

Book Reviews

DROGE, ARTHUR J., and TABOR, JAMES D. *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. San Francisco: Harper, 1992. 203 pp. \$25.00 (cloth).

The subtitle notwithstanding, pagans too figure in Arthur Droge and James Tabor's intriguing survey of attitudes toward voluntary death in antiquity, from Homer through Plato to Augustine. The authors, who present their sympathies frankly in a very topical review of rhetoric about and attitudes toward suicide, argue that until Augustine no one attitude toward voluntary death prevailed in the Church. Scripture was neutral (Old Testament) or even positive (Maccabees, Jesus); the philosophical schools, meanwhile, varied, though Socrates' example was universally revered. The rabbis, contemporaries of the church fathers, even seemed to laud voluntary death, concluding in several cases presented in the Talmud that the suicide had gained "life in the world to come" (chap. 4).

The very variety of attitudes serves to underscore the authors' presentation of Augustine as the turning point for Western Christianity. Having made the case that Scripture, Christian tradition (with the earlier exception of Clement of Alexandria), and contemporary Judaism were either neutral or positive, Droge and Tabor argue for two sources for Augustine's innovation, one distant, one proximate. The distant source is Plato, who (drawing in turn on the Pythagoreans) argued in the *Phaedo* that self-death was spiritually arrogant, a usurping of divine prerogative. The proximate source is North African politics: confronted on the one hand by rival Donatists, who claimed the moral high ground as the "church of the martyrs," and on the other by pagans who, after 410, held Christianity responsible for the invasion of Rome and the consequent creation of pagan martyrs, Augustine urged that self-death was never justifiable save at direct divine command—a condition difficult to meet and, outside of ecclesiastically sanctioned tradition, impossible to prove.

How did Augustine manage to carry the day, to "reverse" Western views of voluntary death? The authors allude to three European church councils that, in the chaos of the sixth century, decreed postmortem ritual humiliations as penalties for suicide. "The door had been shut" (p. 5). I wonder. These same councils, as others, routinely condemned fornication, bestiality, surreptitious paganism, clerical corruptions, murder, and adultery with little result (if we can trust, *inter alia*, Gregory of Tours): effective condemnation of suicide would have been a conspicuous success. Can we know? Here our sources betray us. We cannot wring confirming social data out of this literary evidence. The best we have, until the modern period begins to provide some statistical security, is a species of intellectual history, that is, what certain writers thought about suicide. What people actually did is more elusive.

This essay is a quick march through some intractably difficult terrain—ancient views of afterlife; of divinity; of the soul's relation to the body; of military, political, and civil confrontation; of a multitude of cultures spanning a millennium—in fewer than 200 pages. By making these topics accessible the authors have pre-

Permission to reprint a book review printed in this section may be obtained only from the author.

sented a provocative and timely essay that should stimulate further research as well as fuel future debate.

PAULA FREDRIKSEN, *Boston University*.

ZINDARS-SWARTZ, SANDRA L. *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991. 342 pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

A description and an analysis of alleged apparitions of the Mother of Jesus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Encountering Mary* is a brilliant tour de force. The author manages to navigate through the mysterious, complex, baffling stories of these apparitions and the "secrets" supposed to have been disclosed at them without ever once seeming credulous or incredulous, pietistic or reductionist, believing or unbelieving. Indeed, at the end of the book it is impossible to guess whether the author, clearly well informed about Catholicism, is Catholic. Given the subject matter of the book, that is no small accomplishment.

One can be Catholic, and indeed a good Catholic, and not believe in any such apparitions. One can accept Mary's crucial role in the Catholic sacramental imagination as reflecting the mother love of God and dismiss the apparitions as superstition. One can visit the various ugly and highly commercialized shrines raised to commemorate the apparitions and be dismayed by them and yet at the same time be impressed by the calm faith of pilgrims (as Sandra Zindars-Swartz admits she was at Lourdes). It is difficult for the critically minded Catholic not to be skeptical about the apparitions and the secrets (even if Lucy, one of the Fatima children, turned out to be a more accurate prophet of the fate of Bolshevism than most of the academic students of the Soviet Union). Yet even the most critical Catholic has to admit that these cults are very much part of the phenomenon of contemporary Catholicism and cry out for understanding and explanation.

Zindars-Swartz sees the Marian phenomena as forms of knowledge, as worldviews, often communicated in highly apocalyptic metaphors, which warn of the dangers and the opportunities of the present time, messages not all that different from the apocalypses of the Second Temple era. Deftly she describes the process by which the interpretation of the phenomena are "negotiated" by the various "players"—the seers, their followers, the local church, the Vatican, and Catholics around the world.

The "marvels" Zindars-Swartz describes with so much sensitivity and care might well be covered under an extension of the Jamesian philosophical conclusion of Carol Zaleski in *Otherworldly Journeys* (New York, 1987), an approach that is much more fruitful than any argument about whether something "supernatural" occurred at any of the shrines, as the latter argument usually comes to center on whether the "supernatural" is possible. The apparitions are signs of the wonderful in a world in which official religion, including official Catholicism, has lost much of its sense of awe and fascination for the "totally other."

The present reviewer has visited only one such shrine and that against his will: Knock in Ireland—surely the ugliest church ever raised to honor the mother of Jesus in all history. I am skeptical of all of them, with the possible exception of Lourdes (where something truly wonderful seems to have happened). Zindars-Swartz persuades me, nonetheless, that skepticism and wonder are not incompatible, especially when one deals with the metaphor of the mother love of God.

ANDREW GREELEY, *University of Chicago*.