

English-language research to move too quickly to ‘use’ of Barth’s theology before having acquired a proper understanding’. (165) This collection of essays will go a long way towards remedying that.

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The Hint Half Guessed, Alastair Hulbert, Edinburgh: J. R. Reid, 2008, pp. 237, ISBN 978-0-948785-07-8. £9.00⁵

Alastair Hulbert is one of a number of divinity students of the sixties who, on completion of their studies, decided not to follow the normal ministerial route, but living out a radical understanding of the gospel and a consistent theology chose a particularly difficult, costly and unrewarding path, for the most part outside the institutional church. In his case, his version of the Christian life and mission took him to a bewildering variety of situations. In this work, sub-titled “Mission, Ecumenism and Other Things”, he presents a number of essays, articles, reports and even a poem or two, arranged in chronological order, reflecting his thought and action during the successive phases of his career.

Hulbert’s first five years after graduating were spent with the French Protestant Industrial Mission, which meant this scholarly young Scot, son of the Manse, working as a welder in factories in Roubaix and Paris. Then followed fifteen years with the World Student Christian Federation, which took him all over the world, including the Middle East, South America and the U.S. The next chapter in his career saw him with the Scottish Churches Action for World Development, which involved him in life in Nicaragua, where he reflected on and critiqued the ideology of development which was largely being taken for granted by Western powers, including some of the third world aid agencies.

⁵ Available from Cornerstone Bookshop, Edinburgh or from the author, 27 Reid Terrace, Edinburgh EH3 5JH.

Next came eight years during which Hulbert was seconded by the Church of Scotland to Brussels and the European Ecumenical Commission, with travels all over Western Europe (about which he has written movingly).⁶ The last stage of his recorded journey saw him back in Scotland for five years as warden of Scottish Churches House, Dunblane – a period which ended so unhappily as, through lack of support of the participating churches, the future of the House seemed to be in jeopardy.

It is fascinating to follow the development of the theology to which Hulbert was determined to remain faithful. In 1970s France, he embraced something like liberation theology with its emphasis on praxis, and consequently, though not without qualification, largely accepting the Marxist critique of society. Always impressed by Lesslie Newbigin's theology of mission, he tells how a greater influence has been the thought of the historian and theologian Ivan Illich, and others like Gilbert Rist and Wolfgang Sachs with their critique of Western civilisation. This influence becomes particularly clear in the essays in the latter part of the book, where the cultural pre-conceptions of 'civilized' Western society are vigorously challenged.

Hulbert says that '(t)he aim of this book is to offer some help in the lethargy into which the ecumenical movement in Scotland has fallen in our day, a help to friends and relations on the fringes of church and culture, both to those who still have something to give and to those who are still willing to receive something.' Indeed, his lifelong interest has been ecumenically grounded and he is entitled to speak with authority on this subject. This comes to a climax in his bitter reflection and indeed indictment of the Scottish church authorities in the manner in which they administered and failed to appreciate the role and potentiality of Scottish Churches House, Dunblane. It is only fair to record that since Hulbert's time, some attempt has been made to restore the fortunes of the House.

Doubtless not all will agree with some of his assertions. For myself I think he too easily accepts the fashionable criticism of the Enlightenment, in the absence of which neither he nor his mentors, whose trenchant critique he accepts, would be able to publish a word.

⁶ *The Gift Half Understood: Essays on a European Journey* (London: Melisende, 2002).

But no-one could challenge the honesty, sensitivity and integrity which shines through these papers. There is no self-justification here and it is certainly not a success story. In fact he coolly acknowledges his failures, recounting, for instance, that one of the papers here – rather a profound one, carefully written in preparation for an important European Commission meeting – was not referred to at all at the meeting.

Whether or not the reader agrees with all his arguments, whoever takes the trouble to give them a reading cannot fail to be impressed by these beautifully written pieces – there is something of the poet about Hulbert with a poet's appreciation of language. This is by no means an autobiography, but one of the fascinations of the book is the incidental details of the background against which it is written – the factories in France, student concerns worldwide, interludes in a poor Nicaraguan home, life at the heart of the European Union, the nature of the work of Scottish Churches House. While one must admire the author's presentation of the challenge of mission and ecumenism today, this reviewer admired even more the attempt of him and his family, through constant trial and tribulation, to live and work faithfully to the gospel as they perceived it. This itself stands as an (uncomfortable?) challenge.

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