

Book review for practical theology

Found out: transgressive faith and sexuality, by Alison Webster, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2017, 159+xii pp., £12.99, ISBN: 978-0-232-53263-0
Out of Exodus: a journey of open and affirming ministry, by Darryl W. Stephens with Michael I. Allman, Andrea Brown, Ruth A. Daugherty and Mary Merriman, Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2018, 173+xxiii pp., £20, ISBN: 978-1-5326-3028-6

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own right or serve as the basis for a further book on the issue of learning disability involvement in faith communities.

The concept of a caring, loving and nurturing relationship between a mother and her child is used frequently throughout the book as a model or metaphor of the pastoral care relationship that should and frequently does exist between individual members of a faith community or church. Whilst this is understandable given that historically the forming of caring relationships was often seen as the role of the mother, a better metaphor would be the caring and nurturing relationship between the child and *both* parents. Shurley appears to ignore the role of the father both as a reality and a metaphor, an omission which could be irritating at best and hurtful at worst. Some of the underlying concepts and explorations could do with simplifying to make the book more accessible for both busy pastoral care professionals and the families of those with a learning disability.

Again, Shurley's frequent use of the word 'play' in relation to spiritual and pastoral care of those with a learning disability could be argued to perpetuate the historical perception that those with a learning disability are little more than children in an adult's body, although I accept the suggestion that everyone, no matter who they are or how old they are needs to 'play', to relax, to recreate. Such an inference, however, can only serve to further infantilise and prevent those with a learning disability from being taken seriously as equal partners, as both spiritual and pastoral care receivers and givers within a faith community context. Any future editions of this book may need to address these issues and at the very least justify and defend the use of the female pronoun to the neglect of the male and the concept of play as it relates to a possible infantilising of those with a learning disability.

Overall, a well-written book that is to be recommended for use by all faith communities and their leaders and, indeed, anyone involved in an active ministry or service, particularly if that service involves people with disabilities.

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Found Out is both a cry of protest that the institutional churches are largely ignoring the experiences of women of transgressive sexuality and their faith stories, and an attempt to reconstruct a language to speak of God and of their spirituality. It is an exercise in queer liberation theology, in which the very disturbance women seeking belonging in such churches feel when faced with exclusion, becomes a path to understanding God.

At the core of Webster's book sit two series of conversations. These conversations become the backdrop against which meanings of what it is to be female and sexual in scripture and tradition is re-examined. In the first set of conversations, called 'Resistance', we hear the stories of a diverse range of women who experience Christian teachings as cruelly silencing and controlling. It is perhaps the conversation with Hannah, an autistic woman, which captures most harshly the pain experienced by all women who sense that we are trained from birth to comply with heterosexual norms of both church and society. The constant pressure to smile, be 'good', to be a 'rag doll', were the behavioural norms set her as a child who was, behind the scenes, being sexually abused (61). At the end of this set of conversations Webster suggests that it is with a deep sense of not being good enough that most women and LGBTI+ people live out their faith.

The second set of conversations is called 'Reclaiming Spirit'. For Webster, reclaiming spirit means embracing a faith which is integrated with life's experience, holistic, artistic and embodied. Women in this set of conversations suggest that there are places within the liturgy and hierarchy of the institutional churches to speak their truth, yet these places are difficult to find. 'Does Jesus *have* to be an alpha-male exemplar' Julianne asks (83). She, with other women conducting this set of conversations, find in and around the edges of the Church trusted ground from which to undertake the spiritual journey. Despite their courage and tenacity, the colour of these conversations is hesitant, grey, because the Church shows so little interest in the body and the bodily cycles of women's lives. Deborah warns 'there's a strong tradition of Christian asceticism which casts a long shadow over all of us.' (94)

This same shadow lurks in the background of *Out of Exodus*. Stephens, the lead author, describes it like this: 'Patriarchal structures, typically reinforced by misogynistic beliefs and behaviours, make it nearly impossible to live fully into our affirmation of the goodness of sexuality' (96). The author, writing in the USA, complains that while his denomination, the United Methodist Church, declares belief in the goodness of sexuality, it does not affirm the life, faith and sexuality of the LGBTQIA+ community. Grandview United Methodist Church, the church about which this book is written, has decided in this context to become a welcoming and affirming congregation. This book tells the story of that decision, the experiences of individual believers who made it, and its positive effects on the life of the congregation. Contributors to the book use reflections on the life of Moses, and on the life of Jesus, in dialogue with their own personal narratives, to describe their journey towards a conviction of the vital place of inclusion in what it means to be God's people. It is an exercise in inclusive theology which, despite its North American provenance, suggests useful guidelines for local congregations in the United Kingdom considering the adoption of an inclusive mission statement and strategy.

Both these books are written in a popular style, rely on a variety of voices, and exploit different types of narrative – personal story, Bible study, sermon and meditation – to create dynamic texts which encourage the ordinary reader, theology student and church member to plunge into understanding the issues surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community and the institutional churches. Both books instil the reader with hope that the day of accepting the silencing of people of transgressive faith and sexuality by those churches is over. Women in Webster's narrative are already getting on with negotiating change in their relationships, in sexuality, in gender and in finding languages to speak about God and their lives. Ministers and congregation members in Stephens' account already believe that through an open and affirming ministry they experience the charisma of 'radically inclusive agape love' (p.6). Liberating change has already occurred in both communities, without waiting for the institutional churches to catch up.

The books, however, present sharply different challenges. The challenge of *Out of Exodus* is to church congregations to become more inclusive, but from a relatively traditional Christian


viewpoint. Bible and creed are re-interpreted to welcome the LGBTQIA+ community, who may enrich the congregation's life and ministry with gay and lesbian testimony and theology, so encouraging the church to open its doors to include all people. The lead author writes of the congregation's theological position: 'The biblical narrative offers us a foundational view of God and God's people.' (13). This is therefore a relatively unthreatening book to offer local churches considering the issue of inclusion.

The same is not true of *Found Out*. The challenge in Webster's text is to move beyond gay and lesbian theology, and indeed inclusive theology, to embrace queer theology. Webster, writing in the very different cultural and religious context of the United Kingdom, grasps how many people now find that neither biblical narratives, nor church liturgies, nor ecclesiastical structures fit the stories which they wish to tell about their lives. She understands how many people may still seek a spirituality for their lives, as do the women of the conversations in her book, but that their spirituality finds little resonance in traditional church theologies and patterns of living. She therefore turns to queer theology to explore a God who disrupts common alignments, and fragments traditional meanings, and encourages us to imagine a way of life which emphasises not faith's possession, but faith's creation and inhabiting. Her book uses the stories women tell about their lives to construct images of God, and paths in spirituality, which embrace uncertainty, and invite us on a pilgrimage of becoming.

Both are books of welcome. In Stephens' book the LGBTQIA+ community are invited with enthusiasm into a known way. In Webster's book the known way is lost. The reader is instead encouraged to join new gatherings, where the life of the spirit may be explored with greater honesty and freedom than the institutional churches are presently, Webster suggests, able to provide.

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Encountering the Sacred: Feminist Reflections on Women's Lives, edited by

Rebecca Todd Peters and Grace Y Kao, London, T&T CLARCK, 2018, 163+viii pp., £17.99, (PBK), ISBN: 978-0-567-68300-7

Encountering the Sacred is described by the editors as being 'both an embrace of and a wrestling with Christianity as a living faith tradition' (10). It contains 10 essays by women working in the field of feminist theology, reflecting on experiences ranging from consumerism, friendship, miscarriage, sexual assault and death. Each chapter concludes with devotional material, questions for discussion and suggestions for further reading.

As expected in a compilation of essays, the chapters differ in terms of style and approach. The chapters about simple living and racism use lived experience to connect with the wider social, cultural and political context, focussing mainly on the author's personal journey. This is contrasted with the approach in the gossip and childlessness chapters, where personal reflection is set within the context of traditional religious practices and understandings. Professor Hinson-Hasty, for example, in the gossip chapter ('Girl Talk'), uses conversations with a friend to reflect on the perception of gossip. She tracks the word in its journey from its roots in