Abiding Faith: Christianity beyond Certainty, Anxiety and Violence
Scott Cowdell
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This deeply reflective book is directed toward the re-appropriation of Christian faith at a time when its distinctive sense of self and community is under stress. SC, a research fellow at Canberra’s Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre (PaCT), commends the genuine character of Christian existence in terms of “abiding faith”. This he describes as “the baptized, Eucharistic life of abiding in the encompassing, liberating, vivifying, and transforming reality that is Jesus Christ, his Spirit and his Church” [104]. It amounts to experiencing one’s whole life as continuing conversion. Therefore it must include the profound discomfort of having one’s typical Western individualised ego de-centred by a new sense of self and the world.

The density of the material covered needs—and rewards—careful and even meditative reading. The first part deals with “faith in the crucible of modernity”. It treats of the “homeless heart” of the modern isolated individual, the power of systems to repress the religious spirit and to turn it toward “the false sacred”. The second and more positive part is entitled “Belonging, Believing and Behaving” highlights the inherent mystical dimension of abiding in Christ, the genuine knowledge it offers and the emergence of a new Christ-conformed sense of self.

The richness of the topics treated suggests that this is a programmatic work, promising more books to come, as the major themes are developed. SC has clearly laid the foundations as the ten (small print) pages of bibliography attest. These cover an astonishing range of literary, philosophical, spiritual and theological sources, as disparate as Rene Girard and Rowan Williams, or Tim Winton and Michael Polanyi, or James Alison and Catherine Pickstock, or Richard Dawkins and John Polkinghorne; and yet all pressed into the service of “abiding faith”. SC’s presentation is consistently located in his own Anglican tradition but with a spiraling Catholicity of ever widening circles of beginning and returning.

An admirable aspect of this book is its open and interactive theological method. It is indeed “faith seeking understanding” but ever in contact with our culture in its present critical state. It shows that theology is most self-possessed and creative as a collaborative method in the face of the inexhaustible otherness of reality. It welcomes the contribution of psychology but in the interests of promoting the new communal consciousness of being “in Christ”. SC’s thinking takes in Durkheim’s sociology of religion, but only as a step toward the ecclesial self of Christian community. Likewise, theology such as this learns from economics and ecology under its imperative to love our neighbour, but within the common good
of the neighbourhood of God’s good creation. Theology has learned to locate itself in history, but not so as to forget the abiding reality of what changed history forever. Here René Girard is a deep influence. Furthermore, this kind of theology has no fear of science. It can accommodate itself to Richard Dawkin’s doctoral thesis at Oxford in 1968 on the pecking behaviour of the domestic chick, but find that his *The God Delusion*, in its treatment of the religious behaviour of the human race, falls notably short of any scientific ideal. Theology, in its openness to the wonder creation, has room for evolutionary biology even if that discipline’s most biased proponent has no room for theology. Clearly, too, SC’s theology makes ready use of the arts of literature and film in order to refresh our sensibilities in the presence of the supreme art of divine revelation. Philosophers also, a great company reaching from Plato to Wittgenstein, Levinas and beyond, are at this author’s elbow, to stimulate the special realism and gifted sense of objectivity that is inherent in “abiding faith”.

Quite clearly, SC’s theology is very much a construction site: those entering it are advised to wear hard hats and good boots lest the crumbling masonry of past errors and prejudices do them harm, or the broken glass of shattered self-images become a danger. Without being a polemical, and more out of compassion, SC sustains a critique of the “homeless heart” of the modern isolated, consumer-driven self after the manner of an examination of conscience. The unemployed self cut off from the creative sources of its past has nowhere to go. The author sees the rise of nominalism in the later medieval period as a major factor in a loss of critical assurance in coming to grips with reality. The unreality of the situation mutates, we might add, into the “image-ism” of the present media-shaped world, and the consumerism it inspires in a society, in the thrall of a mindless mimesis of the most anxious and dissatisfied. This weird cultural state blends in varying proportions the puritanical and the prurient, the censorious and the voyeuristic, the tolerant and the violent—to name but a few of its paradoxical features. Here SC does not seek to indulge in *Schadenfreude*; nor does he seek to intensify the self-hatred of the West. His solution is pretty much a representation of the tradition Christian activities of confessing one’s sins and committing oneself to Christ in his surrender to the Father. Through that renewed mystical union with Christ, the believer grows to be an ecclesial person, a self coexistent with many selves “in Christ and the Spirit”. In this patient re-centring, we are invited to find a fresh patience with the Church—and, I suppose, feel a deeper appreciation of the Church’s patience with us!

Behind the whole presentation is not only Girard’s notion of the non-violent self, but also Polanyi’s idea of knowledge as personal participation in and lived familiarity with the realities to be explored. If one wanted to end with a metaphor, “abiding faith” is less like trying anxiously to prevent ice-sculptures from melting in the heat, and more like allowing oneself to be carried along in a stream of living water. As SC observes at the end of the book, “this discussion has been a personal one for me, reflecting a journey of discovery” (208). Readers can be grateful for his decision to share what he found.
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