

# *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century* Alan P.F. Sell

Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006, xi + 239  
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## SUMMARY

At its title indicates, this book, which comprises Alan Sell's 2006 *Didsbury Lectures*, seeks to outline and examine the landscape and rich contribution of nonconformist theology in the twentieth century, particularly in England. Divine providence, the New Theology, baptism, Feminist Theology, Natural Theology, Process Theology, Calvinism, God's Fatherhood, merely-Incarnational theology, the reception of Karl Barth into British theological conversation, and contemporary theological education all receive due and meticulous attention. Sell's interweaving of history, theology, and anecdotal stories – ever with an eye on the contemporary and future scene – make this volume an indispensable study for those interested in the shape that theology took in twentieth-century Britain and the role that British non-conformists played in that shaping.

## RÉSUMÉ

Ce livre reprend les conférences de Didsbury donnée par Alan Sell en 2006. Il présente et examine la riche contribution de la théologie non conformiste au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle, en particulier en Angleterre. Il traite de façon méticuleuse de la question de la providence divine, de la Nouvelle Théologie, de la question du baptême, de la théologie féministe, de la théologie naturelle, de la théologie du process, du calvinisme, de la question de la paternité divine, de la théologie de l'incarnation, de l'influence de Karl Barth sur les discussions théologiques en Grande Bretagne, et de la formation théologique contemporaine. Sell mêle l'histoire, la théologie et les anecdotes, en gardant toujours un œil sur la scène contemporaine et future. Cet ouvrage est indispensable pour ceux qui s'intéressent à la tournure prise par la théologie en Grande Bretagne au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et à l'apport des non conformistes.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Wie der Titel anzeigt versucht dieses Buch, das Alan Sells *Didbury Lectures* aus dem Jahre 2006 umfasst, die Landschaft und den reichhaltigen Beitrag zu skizzieren und zu untersuchen, den die nonkonformistische Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert insbesondere in England geleistet hat. Den folgenden Themen wird gebührend und sorgfältig Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt: Göttliche Vorsehung, die Neue Theologie, Taufe, feministische Theologie, natürliche Theologie, Prozesstheologie, Calvinismus, Vaterschaft Gottes, ausschließlich inkarnatorische Theologie, die Rezeption Karl Barths im britischen theologischen Gespräch und die gegenwärtige theologische Ausbildung. Sells Verknüpfung von Geschichte, Theologie und anekdotischen Erzählungen – immer mit einem Blick für die heutige und zukünftige Szene – macht diesen Band zu einer unverzichtbaren Studie für diejenigen, die an der Gestalt interessiert sind, die die Theologie in Großbritannien im 20. Jahrhundert

erhielt sowie an der Rolle, die britische Nonkonformisten bei dieser Gestaltung spielten.

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With the publication of Professor Alan P.F. Sell's 2006 *Didsbury Lectures*, Sell deservedly joins the distinguished ranks of biblical scholars, historians and theologians who have also accepted the invitation by Nazarene Theological College to give these annual lectures.

Despite significant works by historians Clyde Binfield, Dale Johnson, David Bebbington, Mark Hopkins, and Jim Gordon, and the wonderful four-volume series of *Protestant Nonconformist Texts* (Ashgate), Paternoster's 'Studies in Evangelical History and Thought' series, and numerous other works by Sell himself, it could still be argued that too little ink has been spilt in recent years exploring the enormously rich contribution that non-conformist theologians have made, and continue to make, to theological conversation and Church life. Sell's book needs to be considered among the best that continue to fill a gap in this area.

*Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century* is broad in its scope, offering a well-textured balance of historical contextualisation, theological grappling, contemporary application, and anecdotal stories. Areas of divine providence, the New Theology (associated with R.J. Campbell), baptism, Feminist Theology, Natural Theology, Process Theology, Calvinism, God's Fatherhood, merely-Incarnational theology, the reception of Karl Barth into British theological conversation, and contemporary theological education all fall under Sell's discerning gaze.

In the first lecture, Sell provides an erudite survey, a 'bird's-eye-view of the landscape' (p. 38) of Protestant nonconformist theology in the twentieth century, particular the century's first half. The historical terrain, theological motifs, and ecclesiological realities, and their ongoing relevance for understanding and informing contemporary theological thought, debate and practice are all well covered in this chapter, which sets the tone for the remaining three.

Sell then turns in Lecture Two to the 'doctrinal peaks' of Christology (pp. 41-66), Pneumatology (pp. 66-71), the Trinity (pp. 71-84), and confessions of faith (pp. 84-89), attending fruitfully to each within their historical context while harnessing contributions from an enormous range of nonconformist theologians. Just one example:

No Nonconformist theologian did more in the last two decades of the twentieth century to place the Trinity in the centre of theological debate than Colin Gunton. So all-embracing is his Trinitarian vision (an analogy might be drawn with the centrality of the Cross in the writings of P.T. Forsyth) that it is difficult to place him in a study of this kind. (p. 81)

In the third chapter, Sell turns to discuss one of his great passions: ecumenism. Herein he seeks to address a number of questions: How did the mainline Noncon-

formist traditions understand themselves in the twentieth century? How did they reach out to one another and to more distant communions during the so-called 'ecumenical century'? Is their traditional witness as Free Churchpeople still required, or even viable? Sell provides an at times provocative discussion on the relationship between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism (pp. 91-96), wherein he cites favourably the Congregationalist historian Bernard Lord Manning: 'Protestantism... is not the opposite of medieval Catholicism: it is simply an improved kind of catholicism. Protestantism is not a negative thing. It is a positive re-statement of catholic truth' (p. 93). True catholicity, Sell argues, is not found in a book, nor in a Church, but in that true authority over book, Church and conscience – Jesus Christ, and the effectual word of his Cross, who and which is, as Forsyth noted, that 'to which the conscience owes its life' (p. 92).

Sell then accents the many published nonconformist studies on ecclesiology. It is a breathtaking reminder of the central place that ecclesiology has played in informing nonconformist theology, from John Oman to R. Newton Flew to Leslie Newbigin and Daniel Strange. He notes that while all these contributors were not singing the same part, and 'occasionally a faintly discordant note was struck', they were 'clearly singing in the same choir' (p. 99), which is a fresh reminder of the breadth within the tradition. In more than one way were these theologians non-conformists.

With a newly sharpened pencil, the author turns our attention to 'an abiding issue of global significance' (p. 136): that of the historic episcopate. After noting that nonconformists are not simply Protestants but 'Free Church people', and as such have played significant roles in various ecumenical councils, he suggests that 'the question for us now is whether there is any theological topic distinctive of Free Churches as a whole and not of one denomination only, on which the Nonconformists of England might be expected to speak with a united voice? Living alongside the only remaining Anglican established Church as they do, the obvious candidate is the establishment question' (p. 136). Sell recalls that nonconformists have not been those who have denied the necessity of the state recognition of religion; 'it was, after all, the state which accorded religious toleration' (p. 137). Nonconformists have well understood the appropriateness of proper Church-state relations, but have (rightfully) questioned the very principal of a national church. Again, he cites Forsyth: 'What we protest against is not the abuses but the existence, the principle, of a national church'. The very existence of a state church denies the Church's catholicity. Again, Forsyth: 'However Establishment may seem to work at a given time, *the thing is wrong*... For my own part, any doubt of the truth of our Nonconformist principles would mean doubt of the truth of what is most distinctive in Christianity itself – free faith, free action, and free giving, as the response of men who have been moved and changed

and controlled by the free gift of God and grace in Jesus Christ' (p. 137). A state church is, as Congregationalist John Whale once noted, a 'contradiction in terms' (p. 139). Rightly suspicious of past attempts towards dialogue based on purely pragmatic principles, Sell looks hopefully towards the future, and towards those Anglicans and Free Church folk who are currently engaged in discussion about issues of establishment. He pleads: 'May their outlook be ecumenical and their thoughts in the first place be theological' (p. 144).

The final chapter, entitled 'Rivers, Rivulets – and Encroaching Desert?', turns our attention to eschatology, the atonement, and a collection of other themes that Sell identifies as important for understanding nonconformist theology, but have largely been overlooked in the preceding chapters. He recollects that debates concerning the final fate of the impenitent were hotly contested, not least by Unitarians. Sell's focus here is mainly on notions of universalism, annihilationism and the possibility of post-mortem probation. The discussion is fascinating, revealing again that there really is nothing new under the sun. For example, Sell introduces us to Sydney H. Mellone, Principal of Manchester Unitarian College, and his 1916 work *Eternal Life Here and Hereafter*, who writes,

The assertion, sometimes made, that Universalism means in effect 'it does not matter what we do, for we shall be all right in the end' is unworthy of discussion. Universalism rests on the same foundation on which rests our belief in the eternity of goodness and truth in God... The ethical motive of belief in immortality means that compensation and retribution, to be real, must be redemptive. The religious motive means that final communion with God is the destiny of every soul, and not alone of those who know in this present by living experience what such communion is. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever (cited on p. 150.)

The chapter, and the book, concludes with Sell offering some hard hitting words as he critically reflects on the demise of the Church's vocabulary, the integrity-eroding effects of political correctness on inter-faith dialogue, the revival of interest in the Trinity during the last 30 years, the side-lining of the atonement in the Church's proclamation, the necessity for theologians to not merely speak 'from faith to faith' but to commend the faith to others, and the current state of theological education, particularly in England. On the latter Sell argues that the Church desperately needs a more thoroughly trained clergy than it is currently receiving.

As a devoted churchman who served two pastorates in the United Kingdom from 1959 to 1968, and who has served internationally as a theological educator since, and so not unaware of the practical and financial hurdles that pastoral ministry candidates, their families, their churches and their colleges are often forced to jump, Sell urges churches to take steps to 'ensure that their younger

candidates at least receive a full and rigorous academic course. If this means fewer visits to hospitals and prisons during a candidate's college years, so be it; required in-service training for licensed probationers prior to ordination is not impossible to provide, and it is never more readily received than by those at the pastoral "coal face". He continues,

I see no viable substitute for practitioners' having a solid grounding in the Bible, a thorough acquaintance with the history of Christian thought (which is broader than historical theology, but includes both it and the linguistic competence to read salient texts), and sufficient philosophical-analytical skills to probe presuppositions, analyse arguments and avoid the writing of incoherent gobbledegook. None of this is achieved without real time and effort; and the churches would do well to encourage in all possible ways those ministerial candidates whose gifts take them in these directions, and whose academic lungs can withstand prolonged immersion in extensive and sometimes choppy waters (p. 191).

Disappointingly, Sell pays relatively little attention to the second half of the twentieth century. Apart from infrequent and brief discussions of the contributions of Paul Fiddes and Colin Gunton, by and large the lectures are heavily weighted towards the century's first half which, to be fair, reflects the greatest volume of non-conformist material published in the twentieth century. As a consequence, the relatively slight contributions from within Pentecostalism, the Brethren, Black churches, and independent evangelical churches are all but ignored. This, however, most certainly says more about the dearthly state of more recent nonconformity than it does about Sell's treatment of the material. Congregationalist (receiving the most attention), Baptist, Methodist and Unitarian contributions are, however, well represented. Some readers may also be disappointed that Sell limits his discussion to the nonconformist scene in England and, to some extent, in Wales. While a treatment that seriously took in any more would expand the book's length considerably, and perhaps with little profit, the title of the book could have been more revelatory here. That said, the volume is no poorer for this limitation of scope.

The volume includes a helpful list of biographical references of some of the major personalities discussed in the lectures, as well as an impressive bibliography. Those concerned with the life and theological contribution of the nonconformist family specifically, and those interested in the shape that theology took in twentieth-century Britain more generally (and may be taking in this century) will be prodigiously served by reading this book. It is an encyclopedic, but accessible, study!

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*A Theology of Work:  
Work and the New Creation*

Darrell Cosden

Paternoster Theological Monographs; Nottingham:  
Paternoster Press, 2004,

xvi + 207 pp., £19.99. pb, ISBN 1-84227-332-9

*The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*

Darrell Cosden

Nottingham: Paternoster Press, 2006, vii + 149 pp.,  
£8.99. pb, ISBN 1-84227-417-1

SUMMARY

In this pair of books Darrell Cosden aims to remind us that human work is both essentially part of what it means to be human and contributes to the building of the eternal kingdom. This is a welcome attempt to revalorize contemporary Christian thinking about work, though conflating an appropriate discussion about what we ought to aim for in our work with an evaluation of its actual goodness.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesen beiden Büchern beabsichtigt Darrell Cosden, uns daran zu erinnern, dass menschliche Arbeit sowohl ein wesentlicher Teil dessen ist, was es heißt, Mensch zu sein, als auch, dass sie einen Beitrag zum Aufbau des ewigen Königreiches leistet. Dies ist ein willkommener Versuch, gegenwärtiges christliches Denken über Arbeit neu zu bewerten, auch wenn eine angemessene Diskussion darüber, wonach wir mit unserer Arbeit streben sollen, mit einer Bewertung der tatsächlichen Güte der Arbeit verschmolzen wird.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans ces deux ouvrages, Darrell Cosden rappelle que le travail joue un rôle essentiel dans la vie de l'être humain et contribue en même temps à la construction du royaume éternel. L'auteur revalorise ainsi la pensée chrétienne contemporaine sur le travail de façon heureuse, en réfléchissant sur les objectifs que nous devrions viser par notre travail ainsi qu'en cherchant à apprécier ce que le travail a présentement de bon.

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In this pair of books Darrell Cosden presents the fruit of his doctoral work (St. Andrews) in academic and popular formats. The title of the popular work, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*, aptly summarizes the project as a whole, which aims to remind us that human work is both essentially part of what it means to be human and contributes to the building of that eternal kingdom which will not be burned away in the judgment. This is a welcome attempt to revalorize contemporary Christian thinking about work, though the solution proposed is not without problems of its own. The books target a mainly evangelical audience, and *Heavenly Good* presents a readable and engaging set of criticisms of the terribly