Greg O’Brien, Lecturer in Church History and Historical Theology at Kingsley College, Melbourne, reviews


Greg Dening’s Church Alive! is a different kind of history indeed. It is history in the key of theology, not historical theology, but history written theologically. Described on the book jacket as ‘an ethnographic history of the prophetic imagination among ordinary believers in times of great religious change’, it tells the story of three Jesuit parishes on Sydney’s North Shore (St. Mary’s, North Sydney; St. Francis Xavier’s, Lavender Bay; and Star of the Sea, Kirribilli) and largely focuses on how they dealt with the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. The book is beautifully enhanced with colour photographs of the people of the parishes at work and worship, and the art of Anne Kearney, punctuating and illuminating the text throughout.

Professor Dening is an eminent historian who knows both the science and the art of his discipline well. He sets out to write ‘a living history of religious experience’ which responds ‘to all the demands that a global discipline of the twenty-first century makes of its professionals, but suffused with the understanding that being a believer brings’ (24). The ten page bibliography evidences a wide acquaintance with the literature of post-Vatican II Catholicism, but readers should not expect to see these sources referenced in the usual way in the text. Instead of footnotes and citations, Dening discusses his sources in a conversational way in a separate ‘Notes’ section. More significantly, his sources reside in the text itself, along with his own Catholic faith, as a kind of DNA, informing and determining the writing but in a hidden way, to borrow from the Gospels, as leaven gives rise to bread (Matthew 13:33).

The book begins (in its prologue, ‘The Spirit at Work’) in the first century with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ disciples on the first Christian Pentecost (c. 33 CE) – and then leaps forward over two millennia to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In so doing,
continuity between the two events is posited. Though there is a contrast between the dynamic simplicity of the apostolic period and the pomp and ceremony of the opening procession of Vatican II, Dening sees both events as signs of the revolutionary work of the Spirit in giving life to the church and to the world. Throughout the book, often in the moving first-person narratives of parishioners, the Spirit’s work is borne witness to in an engaging way. It seems a little odd, therefore, in a book so personal in nature that the Spirit becomes depersonalized by being referred to as ‘it’ (193). This presumably is an attempt to get around the gender exclusivity of the male personal pronouns in the New Testament references to the Spirit. Some theologians, such as Elizabeth Johnson (1992) and Jurgen Moltmann (1985) have used the feminine in reference to the Spirit, since the word (pneuma) is neuter in any case, rendering the Spirit a kind of female member of an otherwise male Trinity. While this is perhaps unnecessary and certainly exegetically flawed, it might be preferable to the impersonal “it” used by Dening.

The arrangement of the material is thematic rather than chronological, covering such areas as liturgy, the Eucharist, priestliness, lay ministry, and the role of women, each followed by a collection of personal stories. One controlling feature of the narrative is the responses to the sweeping changes brought into the Catholic Church by Vatican II, including vernacular and ‘folk’ Masses, a stress on the ministry of the whole people of God, a greater ecumenism, and a lessening of the penitential aspects of piety in favour of more celebratory features. While most in these Jesuit parishes embraced such changes with enthusiasm the voices of others who found the changes unsettling and difficult to accept have not been silenced. As for Dening himself it is clear that the prophetic call for reform that issued to a large extent from the leadership and genius of Angelo Roncalli (Pope John XXIII) was a gift of grace to be embraced with joy. That many church leaders, including John Paul II, failed to make the most of the opportunity these changes afforded is deeply regretted by Dening. The phrase ‘the Church-in-Rome’ functions throughout as a kind of cipher for the institutional church, slow to embrace the promise and enact the provisions of Vatican II.

Some readers may find the lack of historical material frustrating at times. It is only in dealing with the Second Vatican Council in the Prologue and in the early history of the three parishes in chapters 2 and 3 that much history writing in the usual sense is to be found. Beyond that, we have for the most part personal impressions, and theological and devotional reflections. But this is after all the kind of book Dening set out to write. He is by his own admission not the kind of historian who is ‘inclined to engage in celebrating the metric moments of institutions’. When first asked by his friend Peter Quinn, SJ, to take on the project he warned, ‘You had better see what sort of history I would write before you really ask me’ (24). The ‘sort of history’ he has written is an imaginative, poetic, and deeply religious ‘history from below’ that is a fitting testimony to the faith and witness of the Catholic Christians of Sydney’s North Shore, the place the Aborigines called Wallumetta (‘the Other Side’). He has written the kind of history that helps us see that that ‘there is no othersidedeness in the Spirit’ (27).

ENDNOTES

1 Moltmann reverted to the masculine in his later work, Spirit in the Trinity and the Kingdom (1991).
REFERENCES

