

On the Reading of Old Books



C.S. Lewis's essay "On the Reading of Old Books" has had a tremendous influence on me since I first read it in my 20's. (By "old," Lewis meant "chronologically old," not a book I've owned for a long time.) Lewis recommends reading at least one old book every time one had read a new one. I have not been able to abide by this rule, and the meaning of "old" necessarily changes with time. What Lewis meant by "contemporary" would now mean "old." I do find it a helpful exercise regularly to learn from previous generations.

The following is a list of "old" (at least not contemporary) books I've been reading recently with some comments:

E.L. Mascall, *Corpus Christi: Essays on the Church and the Eucharist*. Longmans, 1953. This book superbly addresses issues of disagreement in eucharistic theology that are still with us. Too often we presume that "no one has thought of this before."

Mascall's book led me to this one, which should be a classic in the biblical and historical foundations of eucharistic theology, with very helpful discussion of issues dividing Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics:

Charles Gore. *The Body of Christ: An Inquiry into the Institution and Doctrine of Holy Communion*. John Murray, 1901, 1909.

J. B. Mozley. *A Review of the Baptismal Controversy*. E. P. Dutton, 1862.

Mozley was Newman's brother in law, and wrote the definitive critique of Newman's notion of development of doctrine. This book is a balanced discussion of the baptismal regeneration controversy in light of Scripture and the church's tradition. Although Anglo-Catholic in his leanings, he makes the case that the Gorham controversy was rightly decided, and that the issue is not so straightforward as either nineteenth century Anglo-Catholics or Evangelicals tried to make it. (Both sides played fast and loose with the biblical and historical data.)

Henry Churchill King. *The Seeming Unreality of the Spiritual Life*. Macmillan, 1911.

King was President of Oberlin College, and this book reads like a cautionary tale. Reading it makes clear that a college originally connected with "Finneyism" had in a generation gone all the way to liberal Protestantism. King is trying to address the problem of the apparent "unreality" of prayer when you no longer believe in the Bible and the creeds. He contains observations such as that the Protestant requirement of "acceptance of a whole system of doctrines" is "misleading," and tends to the "deadening of the spiritual life." He likes Jesus, because Jesus not only tells us that God is holiness and love, but "makes us able to believe them." The person of Jesus is "the most precious fact in history." Just why we would want to say things like this about Jesus when we no longer believe that Jesus is who the Scriptures and Creeds say that he is, King never makes clear.

King's book is in tremendous contrast to:

Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship*. Herder & Herder, 1999 (originally published 1948?) Casel was one of the founders of the "liturgical movement," and had a tremendous influence not only on Vatican II, but on all subsequent liturgical theology. His argument in this book is that the heart of Christian faith is the "mystery" that the infinite has become finite in Jesus Christ, and that the center of

Christian worship is the "paschal mystery," focusing on Jesus' death and resurrection, and in which the church "participates" through liturgical worship in Word, sacrament, lectionary, and the Daily Office.

Douglas O. Steere. *Prayer and Worship*. Friends United Press, 1978 (originally 1938). This is by a Quaker, but is really an ecumenical introduction to the topics of the title, borrowing liberally from the entire Christian tradition, including Anglicans such as Lancelot Andrewes. It contains little nuggets such as comparing private spiritualities unconnected with corporate worship (what we could today call "spiritual, but not religious") with being an only child, who does not have the opportunity to interact with brothers and sisters. The "only child" turns into a kind of "migratory religious tramp," who "floats from one church to another," but never stays long enough to become established in any one form of Christian worship.

And, finally:

Bede Griffiths. *The Golden String: An Autobiography*, (1954). I found this on the "free books shelf" in TSM's library. This is one of those spiritual autobiographies like C.S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy* or Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* that tells the story of how a bright young atheist eventually ends up in the church. Griffiths was a student of C.S. Lewis who became a Roman Catholic Benedictine. He eventually ended up in India, where he established a kind of Benedictine Ashram, and became a Christian yogi, known as Swami Dayananda. How orthodox Griffiths was at the end of his life, I'm not sure, but this original autobiography is fascinating much like those of Lewis or Merton.