

books

Bravo for this new version of Dante

IT IS difficult for anyone not subject to the popular culture of Italy fully to appreciate how much Dante Alighieri's principal work still dominates this nation's collective imagination.

Two mainstream TV adverts recently demonstrated the point: one, for Foxy toilet tissue, had the laureate writing his *magnum opus* on rolls of the aforesaid *carta igenica*, and, like the Andrex puppy, finding them to be inexhaustible; another, promoting new mobile phones with contracts from one of the main providers in Italy, showed a variety of scenes based (loosely) on *The Inferno*, in which Virgil and Dante are having a high old time. Get our new smartphone, and get out of hell free. . .

English language's cultural appreciation of Dante has always been towards the higher end of the market. The extremely serious and thorough new translation of **The Divine Comedy** by J. G. Nichols (Alma Classics £20 (£18); 978-1-84749-246-3) remains a contribution to high culture without sacrificing an occasional foray into the comedic.

The most important thing to affirm of a poetic translation is that it reads well, and this certainly does: of these three key moments for me from the three books, each has its own linguistic felicity:

Inferno's entry into the gloomy gates:

Abandon hope entirely, you who enter.

Purgatorio's meeting of Statius with Virgil and Dante (yes, don't forget that you need to get more than one classical poet under your belt):

Statius rose and said: "Now you can guess
The depth of all the affection that I feel,
When I, oblivious of our nothingness,
Find myself treating shades as they were real."

The Imperial Eagle of *Paradiso's* Canto XIX:

I saw the beak discoursing, and I heard
A sound which issued saying "I" and "My"
When "We" and "Our" had to be understood.

Whenever an English translation attempts to render the *terza rima* literally, there will also be rhymes of inevitable banality: "way" and "say", "fuss" and "discuss", for example. But, as my citing contemporary Italian appreciation for this incredible masterpiece of world literature at the head of this review makes clear, banality is included in the glory of this work.

I miss the concurrent Italian text so beloved in the old Penguin Dorothy L. Sayers translation, but this edition, with its excellent notes and appendices, more than compensates for the loss of the old, familiar, and, let's admit it, creaky translation.

Bravo, Professor Nichols! They'll be getting him to do toilet-paper adverts next. . .

Jonathan Boardman

Archdeacon of Italy and Malta, and Chaplain of All Saints', Rome



Poet and guide: Dante and Virgil Cross the River Acheron, in hell, in a 15th-century Italian manuscript of *The Divine Comedy* in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome, reproduced in *Mythology: The complete guide to our imagined worlds* by Christopher Dell, a massive hardback of more than 350 pages, with an impressive array of 339 large colour illustrations. The author lumps Christian narratives in with all kinds of other beliefs and legends, and the book is divided into sections on the supernatural realm, the earth, humankind, gifts from the gods, the animal kingdom, symbolic substances, heroes, and quests, journeys, and epics (Thames & Hudson, £24.95 (£22.45); 978-0-500-51615-7)

Continent's Latin religion

David Martin looks at the history behind the Pope from Argentina

lian" oppressors, including millenarian hopes of divine intervention.

Lynch says of the Jesuit experiment among the Guaranis that this "enclave of peace and protection was dismantled and the Jesuits themselves sacrificed for reasons of state with the acquiescence of a dormant Church". This theme of reasons of state and power politics recurs throughout — for example, in the politic abandonment of the Cristeros in the complicated imbroglio of the Mexican Revolution.

In the early 19th century, a Church deeply imbued with royalist sentiment had to deal with the independence movements made possible by the North American example, by the French invasion of Spain, and by an elite appropriation of revolutionary ideas about liberty and utility from both France and England. Simón Bolívar the Liberator remained an outwardly observant Catholic while absorbing the ideas of the Scottish, English, and French Enlightenments, recognising that the Church remained influential with the people.

Eventually, the hierarchy shifted to the cause of independence, partly following its success and the example of the lower clergy, and partly reacting to the anti-clerical revolution of 1820 in Spain itself. It took the papacy far longer to recognise the logic of this change, in this instance providing a nice illustration of the ability of papal "leadership" to limp behind the rest of the Church, doing considerable damage *en route*.

Lynch argues that the later Romanisation of the Church coincided with the liberalisation of the state in a way that left scant middle ground between liberalism and the alliance of the hierarchy with conservative elites, for whom

the Church was a useful tool of their political interests.

This was the main source of violent confrontations — for example, in Brazil and Mexico — marked by genuine hatred. The emergence of a Social Catholicism from the 1890s on eased these negative spirals of conflict to some extent, except that the emergence of totalitarian and sometimes atheistic ideologies in the inter-war years of the 20th century aroused the same fears and reactions as had been previously aroused by liberalism. The result was widespread collusion with right-wing dictatorships, and further reinforcement of the negative spirals.

Lynch suggests that opposition to the Roman Catholic Church was most violent and incendiary where the Church was powerful and had a strong popular base — for example, in Mexico. Lynch concludes with the complicated tussle between conservatives with a strong stake in popular religiosity, such as Pope John Paul II, and the varied strands of liberation theology.

The Revd David Martin is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of London.

EAMON MAHER, in **The Church and its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic question**, looks at the life and work of a controversial figure in the Irish RC Church. McGahern's second novel was banned, and he was also sacked from a teaching post because of his ambivalent relationship with his Church. The author explores how, though he abhorred the institutional aspects of the Church in which he was brought up, he also found much in its awe-inspiring mystery and worship (The Columba Press, £15.99 (£14.40); 978-1-85607-728-6).

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New Worlds: A religious history of Latin America

John Lynch

Yale University Press £25

(978-0-300-16680-4)

Church Times Bookshop £22.50

JOHN LYNCH's latest book is written from a sympathetic but critical Roman Catholic viewpoint, and provides a comprehensive, authoritative, and revisionist review of half a millennium of what has been overwhelmingly a Roman Catholic history up to the mid-20th century.

I cannot imagine its being surpassed, except with regard to changes since then, such as the vast growth of Pentecostalism, of Protestant churches "in renewal", and of the RC Charismatic movement of "New Evangelization".

In particular, Lynch revises our assumptions about the imposition of Catholicism on the "Indian" population. Rather than impose doctrine, the friars saw native populations as already prepared for the gospel, and enacted rituals that "natives" saw as analogous to their own, though endowed with even greater potency. Meanwhile, the newcomers appropriated native values and symbols as embodying a preternatural wisdom.

Lynch goes on to show how, in the 18th century, the Bourbon monarchy used the Church as a power base in a dirigiste and regal programme of Hispanisation. This stimulated revolts that utilised Christian themes against the "Chris-