

ordinary words. Ordinary language, for Cupitt, has no interest in a theoretical understanding of human life (p. 49); and postmodern popular culture, as viewed in TV soap operas, '... is a low and plebeian celebration of life' (p. 91). In fact, it is nothing of the kind. Very often it is simply a commercially driven celebration of greed, violence, and narcissism. Cupitt's ordinary person turns out to be a leisured layabout whose language does not represent at all the purview of the world's wretchedly poor who struggle for an understanding, however rudimentarily theoretical, of their lives. When Cupitt speaks of 'us' and 'our' life-idioms and 'it-talk', just who is included in 'us'? Certainly not the 1.3 billion absolutely poor who do not have TVs let alone the time to watch them; certainly not the millions of conventionally religious people in the Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish worlds; and certainly not American politicians whose lips are caressed by the word 'God' with amazing frequency.

Though written with his customary verve, *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech* is not one of Don Cupitt's more significant works. It opines that 'From now on, the object of religious love and commitment is increasingly going to be life: that is the human world, human values, art' (p. 96). But how would such a view escape the age-old charge of idolatry?

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RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND POPULAR CULTURE IN SOUTHWARK C. 1880-1939 by S.C. Williams *Oxford Historical Monographs, 1999.* Pp. vi + 206, £40.00 hbk.

"They will do anything for me — except come to my church!" — a wry remark attributed to that 'legendary' Christian socialist priest, Fr. Groser, whose memory still lingers among elderly East Enders to this day. Sarah Williams in this fine study of beliefs and practices south of the Thames, centred mainly on Southwark, explains why there was this adult detachment from the institutional church alongside intense loyalty to particular clergy and local places of worship. Full participation in church life usually entailed separation from the *mores* of family and neighbourhood.

The twenty-nine interviews which form the core of this book were conducted with men and women well into their seventies and eighties. This is rare material which becomes scarcer as these hitherto mute voices are silenced for ever. The author has had to go somewhat beyond the strict limits of Southwark to assemble a sufficient sample. Although small in number, the interviews have depth and were obviously conducted with a remarkable delicacy and friendliness. One can hear these unmistakable cockney voices whose sentiments ring with an authenticity recognisable by anyone who has worked in inner London. They are supplemented by

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carefully re-interpreted evidence drawn from other studies of urban religion and culture — Charles Booth, the Burnett Collection, that of Edward Lovett, the Essex Oral History Survey, Mission reports, etc.

When the people are allowed to speak for themselves, the result is almost always enlightening and sometimes very moving. The great virtue of this book is that it is written by a listener who has not attempted to *impose* a methodology: that has clearly been developed from interaction between her profound knowledge of the field and the oral testimony itself. Only by such attentiveness could the richness and complexity of urban religious belief and culture be revealed.

Many Southwark adults went to church only for *rites de passage* ('churching' included) and Watch Night services. They firmly, even fiercely, believed in the importance of these ceremonies. Williams warns us: 'Orthodox and folk religion cannot be crudely juxtaposed as two separate spheres'. These 'rites' had Christian significance for them, but there were other aspects inextricably associated which are too easily dismissed as 'superstitious'. Even today, the rigorous cleric who refuses to baptise a child of a non-attending family can provoke not only anger, but blank incomprehension. It is commonly held that the 'good Christian' is not necessarily a church-goer, but the one who is first on the scene of domestic crisis with neighbourly help. Nothing will convince the passenger on the Clapham or Southwark omnibus that neighbourly generosity is not the essence of Christianity.

Not least among the merits of this book is to make one think again about how 'magical' can be distinguished from 'religious' practice. There would appear to be no such frontier in Southward popular culture. Even in more 'sophisticated' cultures, it is amazingly difficult (impossible?) to draw one. The author demonstrates how folklore practices long thought to be hangovers from rural life are deeply embedded in the urban context. The generations which provided these fascinating testimonies may be dying out, but we may be quite sure such practices and beliefs remain virgourously alive in urban folk religion. A sociologist with professional experience of the East End once told me that 'there is no religion left there'. As he had defined it, there was indeed not much. Yet as Sarah Williams shows us in Southwark, if we attend to what the people themselves tell us, there is a very great deal.

A remarkable change in attitude towards institutional religion took place in inner London from the 1880s. Secularists had previously made considerable headway. But the heroic work of the 'slum priests' and missionaries to the poor, responding to the 'Bitter Cry of Outcast London,' gradually won hearts and alleviated the conditions of many to whom they ministered. What there was of Christianity in the urban religion of the day was mediated by the high dedication of clergy and lay workers, the availability of churches and mission buildings. The author leaves us in no doubt of the prime importance

of the Sunday Schools. Nearly every person interviewed had nostalgic and grateful memories of their attendance. Sarah Williams is sure that such high attendance of children of non-churchgoing families is a case of 'religion by deputy'. It was not simply to get the children out of the way, but a demonstration of values which the parents held. Would a study as rich as this be possible for the years 1939-1999?

TONY CROSS

CHARLOTTE VON KIRSCHBAUM AND KARL BARTH: A STUDY IN BIOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY by Suzanne Selinger *Penn State University Press, distributed by The Eurospan Group, 1998. Pp. ix+206. £35.95 hbk; £15.95 pbk.*

Karl Barth (1886-1968) first met Charlotte von Kirschbaum (1899-1975) in 1924. He had recently moved from being a pastor in Switzerland to being a professor in Germany. The second edition of his famous commentary on the *Ad Romanos* (1922) had made him famous in theological circles. Lollo (as she was known) was a nurse; she had not been to university, was interested in theology and thinking of becoming a (Lutheran) deaconess. Barth had been married since 1913, unhappily almost from the start.

By 1926 Lollo was Barth's secretary, assistant and constant companion. Both his and her family were hostile to the relationship, indeed it alienated her from her family for the rest of her life. In 1933 Barth wrote to his wife asking for a divorce; she refused, which meant under the German laws of the time that he could take the matter no further. Von Kirschbaum became a member of Barth's household — 'Tante Lollo' to his children. When students and colleagues called, his wife would open the front door while she would be waiting to greet them at the top of the stairs to take them into the great man's study. Until her mental breakdown in the early 'sixties (something like Alzheimer's) and final removal to a nursing home, she was indispensable to Barth's teaching and writing. He was getting old anyway, of course; but it seems likely that he could have completed a bit more of the *Church Dogmatics* if she had been able to help him. He visited her every Sunday until his death, singing chorales to her since by then she was almost unable to communicate. His son-in-law continued the Sunday visits and his widow came occasionally. Von Kirschbaum's remains were buried in the Barth family tomb.

It is a puzzling, moving, even rather terrible story. Whether they were ever lovers, Selinger thinks, we can never know: Barth did nothing to dispel the gossip. In many ways, as Selinger shows, he controlled and exploited her; in many ways she dominated his life. As his intellectual partner almost from the outset, she was included in the discussions with the theologians who came to see him. Some

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