This book provides an examination of popular understandings of Mary in the Catholic tradition. It doesn’t purport to be a critique of Church teaching, doctrine and dogma which are usually quite limited, nuanced and sober. Rather it looks at how these have been received and influenced people’s spirituality, prayer, understanding of God and themselves and even gender roles. Renehan highlights that the Church, while proclaiming the dogma, doctrines in a clear, restrained way, does not always work well at correcting these excesses or distortions that develop.

Renehan’s aim is to advance a new methodology for categorising the complex layers that comprise the Marian tradition. She suggests that the figure of Mary may be subsumed into three Marian typologies, which comprise three key chapters in the book, namely Mary as Theatype, Mary as Christatype and Mary as Ecclesiatype.

The second concern of this book is to argue for the possibility of some theological agreement between traditional Catholic Church teaching and Christian feminist hermeneutics. The fourth chapter, “I am woman” discusses difficulties that many women have in relation to the patriarchal structures of the church which are perceived as in opposition to gospel values. The fifth chapter attempts a middle way, a theology of Mary that encompass both Catholic Church teaching and Christian feminist hermeneutics. The hope is that this book provides a possibility for continuing dialogue so that Christian feminists will not “stand outside of their faith tradition simply on the basis of the church’s patriarchal or hierarchical structure alone” (Renehan, 2010, p.137).

The theatypical approach concerns the deification of Mary. Renehan argues that popular devotion has at times bestowed on Mary god-like status, allowing Mariology to become Mariolatry. Apocryphal accounts of Mary’s early life, while not found in the canonical scriptures of Luke and Matthew, have influenced devotion and controversies. She provides examples from the early fathers of the Church and selected ancient and modern theologians whose writings, it is suggested, have contributed to elevating Mary beyond the parameters of orthodox Church teaching.

Themes and elements, that intentional or unintentionally at times have been misappropriated, that are examined in this book include the title Theotokos, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Mary’s virginal motherhood and aspects of her relationship with the Holy Spirit. These are discussed in some detail, and may make demands of some theological background for readers to follow fully. Though some may find her selection questionable, Renehan acknowledges that while there are many counter-arguments against the existence of Mary as Theatype, “given the evidence, particularly from the Middle Ages until today, total denial would be difficult to sustain” (2010, p.39).

Renehan identifies that the Christatypical approach to Mary developed partly as a reaction to the distortions of Christ’s human image. At the time of the Black Death in Europe, Christ was portrayed as a harsh and severe figure associated with the Last Judgement. “As medieval thought progressed, even Christ the crucified one was now to become symbolic of the punishment and judgement of sinners”, (Renehan, 2010, p. 48). As Christ became a more fearful figure associated with divine wrath, the faithful transferred their trust, confidence and hope to Mary, seen as the mother who understands the failings of her children.

There is a valuable discussion of apparitions which Renehan links with the image Mary as warm and tender hearted “Mary took the trouble to appear to the poor, to the humble and to the downtrodden-she was
tangible where Christ was not” (2010, p.49). A strength of her treatment of apparitions is the clarity which she writes about the Church’s position:

Church teaching, for its part, holds its reserve about apparitions and treats them more as permissible pastoral and prayerful experiences rather than as doctrinal or dogmatic directives to the faithful. Nor do they convey new truths but stress Christian virtues rather than the faith of the Church. In order for an apparition to be authenticated, a bishop must approve it, ensuring that the story does not harm the faith or morals of the Christian community at large. Although after investigation the bishop judges that the event is supernatural, the faithful are not and never have been obliged to believe that such an event ever occurred (Renehan, 2010, p.50).

Chapter 3 discusses Mary as Ecclesiatype, located as a human person within the milieu of the Church as the people of God. Beginning with Paul’s letter to the Galatians (4:4), Renehan searches the writings of the early fathers, some ancient theologians and from the magisterium of the late twentieth century for evidence that supports the ecclesiatypical approach. The emphasis is on the humanity of Mary, her solidarity with all, “she suffers as the rest of humankind does and is, therefore, capable of empathising in every way with the trials and tribulations of those who follow Christ” (p.73).

Renehan details a strong ecclesiatypical orientation in the writings of Paul VI and John Paul II. There is recognition of the ecumenical sensitivity of Marian theology with reference to the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission.

This book contains a call to honestly and humbly recognise the reality of gender issues which are problematic for many within and on the margins of the Church in Chapter 4. Renehan does not avoid the contentious issue of priestly ordination and women. She clearly articulates the official Church position and provides a summary of some critiques.

In Chapter 5, Renehan proposes a way of imaging Mary that is an attempt to bridge official Catholic Church teaching and a possible mediatory theology for Christian feminists. Two authors, Elizabeth Johnson and Rosemary Ruether are selected on the basis that they provide sufficient Marian writings to ascertain a theology common to both Church teaching and Christian feminism. Renehan believes that the ecclesiatypical approach with its emphasis on the historical Mary, her faith and discipleship and her role as both model and mother enables Mary to be an encouraging and liberating figure for all women and men.

This is a brave, yet carefully nuanced book. It offers a challenging, potentially enriching perspective for the theologically informed. In each chapter Renehan is vigilant in her consistent statements regarding the official church teaching about Mary, yet keen to bring to the fore the distortions and misappropriations regarding Marian doctrine that have allowed exaggerations in popular devotion to flourish.

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Reading the Bible, Transforming Conflict is aptly situated in the Theology in Dialogue Series. The co-authors have expertise in different areas and bring these areas into conversation. Dempsey’s background is in Biblical Studies while Shapiro’s background is in Communication Studies and their book is an interdisciplinary dialogue around the topic of conflict. An exploration of a range of biblical texts becomes the lens through which conflict transformation is introduced and studied. The aim is to provide insight into the varied elements of conflict and to assist the reader to develop skills in dealing with and transforming conflict. In the words of the authors themselves, ‘The overarching focus and theme of this book is “right relationships” — right relationships with God, with one another, and with all creation’ (p. 1).

In each of the twelve chapters, a biblical text is used as a case study to raise conflict issues for examination. The historical context of the passage is provided and a narrative analysis of the text explores the characterisation and identifies the aspects of conflict in the text. The tools of Communication Studies are then employed to educate in the dynamics of the conflict and offer insights into dealing with the conflict.
theological reflection on the passage leads into a consideration of the ‘grace in the wilderness’ for each conflict situation. Finally, each chapter includes reflection questions which draw the reader into understanding the relevance of the material for their own lives. Additional resources and activities are also listed.

The creation stories of Genesis 1-3 provide the backdrop in Chapter One for discussion on justice, right relationship and the definition of conflict. The next three chapters draw on the Joseph narrative in Genesis. Chapter Two focuses on Joseph being sold by his brothers in Genesis 37. The story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39) features in Chapter Three, while the encounter of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt (Genesis 42-47) is treated in Chapter Four. The remaining eight chapters deal with the following biblical texts: Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38); Susanna (Daniel 13/ Susanna 1); Judith and Holofernes (Judith 10-15); Moses’ negotiation with God (Exodus 32); Jeremiah and Zedekiah (Jeremiah 37-39); David and Michal (1 and 2 Samuel); the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7); and finally, a few Pauline texts from Romans and 1 Corinthians.

These biblical texts have been selected because they are useful teaching tools for an examination of conflict and development of mediation skills. Exploration of these stories provides the opportunity to consider conflict dynamics and related issues, such as how context, culture and goals affect approaches to conflict; conflict styles; forgiveness; social exchange theory; power bases and resources; communication strategies; roles of third parties; negotiation; and managing tensions. The stories also provide examples of various types of conflict, including conflict within families and romantic relationships, social conflict, and war.

This book is described as ‘classroom-tested’ and the questions and additional references listed for each chapter do make it teacher-friendly. It is an important resource for teachers, students and, more generally, anyone wishing to develop their skills in living in right relationship with God, with each other and with themselves. Readers develop new insights into the biblical text as well as new insights into transforming conflict in order to be able to live in right relationship. The authors do not gloss over disturbing aspects in the biblical stories but rather examine the elements of conflict, empower readers to understand and respond to the conflict, and identify moments of grace within the difficult situations. A helpful feature is that metaphors for God are explained as human constructs which have been shaped by the historical contexts of writing.

Dempsey and Shapiro deserve to be congratulated for undertaking such an ambitious project and for producing this valuable resource. Drawing on a wide range of biblical stories, they demonstrate that the biblical text continues to speak to the human condition. The introduction of conflict resolution and communication theory equips the reader to approach conflict with new insight and work for transformation. This dialogue between Biblical Studies and Communications Studies has indeed borne much fruit.

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This book focuses on children and young people in the United States and the contributors clearly come from Christian religious contexts, nonetheless, the matters they are concerned with have applications for and relevance to children and young people in other western countries. A question posed in the introductory chapter to this text asks: What is at stake for the children and youth of today. (p. 2). The subsequent chapters, generated by the research of a range of academics in the US, set out to examine the lives and situations of children and young people. Many offer ideas and directions to move forward in ways that will provide strategies and environments that will be more effective in nurturing the spirit of our young.

The themes that emerge through the chapters are identified in the Introduction: Giftedness and the need for self expression and accomplishment; the influences of social and cultural contexts on personal lives; Longings and desires which result from the individual’s engagement with the social and communal reality
of their lives; Isolation – where our young have not been able to form health and life-giving relationship with others; the issues related to multiple identities where individuals attempt to be different people and wear different faces often in response to media and peer group pressures - thus, they are unable to discover their inner selves; the use of imagination to re-envision and create new life stories after experiences of great personal distress and strife; Kids in crisis who live with violence, poverty and other elements that threaten their wellbeing; and finally, the need for public witness – that is, the need for ‘advocates in all quarters of the community, including interreligious and ecumenical bodies, as well as the unique witness of each faith community’ (p. 11).

The first section focuses on children in a troubling world. Luther Smith Jnr and Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s chapters discuss the crises that face children in the public square. Miller-McLemore claims that children are being used by various agencies to achieve various political, commercial and religious agendas which have little concern for their wellbeing and that religious authorities or scholars have failed to address the situation adequately. Smith observes that when the church acts as a body, it forms a communal identity with a collective voice and resources. Echoing McLemore, he contends that, while the issues that impact on children’s wellbeing are the subject of discussion and concern for other groups and organizations, for instance, school boards and local governments, the Church has been remiss in recognizing and addressing them – ‘the church’s record is characterized by absence and silence’ (p. 16). He describes the wide gap between church teachings (word) and church actions (deed) for children and identifies it as a distinct challenge for people of faith. His argument is that when a church’s identity, mission and work is reflected in its involvement and concern for its children, it will, in turn, ‘receive blessings from children. Such churches are also able to extend their passion for children to the public square – a place that influences the wellbeing of the whole of society’. (p. 30).

Writing from a gender perspective, Katherine Turpin and Rodger Nishioka turn the reader’s attention to the insidious ways in which the materialistic values of contemporary society, accompanied by an intrusive media, shape the spiritual identity of children. In particular, Turpin draws on the Disney princess stories that influence the dreams of little girls, drawing them into a media-driven world which tends to distort the reality of their lives. Nishioka looks at the violence in society and the, often unspoken, Boy Codes that encourage boys to grow up in particular ways: keeping a ‘stiff upper lip’ and don’t show your feelings; its cool to be the tough guy; don’t be a wimp and so on. He reflects on the evidence that continues to show boys underperforming in schools and identifies related areas for further research. Joyce Ann Mercer provides a feminist theological lens through which to view the situation of fatherless children in today’s world which leads to ‘heightened financial stress in mother-only families to the flourishing of youth gangs and the increasing levels of disorder in public school classrooms’. (p. 78) In particular, she analyses Judy Pascoe’s novel ‘Our father who art in a tree’ to identify some dominant themes that emerge in relation to the impact of father-loss on adolescent girls. ‘Father-loss’ is a term Mercer uses to describe the girls’ experiences of a vacuum in their lives rather than referring to the actual location of the father, that is, whether they are present or absent. These three chapters offer some sobering reminders of the many issues facing young people today, even in the supposedly safe environment of school and should be useful, in particular, to classroom practitioners and student wellbeing officers.

The final chapter in the first section by Joshua Thomas reports on the findings from a research study that explored the impact of the experience of war and its aftermath on the psychological and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Given that many countries today have become homes for thousands of refugees and asylum seekers, Thomas’ work is extremely relevant for the many professionals who work with children and young people who have experienced such trauma.

The second section in the book provides a more hope-filled perspective and offers many guidelines for youth ministers, teachers and preachers alike. Mary Elizabeth Moore explores the hopes and dreams of young people which may sometimes remain unrealized because of specific aspects of their lives and circumstances. She identifies ‘yearnings’ of young people: Yearning for the Holy; yearning for community; yearning to understand the world; yearning for ethical guidance; and yearning to make a difference. In response, Moore offers the following themes to guide the work of youth ministers: addressing the search for transcendence; creating a vision of communion; developing wisdom to understand the world; offering ethical guidance that inspires faithfulness; calling and equipping young people in their vocation. Veronica Miles uses an interesting phrase ‘learning to live out loud’ (p. 138) to describe the experiences of young
people when they learn to unmask the distorted representations provided by the media and when they
discover a life built on authentic relationships with others. She recognizes that nurturing young people to
‘live out loud’ can be a lonely and difficult task but offers guidelines to assist those who wish to pursue such
a course of action. Further chapters explore aspects of youth identity and self-knowledge; an
unconventionally conventional’ (p. 136) way of ministering to young girls whose experiences include being
victims of abuse, homelessness and attempted suicide; and the need to develop a variety of different
approaches to youth ministry in order to address the cultural diversity which is the reality of young people’
lives in the United States.

The chapters in both sections of the book highlight many issues that face children and young people in
countries which share a western lifestyle similar to that in the United States and, therefore, have relevance
for professionals working in these other countries. However, I felt that a book that drew on such a variety
of research to generate ideas and proposals for change would have benefitted from the inclusion of a
summary chapter at the end. This would have served the purpose of drawing the threads together to show
links and commonalities as well as divergences. The introductory chapter brought the reader’s attention to
the content of the subsequent chapters. Likewise, a concluding chapter would have been a useful addition
to identify parallels, connections and disparities.

Overall, while the book creates rather a dismal picture in its realistic portrayal of many serious issues that
impact on the mental and emotional health of children and young people today, it also points the way
forward by offering a vision of hope and positive, beneficial action that will foster the wellbeing of the
younger generation and provide them with wisdom which will help them live meaningful lives. As such it is
a valuable text for professionals who work in education, counselling and youth ministry.

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