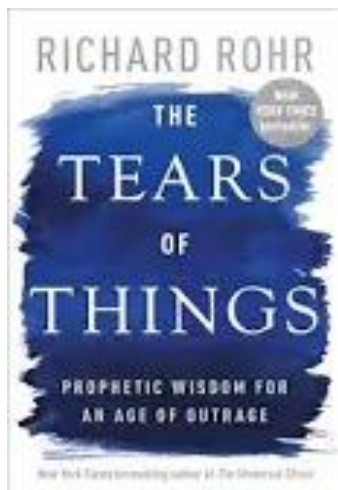




Richard Rohr does not write a bad book. Some of his work is challenging and can be densely compact, but you always come away educated, enlightened and renewed. Tears is one of his easier reads, narrowing its focus and reinforcing the themes throughout so the reader becomes familiar with the arguments across the different chapters.

The book looks at the role of prophecy from Amos through to John the Baptist. The 'mature' prophets, he contends, go through a process beginning with anger and ending in sadness, with exclamations of praise littered throughout.

Traditional religion, he argues, is most comfortable with numbers: things – or people – you can measure, rules you can obey or break, people you can divide into good or bad. It wants a purity code for personal salvation. The prophets, however, cut across this, firstly by declaring everyone sinful (sin is corporate, endemic, institutional rather than individual peccadillos) and then by reassuring the sinners of the eternal and unconditional nature of God's forgiveness and love. Both aspects of the prophets' message tend to be met with hostility by the religious 'accountants'.

The prophets begin full of God's wrath and rage, but, given time, they all come to see that God is sad, rather than hateful and is all moved to pity, to tears, at the state of the world rather than to vengeance. God's model towards humanity is that of a marriage, an open-ended covenant of love which keeps no record of rewards or punishments.

The prophets see the sorrow in all things: our brokenness and inability to find lasting joy.

The prophets' critique is always inward-looking rather than focused on someone else. They are on the edge but not on the outside. For them, faith is a journey downwards to the oppressed, not seeking the transparent glory of success. All of which makes their message unpopular and deliberately ignored.

Rohr, an American Catholic Franciscan, clearly has some targets in mind as he writes: the wealth of American evangelicalism and the shield-wall of the Roman Catholic church are two such. But the warmth of the writing also offers a profound reassurance for those disillusioned with the trajectory of much modern religion as well as offering hope that all is not lost.