
“The subject of Mary has been engaging me as a scholar and author for more than four decades” (225), writes Jaroslav Pelikan, the distinguished Yale University historian of Christianity. His expertise, scholarship, contemplation, and artistic sensibilities all combine in this volume, his thirty-fourth, to produce a rich composite picture of Mary Through the Centuries.

Pelikan’s perduring interest in the role and meaning of Mary throughout history is reflected in his substantial body of theological and historical work. In his five-volume The Christian Tradition (1971-1989), “the doctrines of Mary from various periods repeatedly came in for close attention” (226). While designing and writing Jesus Though the Centuries (1985), Pelikan “was simultaneously planning a companion volume on Mary” (ix). Finally, he used the distinguished DeVane Lecture Series at Yale in 1995 to present these Marian materials and to appropriately conclude his fifty-year academic career.

This present volume has a specific goal: “I shall try to show historically what Mary has meant [and how] she has been a prominent force at various periods in history” (5). The scope is broad; it crosses cultures and spans centuries: it integrates art, music, religious traditions, symbols, literature, theology, history, spirituality, and popular religiosity. Pelikan illustrates how “the Virgin Mary has been more of an inspiration to more people than any other woman who ever lived (and how) she remains so in the twentieth century” (2). The author is convinced that “the centrality of the person of the Virgin Mary is an
indispensable interpretive key [and that] it is impossible to understand the history of Western spirituality and devotion without paying attention to the place of the Virgin Mary" (215).

The title of each of the sixteen chapters is drawn from images and appellations of Mary, often reflecting the Catholic tradition; an appropriate Scripture passage (very appealing to Protestants) is then added as a complement of each title. Pelikan's sensitivity to the traditions of all Christian denominations reflects the ecumenical perspective of this book; the author, a Lutheran, remarks: "One of the most important religious events of the twentieth century has been, and continues to be, the rise of the ecumenical movement" (4).

Individual chapters locate and focus the role of Mary within evolving historical periods. Mary is Miriam of Nazareth in the New Testament; she is Daughter of Zion, Second Eve, Theotokos, and Handmaid of the Lord in the Patristic literature. At other times she variously is Mater Dolorosa, the Face That Most Resembles Christ's, Model of Faith, Mater Gloriosa, and That Woman Clothed with the Sun. It is with clarity, precision, and depth that the author elucidates how Mary has been depicted and venerated through all ages.

Pelikan is not simply interested in providing historical data or in accumulating theological, devotional, and artistic references (although the work is beautiful and copiously enriched with such material). His aim is to elucidate the role of Mary in the development of doctrine (a subject he has explored in other writings). Pelikan's work admirably achieves its goal. He shows how historical, psychological, and artistic phenomena are related to doctrinal evolution; he highlights the role of Marian teaching in the growth of more primary doctrines (e.g. Christology); he identifies the role of art, imagination, music, and popular religiosity as they contributed to doctrinal growth. This perceptive thematization of and insight into the entire corpus of Marian literature and into the Church's faith and reflection is, in the opinion of this reviewer, Pelikan's greatest achievement. Upon reading (and rereading) this volume, one becomes convinced that "the doctrine of Mary proved to be one of the most important places to observe and test the processes by which great ideas (e.g. original sin, archetypes, role of woman, etc.) have developed" (200).

Once the reader grasps this comprehensive and central thesis, individual chapters, special themes, historical events, and theological debates all begin to coalesce around Pelikan's central thematic: Mary's role within the change and continuity of Christian faith and
teaching. Thus, whether the Marian discussion is on biblical references, Theotokos, the rosary and angelus, apparitions, or Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the integrating key, as the book’s subtitle indicates, is always “Her Place in the History of Culture.” Pelikan asserts that Mary’s importance in history is an “indispensable interpretive key [and this] key does not depend on the belief or unbelief of the observer; for even those who do not, or cannot, have faith need to grasp the faith of other ages in order to understand them” (215).

Within the historical panorama painted by Pelikan, one finds delightful, enlightening subsections: the role of Irenaeus and the Eve-Mary parallels (42-52); Mary as “bridge builder to other traditions, other cultures, and other religions” (67), specifically to Islam (68-77); Mary “archetype of the saved” (149); the Reformation and Protestant Mariology (153-63); Vatican II Marian principles (212-13). The book includes twenty black-and-white reproductions of icons and paintings (integrated with the themes of various chapters) as well as nineteen color reproductions of the annunciation (the most popular Marian scene painted by artists), because “the primary importance of the annunciation was believed to lie in the miracle of the incarnation” (82).

Pelikan is a Marian apologist in the best sense of that title. The tone of his work is somewhat scholarly; the English is classical; most references are Western. However, this work should attract readers who, although they may not be familiar with theological research, want to take a reflective look at the role of Mary in Christian faith, theology and spirituality as well as within all of Western culture.

This work will NOT meet everyone’s needs and tastes; there are other books if one wishes to focus more specifically on biblical exegesis, devotional practices, Marian apparitions, Vatican II Mariology, feminine or liberation perspectives, and Asian/Philippine applications. However, this work is exceptional in its lucid presentation of Mary’s role in culture and the development of Church teaching and devotion. No reader will come away from the work without profit and a deeper appreciation of Mary. “The Woman for All Seasons – And All Reasons” (215).

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