

*Accessing a reliable grounding in wonder*

**Martin Camroux (foreword by David R. Peel), *Keeping Alive the Rumor of God: When Most People are Looking the Other Way*, WIPF & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2020, pp 204, ISBN 978-1-7252-6241-6, £20 pbk.**

Can a person be intelligent, honest, and a person of faith? For Martin Camroux, reflecting after a forty-year ministry in the United Reformed Church, the question is not a trivial one. The landscape of faith has changed drastically over the last few generations. The scientific revolution, psychology, a growing appreciation of our multi-faith world, consumerism, and the Holocaust have all, each in their own way, presented fundamental challenges to Christian assumptions that were once almost unquestionable. Here in the UK, collective participation in churches has been falling steadily since Darwin, and shows no signs of letting up.

One option for the Christian apologist would be to ignore all of these developments, stick one's head in the sand, and declare no interest in anything that is remotely threatening to a traditionalist Christian worldview. Indeed, according to some non-religious commentators, this is basically what every person of faith does.

Camroux, like other liberal religious freethinkers, at least tries to take a different tack. He sympathises with Douglas John Hall's pronouncement, 'Belief in a good God is not an easy thing for anybody who thinks to a significant degree.' Tentatively, and with many a disclaimer, Camroux makes the case for a suggestion of some mystery beyond our ken. It would have to be a mystery for, as he writes, echoing Nietzsche, 'the God who is like a superior version of us, only all-powerful and all-knowing is dead.' While the de-anthropomorphizing of God makes the search for God infinitely more difficult, it also allows our images of God to contain glimpses of the infinite – something that was never likely with the old bearded fella in the wicker chair. Camroux asks whether humanity's capacity for wonder, and the beauty at which we wonder at, may be signposts of this something-more, that we could, if we wish to, call God.

To readers who have already read liberal Christian writers like Marcus Borg, Rachel Held Evans, Rob Bell and the like, there is nothing particularly earth-shattering in *Keeping Alive The Rumor of God*. The book is a very readable tour of familiar territory: delineating the limits of human language to express the divine, exploring the concept of progressive justice in a world where progress no longer feels divinely assured, asking whether a literal

resurrection is important to the Christian message. Sometimes, it astounds me how we in the mainline church can manage to say there is a fabulous mystery on the edges of perception, and still manage to make this statement sound somehow boring. All the laudable, liberal caveats of ‘who knows...’, ‘let’s not be hasty...’, ‘let us consider...’ could use a little shaking up, methinks – not in their basic decency or fairness or philosophical integrity, but in the juiciness of their expression. Even as I write this, it feels a bit unkind to Camroux, a very capable writer who has, clearly, done courageous work in his four decades of ministry, honestly facing his doubts, always seeking to occupy ecumenical, interfaith and non-religious spaces with openness, and taking a genuine interest in the perspectives of the poor and oppressed. As an ‘overview of my career’ book, it is an especially readable one. As someone who – I know I’m not alone here – keeps meaning to read more Tillich someday, his explications of Tillich’s theology are particularly useful. I guess my gentle teasing is a nagging sense that, with a bit of chutzpah, Camroux’s next book could be more of a barn buster. There is the sense of some inner fire calling him forth, one that never quite finds adequate expression in the book’s careful structure.

While not intended as such, *Keeping Alive the Rumor of God* actually works very well as an overview of twenty-first-century liberal Christianity. If you are not familiar with contemporary writers about faith, writers with the integrity to combine honest doubt with a yearning for – or even a suspicion of – something more, this book is very much worth your time. Camroux has grappled ardently the justified critiques of faith. He has the courage to admit that he is not wholly convinced, himself, that the Christian story is completely accurate, or even that there is a God. But he also does not avoid the sense of deep dissatisfaction that prevails in our society today. Our post-Christian culture does not possess an adequate narrative, as of yet, to give people a sense that their lives are meaningful and important. Nor are most people in today’s society able to access a reliable grounding in wonder. Surveying the contemporary landscape of faith and philosophy, Camroux is less an apologist for Christianity, than a faithful seeker, who is forced reluctantly to the conclusion that, though the life of faith has its deep, perhaps even irredeemable flaws, it’s hard to see how any alternative to a life of faith is all that satisfactory to what is most human within us.

BOB JANIS DILLON