

Thérèse of Lisieux, Chesterton, Péguy, Bernanos and Balthasar. The selection is instructive in itself including as it does three married laymen and only one professional theologian. Multiple ideas and perspectives are derived by Saward from his chosen guides. Childhood can disclose the perennially valid experiences of trust, wonder, playfulness and hope. For the Christian, it indicates the way of confidence in the Father, play with the Son (Christmas matters), soldiering with the Spirit and delighting in Mary as mother. Baptism is the moment of regeneration, the genesis of spiritual childhood, and confession that of renewed innocence. One of Bernanos's characters remarks that the grace of God makes the most hardened of men a little child. In one of Saward's most perceptive reflections, he says of St Thérèse's experience of the desolation of the faithless that her very innocence is a force of connection, for sin separates even sinners from each other. Holiness alone can unite.

It is, of course, the notion of childhood that is being reposed, not childishness in adults or what Chesterton derided as 'Peter Pantheism'. Not for nothing did St Thérèse, Chesterton and Péguy have a particularly intense devotion to the massacred Holy Innocents. Saward's guides had no illusions about the pain and horror of life or the evils of their age. Like his guides, Saward too can be robust (if occasionally too sweeping) in his criticisms of various contemporary tendencies. Yves Congar recalls somewhere Gerson's project to reform the Church through children, and Saward is definitely a reformer.

Saward gives ample space to direct quotations from his chosen authors, so that this is a book to be lingered over. In fact, its insights and resonances will only be fully discerned if approached with trust and confidence. In this, it enacts its meaning.

ROBERT OMBRES OP

GENTILE TALES: THE NARRATIVE ASSAULT ON LATE MEDIEVAL JEWS by Miri Rubin (New Haven and London: *Yale University Press*, 1999). Pp. 266+ xiv, £25.00 hbk.

Miri Rubin, Reader in Medieval History at Oxford University, is already well known as the author of *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (1991). The present book is an examination of a peripheral series of stories which attached to the Eucharist in late medieval piety. Rubin details two archetypal stories of abuse of the Eucharistic species: in the first and older of the two, 'the Story of the Jewish Boy', the protagonist received Communion with other boys and came home to tell his father what he had done; the father, enraged, threw the boy into an oven. The boy's mother attempted to save him, but the fire was too hot; local townsfolk inquired, and when the fire subsided, they saw the child unharmed as the result of protection from the Virgin and her Child. The boy and his mother converted; the father was thrown into the oven. This story can be traced to the sixth century, and was a popular one in Marian devotion even before it was retold as part of

Eucharistic instruction and preaching. The second story arose from an accusation of host desecration in Paris in 1290: in this story, a Jew obtained a host from a Christian woman. He struck it with a knife, and the host began to bleed; the Jew threw it into boiling water, but the water turned blood red. The host was recovered and the Jew was punished. These stories are recorded to preserve a value, and repeated to encapsulate a moral: in the case of the stories of the Jewish Boy, it was originally the protection of the Mother of God; in the Paris host desecration, it was the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The book masterfully traces the appearance of both of these stories, with variations and embroideries on them, throughout the later Middle Ages. Particular emphasis is placed on the connection of these stories with large- and small-scale attacks on Jewish urban populations, and the numbing parade of pogroms in one city after another reinforces the consequences of these stories' repetition. But it is precisely in this context that two cautions must be cited.

Firstly, it must be noted that not all narratives concerning abuse of the Eucharist involved Jews as the perpetrators; while the blasphemous Jew was often a part, so too, in others, was the blasphemous Christian heretic. Conversely, not all narratives concerning Jews involved the Eucharist; medieval literature features the Jew in lessons against usury quite as frequently. To what extent, therefore, is it central to the story that the abuser of the Eucharist is a Jew and not, say, a heretic? Rubin assumes, but does not discuss, that the Jewish identity of the abuser is absolutely vital and necessary to the story. Without this caution, Rubin's splendid evaluation of a limited section of medieval narratives might be given more importance than it should. Of particular interest is the observation that what might be classified as anti-Jewish stories are most plentiful in periods of Christian revival and renewal (Rubin notes the preaching of the Franciscan John of Capistrano and the Dominican Vincent Ferrer), and are most notably absent in eras of decadence and laxity. Furthermore, to treat such stories of abuse of the Eucharist principally in the context of violence against Jews removes them from a great part of the context in which they would have been presented and understood to their intended audience in the late Middle Ages.

Secondly, and more controversially, Rubin concentrates on the development of these charges as "narrative", and includes references to art, poetry, sermons, drama, historical documents and judicial investigations. It is in the last two cases that this is most problematic; how should one use historical documents, and particularly the transcripts of judicial proceedings and investigations, to evaluate the occurrence of miraculous events in the Middle Ages? While the modern scholar tends to be sceptical (a stance shared with many of his medieval counterparts, such as Ambrose of Heiligenkreuz), does that necessarily imply that the actual historical content in each case was nil? Are all narratives of medieval miracles "merely" stories? In treating the great variety of Eucharistic stories as "narrative" aimed against Jews, Rubin reduces the

historical content and once (perhaps as a slip?) refers to it as the host desecration "fiction". Given the various contexts, the prudent historian should be as loath to discount the factual background completely as he is to be completely credulous.

The book is a compelling tale in the history of propaganda and the power of narrative, and finds chilling echoes in our own time in the genocides of Armenia, the Holocaust, and the Balkans. When presented with clarity, as Rubin does, and when read with care, as the modern reader must, these stories and their studies remind us that such hatreds (even on a massive scale) are certainly nothing new, or even all that unusual, and that we still have much to learn.

BECKET SOULE OP

LOURDES: BODY AND SPIRIT IN THE SECULAR AGE by Ruth Harris (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999). Pp. xxi + 474, £25.00 hbk.

Too often presented in a caricatural way either as a spectacular proof of the divine plan or as the epitome of catholic obscurantism, the Lourdes phenomenon is here at last clearly and objectively analysed by a secular historian. One of the most striking aspects of this impressive study is the ability of Dr. Harris to brush away the layers of hagiography and positivist propaganda that have burdened the story of the miracles and of the beginning of the pilgrimage tradition. Her well-balanced work presents the apparitions within the context of the enigmatic and moving character of Bernadette on the one hand, the creation of the legend by Laserre and the activities of the Assumptionists on the other hand.

The author achieves a *tour de force* in reconciling the demands of scientific historiography with the acknowledgement of the supernatural. The preface, outlining her methodology, warns of this without embarrassment. Unlikely to be accused of religious partiality as catholic historians so often are, Harris is able to freshly address her topic with all its strangeness and ambiguities. Much more at ease than a René Laurentin with non-scientific facts, she offers a much more comprehensive analysis of the shrine by the incorporation of the irrational (p.54). Rarely has an historian, without falling into the clichés of a poorly mastered psychoanalysis, so well succeeded in enabling the reader to understand the phenomenon of the miraculous.

Dr. Harris does not adopt the view of the anti-clerical school which generally sees the majority of the pilgrims as hysterical females, sexually frustrated, in the hands of a dominating reactionary clergy. Her chapter on 'The Vision of the "Self"' is particularly innovative and subtle in the analysis of the diverse experiences of those cured, and especially of the women: 'Rather than seeing the transformations at Lourdes as the effects of suggestion on women who were psychologically impoverished and susceptible, the cures of Lourdes raise a vision of the 'self' as actively engaged and resourceful, able to overcome afflictions that all