

**A COMPANION TO MEISTER ECKHART [Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition] edited by Jeremiah M. Hackett, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2012, pp. xxx + 781, £164, hbk**

Very rarely is one given the opportunity to have a long desired wish made real. The wishful spirit often must settle for a series of disappointing misses and may even give up hope in the quest altogether. But that would be wrong, and the delightfully satisfying work edited by Jeremiah M. Hackett proves the point. Perhaps few other volumes in Brill's *Companions to the Christian Tradition* series will be met with so felt a need in the English-reading world as this volume. Yes, indeed all the volumes to date have been outstanding contributions in the goal of the series to engage the intellectual and religious life of Europe from 500 to the 1800s. However, for many students of Eckhart who lack the languages so necessary to do justice to Eckhart's thought, this volume is a gold mine of scholarship at a high standard. It offers the reader an opportunity to engage the German Dominican beyond the wash of popular bargain book interpretations from self-help gurus to amateur dabblers in mysticism.

The editor has well ordered the contributions, allowing the reader to engage Eckhart's context, his works and the works of his day in Part I. Here one will find a solid background of the events surrounding Eckhart's life which is essential to any student or interested reader of Eckhart. The intellectual climate of ideas that his own thought encountered in the schools and in the Dominican Order presented in this section, is a valuable overview for any serious scholar. Next the work presents Eckhart as a preacher and theologian in Part II. Eckhart's unique integration that is found in his theological project and his sense of biblical exegesis helps to explain his doctrine of God and the kind of mysticism proper to this thinking mystic. Particularly beneficial are the chapters by Markus Enders treating Eckhart's understanding of God and Lydia Wegener's critical examination of Eckhart and women's spirituality. But it is Part III that will prove the most revealing to the casual reader of Eckhart or to the scholar in need of updating. Here they will discover the variety of receptions, interpretations and appropriations of Eckhart's thought over time. These chapters expose the oft wrongly repeated pseudo-works and popular legends that can confuse and even alter Eckhart, contorting his thought to a particular period's interests and biases. Current English Eckhart studies has long been in need of the kind of critical examination that is found in these chapters. Especially noteworthy are the consequences of the long standing tension between the popular German works and the more formal Latin works. Eckhart clearly is a master of both, and it is essential for contemporary readers to appreciate the genius of mind that could broker these realities.

In a volume of this size, close to 800 pages in length, there are bound to be contributions that outshine the rest, but apart from only a few chapters that seem to have less merited inclusion, the volume is a constellation of brilliance and well worth its cost. While the average reader may not find the 'spare change' to purchase it, it is a valuable investment for any devoted Eckhart scholar. However, it is an absolutely necessary acquisition for any serious university library and dedicated academic programme on Eckhart. This collection of essays and the quality of its scholarship easily incline one to describe it as the 'bible' for Eckhart studies today. Its lasting value, for the English reader, is found in its engagement of Eckhart from the panorama of over a century of critical reflection by the finest European and North American scholars. Since the German philosophers first appropriated and misappropriated his works, Eckhart has been a challenging thinker to read. In today's bedlam of interpretations, one will find in *A Companion*

to *Meister Eckhart*, an almost surgical treatment of the many approaches that have sought to define Eckhart's thought.

MICHAEL DEMKOVICH OP

**BALTHASAR: A (VERY) CRITICAL INTRODUCTION** by Karen Kilby, *William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, UK, pp. xii + 176, £ 16.99, pbk

Writing an introduction to the way to approach the works of a major scholar is a difficult enterprise. In the case of this book written by Karen Kilby, when Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Nottingham (UK), the enterprise is much more difficult because of the intention to produce an introduction that is to be (*very*) *critical*.

The book's structure is sober, perhaps too much so. Between an introduction and a conclusion devoted to the defence of the core of the volume, Kilby's work offers substantially four sections in five chapters. This is a sketch of Balthasar's theological personality, an analysis of four central images drawn from his work (Picture, Play, Fulfillment and Circle) and some considerations about two of the recurrent themes in the huge output of the Swiss theologian: the Trinity, and the correlation between gender and 'the Nuptial'.

What is the main contribution of Kilby's *Balthasar*? Of course, it is designed to introduce the readers to his difficult and massive output, particularly helping them 'to find their way around in Balthasar's writing' (p. 5). More closely, on the basis of many passages of the book, it may be said that Kilby aims to criticize the role of this work in the theological debate of the last few decades, as well as in the consideration of John Paul II or Benedict XVI. In spite of his creativity and his importance for theological reflection, Kilby cannot agree with 'the current tendency to lionize Balthasar, to look to him as some sort of new Church Father, as *the* great figure to emerge in the twentieth century' (p.2). The dimension and the elusiveness of Balthasar's cultural output may disorient a scholar who aims to criticize it. In this sense, considering the secondary literature about Balthasar in English, to the point of taking into account the charges of heresy against the Swiss theologian (cf. p.11, about Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), Kilby considers that Balthasar has to be criticized because 'he frequently seems to presume [...] a God's eye view' (p.13). From Kilby's point of view, we can say that the weakness of this theology is its strength. Too often Balthasar, speaking as a very cultivated scholar and as a deep spiritual guide (cf. p. 161), offers a point of view that presumes to be 'above Scripture, above tradition, and history, and also above his readers' (p. 14).

This problematic aspect of Balthasar's theology emerges from various parts of his huge output. First, it emerges in the consideration of his original way into the field of fundamental theology, from the perspective of aesthetics (*Glory of the Lord*). Under the famous programmatic expression '*seeing the form*', the Swiss theologian found a way to hold together Barth and Rahner, overcoming their respective limitations. Yet the aim to describe the *wholeness* of the form (the Revelation in Christ), according to Kilby, cannot result in a dangerous 'all-or-nothing' (p. 55) approach, according to which either you understand the form as Balthasar does or you fail to see it. Secondly, the same difficulty is present at the core of *Theo-Drama*, considered by Kilby through the metaphor of the play that articulates the relationship between the Trinitarian drama and history.