

In the course of his previous books Neil Douglas-Klotz has unfolded a convincing and radical picture of Middle Eastern wisdom. He sees it as having its own distinctive character arising from the structure of Semitic languages, as seen in Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic sacred texts. Whereas Greek and the languages derived from it or influenced by it developed a vocabulary with precisely distinguished meanings and precise phonetic spellings, Semitic words are more like pointers to overlapping pools of meaning organised around a limited number of primary roots. Translations between these two sorts of language (as happened most notably with the rendering of the original Aramaic teaching of Jesus into the Greek Christian scriptures) distorts and obscures the original much more than, say, translations between modern European languages. The work of Douglas-Klotz aims to recover for the Western reader a sense of what has been lost, and a flavour of the original teachings as they would have been "heard by Semitic ears".

Now in *The Genesis Meditations* he takes the further step of offering a reconstruction of what might have been a core meditation for early Middle Eastern spiritual practice: the exploration, through the resonances of language, of *the beginnings of things*. The book leads us into this through a blending of story, meditation and exegesis. It is not a philosophical tract, but an invitation to reconfigure our thinking and living by recovering the stories that we in the modern world have lost. For some, its style may be unfamiliar, though familiar to those who have encountered aspects of Sufi practice. He invites us to a practice that is multimodal, combining regular bodily movements, the breath, syllables sounded either inwardly or aloud, and a sustained intention of the will and emotion, all contained with a new vision of the universe, and of time in particular. In this way the whole person, in all the aspects of our makeup, is brought into alignment with the creative beginnings of the cosmos.

The new vision of time (new, that is, for modern readers) is particularly

The Presence of Beginnings

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THE GENESIS MEDITATIONS
Neil Douglas-Klotz (SMN)

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fascinating. Douglas-Klotz writes:

In the ancient worldview inherent in the Semitic languages, time does not exist like a line extending from past to future ... Instead, the ancient Hebrews saw their beginnings moving ahead of them carrying them along, with future following behind, also moving at the same time. ... We can best here imagine the image of a caravan in which we're included: some people have left first and are ahead of us; some are behind us ... (p21)

For mainstream Western philosophy this just doesn't make sense, and it is offered as something that we can learn to *feel* rather than, in the first instance, conceptualise. We can, however, approach it through some of our less fashionable philosophical streams. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, describes the "now" as being like a snowball that gradually grows through accreting new material as it rolls forward; the Histories Interpretation of quantum theory gives a prime role to the way in which, at each moment, it is the whole past history of that moment that prepares the ground for the potentiality latent in that moment. The past is no longer actual, but is still present as a source within the "now". This inner presence is not unchanging: past moments develop, age, and in this sense become more advanced than the freshly

born events of the present. The caravan moves on. Stories about creation, about the beginnings of things, take on a new meaning on this view. They are not about a distant time of only theoretical interest; rather, they describe the vital impulse of becoming that is with us at every moment.

My initial feeling is that this is a contribution that is vital for society as a whole. We - as a society - need to recover and renew our stories; we need to bring our bodies and emotions back into harmony with the cosmos within which we live; we need to shift from a conceptual framework based on control and mechanism to one based on creativity and freedom. We also need practices that unite, rather than divide, the strands of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Here Douglas-Klotz makes the exciting claim that the meditation he has reconstructed, and obviously developed within his own spiritual practice, can provide a basis for a spirituality that can unite these traditions. If so, it is vitally important for our time.

Whether or not readers will warm to these ideas, and whether or not it can provide a unifying practice across religions, will depend on the people concerned. Those who like to start with ideas and then move to stories and practice will probably find it better to start with his powerfully scholarly *Desert Wisdom*. And while I have participated in, and led, effective multi-faith study groups on different scriptures from conventional perspectives, I do have some misgivings as to how readily these radical readings of scriptures will go down with the average person in the Church/Mosque/Synagogue. But in the longer term, as we grapple with the task of recovering these faith traditions for the contemporary world, integrating also the richness of our current understanding of the beginnings of things from science, then I think that this book will play a vital role in the development of the way we live in the cosmos.

Chris Clarke, formerly Professor of Applied Mathematics at the University of Southampton, now works freelance in the area of spiritual education. ■

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