

Reviews

PSALMS AND PRACTICE: WORSHIP, VIRTUE AND AUTHORITY
edited by Stephen Breck Reid, *The Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2001*
Pp. xvii + 290, \$19.95 pb.

This is a series of papers contributed to a symposium held in Austin, Texas for which there were brought together for three days pastors and biblical scholars in academic settings 'in a collegial and comfortable context'. It was an ecumenical group, which aimed, in the words of one contributor, 'at bridging the gap between academy and sanctuary'; and one might add, between academy and pew, even between sanctuary and pew, in the matter of coping with the psalms.

There is a Part I on 'Psalms and Practice', which might well have been omitted. It revolves round a definition of 'practice' by Alasdair MacIntyre, of which I, being rather more pre- than post-modern (post industrial revolution, though, even post Vatican II) couldn't understand a word, as also with the editor's contribution to this part. With Part II 'Contemplation and Worship' we get down to the business of coping with the psalms (i.e. to practice), praying them, their liturgical use, their place in worship and preaching and kindred topics. In Part III 'Virtue and Authority' we come to the religious morality inculcated by the psalms. I did not quite see how authority came into it: it was in fact about virtue, righteousness or otherwise, the questionable virtue, very largely, of cursing your enemies.

This, of course, is the problem with the psalms in its most extreme form; but there are the lesser problems of complaining to God, of thanking him for things he does not seem to give us, of lamentation and woe, constant wringing of hands, all enclosed in the problem of singing or reciting in our own day these hymns from an ancient and very different culture.

The religious culture of our own day in America, was well presented, particularly in the discussions that followed each part. 'We expect God to make things okay for us, and in the psalms he doesn't'; 'We think we have to be nice to be Christian', 'We ought to be tolerant': to which the answers were; 'Did Jesus ever promise God would make things okay for you?'

'Does Jesus tell us to be nice?', 'Tolerance is a democratic not a Christian virtue'. First encounters with the psalms produce reactions of fear: 'their threatening aspect regarding dancing and praising' (not nice); and of anger; 'This is not *my* God'; 'what kind of God is this? To all of which it was well said by one contributor that the psalms are a counter-cultural tool, prodding us all, on this side of the Atlantic too, into a painful practice of self-knowledge, and of a deeper, more realistic knowledge of our religion and of the God we worship.

To my surprise, one sketch of transatlantic middle class culture said that the Americans do not know the word 'wicked'; only the word

'righteous' (which for them, it seems, does not carry the Pharaesical tinge it does for us); and again they do not understand about having enemies. They certainly do now, of course, after 'black Tuesday', 11 September 2001, but this symposium predates that. There were, to be sure, reports from the cultural fringes, from a multiracial parish in California, and others also, remembering the days of segregation, of the murder of Archbishop Romero, and so on. These outlined the proper place of the so-called cursing psalms, their value in certain situations.

The fact that when reciting the psalms we are constantly voicing sentiments that are not our own at this particular moment, rejoicing when we are feeling very low, lamenting when we are happy, cursing enemies when we do not have any; this was underlined as a useful counter to the average American's 'narrowly individualistic way of appropriating the psalms'.

One contributor notes how laments and curses (she includes them under the same heading) have been omitted from the Revised Common Lectionary. They have, of course, been omitted from our revised post-Vatican II breviary, 'as not easily lending themselves to Christian usage'. Leaving these bits and pieces out does not stop them being there in the psalter, in one of the canonical books of Scripture. As I remarked in a little book of mine, *Prayer, Praise and Politics*, put together from articles I wrote in South Africa 30 years ago or so, when Catholics were suddenly being faced with the psalms in the vernacular, in the raw as it were, and needed some help in dealing with them: 'This amounts to an attempt, in a way, to censor these scriptures. Is it not rather an impertinence on our part to try and sweep under the carpet the various messes which the divine litterbug has left behind him?'.

I was not immediately concerned to bridge any gaps between biblical scholarship and the man in the pew or the pulpit; and so I was innocent of a fault that rather mars a number of these contributions—that is, of devoting more time to the exegesis of their chosen biblical scholar, e.g. Mowinckel or Moltmann, than to the exegesis of the psalms. Thus the contributor who discusses Psalm 109 fails to look at the psalm in sufficient detail, and thus to note the significance of an important difference between Part II of the psalm and Parts I and III. In Part I the psalmist is complaining about the wicked and 'their' wickedness and what 'they' are doing to 'me'. But in Part II, which consists of the really juicy curses, it is 'he' that is being cursed, presumably by 'them', about whom the psalmist says at the end of Part I, 'they repaid me evil for good, and hatred for my love'. Then in Part III, 'I' ask the Lord to turn the tables on 'my' accusers, in the plural. An inescapable conclusion, to my mind, though I fear it has escaped the professional commentators, is that the curses of Part II have been hurled at the psalmist; he is telling God how they have cursed him. From these curses one can gather that he had been a man of substance, a man who had held an important office under the crown, to be a little anachronistic.

I do not know if my book, published in London by *Sheed & Ward* in 1973, ever reached the other side of the Atlantic. I was a little mortified to notice its absence from the bibliography. Had it been available to the

writer of that particular piece, it would have spared him worrying about what Zenger and Brueggermann have to say about these difficult psalms. It would also have made it much easier to present this psalm to modern, middle class congregations, shocking them not by the 'naughty language' but by bringing home to them the awful possibility that they might themselves sometimes be the object of such terrible curses.

EDMUND HILL OP

WRITING RELIGIOUS WOMEN: FEMALE SPIRITUAL AND TEXTUAL PRACTICES IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND edited by Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead, *University of Wales Press, Cardiff: 2000. Pp. 272, £14.99. pbk*

This is a very interesting volume edited by two specialists in Medieval English Literature, who gather together ten essays on the subject of 'female vernacular theology', with a particular focus on texts in circulation in England during the period 1220 to 1500 AD. Because the majority of these texts were not originally written in English, the fact of their translation is indicative both of the influence of Latinate culture on the developing spirituality of English religious women, and of the distinctly pastoral intentions with which the material was directed for wider use. The influence of the Fourth Lateran Council is noted here, as theological study and spiritual practice were deliberately moving from hermetic monastic and university contexts out into the intellectually mixed and evangelistic environment of medieval England. These brief comments found in Reveney's introduction offer a quite fascinating glimpse into the early distinctiveness of English theological thought.

To focus on themes that emerge at the interface of female spiritual and textual practices in this period is a significant step forward within an expanding body of scholarship. The references to available collections of primary texts that have been edited since the 1970s give the reader a useful guide to the resources. A number of these have been shaped by feminist interests or by needs of the undergraduate syllabus. Influential in the interpretation of this material have been scholars like Carolyn Walker Bynum and Barbara Newman, whose interests are primarily historical and ideological, and thus 'of necessity there is little close engagement with the specific circumstances of English spiritual behaviour' (p. 8). This comment by Whitehead suggests that the unique agenda of this collection will open onto another understanding of what it is to be 'timely', of how it is that the receiving, circulating and reading of texts shape, and are shaped by, the patterns and requirements of spiritual formation in particular circumstances. Because formation has been a subject of some controversy not only amongst feminist scholars committed to personal autonomy, but also for those who suspect it as the artifice by which cultural hegemony is realised in the total institution of religious life, this collection offers a refreshing approach to the issues.

The essays are grouped into four sections. The first, with an essay

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