

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Heroes and Villains, Mike Alsford, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006 (ISBN 0-232-52573-0), xi + 159 pp., pb £10.95

Reading this book is a bit of an adventure! The author introduces us to a range of heroic and villainous archetypes on a journey through film, television, comic books, and literature. The purpose is to address our understanding of what these heroes and villains represent in today's society. Alsford opens up the process by which heroes and villains become such figures of love and hate refracting as they do, right and wrong, good and bad. We are reminded of how easily people are divided in to such groups and the complex range of choices and values that undergird our stereo-types and projections.

The endeavor that Alsford is committed to is 'creating an inter-disciplinary exploratory space' (p. ix) within which we might raise and discuss a variety of issues relating to the human condition. The author serves his reader well in creating a lively and informed arena here for raising issues, stimulating debates and introducing a range of ideas and thinkers. The skill of the teacher is demonstrated in distilling the literature and drawing his reader into reflection. The reader becomes a participant in the exploration rather than simply a recipient of a body of knowledge.

As a result it is almost impossible to know where this volume might be placed in a theological library. Part philosophy, psychology, theology, sociology, and political theory – all these various disciplines serve as the basis for examining motives, methods, and outcomes of heroes and villains. Alsford struggles to answer questions around what we are and what it is that drives us as individual human beings and as humanity as a whole. Again, the reader is asked to enquire of herself 'who and what am I?'

Perhaps it is inevitable that many more questions are asked than answered but this is a source of frustration for any reviewer. For example, Alsford demonstrates that both heroes and villains come from situations of having experienced parental loss at an early age. The evil which causes such loss seems to instill fear and callousness in the

individual. Fear then, is the route of the absence of compassion and conscience which so motivates the villain to control, limit and dominate. The theory is attractive and has some coherence but further space and depth are needed to open it up and critique it.

One final difficulty for this reviewer: by the time I reached the end of the book, I had an overwhelming sense of needing to get out of my study a little more often! My lack of familiarity with some of the heroes and villains in the films, comic books and television was a significant drawback but I cannot hold the author responsible for my 'small' world!

Alsford's conclusion is indicative of the depth and subtlety of his perception and writing.

In the light of all that we have said so far, all the glorious figures we have introduced . . . the most one can ever say about heroes, is that they acknowledge their responsibilities and act on them. Often we recognize our obligations to others and the world, but lack the strength to act. Other times we may possess power and ability, but fail to see what needs to be done. The hero, it might be said, is called inter-being when perception of a need and the recognition of responsibility toward it are backed up by the will to act. For this reason it makes more sense . . . to speak of heroism and villainy as ways of being in the world rather than having to do with innate abilities or powers. For this reason it is possible for any one of us to become heroic or villainous. (p. 140)

This is a good book and I commend it for its qualities, particularly as a work of interdisciplinary study. Our RRT might well consider modeling such interdisciplinary reflection and dialogue. Perhaps it is time to break down the categories within which we work – get out of our studies and listen and talk to one another.

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A Passionate Balance: The Anglican Tradition, Alan Bartlett, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007 (ISBN 0-232-52596-x), 220 pp., pb \$18.00/£9.95

Fairly commonly these days one hears dire pronouncements on the state of lay theological literacy: no longer, it would seem, are the 'people in the pews' curious to explore and grasp the depths of their faith, at least from an informative or intellectual perspective. But these latter-day Jeremiahs' warnings fall on deaf ears – not because the church is