Interest in Mary, the mother of Jesus, within the divided traditions of the Western Church, has never been greater than at the present time. Protestants, long suspicious at hearing her name on the lips of Roman Catholics and Orthodox, now approach Mary with much greater awareness of, and respect for, her unique role in the incarnation. For their part, Roman Catholics are sensitive to how some of the more extreme forms of Marian devotion sound to Protestant ears. Movement on both sides has created the possibility of fruitful engagement with the theological issues raised by the phenomenon of Marian devotion in a large part of the universal Church.

In various arenas theological dialogue has tackled and resolved entrenched misunderstandings on all fronts, uncovering in the process a substantial degree of convergence about Mary which previous generations would have found astonishing. In particular, the relationship between Mary and Jesus in salvation history has been explored theologically in ways that augur well for future discourse. Even the Marian title 'Mother of God' is no longer a source of controversy when placed in its proper Trinitarian context. While the present generation is far from unanimous in calling Mary blessed, there is greater openness among Protestants to accord her the status and dignity that is singularly hers. Nevertheless, important differences remain between Catholics and Protestants over Marian devotion and the doctrines relating to Mary. Although nowadays Protestants congratulate themselves that they are able to recognise Mary as an example of faith and obedience, perhaps even as the paradigm of both, for Roman Catholics this is not the final destination but merely the beginning of a journey into the depths of her graced being and unqualified response in the mystery of God's saving purposes.

This latest volume of essays on 'Mary, Mother of God', edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, travels part of that journey in addressing a few of the many theological questions in this sensitive area. Originally given as addresses at a theological conference sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, at St Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, in June 2002, the essays both inform and encourage further reflection. According to the preface, the purpose of the conference was 'to honour Mary in ways that are scripturally based, evangelically motivated, liturgically appropriate, and ecumenically sensitive'. The published papers fulfil that same purpose admirably. There are seven essays altogether, contributed by scholars from Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Baptist traditions: Jaroslav Pelikan, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Lawrence S. Cunningham, Robert W. Jenson, David S. Yeago, Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald and Timothy George. The result is an ecumenical study
of Mary, Mother of God, which presses beyond the historical disputes in search of convergence.

To a certain extent, others have already traversed the ground covered in these essays; though the contributors still tread warily, looking over their shoulder to their respective constituencies. However, there are some bold forays into particularly sensitive areas for Protestants, moving the study of Mary into relatively unmapped territory. For those not particularly versed in the intricacies of Marian studies, the scholarship is commendably accessible and the style invariably clear and readable. Jaroslav Pelikan's essay 'in aid of a grammar of liturgy' makes the greatest demands upon the reader, but those who persevere to the end will have been greatly enriched. By exploring facets of the Orthodox Liturgy, which has preserved a recurring address to the theotokos, Pelikan deftly sketches the contours of a liturgical theology of Mary. For Protestants, here is a salutary demonstration of theology according to the principle of lex orandi, lex credendi.

To single out just two other essays that give the flavour of the whole, Beverly Roberts Gaventa examines an aspect of Roman Catholic belief which Protestants find particularly uncongenial: 'Mary as the Mother of Believers'. The identification of Mary as mother of the Church has traditionally been based on chapter 19 in John's Gospel, where she is given the role of mother to the beloved disciple. Furthermore, that Jesus is head of the Church and Mary is his mother invites the affirmation that she must also be mother of the Church. However, this essay draws on the motif previously identified in Luke–Acts by Raymond Brown and others that Mary is the first and ideal disciple. At the same time, she is also a prophet and mother. Yet, according to Gaventa, Luke does not present Mary as being especially noteworthy or deserving of honour. Instead, by identifying herself as the Lord's servant (slave), Mary indicates that her status derives from her obedience to the God for whom nothing is impossible.

But how do we get from Mary as exemplar of faith to mother of believers? For Gaventa, regarding Mary as an example to be followed is even more problematic than describing her as the mother of believers. Because their roles are unique to the people concerned, Luke's account of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Mary and the apostles is not easily turned into a pattern for others to follow. Indeed, Luke provides so little information about Mary that it would be difficult to know what sort of example he envisaged. Moreover, making Mary the model for contemporary Christian discipleship lends itself to the 'sort of Protestant moralizing that reduces biblical texts to their outcomes in human conduct; that is, Mary becomes a tonic to render readers into better people'. As Gaventa sees it, the incarnation creates a new household in which Mary's work of mothering extends to all those children who look to God for deliverance. At the same time, rather as children become like their parents, Christians absorb Mary's story to become more like her.