

marriage); the cases of Margery Kempe and Joan of Arc; and the horrors of the *Malleus maleficarum* – ‘The hammer of witches’ – in which the two very distinguished Dominicans, Krämer and Sprenger, while clear that men could be witches too, propagated the idea that women are much more susceptible to demonic temptation, thus adding incalculably to the number who were burned or drowned.

Chapter 7 is entirely devoted to the work of Christine de Pizan (ca. 1344–1430), with a handful of contemporary images, including one of her ‘writing in her study in Paris’ and another of her ‘instructing four men’. Some of her writings were enormously popular. Evidently made free of her father’s library (he was a physician who held a chair in astronomy at the university of Bologna before moving to Paris as physician and astronomer to Charles V, King of France), Christine is a key figure in the history of the philosophical idea of woman. She translated some of Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, *Ethics* and *Politics* into French. She does not engage directly with the Aristotelian concept of woman but, as Allen shows, Christine is the thinker who first established the philosophical foundations for gender complementarity.

Chapter 8 analyzes the admission of woman to higher education at the early Humanist Renaissance. Chapter 9 discusses the gender theories of the great Humanists: Nicholas of Cusa, Leon Battista Alberti, Lorenzo Valla, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola – on the whole, in various ways, largely through their admiration for Plato’s doctrines of love and friendship, these thinkers were able to break free of the dominance of long-standing views that denigrate women.

Finally, in chapter 10, we come to Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466) and especially Laura Cereta (1469–1499), widowed at the age of sixteen, who, in her short life, Allen contends, ‘did more personally in terms of offering a new humanist model for woman’s identity than any woman before her’.

As this skeletal outline of the contents suggests, this book retrieves some highly important thinkers in the history of the concept of woman, not least Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola and Laura Cereta. Feminists are no doubt familiar with Cereta’s letters, translated and published by Diana Robin in 1997; but much of the work of these remarkable women is unfamiliar in the English-speaking world. More than simply recovering so much fascinating, neglected and even unknown work, this book sets it all in the context of a powerfully and persuasively argued thesis. As Diana Robin says on the cover, Sister Prudence’s book is ‘essential reading for scholars in comparative European studies, women’s history, and feminist theory’. And especially in theology, Catholic and Protestant, one may surely be permitted to add.

FERGUS KERR OP

LIFE TOGETHER: FAMILY, SEXUALITY AND COMMUNITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND TODAY by Stephen C. Barton, *T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2001, Pp. 256, £16.95, pbk.*

Dr Barton’s book is at first sight unexciting. It consists of a number of essays and addresses written or delivered on various occasions, with, as a connecting theme, the understanding of family and community by the writers of the New Testament. On a first reading, I was not very impressed. I thought it would have been better to ‘cannibalise’ the collected essays and make a new book out of them. Subsequent readings discovered other half-hidden themes, which are not fully developed, but which give the book a stimulating quality.

The book is divided into three parts: ‘Family and Sexuality’, ‘Community’ and ‘Interpretation’. In the first part, Barton’s problem is to see how it can be said that

the New Testament is still normative for Christians in these matters, when our family structures and understanding of sexuality are so different from those of the first century or, indeed, many others of the Christian centuries. Barton tries to find a suitable middle way, between a more or less fundamentalist effort to use texts to justify one particular family pattern, and the opposing rejection of the bible teaching as being hopelessly patriarchal, even though this may be combined with an admiration for Christ and St Paul as life-giving personalities. This leads him to look at the presuppositions of the historical-critical method, the dominant form of contemporary exegesis, and to find them wanting, since simply reading texts as texts falls short of making them effective guides to action. He takes as an example the wedding feast at Cana, which contemporary critics tend to consider simply in relation to the question of the sources of St John's gospel, but which the Latin and Greek Fathers considered as illustrating the sanctification of human marriage by the Incarnation.

The essays included under 'Community' have a slightly different focus. Differences between the gospels, which were once ascribed to different attitudes and experiences on the part of the writers, are now explained by their being the products of different, apparently autonomous, Christian communities. As early Christianity is classified as a 'sect', it is not surprising that it should have a number of potential sects within it. Barton, quite rightly, calls all this into question. Anyone who wants their writings to be read will have some kind of audience in mind, but this does not justify any supposition that the audience either constituted a bounded group with a clear-cut identity of its own, or that it imposed its view of things on the author. The essay on 'Early Christianity and the Sociology of the Sect' is particularly valuable, since Barton shows, very carefully and very politely, how attempts to look at early Christianity as a sectarian movement are extremely naïve, both politically and sociologically. The closing words of the essay point to 'the inevitably political nature of the act of interpretation' (p. 138).

The final essay, 'New Testament Interpretation as Performance' uses an idea advanced in rather different ways by Nicholas Lash, Rowan Williams and Frances Young, that the New Testament can only be understood, not by the meticulous analysis of texts, but by seeing believers put the New Testament into practice. Charmingly, Barton comments on the ideas of Lash, Williams and Young: 'where the Roman Catholic theologian finds in the Eucharist the epitome of the Christian 'improvisation' on Scripture, and where the Anglican archbishop finds it in the festal cycle culminating in Holy Week, the Methodist theologian finds it in preaching!' (p. 237).

I wrote earlier of half-hidden themes not fully developed. One of these would be the way in which the sacraments create community and help us to see community in action. Another would be the 'tradition', in the older sense of the empowerment of the believing community to read Scripture authentically. Another again, mentioned by Barton in a quotation from Frances Young, is the existence of different 'senses' of Scripture, which permits us to give a valid meaning to a passage, even if it was not intended by the original author. Let us hope that this will not be Dr Barton's last book.

ADRIAN EDWARDS C.S.SP

BONHOEFFER by Stephen Plant, *Continuum*, London & New York, 2004, Pp. xii + 157, £12.00 pbk.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) was one of the most provocative of the twentieth century's theologians, and this is a welcome addition to the *Outstanding Christian Thinkers* series. Its text has been organised so that it is fairly easy for the reader with limited knowledge of the man and his world to follow it, and for most of the time Dr Plant has written in an accessible style.