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Book Review

By Angela McCarthy

Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, and Annie Hardison-Moody, eds. *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 9783319596525

Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters offers parents a wealth of different experiences opening avenues of understanding and meaning making. Contemporary writing about mothering is a complex minefield and can be less helpful than contentious! When surveying the effect of social media on who are the good mothers and who are the bad mothers, poorly considered criticism and distortions can become destructive. This book offers a real alternative for mothers and a practical theological response to the eternal issues that confront us. Many of the readers of this journal will have faced the experiences that are outlined.

Bischoff, O'Donnell Gandolfo and Hardison-Moody have pulled together a group of authors to speak on issues rarely considered in theological circles: miscarriage, body knowledge, recovery from maternal loss, parenting elders as a woman, mental health and mothering, motherhood and theodicy. Each of the authors approaches their topic with practical examples and real knowledge of the experience. These are not extrapolated from third person research and number crunching; they come from an experience of suffering and mothering and a deep desire to find theological attributes that can be of practical assistance.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore notes in the forward that gender studies in contemporary research investigate mothering but ignore religion, while religious studies include gender but ignore mothering, and so a very large 'swath of human experience and practice is evaded' (x). The act of motherhood is one of self-sacrifice and when imaged through the kenosis of Jesus Christ on the cross, it can assist a deeply formative exploration of what it means to be mother. One sacrifices self in a particular way which includes blood, flesh, spirit, energy, and in some instances life itself. This book is not only for those in academe but offers a great wealth of thought and reflection for all parents and could form the basis of valuable material for parish groups.

It is not possible to review every chapter in a worthwhile way, so I have selected two to give the flavour of what this book offers. Chapter four, 'And the "Hall Was Burned to the Ground": Mothers and Theological Body Knowledge' (59-85), tells the story of Antoinette Brown, the first woman ordained in the USA. We take it for granted that in the 21st Century women in many countries are allowed to speak publicly; this is only a recent phenomenon and not a universal experience. The title refers to a hall that was burned to the ground in 1838 in Pennsylvania because it was where some women political activists had spoken out in support of abolition and women's rights (59). That would not happen today perhaps, but the realities of women's existence are still not fully expressed in our faith traditions. Nettie Brown wrote theological works as well as works in the field of science. She 'effectively challenged biblical and scientific modes of knowing by using "the very language... used against women to support them"'. The chapter then develops the impact of biological mothering; it matters that women give birth and her argument does not diminish in any way women who are unable or choose not to give birth. Miller-McLemore presents the argument that the 'physical not only gains meaning within culture, but it also influences meaning and shapes thought' (75). Being a mother, having physically experienced childbirth and all the suffering and sacrifice that it entails, does not disappear in one's development of thought and self.

Incarnation is a central belief for a Christian and our physical bodies matter in how we construct theology around it.

Chapter twelve, 'Parenting Elders: Finitude, Gratitude, and Grace', is by Mary Elizabeth Moore. There are many women whose lives are dominated by the people in their care and Moore writes from a personal perspective and how that has affected her and why that is so. Her experience as a senior academic, wife, mother and daughter is profoundly grounding for her as a theologian and in the difficulties that she faced, particularly in the end-of-life care for her parents where she seeks theological meaning. The way in which she refines her experience through theological consideration is very valuable for those in our community who have similar responsibilities. Moore develops spiritual practices from the theological themes of finitude, gratitude and grace. By accepting the finitude of life and finding things to be grateful for in the experience, we become open to the grace that God offers through these duties of caring. A very powerful sentence is a unique description of grace: 'Grace is God's heartbeat throbbing in the world, and our encounters with finitude force us to still ourselves and attune to the Divine beat' (232). That image can be used to guide and elevate our spiritual practices. Centring on precious moments cultivates an appreciation for them and lifts the spirit to focus on the care of others in a different way. Choosing thankfulness allows the carer to accept the difficulties presented and relish all that is good. Receiving grace from unlikely sources is one of the joys of life and appreciating them as we recognise them sustains us.

In a world where the conflicts over mothering abound, this book offers richness of theological thought and support. It is written by women for women and men who wish to deepen their appreciation of how parenting is a spiritual practice and a source of powerful theology.