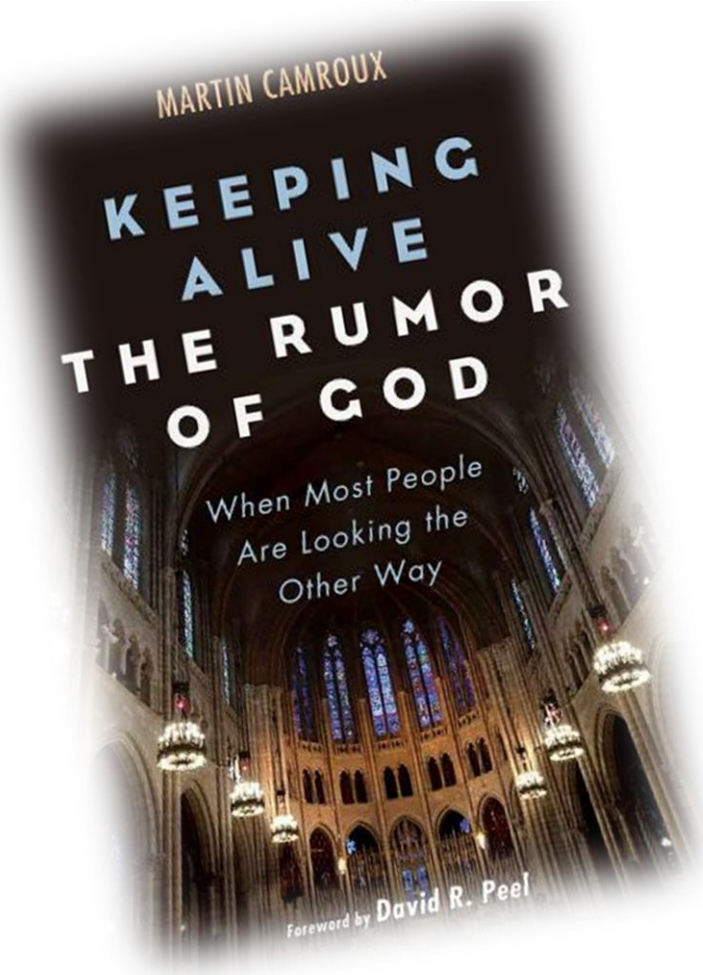
Briefing

Free to Believe



An occasional magazine for *Free to Believe*

Spring 2021

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KEEPING ALIVE THE RUMOUR OF GOD
Introduction by Dr David Peel.
Portland, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2020. ix + 204 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-7252-6241-6. £20.00)

You can buy this in the normal way or slightly cheaper for £16 direct from Martin – by bank transfer or by post from 4 Sorrel Close, Colchester, CO4 5UL. Further details mf.camroux@gmail.com.

Martin's previous book, *'Ecumenism in Retreat: How the United Reformed Church Failed to Break the Mould'* is still available from bookshops of from Amazon, priced £21 – or £15 direct from Martin at the above address.

From the Editor

Welcome, after a long hiatus, to the latest issue of Briefing, in which we review and reflect upon Martin Camroux's latest book, *Keeping Alive the Rumour of God – When Most People are Looking the Other Way.*

At a time when terms such as 'liberal', 'conservative', 'progressive' and 'fundamentalist' are wielded like weapons in the arenas of religion and politics, devoid of context or definition, it is both welcome and necessary to have available an *apologia* such as this for Liberal Christianity.

Too often attempts to explore and discuss the subject are met with the response that such 'labels' are unhelpful, that we are all Christians together and should not be categorizing one another – a response that effectively shuts down any dialogue before it can begin.

Keeping Alive the Rumour of God offers an affirmation to liberals and a challenge for us all. You will see in the following pages that not everyone agrees with every word of the book; not everyone's faith journey follows the same path as the author's, and there are bound to be divergencies along the way. But this comprehensive overview of liberal Christianity, its nature and history, is an emphatic confirmation of the value - indeed the necessity - of liberalism. For by keeping alive the rumour of God in this way, are we not also keeping alive the relevance of the Church?

But, as one of our reviewers says: Read the book!

Ken Forbes
Editor

A Very Personal Book – Martin Camroux

This is a very personal book for me. For nearly forty years I have been a minister of the United Reformed Church, at a time when churches have been increasingly falling to pieces. What we are witnessing is the disjunction of Western civilization from its Christian roots. At its heart is a loss of belief, a growing moral challenge to Christian values and a collapse in traditional views of God. Writing from a Catholic perspective Hans Küng is honest about the challenge:

> Millions have left the church, millions have withdrawn into themselves, and millions . . . have not joined the church. The hierarchs responsible, sometimes confused, sometimes mendacious, prevaricate; it's not so bad. But isn't the light of Christianity slowly being quenched?

Intellectually religious faith has become much harder to hold with integrity. As Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall says: "Belief in a good God is not an easy thing for anybody who thinks to a significant degree."

One might expect that ministering in this context would be unrewarding—and indeed quite a few ministers have become burnt out and depressed by a constant sense of failure. For me, however, despite everything, ministry has been hugely satisfying. I have seen faith still light up the eyes of the dying and sermons just occasionally touch lives. My experience is that whatever the problems we have speaking of it, the experience of transcendence is still part of more lives than we might imagine. So, this book is one person's glimpse into the possibility of God. It is as honest as I can make it. My favourite poet, Emily Dickinson, says: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." I am a white English male who is at home in the church, and for whom a liberal faith has been at the heart of who I am. This is my slant on truth, a very particular and partial one, but none of us can offer more. Reviewing it now, I have a number of reactions.

1) It was a surprise to me how important Paul Tillich came to be in the book. Tillich was one of the theological icons of the nineteen sixties but much of his writing I found deeply turgid – did he perhaps read better in German? But then, by chance, I read Mel Thompson's *Through Mud and Barbed Wire* which explores Tillich's wartime experience in the charnel house of Verdun as an army chaplain. His traditional faith in God collapsed, he had a number of mental breakdowns and developed insecurities which troubled him for the rest of his life. Then on furlough in 1918 he went to the Kaiser Frederick Museum in Berlin and saw Botticelli's painting *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels*. The beauty spoke to him. "It shone through the colours of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood there, bathed in the beauty . . . Something of the divine source of all things came through to me". It was a transcendent moment. There was still a depth and a wonder to life.


Paul Tillich

2) Both parts of that experience spoke to me. The idea God as a personal being, like us only nicer, is no longer credible. That kind of God, the all-powerful male figure who determines what happens to whom, and manipulates life to reward those he likes, is both unbelievable and morally unacceptable. But that is not the end of the matter. As Tillich found life does include an experience of wonder and of what he called "Spiritual presence." I think of Handel who wrote his oratorio *The Messiah* in only twenty-four hours and who described his sense of divine inspiration saying, "I did think I saw all heaven before me and the Great God himself". I have had those moments too. One of the highlights of my childhood was the holidays we had in the Western Isles of Scotland. When I looked out

from Pulpit Hill at Oban to the Hebrides, across the Firth of Lorne to the Isle of Mull I realized that life had a wonder to it which Norfolk had not prepared me for. Later that wonder came in other ways, listening to Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* in Winchester Cathedral, in poetry, art, worship and prayer, architecture and the experience of loving relationships. Beauty and wonder do draw us into something deeper.

3) Trying to make sense of this is difficult, if not impossible. Serious thinkers have always understood this. As Gregory of Nazianzus wrote in the fourth century, "It is difficult to conceive God but to define him in words is an impossibility". The best we can do is use stories, myths, symbols, music, art, and poetry to try and explore it. Above all for me it is the story of Jesus which most powerfully does this. This story is not simply the bare historical facts, as we imperfectly know them, but a vision of life. I come to it through Scripture, through the music of Handel and Bach, though preaching, poetry, and people's lives and find a wonder and beauty in it.

At its heart is a story of crucifixion and resurrection. It begins with a life given in love, crushed by brutal power. But there was more to come. The power of empire, human hatred, cruelty, and bigotry did not prevail on that dark Friday because three days later, there was Easter. I can't tell you what happened, I only say it did. Love broke the power of death. So, I somehow dare to hope that, as Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, the long arc of history is toward freedom, equality, kindness, justice, and love. Or as Wendell Berry says:

It's love that keeps the world alive
Beyond hate's genius to contrive.

Being able to believe that is the the difference that believing in God makes to life.

Martin Camroux is a retired URC minister and Chair of Free to Believe. He is author of Ecumenism in Retreat: How the URC Failed to Break the Mould (2016), and a member of Lion Walk URC, Colchester.

Keeping Alive the Rumour of God – Richard Jurd

Martin Camroux's first book, *'Ecumenism in Retreat: How the United Reformed Church Failed to Break the Mould'* (Wipf & Stock, 2016) is a searingly honest and incisive critique of the URC's failure to be the enzyme to drive further organic unity among British churches, and his perception of the URC's subsequent loss of direction. That brutal honesty is also a feature of Martin's new book, where the focus is rather different: the decline of Christianity in the past century, and particularly in the UK and in the past 50 years or so, and a loss of belief in God associated with a loss of a sense of the transcendent in our lives. However, Martin is adamant that there is whisper, a flicker, a murmur, a rumour of God that can be sustained and encouraged in our lives today.

After a first degree at Hull in Sociology & Politics and a period of lecturing in sociology, Martin undertook his ministerial training for the URC at Oxford. He ministered over 38 years to churches in Southampton, Birkenhead, Swindon and Sutton (Surrey), the last three being URC-Methodist fellowships. Martin and Margaret retired to Colchester in 2013 where they are members of Lion Walk URC, and Martin is much in demand as a preacher in local churches (he was *The Times* 'Preacher of the Year' in 2001). His lifetime's experience as minister, preacher and scholar are all evident in 'Keeping Alive the Rumor of God'.

Even a sympathetic observer would say that not only is the Church in the UK facing an existential crisis, but so also is Christianity itself. Such crises are not new to Christianity. The survival of the initial handful of Jesus People, evolving into the early Church in the first century CE could be a described as a miracle. The Church's persistence through persecution in its early centuries, the different challenges when Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, subsequent divisions, 'heresies', schisms were all weathered. The cataclysmic events of the Reformation remodelled the western Church, and the challenges of the eighteenth century 'rational' Enlightenment were accommodated, and advances in geology and biology in the

nineteenth century were largely accepted. The question remains as to whether our present challenges are unique and whether they can be faced and survived by the Church: challenges associated with secularisation and a high profile, militant 'new' atheism espoused by authors such as Richard Dawkins and Samuel Harris, among a population that includes many who unkindly could be described as hedonistically materialistic associated with an apathetic agnosticism, albeit tempered by a varying social conscience. Many are indeed 'looking the other way'.

Some would say that this description of the current population is unfair. In a multicultural UK many embrace other faiths. Many claim they are SBNR ('spiritual but not religious') however this rather nebulous concept may be variously defined. Others embrace what Brian Mountford calls 'Christian Atheism', an appreciation of the Christian ethos, even worship but without its metaphysical aspects: it is interesting that cathedral worship is not showing such a major ebb, but the attractions of non-commitment for many attendees and the 'sacred performance or concert' aspects of such worship are points to ponder. For others there has been a retreat in the Church to a fundamentalism which can appear at times almost sub-Christian, with a 'flat earth' denial of the advances of modern science in physics, biology and psychology, a biblical literalism with an at best, simplistic and at worst, crude theology and a vindictive God, and (sometimes) a worship style which, while joyfully exuberant, can seem ultimately shallow and unsatisfying, and for some very alienating.

It is these concerns that Martin addresses in 'The Rumor of God'. For Martin the reality of God is central and the spiritual is real, alongside mystery, love, beauty, awe. He invites us to embrace the wonder (for which he speaks of an 'appetite') and the transcendent that comes from a study of the Bible, from worship and prayer and from a challenge to embrace the breadth and depth of a Christian faith, even though this requires some perseverance and hard work. Martin mourns the loss of the transcendent among the people; 'the death of God is a cultural reality'. Christianity involves heart *and* brain. Throughout, Martin's writing is

informed and illustrated by his initial training in sociology and his wide reading of politics and current affairs; he employs his appreciation and knowledge of art (less so of music) and of literature from William Blake to Emily Dickinson, from Peter Abelard and Shakespeare to Gerald Manley Hopkins and Tolkien as examples of ways of expressing the 'divine'. Most notably, Martin's encyclopaedic knowledge of philosophy and theology, especially modern theology, is evident

Martin fully accepts the centrality of the Bible to our faith, but not as a 'paper Pope'. A biblical, Christ-centred faith entails embracing biblical scholarship and criticism. For example it means acknowledging in the Old Testament the genocide in Joshua while seeing the divine forgiveness in Hosea; accepting and celebrating the different focuses to the New Testament portraits of Jesus from James, John and Paul; seeing the poetical truth in so much of the whole Bible Story from Genesis to Revelation, and discerning the spiritual beyond the words.

Crucial, of course, is a consideration of God, as God is in Jesus, something very real for Martin's faith. Here Martin's central focus is on the meaning of Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Cross is not a symbol of a wrathful, vengeful Deity who wants a blood sacrifice, but of 'God [who] enters fully into human life, enters and experiences human suffering, weeps and holds us up with loving arms ... Calvary is about love'. Likewise Resurrection which is not chained to the physics and chemistry of an empty tomb, but which is the eternal symbol of Love's victory.

It is difficult to do justice to this book in a review: the obvious corollary to this comment is to read 'The Rumor of God' yourself. Like Martin's previous book, I found it a page-turner. As I commented when, last spring, I read a preview of the book, 'Martin Camroux's erudite and well-reasoned defence of his profoundly felt and deeply sincere, life-long, liberal Christian faith makes compelling reading'.

Richard Jurd is a scientist in the field of genetics, a Lay Preacher of many years' experience, and a member of Lion Walk URC, Colchester.

What is truth? - A reflection by Iain McDonald

The internet, especially in these lockdown times, can lead one down strange paths. I recently happened on an online interview with R T Kendall who was for many years the minister at Westminster Chapel in London. The interview was recorded early in March 2021 and the interviewer was someone called Angela Courte MacKenzie, an American who appears to live in Scotland. The theme of the interview was liberal Christianity and dear Angela began by asking Dr Kendall (who, apparently has a 'beautiful wife') to define 'liberalism in the church' and – here's the killer line – 'how can we stay away from it?' Kendall 's answer was that liberalism denies the God of the Bible and denies that the blood of Jesus satisfies God's justice. There was much more but I'm afraid I couldn't take it and never did find out how we can stay away from it. If you must know, you can look up Angela's website… This followed hot on the heels of a quote I came across recently from theologian Ian Paul who describes liberal Christians as Christians who think 'the traditional teaching of the church is wrong.'

It seems such a temptation to object to something you know nothing about by mischaracterising it and then demolishing it. Richard Dawkins does exactly the same with Christianity as a whole by setting up a caricature which many of us do not recognise at all and then condemning it. (Mind you, the Christian author David McMurtry has written that, in any case, 'God, as described in Scripture, is only a caricature of God.')

On the other hand, Roger Wolsey, a Methodist pastor in the USA, has a different definition of 'liberalism' – although he uses the phrase 'Progressive Christianity' which, I know, some would argue is not the same phenomenon and he himself sees as flowing from liberalism - but see if you could go along with this: "Progressive Christianity is the post-

modern influenced evolution of historic mainline liberal Christianity and is an heir to the Social Gospel movement. It takes the Bible too seriously to interpret much of it literally. It's a focus on the religion of Jesus more than the religion about him. It embraces the insights of contemporary science; is committed to social justice including good stewardship of the Earth; celebrates the diversity of humanity including various sexes, genders, and sexualities; and doesn't require belief in various historic doctrines of the Church." *

That might be fine as far as it goes – and I'm sure Mr Wolsey does not intend this to be a definitive description – but it does miss out some important facets which Martin Camroux includes in his latest book. One of the crucial ones is the notion of awe – an 'appetite for wonder', as he puts it. I am fortunate to live on the coast of south Devon where there is ample opportunity for wonder. The resilience of the plants in our modest garden which (mostly) recover from the cruel winter easterly gales to produce beautiful spring and summer blossoms; the beauty of the sea on calm days – and the fear it can produce on stormy ones; the diversity of bird life on land and sea (and, as I write, the incredible array of stars in a vast sky relatively unpolluted by street lights)… but not only that, the sheer genius of Isambard Kingdom Brunel who built the railway which separates our house from the beach – all inspire on occasion gasps of amazement and very often quiet wonder at it all.
If this is what Rudolf Otto describes as an experience of the 'mystical which is not irrational but deep and profound', then this is where 'faith begins' (Rumour of God, p48).During the last year when attendance at church services has not been possible, that encounter with the mystical through land- and sea- and skyscape does indeed seem to be a spiritual one in the sense that it moves the human spirit. I sometimes can't help but wonder whether I will choose on a future Sunday morning to stick

with this enriching ‘mystical’ experience rather than attend a service which, let’s face it, can sometimes have a quite different effect.

It has been interesting to read Martin’s book alongside Andrew Francis’s and Janet Sutton’s more recent book ‘Sacraments After Christendom’ **. Both address in their different ways the current phase of church life in the west although I think they disagree as to whether we are already a post Christendom society (Camroux) or preparing for it (Francis & Sutton). Whichever it is, there is no doubt that the pervading influence the church once had is gone. Some of it lingers on as a kind of historical hangover (not least the presence of bishops in the House of Lords, an anomaly if ever there was one) but most people now have no encounter with the church apart from the occasional scandal they read about. I don’t know whether it is this great distance between church and lived reality for most that leads to the greatest number of Christians (and young Christians especially) gathering in churches which emphasise that very distance. The obvious irrationality of a literal reading of the Bible does not seem to prevent a very significant swathe of Christians from going along with it. To otherwise rational people, it doesn’t seem to occur to them that there could never have been a Garden of Eden peopled by the first man and woman who so misbehaved that we are all tarred with the same brush, a state so damaging that it needed a divine intervention and a cruel death to put it all right. It doesn’t seem to matter that there are inconsistencies in biblical accounts – both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels. It was all written by God and, if you take one verse or another out of context and hammer it home, then it all makes sense. Never has the need to present the case for liberal Christianity been greater but never has the difficulty of presenting it been more challenging (nor, it has to be said, better put by Martin Camroux).

What does it mean to engage with the challenge of God, what God is, what God means, how God is to be experienced? There are two seemingly contradictory statements towards the end of Martin's book. "In the end it all comes back to the question of truth," (p179) and then a few pages later "Finally it comes down to Jesus," (p184). Personally I am always cautious about the word 'truth'. It seems so final and resistant to contradiction. Is Jesus the truth? John's Gospel would have us believe he is. But are we not all asking Pilate's question? "What is truth?" The trouble is that wrestling with that question does not seem to be very appealing to most people, at least in a religious context. In any case, perhaps living with that question rather than a vain attempt to answer it remains the challenge of liberal Christians. To me, at least, that is more appealing than Angela Courte MacKenzie's anxious question: "How can we stay away from it?"

* *Progressing Spirit*. Roger Wolsey. Column, 11th March 2021. Progressingspirit.com

** *Sacraments After Christendom* . Andrew Francis and Janet Sutton. Cascade Books (Wipf & Stock) 2021

Iain McDonald was co-founder of the URC Caucus of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and, following ordination in 2006, was minister of Southernhay Church in Exeter before retiring in 2014. He now lives in Dawlish in south Devon, works for the Devon Faith & Belief Forum and chairs the Mary Parminter almshouse charity in Exmouth, east Devon as well as being an itinerant preacher.

Reflections on Keeping Alive the Rumor of God – Ian Bradley

Had I not provided an endorsement for the back cover of this book, I would have been reviewing it for *Modern Believing*. This article will say some of what I would have put in such a review and a bit more besides! First and foremost, I want to say how much I welcome *Keeping Alive the Rumor of God* as a beautifully crafted and deeply moving apologia for liberal Christianity. I appreciate especially its pastoral perspective as well as its literary merit and intellectual weight. It comes alive for me most when the author touches on his own personal experiences. I love the contrast that he draws between the Norfolk landscape of his youth and the Scottish islands where he spent his holidays. There is a whole theology to explore here, comparing East Anglian Nonconformity with the mystical and liberal Presbyterianism of the islands of Argyll (I have attempted to explore the latter in my book *Argyll: The Making of a Spiritual Landscape* – I would love to see Martin do the same with the former).

I love, too, the evocations of and enthusiasm for Mansfield College Chapel and Riverside Church. I share much of what inspired Martin Camroux in his formative years. I, too, revered Cromwell when I was a teenager, to the extent of joining the Cromwell Association and getting its somewhat severe secretary to come and address my fellow (and predominantly Royalist) students in the History Lower Sixth. I fear the experience of attending New College Evensong as undergraduates produced rather different effects on us. For Martin it was something with which he fell in love (page 39) whereas it had the effect on me of turning me away from the Anglicanism in which I had been confirmed and back to the Presbyterianism of my baptism.

There is a huge amount in this book with which I wholeheartedly concur. I agree with the comment apropos Paul Tillich on page 28 that flawed human beings still have profound insights to share (and which of us is not flawed?) - that seems to me also to be eminently true of Jean Vanier. I

share Martin's deep unease about the hymn 'In Christ Alone' and I love his idea of Jesus as a 'a bit of a liberal' (page 175). I could have done with more Holloway and also more Moltmann. I think some invocation and exposition of the latter's concept of 'the Crucified God' could have strengthened Chapter 10.

I could also have done with more of an inter-faith perspective. I was left puzzled by Martin's statement on page 106 that 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' is true without it needing to come from Jesus himself. What does he mean here? This is a tricky text for liberals because of its implied exclusivity (which of course becomes much more explicit in the succeeding remark 'No one comes to the Father except through me'). I am not at all clear in what sense Martin sees this claim as true, especially if it did not actually come from Jesus himself. I would have liked to see more consideration of other ways to the truth, other Christs perhaps in Sydney Carter's famous phrase. For me part of the essence of liberal faith is that it recognises that it may have much to learn from those of other faiths – not least at the moment in terms of attitudes to the rest of creation and the environment, an area which I found somewhat surprisingly absent from discussion in this book. Surely eco-concern and environmental awareness and activism are at the heart of liberal Christianity, just as much, indeed, as the social gospel which is explored at some length in Chapter 9.

I am broadly with the author in what he says about Crucifixion and Resurrection in Chapters 10 & 11 although I think I might go a little further, with Moltmann, in terms of the Crucified God. The way I would put it is that Jesus dies as much for sufferers as for sinners and that the Cross can only make sense in so far as it points to the suffering and sacrifice which is somehow undeniably but mysteriously built into the constitution of the universe, human life and the life of all creation and the natural world and into the very heart of God. Buddhism and Moltmann have important

things to offer here, I think. I totally agree with Martin's statement on page 158 about the 'victory of powerless love over loveless power'. I am with John Stuart Mill when he says that God is either all-loving or all-powerful but cannot be both – and for liberals it must emphatically be the former. This leads me on to the one theme in the book from which I dissent. This is the frequent invocation of the 'God above God', introduced in Chapter 3 and made much of throughout the book. To me this rather distant and hierarchical image seems the absolute antithesis of the God of Tillich and indeed of Camroux which is surely about depth rather than height. God is surely not above anything or anybody but rather in or beneath them. I find this concept of the 'God above God' curious and rather misleading.

But that's my only real point of dissension. I stumbled a bit over the end of Chapter 11 where Martin says that he finds it hard not to dance into church on Easter Sunday which is for him the day of the year. I have to say for myself, and for quite a lot of other liberal Christian clergy that I know, Good Friday, Sundays in Lent and Advent, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are preferable, certainly when it comes to preaching sermons! It's all the stuff about empty tombs and conjuring tricks with bones and post-mortem appearances that makes Easter Day rather tricky for liberals – but I admire Martin enormously for the fact that he doesn't let his doubts and uncertainties about these things prevent him celebrating the wonder and joy of the triumph of love. That is worth dancing about, I quite agree – but maybe that is easier for East Anglian Congregationalists than Scottish Presbyterians – discuss!

Ian Bradley is Emeritus Professor of Cultural and Spiritual History at St Andrews University and author of Grace, Order, Openness and Diversity: Reclaiming Liberal Theology.

Keeping Alive The Rumor Of God, When Most People Are Looking The Other Way – John M Buchanan

Martin Camroux, a pastor and leader in the United Reformed Church has produced a fine and timely book*, Keeping Alive The Rumor Of God.* I thoroughly enjoyed and heartily recommend it. Camroux is an excellent writer, reminding us of our English colleagues seemingly innate facility with their, and our, native language. And, the man has somehow managed to read everything. The book is an excellent compendium of the thinkers and voices that have influenced Christian theology, faith and practice from antiquity to the present, with particular emphasis on the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Camroux's bibliography is a full 11 pages. Augustine, Anselm and Abelard, Aquinas and John Calvin are here. Paul Tillich, Karl Barth and Hans Kung, biblical scholars Käsemann and Brueggemann, influential American preachers Harry Emerson Fosdick, William Sloane Coffin and Martin Luther King are called on to illustrate and buttress, as are composers, artists, poets and architects - J.S. Bach, Mozart, Botticelli, Tintoretto, T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson and Wendell Berry. A long, ongoing conversation and argument with neo-atheists and critics Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris is witty and sharp and continues through the book. Even Donald Trump, who Camroux does not like at all, makes it into the narrative.

I particularly appreciated Camroux's robust defense of theological liberalism at a time when many scramble to avoid the term "liberal." Supporters of Donald Trump, after all, openly aspire to "make the libs cry." The author argues that the Christian liberal tradition is enormously important and the basis of Western humanism and that its gradual marginalization and loss is not a good thing at all.

Christian basics are examined and helpfully exegeted. I was personally engaged by the way Camroux approaches the matter of God through Paul

Tillich's harrowing experience at the Battle of Verdun in the First World War. Tillich was a chaplain in the German army and observed, firsthand, one of the most devastating and brutal battles in history. The conflict continued for ten months and resulted in an unprecedented 700,000 battlefield deaths. Tillich's traditional faith was shattered. It was later, while on military leave, visiting an art gallery, pondering Botticelli's *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels*, that his faith began to be restored but in a wholly new way. Tillich went on, of course, to expand the theological horizons far beyond traditional boundaries. The traditional God that dictated the minutiae of human history, causing bullets to miss one soldier while killing another, was no longer believable. In fact, Tillich argued, God does not exist as a tree or mountain or table exists. God is not part of reality. God is ultimate reality. God is not real. God is reality itself. God is not a being among other beings, god is "being as such." From his battlefield experience Tillich concluded that Christian Faith is "*The Courage to Be."*

Regarding the reality of God Camroux adds his own experience and commentary, familiar to many, if not all, of us that God is also experienced in absentia, the absence of God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus asked for all of us. Camroux proposes that awe and wonder and something like Tillich's experience of transcendence looking at a Botticelli painting is the beginning of faith, citing Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum*. He adds personal mystical experiences, many in nature, with which many will identify.

The book becomes even stronger when Camroux approaches Crucifixion and Resurrection and as he begins to affirm his own faith and as his own testimony emerges. From his long and extensive experience as a parish pastor he remembers: "When I have visited the dying I have usually found this ("The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..." Psalm 23) the most comforting text to have read to them, and often as I read it, they joined

in." (P97) Every pastor, including this one, privileged to be with people at the end of life, has had similar experiences.

Many of us, and I write out of personal experience here, who have maintained progressive, liberal positions in matters of scriptural interpretation and the church's role in the world, advocating, praying and working for social justice, equality, equity have been criticized for straying from the essentials of Christian Faith, even from the faith itself. So, I confess that my heart was warmed, and not at all strangely, to read this unapologetic, unambiguous liberal, Martin Camroux's testimony. It sounded right and relevant to me. He does not hesitate to critique liberal colleagues who seem to make Jesus into nothing more than a social reformer. His personal faith includes this: "Christian Faith stands or falls by the belief that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.' (2 Corinthians 5:19)"

"What is God like?" this restless, thoughtful, intellectually curious, liberal Christian asks and makes his case. "Watch Jesus confront the corrupt, watch his tenderness with the damaged and excluded, watch him offer up his life. Go and stand at Calvary and look up at the cross and hear him say 'Father forgive them.'"

I'm glad I read this book. You will be too.

John M. Buchanan is Pastor Emeritus of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, former Editor/Publisher of The Christian Century, and was Moderator of the 208th General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church USA.

Looking Back and Looking Forward – Claire Wilson

Looking back, I realize that at almost every stage in my Christian life I have engaged with questions which if openly discussed with others might have got me into trouble of one kind or another.(If only Martin's book had been around in the 1980s with its refreshing encouragement to explore: "Truth is never a possession, always a pursuit.")

I discovered the danger of departing from ecclesiastical convention thirty years ago, when women in the C of E were allowed to be deacons but not yet priests. One Sunday when my senior colleague was away, the visiting minister booked as celebrant at the eucharist failed to turn up, leaving me as a curate on my own. I boldly suggested to the congregation that although I could not myself officially preside, it would be acceptable in this emergency situation for all of us "corporately" to speak the words of consecration and then to share the bread and wine.

Afterwards, however, someone evidently blew the whistle on me. I was summoned to the bishop's office and severely rebuked for my inappropriate behaviour: my failure, in effect, to recognise the sacred nature of the Eucharistic. elements.

What kind of God, I wondered then, would have dismissed that impromptu shared celebration as "unholy"? Didn't our action reflect

something of Jesus' warm-hearted, spontaneous manner of response when faced with a challenge? For me, and by extension for at least some of the congregation, there was a joyful, transforming dimension to our worship that morning.

Well, as regards ceremonial practice, I didn't step out of line again. I did, however, start to read with curiosity and enthusiasm books by a number of the many controversial writers whom Martin mentions:, eg John Robinson, Paul Tillich and David Jenkins. This presented a new challenge. My understanding of God as (in Martin's words) a "supernatural being" was in the process of change. Since, however, I attached great importance to preaching. I wanted still to engage with and "carry forward" those who were listening. Could this be achieved, given my ever-growing list of inwardly-held doubts and theological uncertainties?

The strategy which worked for me in that situation was story-telling: stories relating to personal experience, stories attributed to Jesus, stories to be found throughout the Bible. Martin creatively expounds on this theme: "In the Bible we find a kaleidoscope of memorable stories". Through "shared narrative" we are encouraged to explore the questions of "who we are and why we are here", but to do so as on a voyage of discovery, not in expectation of some final indisputable divine answer. I became known as "Claire the story-teller", and for the most part people seemed happy to be left with the challenge of working out for themselves where their own interpretation of a story might lead them.

There were still occasions, though, when apparent separation from eg, assertions in the regularly-recited Nicene Creed was not acceptable. During the years when I first encountered Don Cupitt's suggestion that God and all associated beliefs are, in the end, human constructions, I recklessly admitted to a colleague over lunch at some diocesan event that in the traditional sense I no longer believed in "the life to come". He responded aloud with shocked disapproval. (Would I be summoned by the bishop again?!)

I did, however, find the courage during those years explicitly to challenge the concept of "substitional atonement". Leafing through a vast pile of hand-written sermons last week, I found one which I had preached at least twenty years ago. In it I dismiss the idea of penal substitution almost as comprehensively as does Martin in the chapter entitled "Crucified", where he tells us that the theory is "a theological outrage which has poisoned much Christian belief."

Early in Martin's book there is a personal story about some of the supposedly comforting words spoken to him and his wife on the sad occasion of their baby son's death. As it happens, I am able to recall a not dissimilar experience. In 1973 our first child's delivery went tragically wrong, and he was diagnosed in due course as "seriously mentally handicapped." I then received a letter from a Lutheran friend in which he wondered " How are we to discern God's plan in allowing this to happen?" Fortunately neither Martin nor I had ever believed in a God who would deliberately and selectively inflict distress in that way.

So: what has "Keeping Alive the Rumour of God" done for me? At one level it has provided me with a new perspective on my past years. Those moves away from a conventional understanding of God didn't remove the genuineness of my Christian calling, and I do not regret my years of ministerial experience: it has been possible for me to be alongside people of all faiths and none.

Martin's book also takes me forward, however, in a spirit of hope and confidence. As Easter Day approaches (when, although an Anglican I am scheduled to preach at our local URC church!) the "God above God" continues to touch my life with "love's amazing grace. The moments of wonder are real. The experience of transcendence is real, and the prophetic passion is real."

Brought up non- conformist, Claire Wilson later joined the C of E. and was among the first women to be ordained to the priesthood. She now says she experiences a refreshing openness in Free to Believe.

WESTMINSTER READING PARTY

In light of the government's roadmap for coming out of lockdown the Free to Believe reading party has been postponed from 24- 27 May to August 31-September 3.

THE BOOK

is Tom Holland's Dominion. It sets out to show how totally revolutionary was the way Christianity took a crucified nobody as its image of God.

THE LEADERS

The Reading party will be led by Nigel Uden and by David Cornick. Worship will be led by Anne Lewitt and myself.

THE PLACE

Westminster College is at the very heart of Cambridge, near the Backs. The College has recently gone through a £7 million refurbishment and all bedrooms are now en-suite.

BOOKING

The cost is £245. The conference was fully booked but the change of date has led to a small number of cancellations and, while all Covid restrictions should be lifted by then, certainty is impossible. I am not therefore reallocating the spare places, but I am now happy to add names to the waiting list. A final decision will be made in the summer and it will be possible for anyone to withdraw if they feel unsafe. But we have to live in hope.

Martin

Now buildings for worship are bleak,
We Zoom into church once a week
And are glad to be there
In our favourite chair
With ethereal friends, so to speak.

A link should give trouble-free entry
And using is quite elementary.
But if you dispute,
Remember to mute
If your comments are not complimentary.

Though Covid-19 is much hated,
Our progress should leave us elated.
Defeat of the virus
Is not going to tire us,
As long as we're in-oculated.

- Chris Avis

Donations towards the costs of printing and postage of 'Briefing' are always welcome. Please econtact the Treasurer of Free to Beieve: David Parkin: d.parkin123@btinternet.com