

Nobility of Spirit – A Forgotten Ideal by Rob Riemen.
Yale University Press 2008.

In this wonderful little book of 116 pages, Rob Riemen, essayist and philosopher and founder of the Nexus Institute in the Netherlands, writes passionately in favour of the virtue of nobility of spirit without which civilised society cannot truly exist.

Following a foreword by George Steiner and a prelude which describes a dinner that the author had with Thomas Mann's daughter, Elizabeth, and her friend the composer Joseph Goodman, Riemen presents three essays, The Quest of Thomas Mann, Untimely Conversations on Timely Questions and Be Brave. In the first essay, Riemen writes about Thomas Mann, his political and literary struggles both in Germany and later in exile in America and Switzerland, and how he used the stories that he told so beautifully to make points that were passionately important to him.

His second essay uses the background device of a series of historical conversations, from ancient Greece up to the 20th century, to consider some of life's great existential questions, leading up to a brilliant consideration of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the popular response to them; the shade of Thomas Mann hovers in the background in this essay too. There is also an epilogue to this essay that contains the thoughts of the writer Czeslaw Milosz on the death of a close friend, which rounds off the essay and makes some hugely powerful additional points. The third essay Be Brave is, for me, the most powerful and haunting of the three: its focus is two heroes of immense intellect and courage separated by many centuries and persecuted for who they were and what they stood for, Socrates in 4th century BCE Athens and the Jewish intellectual Leone Ginzburg, tortured to death by the Nazis in Italy in 1944. Riemen brings them to life in a magical way, celebrating the ideas and passions in which they believed, and for which they died, and at the same time enhancing the importance of these values for our own time.

Nobility of Spirit may be a tiny book, but it is weighty and worthy of several readings adequately to appreciate the gems within.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh