

BOOK REVIEW

Mobsby, Ian. 2025. *The Seeking Heart: A Contemplative Approach to Mission and Pioneering*

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Reviewed by Nigel Rooms

I have followed, at a distance, Ian Mobsby's journey as an experimenter in ecclesial new things for many years, since his book *Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church* was published in 2008 and his involvement with the Moot Community in London. Therefore, I looked forward to reading this book, which connects several of my interests, not least the relationships between silence, contemplation and Christian mission.

The Seeking Heart is a development of Mobsby's doctoral research, though I suspect it is largely an edited version of the original thesis. The book overall is a real mixture of insight and thoughtfulness, while at the same time missing opportunities for a deeper engagement with the apophatic, contemplative tradition in Christianity.

What is most instructive, and a good reason for buying the book, is Mobsby's field work amongst 32 "SBNR" people based in London – that is the so-called "Spiritual but not Religious". He charts the rise of the SBNR category in a "post-secular" society (Chapter 1), reviews other research in this field, as well as SBNR literature (Chapter 2). Thankfully he does complexify the notion of the false binary contained within the term SBNR, since spirituality and religiosity are not that easily separated (28), concluding that the SBNR are "a credible grouping, even if they are logically inconsistent" (40). Following that beginning, Mobsby conducts a thorough qualitative research project amongst the SBNR (Chapter 3), and the analysis of the data is helpful in delineating various categories that emerge from within the group. He discovers, perhaps surprisingly, that they are largely happy to speak of God (40), and I was struck, perhaps less surprisingly, how many of them were variously de-churched, having had very unhelpful, even traumatic experiences of Christians and Church institutions.

The second part of the book develops a "contemplative theology and a model of mission" from a large number and a wide range of interlocutors. Mobsby's

contemplative theology is written up in Chapter 4 and begins with Owen Barfield's "evolution of [human] consciousness" and Mark Vernon's development of that in a Christian direction. As I read it, this approach is a way of understanding such movements as the pre-modern, modern and post-modern stages of Western thought – which can also be discerned elsewhere such as in biblical history, and which spiral around themselves in a cyclical fashion (see 80 for the five stages). The conclusion of this section, which leads to a participatory understanding of relationship with God, is helpful since it allows for the possibility of *theosis*. However, along the way it seems we must discard indigenous knowledge from "original participation" as "severely limited" (80) and the benefits of science for life today which arise from "withdrawal from participation" (86). I find Iain McGilchrist's work on left and right brain ways of attention much more helpful on these questions as a way in to recovering the importance of silence in prayer and apophatic theology. Mobsby is able, however to argue for the activity of God in the spiritual seeker, moving them from Kathryn Tanner's "weak participation" to a strong one; "God is seeking to awaken the seeker through a deep connection with God, even if they are unaware of this" (95).

The next chapter (Chapter 5, God's Kenosis, Our Theosis) is even more complex and I am not sure I can do it justice in this short review. What Mobsby works on here is a model for tracking the journeys of his research participants towards or away from the Trinitarian God of the Christian faith. He employs variously Hiebert's set theory, the three-fold spiritual path of purgation, illumination and union overlaid on Barfield's approach to consciousness alongside the work of several other contemporary theologians. Overall, for me as a reader, this model (see 131) is simply too complex a schema to be useful, though I can see how it works in the doctoral thesis. On further reflection, it is also perhaps not complex enough – it is too neat, a tying up of every loose end in the author's mind which leads to something solid rather than fluid, and messy like most of life and spiritual journeys.

The final four chapters map the possibility for a "Christian Contemplative Missional Journey" through four spiritual stages of awakening, purgation, illumination and union which are given a chapter each. Some practical ways of accompanying seekers are offered for each stage, which are useful pointers, though apart from one example subject from the Moot Community it seems no-one else made the journey to a Christian faith (though of course this was not the aim of the research). I have several problems with what is happening in these chapters which I do think need to be aired in a critical review.

Most serious is the use of the Christian spiritual tradition in this work. Mobsby himself speaks against "de-traditionalization" (10) as an effect of pluralism and consumerism. But then he would appear to do that very thing when engaging with the "dark night of the soul" from St John of the Cross in an entirely superficial way (98, 164). He misquotes Elaine Heath's work and is seemingly unaware (as, in fact Heath

is) of the four nights of the active and passive senses and the active and passive spirit in St John's spiritual journey which would seriously impact his model. Not to have read, in a thesis of this nature, the primary texts of the Christian tradition is a serious omission.

This leads us onto his treatment of the goal of the spiritual journey in union (Chapter 9). For Mobsby this seems to be synonymous with conversion and possible baptism when the subject is incorporated into Christ, which is true, but hardly the end of the journey. The Ascent of Mount Carmel would just be beginning at this stage for St John of the Cross. And there is no reference in the book to Eucharist, which I found puzzling. Surely the whole process simply begins again now, following Barfield's schema?

Some other quibbles are around the place of what Mobsby calls the "outer journey" (108–10, 127) which for me is not given enough importance; contemplation and [public] action go together for the Christian as two sides of the same coin. Non-duality (34, 158) and, with it, Buddhism (197) is rather dismissed as even dangerous; this would seem to negate decades of Christian Buddhist dialogue and miss the possibility of seeking a distinctively Christian non-duality following the work of Cynthia Bourgeault and others from the apophatic tradition.

In conclusion, this work is a courageous attempt at engaging with a serious segment of Western society, the SBNR, in Christian mission and is to be commended. We learn a great deal about these people from the research and I am grateful for that. I am less convinced about the proposals set out here, but I know that Mobsby will continue to work with silence and seekers in his new location in Canada and I bless him for that.

About the Reviewer

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