

## Editor's Notes

There is always something hopeful in writing Editor's Notes in early January: the knowledge that they will appear in the light of spring. Spring pushes back the darkness and provides an opportunity to ponder its meanings and promises for us, along with its challenges. The fact that spring also brings Lent adds a particular clarity to these ponderings, a turning toward hope even in bad times, a confidence that God will make a way where there appears to be none, both with and despite the best and worst of human effort.

Darkness, its challenges and its gifts, is a theme running through the major articles in this issue. We begin with **Douglas E. Christie's** intense and evocative meditation on loss, darkness, and the importance of solidarity. This essay draws us into remembrance of childhood fears, awareness of bewilderment and uncertainty that underscores the vulnerability of our own wandering in the vastness of the known and the unknown, present even when we think we are secure. An entirely understandable response to this vastness is to retreat, to find shelter in the familiar languages and routines of the ordinary, including our ordinary spirituality. Christie's reflections uncover a different way: entering into the darkness, into that vastness and unknowability in solidarity and companionship with all the multitude of others who inhabit it too. This is not a task or a mission as much as a waiting together in silence, both caring and not caring, simply sitting still.

Such "learning to walk in the dark" is a major theme in the work of **Barbara Brown Taylor**, which was the focus of a symposium included in this issue. As **Peter S. Hawkins** considers her dedication to "scooping up the bottom halves of things," he highlights Taylor's enduring interest in what Christianity has tended to reject: the world, the flesh, and the dark. The wildness and unknowability of these take us out of the ordinary, not into the inordinate, necessarily, but deeper into our shared creatureliness. In engaging the thick darkness, we may learn how to walk "by faith, not by sight"; we may find true companionship; we may not only wrestle with the unseeable but also receive a blessing. Hawkins's use of language is as "gorgeous, sonorous,

tinctured” as Taylor’s own, an enticing opening toward the More beyond the mediation of the printed word.

In her introduction to the symposium itself, **Lauren F. Winner** focuses on the importance of words in Taylor’s work, and her turn from “the tried-and-true terms of Christian speech” to an apophatic “reconsideration of Christian speech,” language that may be welcomed by those not connected to mainline churches. **Thomas G. Long** reminds us that Christian speech in the form of sermons, where Taylor’s work has been so effective and influential, is in some ways an expansion, not an interruption, of her life as a writer. Her sermons are unusually deft in putting into conversational terms the fruits and insights of deep formal biblical scholarship. In the brief form that is the contemporary mainline sermon, Taylor manages to lure her hearers into that identification with biblical characters that generally requires much longer development within the visual complexity of a film. Taylor’s gift in presenting biblical figures includes the capacity to make them not only appealing but challenging.

These same elements are evident in Taylor’s work as a memoirist, discussed by Hawkins and also by **Donyelle C. McCray**. Barbara Brown Taylor has a “fandom” that most preachers do not acquire. “Fans circulate her eloquence and optimism, her conceptions of the beautiful and constructions of the meaningful life, and her canon of art and literature.” This is surely testimony to her power as writer and preacher. But in a culture dazzled by celebrity, fans and followers may readily bring with them “toxins” that produce a willingness to cultivate influence, even notoriety, rather than helping Taylor to “edge the discussion along” and “ask questions everybody’s asking.” Taylor has the admirable ability both to work with her audiences’ receptivity and responsiveness while still keeping the strongest focus on the presence of God in the ordinary as well as extraordinary, the darkness as well as the light.

Uncovering and cultivating the ability to weave pastoral responsiveness with clear and steady theological focus is one of the aspirations of programs of formation for ministry. **Sue Groom** examines what the perhaps overused word “formation” has come to mean over nearly fifty years of training for ordination in the Church of England. “Formation” has at times meant the development of skills and apprenticeship, as in a craft or profession, or the integration of knowledge, skill, and personal wisdom. It has referred to developing a spiritual life that can ground and center the demanding life of ministry.

It has referred to nurturing the willingness to be interdependent both with others and within the varying facets that make the self. It has focused on processes as much as acquisition of knowledge, on the cultivation of habits and dispositions. Today, “formation” encompasses all these elements, each of which can be cultivated in a variety of ways and in various contexts. This is an important realization in a time when training for ordained ministry takes place in a variety of settings, with differing emphases, programmatic structures, durations, and so on—a situation as familiar in the United States and Canada now as it is in England. Groom’s careful examination of the concept of formation as it has been used over a period of such great change in the church reminds us that formation for ministry is the task not only or even primarily of theological educators and of the ordained, but of the whole church.

Groom’s discussion of formation does not explicitly consider the importance of the “dark” in these developments, but those involved in formation are well familiar with the sense of loss, bewilderment, and uncertainty that have been engendered by changes in church and culture in the Global North over the last several decades. **Jillian Jackson**’s essay—the winner of the 2016 Hefling Essay Competition—looks at the role of loss and suffering in the bodies and spirits of those afflicted with eating disorders, “those shrivelled women” (and men) whose unwillingness to eat is a manifestation of despair. This despair often rises from “years of suppressed needs and feelings” and reflects a willingness to suffer in the face of the crying needs of others, primarily those nearest, but also of the whole wounded world. Eating disorders are not, as often thought, an expression of self-absorption. They are rather the bodily expression of loss of meaning and purpose, experienced in direct personal experience and also internalized from a culture that has focused meaning into the display of material wealth and physical appearance. Jackson turns to a reading of the Trinity in terms of abundance and overflow as a resource that may help those suffering from eating disorders to feel themselves filled rather than emptied, loved rather than despised.

The same focus on the church’s engagement with those whose gifts and needs have been marginalized is central to **Benjamin N. Garren**’s reflections on the Episcopal Church’s ministry at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The community there is well aware of the effects of European culture and religion on indigenous peoples in the Americas, and finds its identity and mission in focusing on

the transformation of this problematic legacy through careful and respectful incorporation of indigenous traditions into the worship and common life this ministry offers.

Our other Practicing Theology offering in this issue is a deliberate contrast. **Paul J. Carling** and **Armando Ghinaglia** are involved in a very different ministry with the Episcopal Church at Yale University. Carling and Ghinaglia give us a contemporary account of a campus ministry of long standing, with its emphases not only on the pastoral care of students but also on campus-wide, often interreligious events. These make important contributions to the ongoing transformation of one of the United States' most elite institutions.

Next, the issue turns to discussion in depth of recent works whose focus is on the being of God in Godself, a question that underlies all of the preceding articles. Who is God? How and to what extent is God's being expressed in creation? And how do we know what of our experience is of God? These questions have never been easy, but they are pressed more acutely by the contemporary recognition of the significance of human experience in all of its diversity and of the suffering that pervades so much of creation. In the midst of these complex and baffling realities, what does it mean to say that God is perfect?

God's perfection understood precisely as abundance and overflow—plenitude—was a significant focus of John Webster's theology, as presented in **Brad East's** extended review of Webster's life and work. Webster, who died in May 2016, was a "theologian proper," that is, a theologian whose delight and vocation was to talk about God. Greatly influenced by Karl Barth, Webster saw his work as necessarily contrary to the spirit of the (sin-afflicted) age, cast in a primarily constructive way, a refocusing on "the sovereign and majestic fullness with which God is himself; it is the eternal and entirely spontaneous plenitude and completeness of his life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit." For Webster, focus on God's aseity affirms the value of creatures in themselves: they are not a means to the ends of God's own perfection, but an outpouring of the "gratuitous, boundless love" which is the undivided Trinity. This love means that God resists creatures' resistance to God, always providing "the moment of reconciliation." East's appreciative and critical review of Webster emphasizes Webster's achievements, while also pointing to important work yet to be done in the same vein.

**Robert MacSwain's** in-depth review of major works by Alvin Plantinga and J. L. Schellenberg offers an overview of the current state of an ongoing debate: whether it is reasonable to believe in the existence of God. This question also addresses issues of aseity, who God is in Godself, and in some ways is fueled by the kind of argument Webster has made. As MacSwain notes, questions about the extent to which God is knowable continue to be the main focus of contemporary theological epistemology.

Religious architecture, especially the spaces in which we worship, provide their own understandings of the ways in which God may be both known and hidden. As **Richard Lawson** notes, prayer takes *place*, and the shape of that physical place shapes prayer. In reviewing recent books by James Williamson and Jay Price, Lawson highlights the interplay of the mystical and the practical, a key component of religious architecture. Lawson moves beyond these authors' discussions to apply their insights to the chapels of the Seminary of the Southwest and Virginia Theological Seminary.

And the six poems and the reviews of twenty-seven other books—including the new book on Barth and von Balthasar by the *ATR's* Associate Editor, Jason A. Fout—provide further possibilities for readers' own explorations of the interaction of theology and practice.



In early February, *ATR* Board President Roger Ferlo informed the Board that Editor in Chief Anthony Baker had resigned his post for personal reasons, and would continue on the Board as Chair of the Editorial Committee. All of us at *ATR* are grateful to Tony for his fine work, and are delighted he will continue in this new capacity. While *ATR* searches for a new Editor, I will be Acting Editor. I am grateful for the opportunity to work once again with the fine editorial staff of the *Anglican Theological Review*. It is always a privilege to be able to live with the articles for a period of time, and witness the dedicated work of those whose skills and generosity of spirit ensure the quality of this and every issue. I hope that you find here the pleasures and challenges of the dark along with those of ever-expanding light.

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