

Hugh Kemp, "The Faith of the English: Integrating Christ and Culture by Nigel Rooms (Review Article)," *Anvil* 28.2 (2011).

Review of Rooms, Nigel. *The Faith of the English: Integrating Christ and Culture*. London: SPCK, 2011

Reviewer: Hugh Kemp, Redcliffe College, Gloucester

Title: *The Faith of the English: a study of English and Christian Inculturation*.

Having read Kate Fox's *Watching the English* (2004), friends and colleagues then said "you should now read Nigel Rooms' *The Faith of the English*". They perceived that I needed to learn quickly not only about Englishness but what *English* Christian faith was all about. On picking it up, I discovered a guidebook opened up before me: like a "Short Guide to the Villages of the Cotswolds", Rooms offered to me a Short Guide to the Contours of English Spirituality. I was very glad to have read it, and I intend on reading it again, several times. Trying to understand Englishness, and now trying to figure out English religion/spirituality/churchiness is a challenge for this recently-arrived immigrant: these Kiwi feet in modern time need to walk upon England's mountains green.

The Faith of the English looks deceptively light reading. A paperback of only 161 pages, it contains six chapters and an appendix. Not that it's heavy reading: it is well accessible, yet informed by research, anchored in current thinking and literature. The appendix is a 6-week course to be done in church homegroups. Rooms himself declares that the book is 'a study of English inculturation [which is] a continuing journey rather than [the expectation] of arrival at a distinct end-point' (p. 24).

I sensed two rich qualities with which Rooms has taken on this task: humility and practicality. There is a quiet yet firm tone to the book: Rooms wishes to analyse English spiritual sensibilities as a learner. He is looking respectfully for an 'integrated spirituality' by challenging the Christians to talk about their Englishness (p. 25). Where Kate Fox declares that the English are introspective, Nigel Rooms says 'now act on that introspection'. To this end, Rooms' home group study gives a practical way of doing this. He writes: "my final point is to hand the task of continuing the English inculturation project over to you, the reader, in the hope that together we can continue to realize the integration of Christ and culture in our blessed plot" (p. 128). I the reader, am expected to do something about this: hence the six week course.

A colleague of mine had done this – run the course in one of his church's homegroups – with mediocre success. The result was not particularly measurable: the six weeks was peppered by long awkward silences and self deprecation. Kate Fox's point exactly: the English are blighted with social dis-ease. The homegroup underlined Rooms' suspicion that English Christians can't see the need for self-reflection.

But this might be too harsh an assessment of one particular group. After a helpful first chapter on theory of inculturation, Rooms demonstrates that Kate Fox's categories are a legitimate lens through which to view Englishness (chapter 2): social dis-ease, a unique humour, moderation, hypocrisy, empiricism,

Hugh Kemp, "The Faith of the English: Integrating Christ and Culture by Nigel Rooms (Review Article)," *Anvil* 28.2 (2011).

Eeyorishness, class-consciousness, fair-play, courtesy, and modesty. Chapter three is titled 'Doing inculturation in England' in which Rooms brings in theory from Paulo Freire, Paul Ricoeur and others. Using a 'hermeneutic of imagination' Rooms reduces Fox's 10 categories to six (with characteristic tag lines), and hence the six lessons in the appendix: 1/ Moderation ('don't rock the boat'), 2/Humorous moaning ('typical!'), 3/Privacy ('an Englishman's home is his castle'), 4/Fair play ('Well, to be fair...'), 5/Class ('I know my place'), and 6/Courtesy ('Sorry..'). If these are legitimate cultural contours, then what might it mean to be have an *English* Faith?

Rooms' fourth chapter is where his genius lies. He takes the Robin Hood story and argues that it is the quintessential 'foundational English story' in which all these characteristics are evident. The Robin Hood myth not only describes the English, it prescribes English behaviour – and the related religious/spiritual/Christian behaviours – precisely because it is so well known and constantly retold. If I want to figure out the English, and English Christianity, and particularly the C of E, then I should read Robin Hood.

Yet is there a standardized Robin Hood story? Rooms argues 'no', but this is the point. The story has changed through time. Calling on the scholarly work of Stephen Knight, there have been at least four major metamorphoses of the story (p. 75). A casual trawl through the Internet Movie Database reveals at least six major Robin Hood films, and dozens of TV serials, with translations into many languages. These range from 1938-2010. That Robin Hood is iconic as a cultural story, yet changes over time was recognised by a past colleague of mine, Paul Windsor, who uses Robin Hood films to demonstrate culture change: take any one scene – for example, Maid Marion coming to Sherwood forest – and see how it has morphed through the years. The scene is iconic, but the interpretation of the scene demonstrates values of the era in which each film was made.

Rooms unpacks what Robin Hood is to English culture in general (p. 90), and offers suggestions regarding the church in particular. Robin is a liminal character in a greenwood kingdom. He is an outlaw who cares for the poor, and subverts the systems of the powerful and corrupt. He creates community. Robin Hood dies as an outlaw, at England's geographical and idealist core. Biblical words like *basilea* (kingdom) and *koinonia* (fellowship) quiver on Rooms' lips. If missiologists can talk of an African Christ, or a Chinese Christ, or a Black Christ, can the English have Robin Hood as their 'English Christ'?

That the English need to have an 'English Christ' is the whole premise of the book, and this is what makes it not only a sociological study, but a uniquely missiological work as well. Rooms declares that we all need to 'take utterly seriously' our primal or implicit religion. In Robin Hood it could be represented by the band of laity living in the green wood. In his final discussion (from page 117), Rooms offers some truly imaginative hermeneutics of culture, spirituality and Englishness. Three characteristics stand out, which I am going to try and adopt as a newbie in England: shrine, festival and pilgrimage.

Hugh Kemp, "The Faith of the English: Integrating Christ and Culture by Nigel Rooms (Review Article)," *Anvil* 28.2 (2011).

I'm going to embed myself in place, this place, England. Was Glastonbury our national shrine? Then perhaps my garden will be for now (when it's not raining). Can St George's day be turned into a uniquely English Christian festival? (I've got to find out who St George was!) And pilgrimage. I mapped out a 26 km route – a day's walk – with a friend from church through Somerset which 70 people will walk together this summer, sojourning at significant places (shrines), celebrating creation and Christian historical sites (festival) while journeying together (pilgrimage). I suspect the shrine-festival-pilgrimage nexus will take on a uniquely English cultural turn at the many pubs along the way. Maybe I'll join them in my first tentative steps of becoming truly inculturated into the spiritual ways of the English.