A faith to live by
by Ronald Ashby

Reviewed by Rowland Croucher

This book, for me, was a "page-turner" – a marvellous collection of concentrated wisdom extracted by an interviewer who is both editor of an award-winning Anglican (Diocese of Melbourne) newspaper, but who's also done post-graduate study in contemplative spirituality, (like that combination of attributes/vocations). The interviewees are mostly academics, but the young radical evangelical Shane Claiborne and his older mentor Jim Wallis are there too. Three are women (Joan Chittister, the outspoken Benedictine nun, Helen Prejean, author of the powerful book Dead Man Walking, which was made into a movie with the same title, and Esther de Waal, renowned UK author of books on spirituality). The influential and prolific prophets/teachers Richard Rohr and Brian McLaren are also included. And more than average space is given to three people with some quite disparate, though strangely complementary views on spirituality – Archbishop Rowan Williams, cartoonist Michael Leunig and academic David Tacey, who says he learned a lot of his insights from his students.

The best gift I can offer in this brief review is to whet your appetite with some of the book's best or most challenging quotes:

• Rowan Williams: "[Each morning] I take about half an hour to say the Jesus Prayer: The two best bits of advice about prayer, from Dom John Chapman: 'Pray as you can, not as you can't' and 'the less you pray the worse it gets'."

• Contra Stephen Hawking's opinion that 'Heaven is a fairy tale for people afraid of the dark' mathematics Professor John Lennox responds: 'atheism is a fairy story for people afraid of the light'.

• Fr Lawrence Freeman, author of books on Christian Meditation, recommends that we meditate for half an hour in the morning, and again at night. The best mantra? "Maranatha" (Another interviewee in this volume, I've forgotten who, recommends 'Christ in me, the hope of glory'). And this: 'There is nothing about being guilty I don't think in the teaching of Jesus'.

• Esther de Waal quotes Philip Toynbee: 'People often think the basic command of religion is 'do this, do that'. It isn't. It's look and wonder.' And this well-worn maxim: 'God is only to be found in the reality of the present moment.'

• In the "did you know?" category: Francis of Assisi is the most written about person in history. There are more books about him than Jesus' (Richard Rohr).

• Theoretical physicist Sir John Polkinghorne: 'The fact that science can only tell you that music is vibrations in the air doesn't mean that music is only vibrations in the air'.

• Author Morris West on hell: 'I cannot imagine inflicting infinite pain on even the most horrendous of human beings'.

• Philosopher-theologian Dr Keith Ward likes Gregory of Nyssa: 'Souls go on adventuring infinitely into God'.

• St Joan Chittister reminds us that: 'Even in the midst of [afflict] pain, suffering and grief, it is possible to say 'Alleluia'.

• Activist Jim Wallis likes Bishop Desmond Tutu: 'As Christians we are prisoners of hope'. His friend Brian McLaren tells us to a stance of humility when conservatives and liberals wrestle with issues like homosexuality. 'Conservatives are trying to be faithful to God... and the tradition, [but must also] acknowledge the compassionate and Christ-like attitudes of liberals towards gay people.'

There's much more: Indefinite wise bits and pieces on every page. Ask someone you love to buy it for your next birthday or something.

Roland Ashby, A Faith to Live By: Conversations about faith with twenty-five of the world's leading spiritual teachers (Anglican Media/Mosaic Press 2012).