BOOKS

AUSTEN IVEREIGH

INSPIRATION FROM A BOLD MYSTIC

Chiara Lubich, Essential Writings: spirituality, dialogue, culture
Compiled and ed. Michel Vandeleene
NEW CITY PRESS, £12.40
■ *Tablet bookshop price £11.20* *Tel 01420 592974*

With 140,000 members worldwide, and another 2 million connected in other ways through its prayer groups, ecumenical and interfaith meetings – not to mention its 20-odd towns and 654 businesses run on "communion" principles – Focolare is one of the most impressively numerous movements in modern Catholicism. It pops up everywhere: hosting a pan-European ecumenical gathering here, an "encounter" of politicians, journalists and artists there, offering an Argentinian safe house to the scandal-dogged Archbishop Milingo, even inspiring the spirituality of the Catholic drug rehab in Brazil which Pope Benedict visited in May. Those kinds of numbers, and its extraordinary energy and commitment, should make it a major feature on the Catholic map.

Yet Focolare flies below the radar, escaping familiar categories: it is a lay association, founded and led by a lay woman, but many members are priests; it is a Catholic movement, but a large number of members are Anglicans, even Muslims; some of its members are celibate, and live together, while others are married, with jobs; it is unmistakably Italian, yet manages to be quite at home in Africa or Hemel Hempstead; it is deeply Marian, yet oddly feminist.

Pinning down Focolare is like trying to nail jelly to a wall. But why try? It is hard to say what Franciscans are for (peace and joy?) or what makes Jesuits different – until you consider their founders, their character and the particular insights which flowed from their prayer. Chiara Lubich, Focolare's octogenarian founder – the online Wikipedia has her down, oddly, as an "Italian Catholic activist" – is not a theologian, exactly; but she has a trained mind unafraid of major ideas. Nor, despite flashes of beauty, is she a writer: the style is too clunky, sometimes even pedestrian, to have won her the readership of an Henri Nouwen or Ronald Rolheiser. But poring over this anthology, it is hard not to grasp her significance to contemporary Catholicism.

Lubich is essentially a mystic: she was illuminated as a young woman in bombed-out

Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare movement, receiving an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of America in Washington DC

Trento; filled with fire and vision, she set about putting into practice the words of John's Gospel, "that all may be one". Her great contribution to Christian spirituality is to take prayer into human relationships. In a world fractured by clashing narratives, she offers the possibility of "going to God together", not by dragging others or persuading them or defeating them, but by "stripping away those habits that allow me to anchor my security in what sets me apart from others", as the Archbishop of Canterbury puts it in his introduction. Like the Holy Spirit,

In bombed-out Trento, Chiara Lubich, filled with fire and vision, set out to put into practice the words of St John's Gospel, that 'all may be one'

Focolare has a genius for relationship, one forged in a spirituality of kenosis, or self-emptying, which is developed in the first third of this book. The object is to "lose God within us for God in our brothers and sisters" – to seek the Kingdom of God not just within us but within people, "to speak in order to become one with others", as she says in her classic essay, "The Spirituality of Communion". "If you cannot always pray, you can always love," she says. Two people "fused in the name of Christ" become a "divine power in the world", she notes in 'The Dream of a God": the soul endures pain by thinking of the pain or joy of others; this is "the little secret that builds, brick by brick, the city of God within us and among us".

Hence Mary as model: she is at once *La Desolata*, one both intimate and empty; and she is *Theotokos*, mother of God, the personification of the Scriptures. Lubich on Mary often hits notes of extravagance: she is "the flower blossoming on the tree of humanity, born of God who created the first seed in Adam. She is the daughter of God her Son" – which some may think best confined to a spiritual diary. But she can equally strike on something apparently straightforward – "do to others what would you have them do to you" – and flesh out a whole practical programme for living.

The second part of the book is a series of insights for such a programme. In one essay she suggests asking yourself, when you meet someone, what they are going through, and keep loving them until you find that same suffering in yourself. "Love will suggest to me how I can help them," she says, "because as Christians we know the value of suffering." Spend one day doing this, Chiara insists, and "a joy we have never felt before will flood over us. A new power will fill us. God will be with us, because he is with those who love."

The third part seeks to apply her programme of empathy through kenosis to the worlds of politics, the media and the arts. She delineates the mission of her followers with the boldness and directness of a medieval saint: "Today, politics is a weapon that serves Satan," she says, "but it could also be put to the service of God." Her political manifesto? "We need to put more religion into politics, more mysticism into practice, more wisdom into government, more unity among all." If this seems a little, well, simple, it is followed later by a startling insight – that modern politics has striven after liberty and equality but neglected fraternity. Like Catherine of Siena, she sternly knocks together these squabbling politicians, offers them a "dynamic of mutuality" and invites them to love each other's parties as their own.

For sceptics she offers the example of the Bangwa people in English-speaking Cameroon, who sought help from Lubich in the 1960s. "I had a strange impression", she recalls of her visit there, "that God, like a sun, was enveloping all of us, Focolarini and Bangwa together; and that the sun, almost like a divine sign, made me foresee the rising of a city that we would build together, there in the midst of the tropical forest." Hospitals, schools, houses followed; and the Bangwa adopted the spirituality of communion. They live now "in absolute peace", without need even of police.

This is a handsomely put together book in a hotchpotch of styles – spiritual musings, major addresses, letters to followers – followed by useful sources: chronology, bibliography and index. For anyone wanting to get inside the mind and heart of one of the Church's most significant contemporary figures, it cannot be bettered; it is also just the thing to hand the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints when – as it surely will – that time comes.

Respectful adversaries

People of the Book: the forgotten history of Islam and the West
Zachary Karabell
JOHN MURRAY, £25
■ *Tablet bookshop price £22.50* *Tel 01420 592974*

In 917, two envoys from the Byzantine court in Constantinople travelled to the heart of the Abbasid empire: the fabled city of Baghdad. Upon reaching the caliph's compound, they were taken on a tour of 23 palaces including the palace of the tree, with its astonishing automata; the palace of the 100 lions, where wild beasts began "sniffing them and eating from their hands"; and the palace of paradise, where eunuchs slaked the ambassadors' thirst with iced water and sherbet. Thirty-eight thousand wall hangings, 22,000 elegant carpets and countless trays of jewels were on display to impress the visitors.

Relations between Baghdad and Constantinople were far from cosy at the time. The envoys had been sent to negotiate a temporary pause in hostilities between the two empires and to organise a routine exchange of prisoners. But if the rulers of Byzantium and the Muslim rulers of Baghdad were enemies they still behaved decorously towards one another.

I suspect that this story might appeal to the American writer and historian Zachary Karabell, who seeks to remind us that, over 14 centuries, the relationships between Christianity, Judaism and Islam have often been dynamic and fruitful. With contemporary religious animosities – so often fuelled by historical myths and misrepresentations – running rampant, that is a laudable and pertinent aspiration. The notion of an ingrained and inevitable antagonism between Islam and the West is, as Karabell avers, deeply questionable. He does not ignore the darker side of this long and complex history. Some of his accounts are rose-tinted but, for the most part, he does not seek to deny the recurrent carnage or cruelty. All he wants us to remember is that, for every instance of violence or prejudice, there was a moment of enlightened encounter or mutual respect.

God moves a mountain for the Christians of Baghdad, illustrated manuscript of *c.* 1412. From *The Church of the East* by Christoph Baumer (IB Tauris, £25)

Do such moments represent a forgotten history, as Karabell's punchy title suggests? Not really. It is hard to think of venues of rich cultural interplay that have been more fully examined than Abbasid Baghdad or medieval Cordoba: the tales of manuscripts being translated, ideas being exchanged, tolerant theological discussions being staged, are familiar enough. That said, Karabell still has a good point to make about the complex and sophisticated history of Islam and the West and one that, in these troubled times, is positively therapeutic. He covers a great deal of ground, from the birth of Islam in the seventh century to the establishment of the great Muslim caliphates in Spain and the Near East, on to the Crusades and then the rise of the Ottoman empire and, finally (if a little sketchily), into the modern era. He is to be applauded for grappling with such an unwieldy subject, and it is very satisfying to see the role of Judaism being discussed at considerable length. From time to time, however, Karabell's delivery lets him down.

Writing a history book that tries to teach lessons to the present by recounting episodes from the past is a perilous pursuit. You run the risk of being anachronistic or reductive (pitfalls that Karabell doesn't always sidestep) and the tendency to preach is hard to resist. Historians are fully fledged members of society, of course, and they have their opinions about the full gamut of contemporary issues, but too often in these pages one has the sense of being lectured at.

If he sometimes misfires, however, Karabell writes extremely well and many of his chapters – notably his even-handed discussion of the Crusades – are extremely rewarding. The relationship between Islam and the rest of the world will be one of the defining issues of the twenty-first century, and revisiting the historical context of present-day dilemmas and opportunities is no bad thing.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, Richard Knolles declared the Ottoman Turks to be the "greatest terror of the world", but he combined his misgivings with a keen sense of the Ottoman empire's extraordinary achievements. "There is in this world nothing more admirable nor strange ... nothing more magnificent nor glorious ... nothing more dreadful or dangerous." Such ambivalence towards a rival religion was hardly a high watermark of cultural understanding but, compared to some of the bitter pronouncements we hear in today's world (from both sides of the religious divide) it sounds almost adulatory. **Jonathan Wright**

Novel of the week

Mister Pip
Lloyd Jones
JOHN MURRAY, £12.99
■ *Tablet bookshop price £11.70* *Tel 01420 592974*

Mister Pip is about doing the right thing, about what it means to be a good person and the power of religious faith. Most of the action takes place in Bougainville, in the South Pacific, in 1991 during the island's fruitless bid for independence and control of its copper mines. In a village near the coast, the inhabitants are perplexed and terrified by the violence erupting around them. The coppery-skinned "redskins", soldiers from Papua New Guinea, are trying to take control of the area. The sole remaining white man, the reclusive Mr Watts, decides to reopen the village school, teaching with the only book available, a copy of *Great Expectations*. Mr Dickens, he assures his pupils, will give them strength by showing them a new world, Victorian England. There they will discover that people in books, like Pip and Joe Gargery, also confront and overcome difficulties.

The children's encounter with the West through Pip, his bad-tempered sister, the convict Magwitch and Miss Havisham is recounted by Matilda, aged 14. Her father, a former mineworker, is in Townsville, Australia; she lives in the village with her devoutly Christian mother. *Great Expectations* becomes Matilda's constant reference point, the master text by which she understands the outside world. But there are no easy parallels. The horrible consequences and moral choices precipitated by Mr Watts' readings outstrip anything described in Dickens' novel.

Years later, when the adult Matilda seeks explanations for and reflects upon the events of her childhood, her self-confidence falters. Her research visit to England concludes with trips to Gravesend and Rochester, with its Charles Dickens Centre. Here she finds her beloved Pip reduced to a figure in a commercial theme park. Her belief in the power of literature is shaken; she becomes aware of its limitations.

The villagers in *Mister Pip* strike me as convincingly Melanesian, especially in their speech patterns and the author's descriptions of their feelings of mutual obligation towards both individuals and the community. Sparky, clever Matilda's transmutation into a literature PhD student is less credible. Her voice becomes too wearily English and middle-aged. Grace Watts' belief that she is the Queen of Sheba and Mr Watts' collusion in this, as an explanation for their presence on the island, seem contrived. So do the insights into Mr Watts' character, as provided by his wife. These minor flaws, however, cannot detract from the brilliant originality of the novel's plot, its exotic setting and gripping narrative. **Margaret Taylor**

Birds of a feather

Crow Country
Mark Cocker
JONATHAN CAPE, £16.99
■ *Tablet bookshop price £15.30* *Tel 01420 592974*

Taking them as a whole, I do not like the crow family. My pet hate is the handsome black and white magpie with its saucepan-handle tail. When there are magpies around, no nesting bird's eggs or young are safe. In tandem comes the cunning crow, striking fear through its sinister call. Then the powerful raven, a huge bird, highly intelligent and scheming, whose guttural croak is so deep that the human voice cannot reproduce it. Then the jay, beautiful in cinnamon, the blue feather in its wing traditionally prized by hunters for their hats. At the end of this line of gangsters, however, are two birds of better character: the lively and mischievous jackdaw, much smaller, with its cascade of chacking notes, and the rook, social, waddling in its baggy trousers, its familiar caw the quintessence of the countryside, wise-looking, according to repute a parliamentarian. It is the rook which is featured in this new book by Mark Cocker.

Cocker has been observing rooks closely in the Yare valley of Norfolk for five years. "Dad's out rooking," his daughter would say. Cocker admits it has become an obsession. He recalls telephoning his fellow naturalist Richard Mabey and getting the answering machine. Behind Mabey's recorded message could be heard the calls of a rook or crow. When he remarked on this to his friend, Mabey told him to watch out. "You're becoming a nerd," he warned him.

The centre of Cocker's attention has been rookeries, rooks' roosts, and the relationship between them. He likes to go out at dusk to watch the incoming lines, with jackdaws in attendance, making their way to their chosen field, where they fling themselves down through the air.

Thousands of birds gather noisily in the flock on the ground. Fresh arrivals continually swell the numbers, landing on the periphery before taking short flights inwards. Then at a certain point a silence comes over the assembly. Cocker, knowing what is about to happen, is on edge with excitement. Suddenly the flock explodes like a huge black flower or mushroom as every bird launches itself upwards in a roar of sound towards the trees nearby where they will roost for the night.

In between his observations about rooks in this book, Cocker freely wanders off down other paths. It is like an after-dinner conversation. His family's move from Norwich makes him reflect on bird migration. He relates dramatic episodes in his cross-country expeditions in England and Scotland. He recalls past history when Norfolk was mainly water, and roach and bream were so plentiful that fishermen thought nothing of catching a ton in a day. He quotes the poetry of Robert Burns and Virgil and John Clare. He tells of British POWs patiently counting rooks and jackdaws flying above their German camps.

He marvels at nature, fascinated, constantly tempted to overwrite. Thus the hoots of the tawny owl "cut their sinuous way through the air with stiletto-like precision". He watches a dragonfly on a wall: "Here it is, a scarlet cruciform filling itself with autumn sunlight, savouring the immensity of its existence." On a winter's day the cold acquires "a rat's relentless incisors".The same expert knowledge and acute observation which made *Birds Britannica*, the book he wrote in association with Mabey, such a triumph, are evident here, but in that book the concentrated emotion was contained through the discipline of the encyclopedic form.But he writes like that to draw the reader into a mystery "threaded into the very fabric of my everyday world", as he puts it – a mystery of which human beings are a part. The observer and the observed are related. "Everything is connected to everything else," he says, so that rooking "is about the whole world".

In the end what drives a naturalist is a passion for all life which Cocker does not hesitate to describe as "a way of loving". He wants to show all this to you through his eyes, so that you will never see it in quite the same way again. He does it in this book about rooks by demonstrating how extraordinary is this apparently most ordinary of birds. **John Wilkins**

Rooks in flight: their familiar caw is 'the quintessence of the countryside'. Photo: Chris Gomersall

OUR REVIEWERS

Austen Ivereigh is a writer and campaigner.

Jonathan Wright's most recent book is *The Jesuits*.

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John Sutherland: 'a self-effacing insistence on the mediocrity of his youthful career'

Middling through

The Boy Who Loved Books

John Sutherland

JOHN MURRAY, £16.99

Tablet bookshop price £15.30 *Tel 01420 592974*

There are no end of memoirs that celebrate a joyous and coddled childhood. The current taste, of course, is for lashings of violent abuse and confinement in the unlit cupboard under the stairs. *The Boy Who Loved Books* is the best book I've ever read about an altogether more common sort of childhood, one of benign neglect and low-level damage, of dispiriting rather than grinding poverty, of scraping into provincial grammar schools and redbrick universities, of middling marks and the Third XV. "It was", John Sutherland recalls in his characteristically languid way, "all rather limboish."

Sutherland's father was killed in 1942 when his Wellington crashed into a mountain during a training exercise. John was four. His mother, christened Maud but soon switching to the smarter Liz, moved on briskly, taking up with a series of American officers stationed in Colchester during the war, and later following the wealthiest prospect back to his home in Argentina, returning three years later bronzed, be-furred and impeccably varnished. John was "parked" with relatives in Scotland and Essex, the costs of his maintenance and private education taken care of by the resourceful Liz.

While he wrote immensely long letters to her every week, she replied "seldom, cursorily and always fondly". John felt a "half-orphan", an inconvenience, "baggage to be stowed, kindly but firmly". On her return to Colchester, Liz secured a job with the council. Using her "connections" (her bedroom door is often locked in the afternoons) she rose up the management ladder, eventually winding up as a JP, and taking early retirement in the south of France with a second husband. As she cheerfully told him, she had gone from being whispered about as a trollop to being nicknamed "rich bitch".

Over 50 years later, and now a distinguished critic and retired university professor, Sutherland doesn't disguise a lingering sulk over his mother's failure to have had ginger nuts and milk on the kitchen table when he came home from school. She was never, he recalls resentfully, "deeply involved in lives other than her own".

It's hard to gauge how fond Liz really was of her son, but she certainly wasn't the smothering sort. In place of the ginger nuts there'd usually be a ten-bob note for the schoolboy to buy himself a few pints. Liz sounds terrific. There's no mystery why John should have been besotted by her. He's less successful at demonstrating why she ought to have been as besotted by him. But naturally enough it still grates that she wasn't.

John found solace from the mediocrity and loneliness in books and booze. By the time he was 18 he was gulping down huge Victorian novels by day and 10 pints of Bass by night. Alcohol, of course, is the traditional consolation for men resentful of the world's stubborn way of refusing to revolve around their requirements. But the adolescent boozing that gave the young Sutherland status (he might just as well have called his book *The Boy Who Could Hold His Drink*) grew into a catastrophic dependency that he was not to shrug off for another 30 years.

Sutherland is the virtuoso of the second-rate. Colchester Grammar is haunted by a "searing sense of inferiority". At Leicester University "the campus air is porridge-thick with inferiority complex". And his eventual alcoholism is second division. "I never starred at AA meetings." Even his resentment has a wry half-heartedness; it lacks the Osbornian fury of so many others who became adult in the 1950s.

But in the constant self-effacing insistence on the mediocrity of his youthful career is the plaintive voice of a half-loved small boy imploring us to give him a cuddle and tell him that he's not middling at all, that he's really a very clever boy indeed. And he is, too.

Brendan Walsh

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EVERYDAY LIFE IN BRIEF

Queuing for Beginners by Joe Moran (Profile, £14.99). Taking daily routines, from rising to bed, cultural historian Joe Moran has pieced together an eclectic history of everyday life in Britain. Our habits are subject, more than we think we know, to outside manipulation. Toys in breakfast cereals were the first example of marketing aimed at children; the open-plan workplace was pioneered in the Fifties by German "office landscapists". Moran charts the development of office-chair design: throne-like for management, nimbly-wheeled and armless for their lady secretaries. The water cooler featured in Sinclair Lewis' 1917 novel *The Job* ; in the 1990s, London Underground staff went on strike when their cappuccino privileges were withdrawn. Irritated by text messaging shorthand? Victorians saved space on postcards by dashing off "Hvng wndrful time". *Tablet* price £13.50.

Household Gods: the British and their possessions by Deborah Cohen (Yale, £25). A look at the evolution of British taste from the nineteenth century to the age of Ikea. Cohen covers fast-moving furniture fashions; but stuff is about status, "the competing claims of God and Mammon". Eras of opulence (the Edwardian furniture store Waring & Gillow's rotunda was half the size of St Paul's Cathedral's) are followed by opulent minimalism. There are tremendous details: gutta-percha – the dental putty – was used in the nineteenth century for everything from *faux* inlay to Jacobean-style panelling. Readable and excellently illustrated – though Cohen's prose is, like a Victorian parlour, serious but highly fringed. *Tablet* price £22.50.

Austerity Britain 1945-1951 by David Kynaston (Bloomsbury, £25). In 1946, Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote: "No one in wartime can quite escape the illusion that when the war ends things will snap back to where they were …" Things did not snap back: post-war rationing was even stricter; the British, says Kynaston, were apathetic and unsure of themselves. This brilliant and comprehensive book brings these uncertain years to life. Citizens were worn down by queuing and form-filling; planners among the bomb craters looked to "clean proud towns of living and light", not anticipating the bleak isolation of tower blocks. In 1947, drought, freeze and floods decimated crops. The first wave of immigrant workers arrived in a country where only 37 per cent could name a product imported from the colonies – and only 49 per cent could name a single colony. *Tablet* price £22.50. **Lucy Lethbridge**

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