

SOME RECENT PROTESTANT MARIOLOGICAL PUBLICATIONS

By

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A notable number of recent publications have been devoted to the Blessed Mother. Their range has been wide and not without significance. Some have been authentically theological; a few of these have been pietistic, inevitably, but most have represented a sincere effort to state the faith and theology concerning Mary in terms updated by Vatican Council II. Others have been abusive in a mood and manner that one had thought to have gone with the winds of an earlier generation of emotional hatred not so much of the Mother of Christ but of His Church, and, indeed Himself.

Recent books have included rationalistic "studies" of a type one had thought passé. For example, Geoffrey Ashe's *The Virgin*, the general message of which is set forth on his first page (properly enough curiously entitled "Ewig-Weibliche") where he quotes the opinion of an Anglican Canon against the traditional Mariology of the Catholic Church and no small part of the Anglican: "The evangelical has a strong suspicion that the deepest roots of the Marian cultus are not to be found in the Christian tradition at all. The religious history of mankind shows a recurring tendency to worship a mother-goddess. Three factors in particular suggest that the cult of Mary may be an intrusion into Christianity from the dark realms of natural religion. First, it seems that historically the earliest traces of Marian devotion seem to come from Christian circles to some extent at least tainted with syncretizing Gnosticism. The second is the ease with which the devotion becomes associated with local holy places so that the faithful make their prayers to our Lady of a particular shrine. May it not be the case, the evangelical wonders, that what we have here is in reality an older religion, a paganism which has been too lightly baptized into Christ and whose ancient features persist under a thin Christian veil? The third factor is an apparent correlation between Marian devotion and an

elevation of chastity to a point of esteem where marriage and sexual intercourse are depreciated if not reprehended. Is the increasing emphasis on a female object of devotion in some way a form of psychological compensation?"

Attack on Mary

Ashe's book is mild and more or less routine "de-mythologizing". Far more significant in terms of what one suspects is going on at the moment is a book by an apostate Catholic who describes herself an "agnostic". Lest one add to the publicity of this particular "scientific" book by an ex-alumna of a Catholic school in Britain, we shall omit the name of the book and of the author and suggest that the contrived "scholarship" of this singularly vituperative history of Catholic devotion to Mary is better understood if one reflects on a quasi-autobiographical paragraph in the book than if one wades through the erudition that so vilifies the Marian shrines and cult that the *New York Times* apologized for reviewing it in remarkably frank word for the *Times*. Thirteen days after a flood of protesting letters to the publication which prides itself on printing all the news that's fit to print, the *Times* made a qualified retraction. It published nine letters, offered as a "sampling" of all those received, and added: "Publication of this article on the eve of the Roman Catholic Feast of the Immaculate Conception was an unfortunate and entirely accidental coincidence; the *Times* regrets any offense this inadvertent timing may have given to our readers".

Its retraction was printed by another publication under the title "Lady Publishes Unlady-Like Attack on the Blessed Lady". British publications which ran this particular article in whole or in part were not similarly apologetic nor fair.

A train ride

One surmises that the give away concerning the motivation of the article and the roots of its original writing are to be found in a description the British writer gives of a train ride she took to a shrine of the Blessed Mother, a shrine, oddly enough, where the Virgin's chief concern is not conception or parturition, but healing. The passage provides an extended description of the British lady's self-consciousness as she rode in an ordinary train compartment surrounded by working men. What she has to say should be of much more interest to a psychologist studying her than to a self-described historian describing Catholic devotion to the Mother of Christ. She writes: "The train passed through the plain of

Aragon where the mean villages cluster round opulent churches. In Saragossa I changed to a small, country train that would take me to the Spanish-French border, only a few miles from Lourdes in the Pyrenee. It was the end of the day, and the train, stopping frequently, took on field hands and labourers and soldiers to deposit them a few villages down the lines to make their way home. I had already found my solitary state a handicap in Spain. The only person who had spoken freely to me for ten days was a hunch-back verger in the cathedral of La Seo in Sargossa who plucked me by the elbow, saying, "Why are you alone?" And then, smiling gently, led me to inspect the array of reliquary heads in silver and gilt on the altar. But in the carriage, the silent, hostile, hungry stares of my male companions were so intense that I wanted to leap to my feet and shout.

En route to Lourdes

"In that compartment Catholic attitudes were perfectly enacted. The men, dusty, haggard and speechless after work, devoured the female stranger with unashamed eyes as if her impudent situation had forfeited her self-respect and turned her into inanimate concrete. And in these circumstances the female frightened by the scrutiny (although there was nothing violent in it) cannot put herself on a par with the men, but is turned into the bashful, averted, impotent woman that society prescribes. Yet once, when by mistake I caught the eye of a young man, he dropped his gaze almost shyly, and then nudged his companions as if in pride. Thus men are emasculated by the excessive importance they accord to women, and women lose access to existence outside the wary expectations of the male.

"So on my way to Lourdes — appropriately enough — I saw in a flash the Catholic cycle: warnings against perils of the flesh lead to obsession with it, which in turn increases desire. This inspires self-disgust because it has been decreed sinful, and therefore leads to a need for forgiveness which only the sacraments of the church may grant. It is the wheel on which Catholics — men and women — are bound".

A truer version

The undersigned has visited and spent no little time in some of the places that the lady-like writer finds particularly offensive, notably Rocamador. He has never been in a train crowded with tired workers, old men or, for that matter, peasant boys who would have had the slightest prurient interest in the author of this self-

revealing collection of snobbery and self-conscious fear. In fact, one wonders if there is not at least one so-called "Catholic mentality" that even the most extreme person who abandons the faith does retain, priggishly, at least when she's in compartments filled with men and especially, God forgive them, Europeans. The self-revelation of the "scholar" is far more revealing than anything the scholar writes about the Blessed Mother.

It also suggests, as do other parts of the article, a familiar enough fact not necessarily confined to the realm of religion; it is, in fact, fairly commonplace. When some types of people wish to destroy or undermine a member of a family or a family itself they undermine first of all the mother. Every language is filled with expressions which make this clear, all of them expressions derogatory of the mother of the family. It is almost as if the writer or speaker wishes to imply the unworthiness of the son by using a deprecatory phrase about his mother. Small wonder that the contemporary attack on Christ so often begins with unworthy phrases about his mother; one wonders if this is not a case in point particularly when he reads that the author, an alleged convent school girl, concludes her defamatory article by saying that of course, she does not believe that Catholics who count on salvation, as they say in concluding words of the Hail Mary, are in any possibility of receiving it.

Methodist pastor

Far more refreshing and, please God, significant are two Mariology books by other Protestant theologians. One is on the Rosary and is written by a Methodist pastor in England. It is entitled **Five For Sorrow and Ten For Joy**, a consideration of the Rosary, and it is a series of meditations on the mysteries of the Rosary, first published in 1973. The Reverend J. Neville Ward, a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the Methodist Church, is convinced that the medieval Rosary has a profound message for our times, for Catholics and Protestants alike. It is a message of consolation, Scriptural in its background, and reasonable as well as devotional in its content. The author was one of the speakers at the Zagreb International Mariological Congress and his book is widely and profitably read.

According to the Reverend Ward, the Christian who has a rosary in his hands is within an ancient tradition, for no other scheme of prayer has been so widely used in the Christian West. The blurb sheet of his book observes that as one become familiar with its use, the prayers represented by its beads gradually recede to

form a kind of "background music", and the mysteries into which it is divided are before the mind as though one were looking at religious pictures or ikons. The images of these themes for meditations tend to haunt the mind outside of prayer at any time and any place drifting in and out of one's preoccupied consciousness, sometimes only momentary, sometimes staying to unfold new significances and relations to one's personal life, or simply bringing a breath from the world of God's action in Christ into the hurry and stress of the busy day.

For these reasons, to the question: Does everyone in this day and age care less about the Rosary, or is it not outgrown?, the Reverend J. Neville Ward answers: **Absolutely not!**

The other Protestant theologian who offers "A New Protestant Vision of the Virgin Mary" is, strangely, the writer whom Geoffrey Ashe describes as the only contributor to a volume, written some years ago, of Anglican essays on Mariology who dissents from the tendency of his fellow essayists to dissect Mary's cult eruditely without leaving the safety of a Christian ground for the cult of the Virgin. According to Ashe, they never once risk a glance at the paganism behind her, nor do they mention — de Satgé himself does not in the earlier book — that the earliest documented worship of her is not as Christ's mother, a human creature (however holy), but as a divinity in her own right.

Hopeful Sign

That the same Canon de Satgé should write as he is now quoted by Geoffrey Ashe in *The Virgin* is strong evidence that the chasm between Catholic devotion to Mary and Protestant misunderstanding of her role in Redemption and in history is closing at a rate some of us never expected. This may be due to Ecumenism; it may be due to deepening piety; it may be due to the Spirit of God at work in the world. But it is a hopeful sign of the future direction which christian devotion and theology may be taking.

Canon de Satgé, to be sure, argues that there was much in Catholic developments in the century before Vatican II to nourish the Protestant sense of outrage at the Catholic cult of Mary. He quotes René Laurentin as describing Catholic excesses and enthusiasms but he also quotes Father Laurentin's reasoned account of the modern in Catholic Mariology. Canon de Satgé is not less sensitive to the corresponding sense of outrage felt by Catholics at Protestant slurs upon the all-holiness of the woman who was chosen to be the Mother of God. The Anglican Canon is careful to quote Father Laurentin's description of the true sense of proportion and

the moderating influence of Pope Pius XII in his dogmatic definition concerning the Blessed Mother, De Satgé is particularly fair in his description of the Mariology of the Second Vatican Council and he accurately underscores its great ecumenical significance, even though he qualifies somewhat the intent of the Council Fathers.

Anglican book

There follows a book which is, to say the least, a fascinating insight into the new Protestant vision of the Virgin Mary. It would be excessive to describe the book as a complete presentation of Catholic doctrine on Mary and it is, in fact, a truly Anglican book. But it is an Anglican book that is open to development and there is no possibility of challenging its fairness nor, indeed, its positive direction so far as the doctrine and cult of the Blessed Mother are concerned. The author points out that it is impossible to be nourished for long by the traditional Anglican diet and to think of the Virgin in isolation from her Son, an object of devotion by herself. What Canon de Satgé says of "the strength and the reticence of the Anglican tradition" is expressed in some verses by G. A. Studdert Kennedy which deserve to be far better known than they are.

A Lady poem

Entitled **Good Friday Falls on Lady Day**, the poem runs:

And has our Lady lost her place?
Does her white star burn dim?
Nay, she has lowly veiled her face
Because of Him.

Men give to her the jewelled crown,
And robe with 'broidered rim,
But she is fain to cast them down
Because of Him.

She claims no crown from Christ apart,
Who gave God life and limb,
She only claims a broken heart
Because of Him.

To this perhaps one day all Christians will say Amen. In any case a scandalous cause of division among Christians will have been removed when these lines, together with their theological implications, are finally fully understood.