

A Review of Steven Ogden's "I met God in Bermuda" by Drew Hanlon

This is a book that logically follows the progressive realism of contemporary Christian theology and spirituality in the west.¹ It is also a book that raises many questions – not just about matters divine or spiritual – but implicitly about why has there been such inertia in mainstream Christian circles when dealing with liturgy, teaching, world-views, images of God and the God/world relationship and so many other matters of faith in Australia. It asks the tough questions: where is God in suffering? does Jesus matter? does the church matter?

This book is written by an academic theologian with a pastoral concern and a message that can make a difference in the everyday life of the church. I was left with a question about why it is that in Australia it takes an academic theologian to write such an engaging, provocative and accessible book. I put forward a thought: in Australia there seems to be an unwillingness from most clergy to put their necks on the line and suggest that there has been a radical paradigm shift in the way in which theology is being done in other parts of the world. I wonder if we have been afraid of finding our own voice in the way we do theology.

Another problem might be that for a variety of theological and sociological reasons in Australia we have grown up in various denominations in mainstream churches with a predominantly congregationalist mentality, which hinders the exploration of the difficult challenges and changes that a theologian such as Ogden puts before us. We have shrunk theologically as a culture, generally preferring to refer to the text or tradition rather than engage the text and the tradition as it reveals the face of God in the coal-face of our society. The church is not a place that encourages diversity and argument but conformity: "I'll remove funding if you challenge me". This congregationalist mentality can lead us into choosing easy options, to spiritual laziness and to a process where there is an unhealthy mutual dependency between priest/minister/pastor and congregation: one is dependent for a livelihood and is often encouraged not to upset the apple cart; the other generally comes not wanting to be challenged or encouraged to let the spirit blow where it will in the process of the absence and presence of God in the world around us.

This unwillingness to engage in such discussion is in contrast to an emergent field in theological/psychological/spiritual studies that allows the place of inter-subjectivity between people, groups, the world and God to be taken seriously in which we do not take as our 'first principles particular forms of dogma, liturgy or interpretations of the bible'. That is, our everyday experience is taken as a primary place of the manifestation of God. This is engaged with the tradition but interpretation of our experience is not forced through a particular ideological lens. Rather, we share the inter-subjective experience of loss and love, joy and despair, presence and absence – the experiences of death and resurrection in our lives.

¹ By progressive realism it is meant theologians like John A T Robinson and Carter Heyward, theologians who are post-theistic but who steadfastly believe in a divine reality that our language refers to. This is in contrast to non-realists like Don Cupitt who would argue that there is no referential reality that our God-talk refers too – hence non-realist.

This is the type of dangerous book that needed to be written, but can only be written by a professional theologian: it is risky for the priest in the vicarage or rectory to write because by and large our mainstream churches are obsessed with orthodoxy. As a church it is arguable we are not yet willing to face up to the difficult questions; we have not yet learned to hear different voices.

“Bermuda” is a book that is challenging and quite dense in parts. However, for the reader who spends time engaging with it carefully, the book provides an opportunity to experience the wondrous high of intellectual stimulation and also the depths of spiritual wisdom.

This being said, this is not a book for the feint-hearted. It is a book for hardy, open and flexible souls as it faces questions that are likely to be music to the ears of some and shake the faith of others deeply. Nevertheless, these are questions that have been avoided by the church, which has helped lead to its marginalisation from modern life. Steven Ogden addresses our experience of God rather than constructing a particular theology – although as Ogden highlights, these two are not mutually exclusive.

Ogden highlights the idea that our experience of the world in the 21st century does not match with many of the theistic interpretations and images of God (Lord, Old Man in the Sky) found in the scriptures and the tradition, which feed each other. Further, these images of God lend themselves to ridicule and self-absorption and can be interpreted in an ego-centric and trivial manner. As Ogden posits, these images can reflect the god that we turn to in the desperate need for a car park: we pray and magically one appears. Ogden rightly asks: where was this “Car Park God” in relation to the despair and cries that were silenced forever in the Holocaust? The question is unavoidable when one goes into the unwanted, unnecessary suffering in history and is forced to face up to the question: Where is God?

While Ogden is critical of the theistic models of God, he is also aware of his and the tradition’s indebtedness to the insights of this image, notably the distinction between the transcendence of God, reflecting God’s distinctiveness from creation, and the immanence of God, which reflects God’s presence in creation. Ogden also acknowledges the many varieties of theism. Nevertheless, Ogden argues that the various models of a theistic God fail to deal with a major shift in cosmology and the problem and reality of suffering, in a pastoral manner. These models generally “let God off the hook”. As Ogden puts it, “the history of suffering represents a judgement on God. Consequently, God has failed. In short, this is *the* God problem.”

Theism, according to Ogden, has failed us on a number of fronts. Psycho-spiritually, we find it hard to shake off “the big fella in the sky” from our minds and hearts –even if we know ‘it’ not be true. In relation to suffering, theism has failed us emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and pastorally. It has not enabled us to really be fully present in one another’s experience of the absence of God, allowing the place of absence to be a place of presence here and now. For those bearing a theistic, and hence dualistic, appreciation of existence, it can often be the case that suffering occurs as a result of individuals’ failure to pray “correctly”, believe the “right” things or act in the “right” way. Invariably somebody has to have betrayed God’s good purposes and certainly this is not God’s fault.

If you did not get the “right” outcome perhaps you are simply a fallen sinner as a son or daughter of Adam. As Ogden highlights, such beliefs are bad theology because they do not take the reality of suffering seriously. There is a willingness to protect an idea about God rather than engage with personal or collective experiences. Ideas and philosophical assumptions are maintained to protect a God who does not need protecting. These philosophies of omnipotence and control, and unreconstructed concepts of a personal loving god, can end up doing significant harm to individuals, groups and the “public relations exercise in communicating the significance of God”, as these concepts fail to adequately engage us in the midst of suffering; indeed it would be arguable that more people find that at a time of suffering they are most acutely aware of their alienation from this God.

Alongside this awareness, Ogden brings a light-hearted sense of the everyday experiences of grace amidst his well-argued expression of an engaging, transforming and intellectually stimulating faith. To bear this out for us in some relatively recent context he uses two of the leading lights of twentieth century theology as a basis for addressing the issue of suffering and a post-modern twenty-first century faith: Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner. Both of these theologians have addressed the issues of alienation and suffering that have faced humanity in the post-modern period.

Ogden’s overview of the anthropological and theological significance of Rahner and Tillich is one of the book’s outstanding contributions. These writers present highly complex and sophisticated systems of thought but with much humility and a sense of the beauty and vulnerability of the human condition. Ogden articulates the advantages and disadvantages of Tillich’s sense of alienation of humans from one another and from God. Tillich’s view is fundamentally a pessimistic one – this is a broken world in which we are aware of our sense of the absence of God, and yet this profound longing helps us to know this absent presence as the Ground of our Being. That is the reality that has now vanished from our view. “The experience of absence arouses a yearning for God”.

By contrast, Ogden perceives Rahner’s work as revealing a God of grace who has given humans a ‘natural’ awareness of the presence of God, with an ability to respond to this sense of grace. Neither of these two writers devalue the impact of suffering on the human condition, or pretend that it does not happen, but rather see that humanity and God are to be encountered in the beauty and terror of existence.

As Ogden faces up to re-articulating our God experience, our experience of the reality of suffering and the need for transformation, I am reminded of a couple of possibilities: the indifference of pantheism, the distance and mind-juggling that goes with theism, and the relational dynamic of mystery and interdependency that goes with panentheism. I am also reminded that these are all just models – even as they model our experience, they do not contain the reality of that experience. One of Ogden’s Anglican predecessors, John A T Robinson, put it unequivocally in relation to evil, post-theistic theology and the divine field:

The evil in the world is indeed terrifyingly real, both at the sub-personal and at the personal level, but it is still part of the face of *God*. That is to say, love is there to be met and created through it and out of it. It is not without purpose: meaning can be wrested from it even at the cost of crucifixion. It is not separate from the face of love, and therefore cannot be

separated from it. That is the saving grace: God is not outside evil any more than he is outside anything else, and the promise is that he 'will be all in all' *as love*.

In Robinson's work we see the signs of a spirituality that allows the experience of a God who participates in "the divine field", who is at risk, who creates and is being born amongst, amidst and through God's creation; God in 'whom' all things exist. As Ogden succinctly puts it, this is a "God who is not in control" but who inspires us to awareness of the all-pervasive presence and absence in which this self-manifesting, self-emptying, self-transcending 'reality' urges us to participate .

Out of Ogden's challenging work it is possible to appreciate our experience of the sacred as non-dualist, non-reductionist, and inter-subjective processes through a "web of relationships (human, ecological, cosmological and cultivated in the shared experience of faith communities. In concert with others, we simultaneously experience the sacred and discern new wisdom for twenty-first century living". This is a God who no longer needs "to be excused or protected or defended but engaged, for it's (in) the process of engagement that we discover new experiences and dimensions of grace."

The God that Ogden invites us to begin to explore is experienced in absence and presence, suffering and wonder, joy and despair; just as we experience the divine in this complex and yet so simple interplay, perhaps God experiences these realities through our individual and collective lives. This is why Jesus matters, because "he is a potent and impassioned symbol of grace. He is a life affirming expression of the presence of God in the world".

The church matters too, for all its many all-too-human faults. In "spite of ecclesiastical tyrants and scoundrels", (the church) remains vital because it is the continuation of the early "corporate experience of the early faith communities in which the resurrection is conceived, the *tangible* body of Christ-in-the-world". Our shared experience of the presence of God builds community on this foundation, which brings to the community of faith a sharing and deepening awareness of the presence of God through discernment, and bears Real Presence for the world. Ultimately, as Robinson suggested in a different context, work such as that of Ogden, and of those of us seeking to express a vital transformative faith that is not captured by pre-modern world views, arises out of a "conviction *in the first instance* not as belief in the existence of a Being but as apprehension of a relational reality". It is the relational dynamic matrix between God and the world that Ogden suggests we embrace and are embraced by, and in which the absence and presence of God will be painfully and wondrously absent and present in the life of the world.

Ogden suggests that for all intents and purposes God is not in control in the world, or at least in the way in which we once expected God to be. Perhaps the mystery of our faith is that God and creation call us into discipleship and to be a part of the process of the active manifesting of God's living real presence here and now. With God in our midst, with each other, and with creation, this is going to a great step in living and faith.

This book sketches a twenty-first century faith that is not fixated on doctrine but benefits from its insights, that is not mythomaniacal but is aware of the sacred truths of our myths. It offers a way forward from loose liberalism that does not make demands on our lives or conversely, a rigid

conservatism that demands intellectual assent to a set of prescribed and predetermined concepts about God and creation, whether these assumptions be known, spoken or not. This book embraces and advocates the Christian faith in its wrestling with absence and presence, Fullness and Emptiness, the One and the Many, and provides a new means of discussion about the faith.