one that devours and destroys. And one that frees us. In spite of, and often in the middle of, danger, disaster and cruelty.

For me, the great strength of this book is that Radcliffe faces the darkness of the world full on. His heroes are people like Jean Vanier, who threw away comfort and prestige to make a home for the forgotten; Suad Nofa, a schoolteacher in Raqqa, who stood in front of the headquarters of Daesh after they had captured the city, holding banners of protest and refusing to be silenced; Archbishop Desmond Tutu who faced down the South African police when they invaded St George’s Cathedral, Cape Town, bayonets drawn, to end an anti-apartheid protest, and invited them to join “the winning side”; and Christian de Chergé, prior of the Algerian Trappists, who, knowing his death to be imminent, wrote to his approaching killer: “And to you too, my last-minute friend, who will not know what you are doing ... I say this ‘thank you’ and this ‘adieu’ – to commend you to this God in whose face I see yours. And may we find each other, happy ‘good thieves’ in Paradise, if it pleased God, the Father of us both ... Amen! *Inshallah!*”

The Subtitle of *Alive in God* is “A Christian

Imagination” and Radcliffe, along the road – the book is a journey – explores the way filmmakers, novelists, scientists and poets, some believers, some not, have found glory in unlikely places. The poet and critic, Clive James, for example, wondering what is given in illness and physical decline, answers: “This much: you get to see the cosmos blaze / And feel its grandeur, even against your will, / As it reminds you, just by being there, / That it is here we live, or else nowhere.” The Christian imagination here, as throughout the book, is Radcliffe’s, rather than James’ – the “afterlife” is not a consideration for the poet – but it’s the celebration of “now”, no matter what, that unites them. Indeed, as the author points out in his concluding chapter, what subverts faith in God is not atheism or secularism but what the Jesuit Adolfo Nicolás calls “the globalisation of superficiality”. Drowned in a flood of triviality, fake news, alternative facts and false promises, the human imagination is confused and broken, unable to concentrate, to treasure a moment, or to find truth in silence or the words of a wise teacher.

IF ALL THIS makes the book sound gloomy or despairing, the opposite is true. The joyful scarlet dancers of Matisse’s *La Danse* on the front cover signal the celebratory in Timothy Radcliffe’s interpretation of Christianity. In his reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, it’s the party after the reconciliation, “the true festivity that the son has failed to find in his debauchery in a faraway land”, that matters. And how God’s touch can and does sacramentalise the ordinary. Here Radcliffe quotes a poem from that awkward but profound priest/poet, R.S. Thomas, about God’s discreet and hidden presence: “We never catch / him at work, but can only say, coming suddenly upon an amendment, / that here he had been.”

Alive in God lives up to its title. It’s an invitation to Christians and non-Christians to consider, in dark times, how the religious imagination is a force for good. Sometimes the sheer number of witnesses cited by Timothy Radcliffe threatens to overwhelm the argument but, with witnesses of this quality, one can’t really grumble. The last word should go to the preacher: “We set people’s hearts burning most intently when we release their imagination in ways that we could never have anticipated and cannot ourselves even understand.”

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