

REALNEWS

Reflections at Day's End

No. 11 March/April 2010



**Castle Bravo Thermonuclear Test
Bikini Atoll, March 1st 1954**

Where Do We Take Our Instructions?

While driving through a small country town in Gippsland, my wife and I stopped briefly for a take-away meal. As it was being prepared, we visited an opportunity shop a few doors down the street to see what unexpected treasures it might hold. As usual, I was drawn to the dusty bookshelf and began to scan the titles. My attention was drawn to a slim volume written by British journalist and author Malcolm Muggeridge in the early 1970s. Its title was "Something Beautiful For God" and it was based on his BBC program about the work of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

As I took it off the shelf, I clearly remembered the voice of my long-departed mother telling me nearly 40 years ago that I should read the book. I never did read it at the time. I found a one-dollar coin in my pocket, paid for the book, and went on to collect our meal.

While reading it over the next few days, I recalled how my mother had ventured out to the Missionaries of Charity convent in Fitzroy in order to "help" the Indian sisters in their work with the broken and homeless men of inner city Melbourne. She only managed three or four visits. It proved to be too painful for one of her disposition. I can still remember the tears streaming down her cheeks as she recounted her experience of those visits.

We tend as a society to remove from sight those realities that may disturb our sense of order, of control, of comfort, of civilised pleasantness. It is very tempting to arrange things so that one lives a

predictable and well-cushioned life shielded from the human wreckage that lies just below the surface. Yet something as simple as spending an hour or two in a railway carriage outside of peak-hour can reveal how wafer-thin the veneer of social order and civility can be. And the surprising number of young people begging for food and money in and around the streets of central Melbourne reveals further what lies behind the façade of affluence and self-satisfaction that is everywhere projected. One does not need to walk the streets of Calcutta to know the ubiquitousness of the dispossessed and the privation and deep need that everywhere burdens the lives of so many.

Mother Teresa was born of a peasant family in Albania in 1910. Her father died when she was a young child and she was raised in the simple faith of her community. She joined the Loreto Sisters at the age of 18, having decided when she was 12 years old that she would serve as a missionary in India. After a short stay in Ireland, she arrived in north India in 1929. Over the next 20 years, she formalised her religious vows and served as a teacher in a Loreto convent school for girls in Calcutta.

In 1948 after experiencing a profoundly transformative personal revelation, she departed the convent, replaced her regular Loreto habit with a plain blue-lined cotton sari, and immersed herself in the street life of Calcutta. After securing modest accommodation, she immediately started a small school for girls and began visiting the destitute and the dying who were everywhere to be found in the city. Her work was sanctioned by Rome in 1952 and the small group of women that had formed around her took on the name "Missionaries of Charity."



By the time Mother Teresa departed this world in 1997, her order had grown from a group of 13 women living in a small convent in Calcutta to over 600 missions housing 4,500 nuns in 123 different countries. Among those missions were numerous hospices, centres for the care of leprosy, tuberculosis and AIDS sufferers, orphanages, refuges for the destitute and homeless, and schools. This simple woman from Albania had in a short 50 years brought selfless service and loving presence into the lives of the most neglected and abandoned among us in over 100 countries throughout the world.

Earlier this year, I happened to tune in to Radio National and caught the unmistakable tarnished tones of Christopher Hitchens speaking at what was obviously a large public gathering. My attention sharpened when I heard an oblique mention of Mother Teresa's name, and roars of laughter and applause from a clearly adulatory audience. I then recalled an article I had seen some months earlier in which Hitchens had relentlessly attacked the life and work of Mother Teresa.

I decided to look into this a little further. There was no shortage of material on the Net. It is no secret that Hitchens has had it in not only for organised religion, but particularly for Mother Teresa for many years. One abundant source of written, audio and video material relating to

Hitchens and his ideas was the website of his close friend, Richard Dawkins. There is clearly a brotherhood of sorts among a small and vocal cadre of militant atheists who have made it their mission to dispel the darkness and folly of religious thought and aspiration with the enlightened understanding that this world is an essentially groundless and meaningless phenomenon wrought of the play of random chance and mindless chaos.

The English-speaking world was introduced to Mother Teresa and her work through Malcolm Muggeridge's film "Something Beautiful For God" which was broadcast by the BBC in 1969. Twenty-five years later, the English-speaking world was given a differing view of Mother Teresa and her work by Christopher Hitchens. His film "Hell's Angel", co-written with his then ally Tariq Ali, was broadcast by the BBC in 1994. Like Muggeridge, Hitchens followed up with a book, which was provocatively titled, "The Missionary Position."

Hitchens' film is a breathtaking assault on Mother Teresa. In it, he describes her as "a demagogue, obscurantist and a servant of earthly powers". After dismissing "that old fraud and mountebank" Malcolm Muggeridge, Hitchens begins his harangue by criticising the modest facilities and rudimentary methods used in the *House for the Dying* in Calcutta. Nowhere is there any acknowledgement that Mother Teresa and her nuns were working voluntarily under near-impossible conditions with no institutional support. Nowhere is there any mention that the derelicted men and women in the *House of the Dying* had been literally gathered up from the streets, having been ignored and sidestepped by passers-by. And nowhere is there any mention that even if they had had been taken to any of the

public hospitals in Calcutta, they would not have been admitted. Such was the reality of life for the dispossessed in Calcutta.

Hitchins does not bother mentioning that Mother Teresa and her nuns always maintained respect for the wishes and beliefs of those who were brought to the *House of the Dying*. Muslims were read the Koran, Hindus were brought water from the Ganges, and Catholics were administered the Sacraments. From Hitchens' elevated perspective, such ministrations are quaint but essentially useless exercises.

Speaking in front of a grotesque caricature of Mother Teresa which was as an ever-present background image, Hitchens directed his silken vehemence towards her views of abortion and her meetings with politicians of influence. He effectively glossed over her work with the dying, with lepers, with the orphaned and the homeless as a well-meaning but misguided and inconsequential form of social work.

Nowhere does Hitchens reflect on the fact that, unlike himself, Mother Teresa's place was always with the lowly, with the abandoned and with the damaged; that her work was based on love and on a transcendent vision of humanity and divinity; that she was a simple but strong-minded nun working selflessly within the framework of an institutional Catholicism laden with its own share of anachronisms and neuroses.

Regardless of Hitchins' cynical and stonehearted polemic, the fact remains that through the drive and dedication of this woman, hundreds of thousands of individuals have been graced with the experience of human warmth and of loving presence during their time of greatest frailty and vulnerability. Like Brother Francis of Assisi before her,

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was gifted with the capacity to see and to honour the presence of Divinity within every broken life that she encountered.

We are assailed on all fronts by conflicting views of what is in our interests and what is not, of what is correct and what is erroneous, of what is necessary and what is expedient, of what is fact and what is fable. Argumentation may win or lose debates, but matters of human truth cleave more to simple turnings of the heart than clever turnings of the tongue.

Where shall we take our instructions?

THE WOUNDED EARTH

WHEN PROTECTORS BECOME DESTROYERS

The Ruin of Rongelap



While the colours of the rising sun were beginning to play over the skies of a still Pacific morning on the first day of March 1954, a second sun suddenly and furiously erupted from Namu Island in the Bikini atoll. It carried the fruition of an unflinching determination by the nuclear physicist Edward Teller to gift the world with a weapon as powerful as the sun itself, a weapon based on the fusion of hydrogen atoms.

Within one second of that infernal detonation, an immense fireball 7

kilometres in diameter had formed. In less than a minute, the fireball had risen to a height of 14 kilometres. Eight minutes later, the fiery cloud had billowed out to a height of 40 kilometres and had spread out over a distance of 100 kilometres. Even so, it continued expanding outwards at a rate of more than six kilometres a minute. Beneath this unearthly fury, the Bikini atoll had been riven in two by a gaping crater two kilometres wide and nearly 200 feet deep.

The clever men who had worked so hard to create such a weapon were well pleased. The 80,000 inhabitants of the Marshall Islands, in which the Bikini atoll was situated, were to suffer for generations to come.

Rongelap atoll lies 170 kilometres to the east of Bikini. On the morning of March 1st 1954, the sky lit up as it had never lit up before. The atoll shuddered as from an earthquake and a horrific roar filled the air. A little later, white flakes began to fall from the sky, covering everything on the atoll with a layer of ash up to two centimetres thick. The sky had turned a ghastly grey, and families gathered together wondering what had happened. The children played with the strange “snow” fallen from the heavens. Some even tasted it to see what it might be.

One day later, some Americans arrived by boat. They were wearing full protective clothing and proceeded to take a number of measurements with their Geiger counters. According to the islanders, they came and went within 20 minutes, and did not speak to any of them during that time. A number of US navy boats returned the next day, more than 48 hours after the initial blast, and began to evacuate the islanders.

Even before the Americans arrived, most of the inhabitants of Rongelap had

developed symptoms. Many were vomiting and had developed diarrhoea. Within a few days, their skin started itching and burning and began to develop black-pigmented areas that became ulcerated and infected. Within a fortnight, most of their hair had fallen out, and blood tests showed significant abnormalities. This was but the beginning of a tribulation that continues to sear the lives of three generations of Marshall Islanders.

Further afield, the radioactive plume from the *Castle Bravo* atomic test had settled on numerous inhabited atolls in the Marshall Islands archipelago, exposing many thousands of their inhabitants to varying levels of radioactivity.

Hiroshima was the first triumph of a group of new Prometheans intent on unleashing undreamed of destructive power in the service of the forces of war. The first atomic explosion in human history, not-so-cryptically named *Trinity*, had lit up the morning skies of the New Mexico desert in July 1945. That awesome event inspired J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Manhattan Project, to ecstatically sing the chant of power from the Bhagavad Gita: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”



Within a year of the atomic slayings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US military had claimed the Marshall Islands as their hidden testing ground for nuclear

weapons. As a result of backroom negotiations, the United Nations handed over the Marshall Islands to the US as a Protectorate in July 1947. But in June 1946, a full year before the UN handover, the US Navy exploded a 23-kiloton atomic bomb above Bikini atoll. Three weeks later, they detonated a similar device 90 feet below the atoll. The Promethean Games had begun in earnest.

At the end of World War II, Stalin lost no time in ensuring that the Soviets would not be left behind in the race for nuclear supremacy. Armies of engineers and scientists were put to work and within four years had constructed a replica of the Fat Man bomb dropped on Nagasaki. The Soviet version was detonated in August 1949 and had an explosive power of 22 kilotons, or the equivalent of 22,000 tons of TNT.

This successful detonation by the Soviets drove US military planners into a frenzy of renewed activity. They soon enlisted the support of the Hungarian physicist Edward Teller who, even while working on the Manhattan Project, was dreaming of the feasibility of producing a fusion bomb based on deuterium and tritium, the isotopes of hydrogen. He understood that theoretically, there was no limit to the explosive power of such a weapon.



After the Soviet atomic test in 1949, Teller set to work convincing his colleagues that the time had come to develop a

more powerful weapon based on thermonuclear fusion. Both Oppenheimer and Enrico Fermi had voiced their

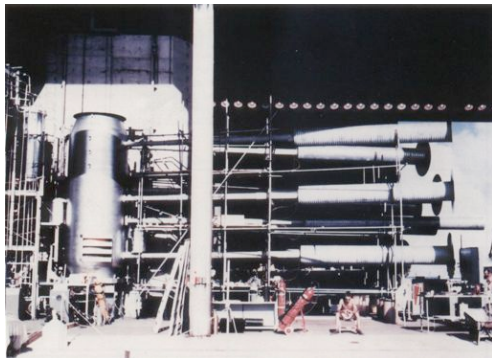
opposition to the construction of such a bomb. But the successful Soviet atomic test changed everything. After intense lobbying at the highest levels by Teller and his military supporters, US president Harry Truman rubber-stamped the project in 1950.

Many of the nuclear physicists who had worked on the Manhattan Project were contacted. Within a short time, a group of 20 scientists calling themselves “The Matterhorn Gang” were furiously working up theoretical formulae to compute the progress of a man-made thermonuclear combustion process. The calculations proved so formidable, that IBM programmers in New York, the entire computation department of the University of Pennsylvania, and the operators of the large experimental computers owned by the US government were enlisted in the project. Most of the available computing power in the United States at the time was handed over to the scientists at Los Alamos.

Work began shortly after on the construction of a large-scale heavy water nuclear reactor at Savannah River in South Carolina. This facility was to produce the tritium that enabled the production of a massive arsenal of thermonuclear weapons by the US over the next forty years.

In less than three years, the previously deserted Eniwetok atoll in the Marshall Islands had become home to a six-storey structure built especially to house the first hydrogen bomb, innocuously named *Ivy Mike*. It contained an immense cooling apparatus to maintain temperatures at minus 250° Celsius (minus 417° Fahrenheit) in order to liquefy the deuterium used to fuel the bomb. The whole assembly weighed over 60 tons. This structure was linked to a two-mile long tunnel filled with helium, which enabled scientists to determine

what occurred in those infinitesimally small moments during which the fusion reaction commenced.



Despite the fact that Teller had driven the process from the start, he chose not to join the audience of over 10,000 mainly military observers gathered around Bikini Atoll to witness the event preferring, rather, to monitor the explosion on a seismograph in a Californian laboratory. He reasoned that if the detonation was successful, its shock waves would be easily detectable on the US West Coast, 8,000 km away. He had reasoned correctly. Long before word of the event could arrive through the usual channels, Teller jubilantly reported the success of the operation to his colleagues at Los Alamos, and to his political sponsors in Washington.

The blast exploded with a force of 10.4 megatons, the equivalent of 10.4 million tons of TNT. It completely vaporised the structure in which the bomb was housed leaving a crater more than a mile wide and forming an immense mushroom cloud 100 miles wide and 25 miles in height. The blast destroyed all life on the immediately surrounding islands.

Teller and his group immediately set to work on building a new bomb that would be “deliverable” by air to any nominated target. In the design that followed, the liquid deuterium used in the first thermonuclear explosion was replaced by solid lithium deuteride. This could be

detonated in such a way as to split the lithium atoms into heavy isotopes of hydrogen, thereby providing the necessary fuel for a thermonuclear fusion process. This new design formed the basis of the weapon that was exploded on Bikini atoll on March 1st 1954.

Despite their most careful calculations, Teller and his group seriously underestimated the explosive power of their second more portable version. They had predicted a yield of five megatons, but when their baby burst forth into the world, it flashed out at an astonishing 15 megatons – a thousand times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima - and spewed millions of tons of radioactive debris throughout the region.

Stalin and his scientists had in the meantime been watching these developments with great interest. On August 12th 1953, nine months after *Ivy Mike*, the Soviets exploded their own thermonuclear device. It came in at 400 kilotons, nearly 30 times more powerful than the bomb used in Hiroshima. Unlike the first US hydrogen bomb however, the Soviets had produced a useable weapon that could easily be dropped from a plane. Two years later, the Soviets detonated a more respectable 1.6-megaton hydrogen bomb at Semipalatinsk in northeast Kazakhstan.

The party got progressively wilder. Within six years, the Soviets exploded *Tsar Bomba*, a mother of a bomb that clocked in at 58 megatons. In human language, that single bomb carried the explosive power of 58 million tons of TNT. At the time, Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev boasted that his scientists and engineers could easily have done better, but were restrained by the fact that the Soviet Union was not large enough to absorb a shock that would have shattered windows 4,000 miles away.

Teller had been correct in his conjectures. There was in fact no limit to the explosive power that could be released in thermonuclear detonations.

Writing from Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky a year after the *Tsar Bomba* explosion, Cistercian monk Thomas Merton reflected:

“Up to now (August 1962) there have been 106 nuclear tests since testing began again (almost a year). Thirty-one of these by the USSR, seventy-four by the USA, and one by Britain, in the USA (Nevada). The USA has made twenty-nine atmospheric tests, twenty-six in the South Pacific and three in Nevada. The USA has also made forty-four underground tests and one in the stratosphere. Total of all nuclear tests since the beginning: USA 229, USSR 86, UK 22, France 5.

Grand total: 342 tests, of which 282 were in the atmosphere.

Nice going, boys!” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1965)

But it was not such nice going for the people of the world, and more particularly, for the people of the Marshall Islands who had in the 12 years between 1946 and 1958, weathered the fallout of 67 atmospheric tests conducted by the US military.

Within a decade of the *Castle Bravo* test, 90% of the children who were under 12 years old on Rongelap at the time of the explosion had developed thyroid tumours. Marshall Islanders continue to have one of the world’s highest rates of abnormalities of the thyroid.

Many of the women from Rongelap suffered stillbirths and miscarriages in the years after *Castle Bravo*. Beverley Kever, author of “News Zero: The New York Times and The Bomb” describes the experiences of Ainri, a young 18 year

old woman who was pregnant with her first child at the time of the 1954 test:

“After the blast, Ainri gave birth to a son, Robert. His thyroid glands were so damaged that he became dwarfed. The glands were later removed, consigning him to a lifelong regimen of medication. Ainri got pregnant again and gave birth, she said, to “a bunch of grapes that had to be pulled out of me.” Twice more Ainri got pregnant, she said, and gave birth to children who appeared to be normal but died several days later. Another son, Alex, survived, but again with damaged thyroid glands. Ainri herself has thyroid problems: two new growths recently (2004) appeared there.”

There is a more sinister dimension to the experience of the Marshall Islanders that has only recently come to light. Even before the *Castle Bravo* detonation, a research document entitled Project 4.1 carried the statement that the Bikini blast would enable a “study of responses of human beings exposed to significant beta and gamma radiation due to fallout from high yield weapons.” That particular document was circulated on November 10, 1953, four months before the test.

What had been observed after Hiroshima and Nagasaki was simply not enough. More data was needed and the Marshall Islands, being at a suitable remove from the US mainland, provided an opportunity for some useful “information” to be gathered. Those who oversaw the “management” of the Marshallese affected by the atomic tests knew exactly what they were doing.

The irradiated inhabitants of Rongelap were removed from the island three days after the initial blast. They have been monitored on and off ever since. In 1957, they were returned to the island by US authorities. During their three-year absence, the US continued to carry out both atomic and thermonuclear weapon tests in the Marshall Islands. A further 11 thermonuclear tests had been conducted

on Bikini atoll, while an additional eight atomic and three thermonuclear tests were carried out on Eniwetok atoll.

No attempt was ever made to clear Rongelap of the immense amounts of fallout to which it had been exposed. The Rongelapese were that it was perfectly safe for them to return to their ancestral lands. They were, however, advised to avoid the more northern islands in their fishing expeditions. It was also suggested to them that they should eat mainly imported canned food.

In 1956, the year before their repatriation to Rongelap, Merril Eisenbudd, an official with the Atomic Energy Commission, had this to say about the “data” being gathered for Project 4.1:

“Now, data of this type has never been available. While it is true that these people do not live the way westerners do, civilized people, it is nonetheless true that they are more like us than the mice.”

And after they had been returned to Rongelap, Dr Robert Conard, head of the Atomic Energy Commission medical surveillance team wrote in his 1957 annual report:

“The habitation of these people on Rongelap Island affords the opportunity for a most valuable ecological radiation study on human beings. . . . The various radionuclides present on the island can be traced from the soil through the food chain and into the human being.”

During the 1970s, the inhabitants of Rongelap became increasingly distrustful of reassurances by US government representatives about the safety of their land. A number of children had been born with birth defects and others had been diagnosed with leukaemia and thyroid tumours. They sought independent advice.

In 1983, the people of Rongelap were eventually provided with copies of a translation of a US Department of Energy document prepared in 1978. The document stated conclusively that many parts of the island they had lived on since 1957 had a contamination rating of Level 3, the same as that deemed for both Bikini and Eniwetok atolls where all human habitation was forbidden.

Their worst fears were realised. They immediately approached the US authorities and asked to be evacuated from the island. Their request was summarily refused and they were again reassured by the US Department of Energy that Rongelap was “safe” and that there was no cause for concern.

Yet they were desperately concerned about their own and their children’s futures. Again, they sought outside help. The Greenpeace yacht *Rainbow Warrior* travelled to Rongelap in May 1985 in order to relocate all of the inhabitants to Mejato Island, 180 kilometres away. This was to be the last action of the *Rainbow Warrior*.



Two months later, the Greenpeace yacht was on the bottom of Auckland Harbour after having been torn apart by two bombs planted by agents of the

French government.

In 1988, the US government was forced to acknowledge the extent of the contamination of Rongelap declaring parts of the island group “forbidden territory” and in the words of Beverley Keever, “recommending that the

remaining part would be safe only if inhabitants ate imported food *for the next 30 to 50 years*" (italics in original). During the 28 years from 1957 and 1985, the inhabitants of Rongelap had been continuously and knowingly exposed to dangerous levels of Caesium 137, Strontium 90 and a white-hot cauldron of long-lived radioactive isotopes that had settled everywhere.

In the time since their relocation by the *Rainbow Warrior*, some reparations have been made through the US Nuclear Claims Tribunal. Over 1,800 Marshall Islanders received some financial compensation from the US government for the leukaemia, cancers of the oesophagus, stomach, small intestine, pancreas and bone, and severe growth retardation due to thyroid damage that they have suffered. But Keever observes: "46% of affected islanders died before they were fully paid for their injuries."

Clean-up operations on Rongelap began in 1999, with massive amounts of potassium being shipped to the island. This was added to the soil in order to decrease the uptake of radioactive caesium by plant life. Despite the unimaginable damage that has been done to their lands, the people of Rongelap are looking forward to soon returning to the islands that they have inhabited for over 4,000 years.

The story of Rongelap is not an isolated event in the sordid history of nuclear adventurism. Between 1945 and 1998, the US has conducted a total of 1,054 nuclear tests, over 330 of which were atmospheric. The Soviets have detonated over 700 nuclear weapons during the same period. Between 1966 and 1996, the French have carried out nearly 200 nuclear detonations - both atmospheric and underground - in Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls in Polynesia. China has conducted 45 tests, as has the UK, while

India, Pakistan and North Korea have between them exploded 14 nuclear devices.

The world has been irremediably altered by the nuclear tests conducted during the latter half of the twentieth century, a time in which we have also come to see the creation of a massively expensive medical system to treat a world-wide epidemic of childhood cancers and so-called "diseases of civilisation."

What we have witnessed during this time is the dehumanising dimension of certain aspects of the scientific endeavour. This is not a peculiar feature of twentieth century civilisation, but is evident in the calls of Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century to extract "nature's secrets" by whatever means possible. This attitude toward the natural world was further spurred by Rene Descartes in his declaration that life was essentially a clockwork mechanism that could be subjected to the demands and manipulations of the *res cogitans*, or the sphere of human thought and will.

The free expression of the seemingly limitless power of human rationality has come at the cost of distancing the human heart and human feeling from the determinations of so-called dispassionate science and research. Yet the present over-reach has brought in its train its own inherent breakdown. Having failed to cultivate the capacity to reflect on the human and natural consequences of our projection of power in the material world, we have lost sight of the sustaining forces that have enabled such projections to begin with. We are both in the world and of the world and as the air, earth, fire and water within which we live, move and have our being become progressively more damaged and more toxic, so too ourselves.

Within the sweep of history, the fate of the people of Rongelap is but another small stain in the wash of blood and grief that reaches far beyond the vast charnel grounds of time and empire.

The gift of human intelligence has yet to be sufficiently informed by the greater gift of human wisdom. The power of human will has yet to be sufficiently infused by the greater power of human love.

Further Sources

1. Beverley Keever's important paper "[Suffering, Secrecy, Exile. Bravo 50 years later](#)" published by Nuclear Age Peace Foundation describes many of the hidden dimensions of the plight of the Marshallese since the *Castle Bravo* detonation.
2. Glenn Alcalay's brief overview "[Atomic Atolls](#)" published March 12, 2010 by CommonDreams.org offers the perspective of an American anthropologist who served as a Peace Corps volunteer on in the Marshall Islands during the 1970s.
3. The [Acceptance Speech](#) given by Senator Jetan Anjain of Rongelap on receiving the Right Livelihood Award in December 9th, 1991 gives a brief but poignant account of the how the Rongelapese have had to deal with the deception and neglect perpetrated by US government officials over the past half-century.
4. For the more masochistically inclined, there is fascinating insight to be gained regarding the mindset of the scientists involved in the creation of both the atomic and thermonuclear weapons at Los Alamos in a series of video remembrances by [Edward Teller](#) recorded in June 1996.

LETTER FROM ALEXANDRA

The Disclosed Centre

Deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts. (Jeremiah 31:33)

It is always a good thing to lose the knack of crusading, to become a deserter

from rat races and other people's wars. How we need such conscientious objectors! Men and women who have finally grown suspicious of the game, those subversives who no longer have to buy and sell to save themselves and have lost the need to fall into line. We need them! We need a new band of discontents who refuse to live out take-away lives. People who have abandoned the crazed longing to enlarge themselves with empty promises, who can spin away from our bargain-hunting world and its astringent prizes.

Look hard enough and you will see there are many pilgrims leaving Babylon, not-so-lonely prophets looking for a wider promised land. You may see them walking more readily the less-is-more road, preferring to lose weight, growing humbler, smaller, kinder.

Little by little they walk the road, feeling things at first hand, slipping in through the gaps, deep into the middle of things.

Sometimes they are slow enough to find that there is room enough for everything, pausing between heartbeats to listen like lovers in the dark, finding that there is another conversation going on beneath the clamour of headlines.

Whatever the silence discloses to them never gets defined. They just know when to move on, letting the road do the talking, eyes wide open.

Whatever sermons they preach will always be made of flesh, whatever words they speak will be heavy with lived experience, spoken at stepping speed so as we have to keep on moving if we want to understand, inviting us to watch as well as listen. Spoken so that we too might walk as well as talk. Spoken at stepping speed so that it isn't hard to stop.

Whatever lessons these new prophets might teach will be too particular for listing, falling to earth in singular moments of committed living, mixing into the tangle of light and dark within us, calling for immediate response and recognition.

It is then we might find ourselves with our choices. Will it be the heart or the letter of the law that guides us? What instincts will we obey? Where will we find heart? How do we receive? What will we expose? What will we value? What can we create? What can we seek? What is worth knowing?

We may eventually find our answers in what we put our faith in and what we are faithful too, what we share and don't share, what we create or destroy, what we defend or do not defend, how we forgive or do not forgive. The pilgrims lessons are simple. But they are never easy.

Vincent Jewell
Alexandra, Victoria

BOOK REVIEW

Emanuel Swedenborg. Scientist and Mystic, Signe Toksvig, Faber and Faber, London, 1948



Visionary experience is integral to human nature. It finds expression in both organised religion and in personal revelation. Every

culture carries its own stories and most cultures honour those whose life-worlds are capable of bridging other realities. Despite the attempts of both materialist scientism and political tyrannies to negate the reality of the supramundane, it continues to irrupt into the lives of

many and carries its own revelatory power.

Emanuel Swedenborg was born into a powerful Lutheran household. His father had been Dean at the University of Upsala and went on to become Archbishop of Upsala. In his early adulthood, Emanuel Swedenborg managed to separate himself from his father's overbearing nature and his extreme and egotistical theologism.

Swedenborg was a very unusual man. He was an accomplished scholar of Latin, Greek and Hebrew texts. He was also a skilled mathematician who had mastered most of the sciences of his time including mineralogy, engineering and human physiology. Swedenborg occupied positions of great influence in the Swedish civil service. He had the ear of the king, and was regarded as a man of high ability. He was also a gifted visionary who, especially in his later years, inhabited multiple worlds.

The notion of soul was central to Swedenborg's thinking. He understood it to be the immaterial yet coherent force through which our material natures are animated. It is likely that as a young man, he was introduced to the ideas of Plotinus and of early Christian Neo-Platonist theologians and thinkers such as Origen and Dionysius. Little wonder then that the young William Blake was drawn to Swedenborg's ideas during the late 1700s.

Signe Toksvig's study sensitively opens the life and experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg and reflects on the difficulties experienced by the man in his quest to reconcile his supramundane experiences with his deep knowledge of the natural world and its demands, and his efforts to transmit his personal insights to others.

Many of Swedenborg's later writings describe the worlds that he comfortably inhabited and offer interpretations of his experiences in those worlds. They are part of the many-coloured literature of mystical experience. Although his writings may provide a broad base for the construction of systematic theories of spiritual descent, they nevertheless remain a personal record.

The usefulness of Swedenborg's vision rests in its confirmation of both numinous and luminous realities that are universally described and part of the life-world of many throughout history. The details of Swedenborg's vision may offer a fruitful basis for individual exploration, but ultimately, in these matters, one is better served by attending diligently and reflecting carefully on one's own experiences.

The essential task is to discern the universal within the particular.

Selected excerpts from Signe Toksvig's study of the life and work of Emanuel Swedenborg can be found on the [Lit. Reviews page](#) of the THP website in the "Mysticism" section of "The Wisdom Traditions" category.

POETICA

Dancing Dust

We stood in the light of day
Now we sit in the dark of night
Awaiting simple presence
And a return to the very moment

From this small cell
The day seems too hard driven
By those of might and power

But listen still

Soft footsteps fall upon the dust
And stir a gentle storm
That slowly gathers force

And when the drums beat louder still
That soft foot fall more fierce becomes

The earth can shake when men do dance
And call upon the Hidden One
As surely as it heaves and quakes
When atoms fuse and atoll breaks

Beat the drums my fine young men
And fill the night with pulse and promise
Bring to heel the sacred force
Bring to hand the moving light

Sing the song and dance the story
Call the tune and turn the earth