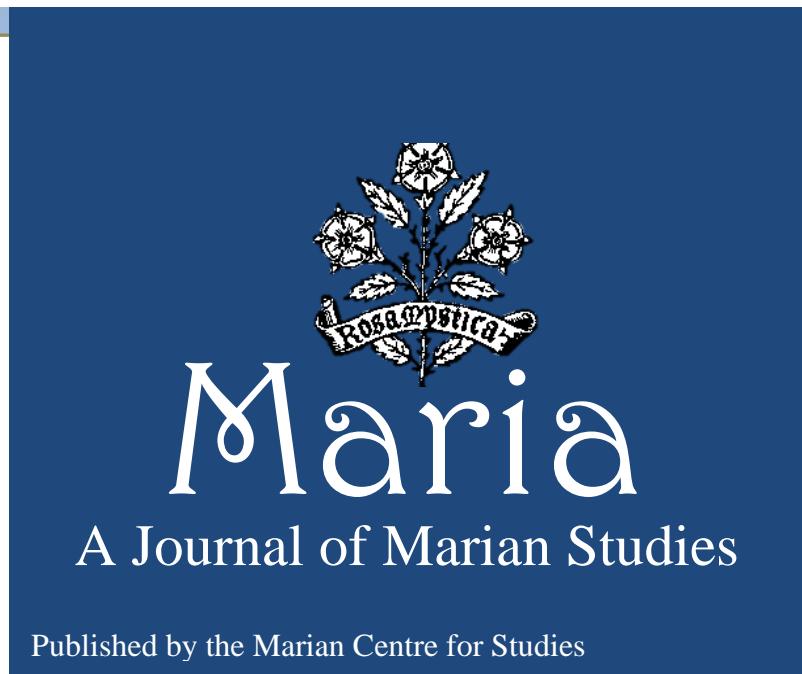


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Title: Review of *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation*

Review article:

Baláza M. Mezei, Francesca Aran Murphy and Kenneth Oakes (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation*, Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-0-19-879535-3; 978-0-19-251466-0 (e-bk). Pp. I-XXX, 1-685.

This remarkable recent addition to the ‘Oxford Handbook’ series has many laudable features, including, as will be appreciated by readers of this journal, the fact that a place is given to the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Divine Revelation. The substantial text of over seven hundred pages is helpfully divided into six sections of different approaches: biblical, theological, philosophical, historical and comparative, scientific, and cultural. Titles of the forty chapters range from ‘Revelation in Christian Scripture’ to ‘Revelation and the political’ and ‘Where words end: Revelation and silence’. Most of the articles are from a Western Christian worldview but chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Confucianism, as well as on African traditional religions, the new atheism, and various scientific perspectives enable the reader to gain insights from a wide range of sources.

While it is important to begin by acknowledging the rich array of content contained in this handbook, this brief review will not attempt to address anything other than the Marian content. Chapters where Mary has a significant place will be discussed, and other places where she is present indicated.

The Marian heart of this book is the chapter ‘Apparitions of Mary as Revelation’ by Chris Maunder (pp. 202-18). Integral to Maunder’s presentation is the premise that the revelation communicated by visionaries, notwithstanding the possibility that it may sometimes be a response to ‘divine stimulus’, is ‘subjectively created and culturally constructed’ (p. 216), with the lay, mainly female, and in some cases extremely influential, modern visionaries being portrayed as ‘popular theologians’, who at times ‘inspire an innovative reshaping of the tradition’ (pp. 204-205).

Maunder’s wide-ranging article discusses diverse subjects which can be revealed by Marian apparitions. These cover four main areas, around which the article is structured: the nature of Mary, future events, the hopes and fears of humanity, and social and cultural dynamics. Examples are given to demonstrate how complex, creative, political, or apocalyptic messages are often controversial. Thus, the relative ease with which the traditional Marian titles of Beauraing and Banneux received ecclesial acceptance is contrasted with the disputed Amsterdam visions, which called for a fifth Marian dogma to be proclaimed and about which the official church position has changed over time. The specific complications arising from



prophetic messages are also explored. Maunder addresses the question of how apocalyptic-type prophecies, such as those at Garabandal and Medjugorje, might be interpreted should the visionaries die without the prophecies being fulfilled, and proposes that a possible response is the prophecies being read symbolically, with the apparitions thus being understood as revealing the hopes and fears of humanity.

The chapter includes a fascinating illustration of how the devotions connected to Guadalupe reveal social and cultural dynamics spanning several centuries. Maunder refers to a significant number of academic studies in his account of how, since the details connected to the apparitions probably came from a priest in the seventeenth century, ‘it was initially an imported devotion, coming in on the back of colonial conquest’ (p. 214). However, aspects of the indigenous understandings of both nature and goddesses helped this importation, and, in a striking development, Our Lady of Guadalupe later became the national symbol of Mexico and is used in the struggle for the rights of indigenous people.

For readers wishing to know about Maunder’s multi-faceted approach to apparitions, his *Our Lady of the Nations: Apparitions of Mary in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2016) is highly recommended. Chapters on visionary women as ‘popular theologians’, as well on a variety of modern apparitions provide enlightening additions to this chapter.

Rocco Buttiglione’s article ‘Revelation and Theology of the People’ (pp. 218–36) also explores the significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Taking a notably different approach to that of Maunder, Buttiglione focuses on how the largely pagan Meso-American culture was assumed and purified at the level of popular culture through the apparition of Guadalupe, enabling Christian faith to take root in Mexico without destroying the original culture. He describes how while in the initial years of the Spanish conquest of Mexico there had been very few conversions to Christianity, this changed dramatically following the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to the Indio Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (1474–1548), and within a few years the entire Indio population of Mexico had been baptised.

What factors were behind this remarkable volte-face? Buttiglione identifies the fact that the hill on which Mary asked for a temple to be built was once the location of the sanctuary of Tonantzin, the mother of Mexican gods and mortals. For Meso-Americans

Tonantzin was an archetype of maternity, while for Christians Mary was both an historical woman and an archetype of maternity. Thus, the chapter puts forth the argument that Guadalupe shows how Tonantzin, the archetype of the Meso-American culture, was purified so that it could receive the presence of the Mother of God and be understood from a Christian perspective. Buttiglione's thesis therefore gives non-Christian religions a place in the communication of divine revelation, while stressing that, since all human religions and cultures find their fulfilment in Jesus, the truths within such revelation have been awaiting Christian fulfilment.

Turning from apparitions, Michele Schumacher's chapter on 'Revelation and human sexuality' (pp. 569-86) discusses Mary in an entirely different context, presenting a Roman Catholic ecclesiology within which the nature of human sexuality is revealed. Drawing heavily upon St Pope John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, as well as St Augustine and other patristic authors, she explores the theological significance of human sexuality, including the central role of Mary, the New Eve, and the Church as bride of Christ.

Mary's role within the theological vision presented by Schumacher is basically two-fold. Firstly, as Mother of God, she played an essential role at the incarnation, where, as Augustine described, her womb was the 'bridal chamber' from which Jesus Christ 'came forth like a bridegroom' (p. 575, quoting *Tractus in Iohannis Evangelium* VIII, 4), with God espousing human flesh through Mary's faith-filled co-operation in her active *fiat*, the gift of herself, which enabled the gift of God's Word to be given to all humanity through her. Secondly, Schumacher emphasises the intrinsic connection between Mary and the Church, describing the depiction of Eve being taken from the rib of Adam in Genesis 3 as symbolically prophesying the union of Christ with his Church and presenting 'Mary-Church' as recapitulating Eve's mission to be 'the Mother of all living'. Therefore, Mary is the Church's 'archetype and first cell' (p. 576, quoting von Balthasar's 1982 work *The Threefold Garland*, p. 33).

Schumacher's sources are combined to create a unified, comprehensive theological vision, which, had the constraints of a chapter article allowed, would have been enhanced by engagement with those who have critiqued this approach. Given the influence of the



theologians Schumacher draws upon, and the disputed models of femininity and masculinity underlying this ecclesiology, such an addition would have been particularly welcome.

Alongside these key chapters, *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation* includes other notable references to Mary. Unsurprisingly, the chapter by Ralf van Büren on ‘Revelation in the visual arts’ (pp. 621-40) includes reference to several works of art which include Mary. The example of *Madonna Enthroned* (Bode Museum, Berlin, from 1199) is used to highlight the role of sculptural three-dimensionality, which favours ‘a more vivid manifestation of the divine mystery’ (p. 628), and the way in which renaissance artists employed theatrical features is demonstrated with reference to *The Holy Trinity* (1425/1428) by Masaccio in Santa Maria Novella, Florence, in which the Virgin Mary is looking directly at the viewer. Similarly, the importance of the sensuous in contemplating divine mysteries is illustrated by the effect contemplating the altar painting *Visitation of the Virgin Mary to St Elizabeth* (by Federico Barocci in the Chapel of the Visitation) had upon St Philip Neri, as it led to his being in ecstasy, with the Oratorians recognising the role of the altarpiece in prompting his ‘mystical ascent to divine revelation’ (p. 632). Likewise, van Büren describes how Caravaggio depicted ‘time-transcending realities’, including in his *Madonna of Loreto* (1604–1606), in the Cavalletti Chapel of the Roman church of Sant’Agostino, which portrays pilgrims kneeling, not before the cultic statue inside the Holy House of Loreto but in front of a very realistic image of the Virgin and child at their home in Nazareth (p. 632). Each of these examples merits a close examination of the work of art in question, and a delightful consequence of reading this chapter was being led to research them and allow the art itself to reveal something of the divine.

Other references to Mary in this text include Timothy Bradshaw giving the dogma of the Immaculate Conception as an example of revelation ‘not arising from New Testament witness but evolving from centuries of custom and spirituality’ (p. 57), and Gilbert Narcisee describing the role of the title ‘Mother of God’ in preserving truths of revelation, including Jesus being true God and true man, and the (Marial) reality of the flesh of Jesus (p. 153). Despite the fleeting nature of these references to Mary, the fact that she is present in a variety of approaches to divine revelation demonstrates her role, not only in the much-discussed area of apparitions, but naturally and relatively discretely within Christian revelation.