

BOOK REVIEW

Ann Loades, *Explorations in Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy: People Preoccupied with God* (ed. Stephen Burns; London: Anthem Press, 2023), pp. vi + 243. ISBN 978-1785278587.

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Ann Loades died in December 2022 while this collection of her writings was in press; Stephen Burns, who has long championed her work and aided its dissemination, opens this volume with a moving personal note. Professor Loades, speaking in her short film, 'Danseuse', described herself as 'a loner': no doubt she had to be, as a woman forging a path through thickets of masculine tradition and presumption as she did. Yet she was widely known and appreciated as a supremely sociable 'loner', one with a far more crowded address book than most academics. In her scholarship, too, she chose to work in company and this book is, fittingly, a tribute to that preference. Here are five pairs of essays on significant exponents of Christian spirituality and theology from the last century, along with a closing, longer piece focused on Stephen Sykes and colleagues, 'Exploring the Problematic Legacy of Power'. This last essay was newly written, the others have all been published elsewhere. Of Loades' earlier conversation partners only one, Austin Farrer, could be described as a theologian by profession; the others – Dorothy Sayers, Evelyn Underhill, Simone Weil and C.S. Lewis – have in common a profound concern with Christian spirituality, unusual literary gifts and an insistent intellectual honesty – a feature which mirrors Loades' own character. Simone Weil aside, they also happen to be Anglicans, though, like her, far from uncritical loyalists. Readers who know Loades' other publications will be aware that she argued for, and embodied, a wide and adventurous approach to theology, encompassing visual arts, music, drama, ballet and works of imagination, and her work bore this quality long before it became more popular.

Two things stand out in these biographical and theological studies. The first is Loades' admirable capacity to enter into the thought-worlds and even the personalities of her subjects. She is able to render a sympathetic account of their voluminous writings along with many insightful glances into the issues of their specific times and circumstances. Loades never abandons her own evaluative perspective (most evident in her treatment of Lewis) but she never lets that

perspective inhibit or muffle the authentic 'voice' of each subject. Though these writers lived in very different times from our own, they appear not as museum pieces but as people well able to speak fresh words into our own debates. In her own words, writing about Austin Farrer, she would have him 'speak to us [as] not merely the elegant philosopher and theologian of an earlier generation, but as a living voice'. By her attentive engagement with these very disparate figures of faith Loades evokes an un-ethereal but real sense of the communion of saints. The second common characteristic of these studies may be a source of pleasure to some readers and mild frustration to others: they are not written to make *a point*. The reader's sense, at the end of a chapter, is of having attended an enlightening symposium: a conversation in which many new insights have been touched off rather than any one argument advanced.

The extended essay which ends this collection ('Stephen Sykes and Colleagues: Exploring the Problematic Legacy of Power') does reach one salient and uncomfortable conclusion: that even the most mature and reflective Anglican theology failed to reckon with the emerging reality of the abuse of ecclesiastical power and its implications for ecclesiology. The pages leading up to this exhibit the breadth, affection and asperity of Loades' vision and its rootedness in the academic and spiritual life of Durham – the place from which she travelled so widely and to which she contributed so generously. For those not daunted by the price of this finely produced and edited book it offers a rewarding encounter with her distinctive theological genius and a stimulating introduction to half a dozen other singular and creative writers 'preoccupied by God' who might easily be forgotten.

Peter Fisher
St Chad's College, Durham, UK
E-mail: ptfisher@btinternet.com