

chapters offer helpful introductions. While they draw on Barth's own idiosyncratic terminology and loquacious, elliptical theological phrasings, they do so in a way that is grounded and inviting, especially—I suspect—for readers new to Barth.

The biography concludes somewhat unusually with an epilogue in which Tietz offers a hopeful and personal appeal for the continued relevance of Barth's theological project. Here Tietz pushes readers to assess anew Barth's place in theology today. She clearly thinks that Barth deserves better than the fringe status he commands in German-speaking theological circles. 'Despite the majority's return to liberal theology', she writes, 'a range of German-speaking theologians continue to find Karl Barth's theological approach seminal. The author of this biography is one of them' (p.411). In this telling comment, Tietz demonstrates both the promise and limitations of her biography. The Barth one finds there is lively and demanding, and for readers with more than strictly historical interests, there will be no way to avoid asking the question of what to make of him, his life, his work, and his God. In offering her own appeal for Barth, Tietz helpfully demonstrates her own willingness to model an answer to these questions today. And yet, Tietz's own response is narrowly focused on German-speaking circles and neglects the widespread reception Barth's theology has received in the intervening half century especially among Protestant theologians in South Africa and the United States. In this way, Tietz's biography leaves open the door to further historiographic attempts to capture not just the details of Barth's impressive life and work, but their relevance to the quite different ecclesial and theological circumstances from which his readers find themselves encountering him today.

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GRACE IS NOT FACELESS : REFLECTIONS ON MARY by Ann Loades, *Darton, Longman & Todd*, London, 2021, pp.136, £16.99, pbk

For a variety of reasons, which I suspect will intersect with the interests and perspectives of many readers of *New Blackfriars*, I picked up this collection of essays on Mariological themes with eager anticipation.

The volume promised 'rare and original material spanning more than thirty years' of an eminent theological career noted for feminist conviction lived in profound commitment to Christian faith within the Anglican tradition. Consequently it seemed inherently likely to include much that would

be, in the best sense, provocative, a solvent of various rather too easily won certainties about both feminism and Christianity. The title of several individual essays – Mary: for everyone; Mary: for now; Regarding Mary and the Trinity: the Anglican position – suggested both an attention to the specific and an aspiration towards the universal of considerable potential for honest and intellectually serious Mariological discourse, not least ecumenically. It was pleasing to see sermons included alongside academic conference addresses; encouraging to find literary texts cited as a properly theological resource; heart warming to be reminded that, in 2019, the annual issue of Christmas postage stamps had been marked by the Royal Mail's commissioning a commentary on the Nativity story from Professor Loades.

In other words, I looked forward to reading the various pieces included in the anthology as so many justifications of its title. Grace – in the evocative words of Cornelius Ernst OP - is not faceless, no mere celestial lubricant designed to ensure the smooth functioning of some impersonal ecclesial mechanism. Rather, it is to be found visibly and distinctively at work in the concretely human life of Church and society; in Marian devotion lived with proper attention both to its potential to transfigure our sexual politics, and to the risk of its deeply inauthentic recruitment for the purposes of exploitation and oppression; in the adoption for theological purposes of the necessarily specific language of metaphor and narrative simultaneously with that of propositional abstraction; in the hospitality to homiletics alongside the vocabulary and preoccupations of the academy. In our currently parlously polarised ecclesial times, I also hoped that this text would be one that could be fruitfully read by those demonised as 'warriors' in the allegedly mutually exclusive causes of 'culture' and 'social justice', as well as by those for whom such dismissive caricaturing of the good faith of fellow Catholics is a cause of profound distress.

In many ways, I was not disappointed. These pieces are all unmistakably the work of a theologian generously sensitive to the nuance of positions not her own, who traverses comfortably the byways as well as the highways of Christian tradition, over a remarkably wide tract of historical and confessional terrain. The *dramatis personae* of the opening essay in the collection, 'The Virgin Mary and the Feminist Quest', for instance, includes Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. These highly diverse doyennes of 19th and 20th century feminist theology appear together with Martin Luther, whose 'attitude to women and the feminine' is, Loades notes 'somewhat complex', not least on account of the possibility of reading his ecclesiological project as an attack on the Church conceived specifically in maternal terms in juxtaposition with his warmly personal Marian piety. The essay also features C.S. Lewis, whom Loades commends - in accents of understandable astonishment, given his earlier track record in such matters - for his reflections in widowhood on the potential of the language of complementarity to degenerate into complacent self-satisfaction, to the diminishment of men

and women alike, and a range of late modern Roman Catholic Magisterial texts. Here, Loades notes - and notes Mary Daly as having noted before her - a possible interpretation of the 1854 dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception that sees it as supportive rather than subversive of the dignity of women on the grounds that it destabilizes 'the myth of feminine evil'.

But alongside these variously major players in Christian life and thought, Loades introduces us to voices that we are rather less likely to have heard before: Eliza Sharples, the early 19th century PR spokeswoman for Eve ('Do you not, with one voice exclaim, well done woman!...If that was a fall, sirs, it was a glorious fall') and an anonymous 11th century poet who describes virgin saints gathering spring flowers in the fields of paradise in terms that as Loades rightly says, are reminiscent of a Fra Angelico depiction of heaven.

For some, insistence from an avowedly feminist author that Christian ascetic exaltation of virginity has a 'splendid best' as well as an 'awful worst' will doubtless be both surprising and salutary. Meanwhile, it will do Catholic apologists of a more traditional bent little harm to be reminded that even Magisterial exaltations of self-sacrifice and duty - and specifically the association of these qualities with women in general and Mary in particular - can be misappropriated in the interests of abusive misogyny. Wherever we are situated on any conceivable theo-political spectrum, then, there is as much here to enrich our imaginations as to inflame our ideological sensibilities.

Other texts in the collection are equally - though differently - stimulating and instructive. Of particular value, to this reviewer at least, is the wide-ranging piece on the Nativity in recent poetry. A major strength of this essay is the commendable way in which Loades allows the poets on whom she focuses to speak, extensively, for themselves, and I imagine that most readers will find something in the fresh presentations of the old, old story here to challenge, but also straightforwardly to delight.

Why then, do I hesitate wholeheartedly to commend this volume? Most of my reluctance is due to a variety of somewhat debilitating editorial failures. There are lapses of attention to detail in Steven Burns's introduction, as when the date of the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption is wrongly given as 1954, presumably by association with the analogous definition of the Immaculate Conception a century earlier. Although objectively relatively minor, such errors are not calculated to secure a sympathetic hearing in those predisposed to disapprove of the theological mindset of their perpetrators.

Meanwhile, although the anthology contains, as advertised, material written over several decades, I was not left with any particularly acute sense of development in Loades's thinking. By contrast, a manifest continuity in her perceptions and concerns is visible, but somewhat too often this effect is achieved by means of straightforward reiteration, not merely thematic, but substantially textual. It is, of course, unsurprising that a life-

time of passionately dedicated theological research will be marked by frequent returns to the same sources, and right that a retrospective anthology will bear some traces of this. I am less convinced that this justifies the inclusion of quite so much frankly repetitious material.

Finally, despite the promise that the introduction would provide ‘significant context’ for the collected pieces, there seems surprisingly little editorial sense of how Loades’s work is situated in the far from monochrome or static wider environment of feminist theology. Nor – relatedly - is any challenge posed to her fundamentally universalising stance relative to various increasingly clamant questions of diversity and identity which contemporary theology ignores at the risk of trading precisely in graceless, faceless abstraction. Loades’s description of feminism as concerned with ‘change for the better in terms of justice for women’, for instance, stands in need of acute interrogation if it is not to be merely impotent cliché. What counts as justice for women? Why should we expect all women to agree on this? And what are the implications for our life together in the body of Christ when we do not? The failure of both Loades and her editor to grapple with these questions risks obscuring the real potential these pieces have for encouraging robust and respectful conversation on the issues that they – implicitly or explicitly - raise.

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