

Introduction

AS THE WORLD GROWS increasingly complex, human beings need more, not less, good counsel for Christian living. This book reaches into the treasury of Anglican spirituality and draws out pearls of wisdom for today's needs. The Anglican tradition has shown an abiding concern for a holy living that leads to a holy dying. The present work offers earnest, practical devotion to inspire and to instruct the Christian pilgrim in the path of discipleship. Here you will find not a general collection of spiritual writings but direct words of spiritual counsel. Moreover, you will encounter many passages selected for both their authoritative content and their surpassing beauty. This book takes seriously the Anglican emphasis on a form of religion that quickens the mind, forms the conscience, guides the will, and lifts the spirit.

Having said that, we recognize that no book can substitute—in immediacy, vitality, and sensitivity—for a personal relationship. An insightful colleague, a sage spiritual director, or a thoughtful friend will have known you over time, will see you as a distinct individual, and therefore should be able to respond to you in a way that is dynamic rather than static.

Although marks on paper can never replace that kind of encounter, it remains true that the relation between reader and text is not a static one, either, and that the printed word possesses its own unmistakable companionability. Authors in this volume have been friends to generation after generation, they have spoken to all sorts and conditions of men and women, and they retain the capacity to say the fitting thing here and now.

The present collection may not include your favorite writer on spiritual matters. You would certainly be correct to point out that English spirituality comprises a far richer and more variegated set of works than

is represented in these pages. It rests upon the Old and New Testaments and the *Book of Common Prayer*; it includes such figures as Anselm of Canterbury, Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, Margery Kempe, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*—all of whom wrote well before the sixteenth century. But editors have to draw the line somewhere, and so for reasons not entirely arbitrary this book cites only those who are heirs of the Tudor Reformation.

The main purpose of this volume is not to introduce you to some great figures in the history of the Church or to give you a taste of some fine prose, although both of these experiences can be enjoyed along the way. The primary justification for this collection is to allow some compelling voices from the Anglican tradition—a *via media* both fully protestant and fully catholic—to speak directly to you: heart to heart, mind to mind, soul to soul.

We live in an era of pluralism and rapid social change. Ours is a polytheistic age of shifting value centers and shaky commitments. Many times, counselors even within the Church neglect what Professor Don Browning of the University of Chicago Divinity School has spoken of as “the moral context of pastoral care.” Employing a method that is basically “eductive,” counselors may seek only to support the client as he or she “clarifies” his or her values.¹

Of course, this therapeutic approach can be extremely helpful. To flee to the opposite extreme is to embrace legalism and moralism, and thus to risk undermining authentic selfhood. We are right to be wary of the tyranny of “the should” and to want to discover our own true paths in life. But we also have to acknowledge that the road we most often travel is not one that cuts through virgin forest but is rather a cluttered and confusing route punctuated by signs and signals of every kind. A person seeking trustworthy counsel is simply asking to be shown a few reliable signposts along the way.

In the Anglican tradition of spiritual reflection, a heavy emphasis has always been placed upon individual responsibility and the use of a person’s distinctive powers of thinking and willing. As Stephen Neill has pointed out, “the Anglican appeal is to the intellect, the conscience, and

1. Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care*.

the will.’ The individual who must decide and choose is not left alone, however, but is sustained by the Body of Christ.²

St. Augustine well understood the need that all Christians have of this continuing assistance. In his biography of the bishop of Hippo, Peter Brown observes that the *Confessions* did not give the conventional Christian of sixteen hundred years ago quite what he or she wanted: the book came as a surprise and an annoyance to many. Why? Because it was not what readers expected: the account of a successful conversion. It was not the story of a total transformation simple and dramatic and final.

Augustine’s experience of conversion did not mean that he had now arrived safely in port. The author of the *Confessions* makes it clear that the harbor of the convert is still buffeted by storms—or, in another image, that even the baptized Christian must remain an invalid.³ As Peter Brown writes, “Like the wounded man, found near death by the wayside in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, [Augustine’s] life had been saved by the rite of baptism; but he must be content to endure, for the rest of his life, a prolonged and precarious convalescence in the ‘Inn’ of the Church.”⁴ The authors of the extracts provided here may be thought of as experienced, well-recommended servants of this Inn.

This minimal orientation should suffice by way of an introduction. Each chapter has an internal structure, of course, as does this book as a whole; but by no means has this volume been arranged so that it needs to be read through from first page to last. Sketching this book’s complete program in advance seems, therefore, rather beside the point.

The only injunction that you might consider taking to heart is a fairly obvious one. It has to do not with this book’s architecture but with its tempo. Where you begin hardly matters because you should read as your heart moves you and the Spirit leads you. But how you read what you feel inclined to read is a different matter. If this undertaking is truly to become an exercise in spiritual reading, then the proper pace is *lentamente*. If you read slowly, then you may discern meanings that the extracts’ authors possibly—and the editors probably—were not aware of: another reason for the editors to forgo trying to foreshadow this work’s contents, for how could they say for certain what those contents are?

2. Neill, *Anglicanism*, 423–24.

3. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 177, 365.

4. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 365.

These excerpts' rough delivery from their matrices—torn from their homes, replanted by editor-nurserymen—has freed these words to find new places of habitation. The reader's freedom to discover dovetails with the texts' freedom to signify. What lies on the surface is one thing: a quick perusal takes in nothing worthwhile. Return to the same ground after a heavy rain, when you have more time, and you may descry a half-hidden treasure. A passage that initially puts you off could be found to have something going for it after all. An author whose musty language offends modern sensibilities may nonetheless offer one line in ten or fifteen which speaks to your condition.

Admittedly, in some cases, a writer's approach to a topic—his or her main point—may be readily discernible, his or her meaning both clear and fixed. But, vexed by tone or content, you may simply dislike or disagree with what this author has to say. Thus, instead of gently nudging you toward hearty agreement in some perceived truth, the writer may provoke you into opposition—or into a wider or deeper view than that represented by the extract. The possibility of this achievement in insight on your part is not to be gainsaid: In your disagreement you may well attain to a more profound grasp of the truth—you may proceed farther in the Light—than this supposed expert. In the event, these passages will again have served a useful purpose, for these words are not the last word, set before you as the teaching of a magisterium, defining true doctrine once and for all.

Finally, in all likelihood, you will never find anything worthwhile in some of these texts, either to affirm or to quarrel with. I confess that a few of these excerpts do not connect with me at all, and I have no expectation that they ever will. But others of these passages contain some of the most meaningful and memorable prose I have ever encountered, and I return to these words again and again, year after year.

David Hein