

complacently so. It is absolutely guaranteed that when loins are girded up for a paragraph of the type “This does not mean *x*, in fact it means *y*” the quantity of words expounding *y* will be with comic inevitability three of four times those of *x*.

Fans of Williams will not mind this at all, but maybe fans are the problem. Williams’ introduction thanks Mike Higton for “initiating and carrying through” the publication, which, with touching naivety, Williams calls “an exemplary work of selflessness”. Presumably it is Higton who set the time-frame for the essays (which otherwise seems a little arbitrary), who selected them (could others have been included?) and who decided on the non-chronological order: “I have tried to arrange it so that, if read from start to finish, the reader might be aware of being taken on a wandering and circuitous but continuous journey.” Such a journey is called a wild-goose chase; and the promise of it is hardly going to tempt one to read the book “start to finish”. Williams needs no help producing a work to be left unread on the shelf of the vicarage study. What he does need, if he is to be more than a superb theological reader and critic, is a bit less awe.

GRAEME RICHARDSON

THE ART OF THE SACRED: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AESTHETICS OF ART AND BELIEF by Graham Howes, *I. B. Tauris* London, 2007, Pp.ix + 190, £17.99 pbk.

Islam and Evangelical Christianity have come to denote the resurgence of religion of late in ways that have delivered profound unsettlements to the more secularised sectors of academia. These concerns disguise more subtle processes operating in contemporary forms of culture that have deeper implications for the understanding of religion, notably Catholicism. The changes relate to how organised religion is to be regarded. This reflects the advent of visual culture where the Internet has expanded the virtual in ways inconceivable a generation ago. A premium has now been placed on ways of seeing and of deciphering icons and images that is as unexpected as it is significant. Seeing as believing has become a motif of this form of culture.

Against this background, Howes has produced a very timely, illuminating and wide ranging introduction to a topic that can only increase in theological importance. He comes to the study as ‘a historian by training, a sociologist of religion by adoption, and also an art historian manqué’ (p.2). Very clearly written and artfully embodying an enormous amount of reading well assimilated, Howes has accomplished a wonderful work of compression that is stimulating, accessible and lively. There is not a dead line in this study. Working from a query of Ruskin, as to how far Fine Art is conducive to the religious life, Howes explores what is known as visual piety, a term well explored by Morgan in the U.S.A., but given an English understated Anglican appreciation in this study.

Starting with a sketch of four dimensions of religious art, Howes moves to a paradox that as Victorian intellectuals gazed at the tide of Dover Beach ebbing away, the rising middle class, benefiting from printing, were placing images of Christ (notably those of Holman Hunt) on their suburban walls. Intellectuals might have suffered religious myopia; the middle classes, on the other hand did not – they knew what they needed to see to believe. This produced what Howes denotes charmingly as an ‘inverted secularism’. Howes is especially good on the complexity of English attitudes to sacred art in all its contradictions. These are well illuminated in two chapters on art and patronage and the response to the exhibition, *Seeing Salvation* at the National Gallery in London in 2000. The paradox of an apparently disbelieving nation coming as pilgrims to London to

see a profoundly Catholic exhibition that ended up as a counter attraction to the Millennium Dome is very well exposed.

The most interesting aspect of this study is the interplay brought into focus between the artist and the patrons, well explored in chapters 4, 6 and 7. The contrary expectations between the vision of the artist and the expectations of their ecclesial clients are given a very original exploration. Chapter 4 on the commissioning of works by the sculptor Henry Moore and the painter, Graham Sutherland for an Anglican Church, St. Matthew's, Northampton seem less about clashes of expectations than of artistic styles. The politics surrounding how a religious image ought to be presented to be seen with edification is brought well to the fore. The issue of who owns the religious image, or its setting or use is treated with a lot of insight. More meaty theology emerges in the skirmishes between the artist and the patron (in this case the Dominicans) discussed in chapter 6.

In this chapter, Howes brings out an odd point, on how little is known on the dispositions of the painters of religious art. This excellent chapter draws parallels between Fra Angelico at San Marco, Matisse's *Chapelle du Rosaire* at Venice and the ill-fated commission for a chapel given to the New York artist, Mark Rothko. The way artistic vision collides with conventional notions of how images should be seen to be believed is exceedingly well drawn. This leads to the best chapter, 7, in the study on the artist as believer, which ranges from Rembrandt to Holman Hunt. A secularised history of art wipes out this issue as a matter of concern. In this regard, Howes performs an important service in rehabilitating this matter that draws sociology and theology into a creative, if not edifying relationship.

The degree to which sacred images facilitate piety is also well handled in chapter 5 on buildings and their religious purposes. Rightly, Howes descends on the notion of 'as if' in Steiner as pointing to the way religious art is to be handled. By contrast to the preceding parts of the study, the last chapters on 'religion to spirituality' and theology and the visual arts seem slightly pessimistic and lack some galvanising vision of what is required. They bear the uneasiness that lurks in Anglicanism on the making of images for religious use, and the virtual impossibility of overturning the effects of the Reformation where the scaffolding of visual piety was dismantled. This accounts, perhaps, for the slight property of nostalgia and regret that floats around the study.

Overall, this is an important work, perhaps far better in its parts than its totality. It deserves wide circulation. Many questions, issues and insights that require deep reflection are brought together in a unique study. Unusually, this introduction comes with two pages of spirited endorsements from the great and the good; in this case, they are very well deserved.

KIERAN FLANAGAN

LIGHT IN DARKNESS, HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL by Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, xvi+458 + 9 colour plates, \$55.00 hdk., \$36.00 pbk.*

The reception of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar must constitute one of the most extraordinary theological phenomena of recent Catholic theology. In some circles he is regarded as the modern Catholic theologian *par excellence*, a staunch defender of the Faith against 'liberal' theologians accused of diluting the particularity of Christian revelation and the distinctiveness of Christian life. Others, often no less 'conservative', argue quite the opposite. For them Balthasar is a theologian whose work is innovative to the point of undermining orthodoxy.