A Communion in Faith and Love
In light of the current challenges faced by global Christianity, Doxa & Praxis, a collaborative effort of the Volos Academy and WCC Publications, invites creative and original reflection that reappraises, reappropriates, and further develops the riches of Orthodox thought for a deep renewal of Orthodox Christianity and for the benefit of the whole oikoumene.

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A Communion in Faith and Love
Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s Ecclesiology

Edited by
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and
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Foreword

AIKATERINI PEKRIDOU

“The great person is ahead of their time, the smart make something out of it, and the blockhead sets themselves against it.” – Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)

The legacy of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005) proves French sociologist Baudrillard right. Behr-Sigel has been acknowledged not only as a theologian shaped by the historical events and debates of her time but also as an intellectual who made the most out of the hardships of war and was so courageous as to raise and explore questions ahead of her time. Her strength, ecumenical openness, wide theological knowledge, and inherent sense of justice are the key attributes that shaped her work.

The deep spirituality and compassion of this Orthodox theologian impelled her to live out her faith in Christ, transforming it into meaningful action and help for those in need. Her vision of community, oriented towards communion with the triune God, defined her view of the church and the relationships between its members as well as with those who do not belong to it. Perhaps her most widely known contribution is with regard to the ministry of women in the church and the thorny question of the ordination of women, both of which research areas were innovative for her time.

Behr-Sigel’s theological thought was undoubtedly shaped by the geographical, cultural, educational, and confessional context in which she studied. Her German and French background, her theological upbringing in both the Lutheran and the Reformed traditions, and the openness of the Protestant and Catholic faculties in eastern France that allowed for mutual exchange – to say nothing of her in-
teraction with the Orthodox tradition – all contributed to her own openness to what was different. Behr-Sigel came of age in a liberal scholarly culture that promoted academic excellence combined with a lived faith aiming at service to the pastoral needs of congregations. This prepared the ground for Behr-Sigel’s later engagement with the great social problems of her time.

One might speculate that Behr-Sigel inherited her ability to create community with people of other religious affiliations. Born to a Lutheran father and a Jewish mother, she later made the choice to embrace the Orthodox tradition. However, she managed to retain her ecumenical sensitivity and was always actively engaged in the ecumenical movement, accounts of which involvement are found in her writings in various theological journals. During World War II, Behr-Sigel constantly fought against fear and risked her safety to stand by those who were persecuted. Boldness was one of the essential features of her character that surfaced in the midst of the misery and anguish of this period, continuing to characterize her attitude and theological work to the end of her life. Her deep faith in the incarnation and its humanizing force sustained her during this period and became the solid foundation of her theology.

Behr-Sigel’s theological work is characterized by her ability to translate the Orthodox faith and theology into a language understood in the West. Her close ties to the Russian emigration of Paris familiarized her with Russian Orthodox thought, which she was able to articulate and make known. Her studies on monastic spirituality and Orthodox theology revolve around an incarnated faith that radiates Christ’s self-denial and kenotic love. This is particularly evident in her work on Alexander Bukharev. The Russian Orthodox influence can also be discerned in Behr-Sigel’s theological anthropology and more precisely in her involvement in the debates surrounding Sergius Bulgakov’s sophiology.

Behr-Sigel was an astute reader of scripture and patristic literature. Her anthropology, which reflected on the sameness and otherness of men and women within the church, was grounded in patristic commentaries on the Bible. Building a new community where men and women joined in the joy and peace of the Trinity implied for Behr-Sigel the reinterpretation, rather than the repetition, of church Tradition in the present. For her, “Tradition is the very life of the
Church in its continuity as well as in its ever-flowing newness,”¹ both of which are seen as the work of the Holy Spirit. The renewal of Tradition concerns the aspiration toward a new community “from which will be banished all forms of domination, servitude, and exploitation of one person or group by any others.”²

Anthropology and ecclesiology are closely linked in Behr-Sigel’s vision of this new community experienced in faith and love. Men and women are created in God’s image, and so the gifts of both are needed in this new reality. The differences of culture, ethnic background, and social and economic status are overcome as persons are related to one another in the new community and oriented toward their relationship with the triune God. Every person has dignity and is to be respected because every person reflects God.

A pioneer during her college years, one of the few women who had been admitted to study theology and then was appointed as assistant minister in a Reformed parish, Behr-Sigel later became a pioneer for Orthodox theology by raising the question of the role and ministry of women in the church. She dedicated her life to raising awareness about the position of women, which she examined in relation to a patriarchal and hierarchical ecclesiology as well as in the context of the church lived and experienced as communion.

Behr-Sigel explored the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood in the context of the ecumenical dialogue. Her main question was whether the ordination of women to the priestly ministry would constitute a break from the faith of the apostolic church or whether it could be perceived as an acceptable difference depending on one’s theological emphases. Behr-Sigel’s view gradually shifted from the denial of women’s ordination to the priesthood to the recognition that there were no convincing arguments against it that are actually rooted in the faith of the church.

All but two of the papers published in this volume were presented during the 2011 conference on “Being Human, Becoming Divine: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s Contributions to the Church” at the Centre St. Thomas in Strasbourg, France. Special thanks and gratitude are owed to the theologians who envisioned, planned, and organized this

¹ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, The Ministry of Women in the Church, trans. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach: Oakwood, 1991), 94.
² Ibid., 95.
meeting whose fruits we can now enjoy: Rev. Dr Sarah Hinlicky Wilson of the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg and Dr Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, then member of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies. In addition thanks are due to Dr Fulata Mbano-Moyo, Programme Executive for the Women in Church and Society Programme of the World Council of Churches, who has tirelessly accompanied Orthodox women theologians in their ecumenical journey, and whose programme has underwritten this publication, and to Dr Tamara Grdzelidze, then Programme Executive for the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order. A word of thanks is also due to Nikolaos Asproulis for his help in completing this volume.

The present volume is compiled and published in the hope that current and future research will be inspired by Behr-Sigel’s life and theological work, which ventured into uncharted territories, to explore further its implications for theology and especially ecclesiology. Churches and academic institutions have much to learn from theologians like Elizabeth Behr-Sigel. She was actively engaged in the life of the church and did not shy away from the social problems of her time. A restless thinker, critical of her own tradition, she became a liaison between the Eastern and Western theological traditions as her view of communion was nourished by prayer and liturgical life and was extended in loving personal relationships in the human community here and now.
What is it about Elisabeth Behr-Sigel that draws the personal and scholarly attention of people from so many countries and across the ecumenical spectrum? The best explanation is probably that she is unique: truly one of a kind. Female theologians in any church tradition are rare, and perhaps even rarer in the Eastern churches than in the West. The fact that she is not a “cradle Orthodox” but a convert makes her reputation all the more remarkable. Nor did she dwell in a historically Orthodox country, but throughout her life inhabited dual worlds: French-German in Alsace, Lutheran-Reformed in her youth, an ecumenical Orthodox in adulthood, a French national who “repatriated” herself to a Russian-émigré church community, an active member of a conservative church in a highly secularized society. She devoted as much energy to commentary on literature and the writing of biographical studies as to more traditional theological loci. She combined probing studies of Russian spirituality with anti-torture activism. She was a prolific reviewer of books as well as the founder and chief author of her parish’s newsletter. She was an editor and a wife, a scholar and a mother. And she had a great gift for friendship: the number of those who mourned her passing and still speak of her with enormous affection is impressive indeed.1

1 Her life story has been told with great detail and insight in Olga Lossky, Toward the Endless Day: The Life of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, trans. Jerry Ryan, ed. Michael Plekon (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). The biography itself grew out of Lossky’s friendship with Behr-Sigel and made use of Behr-Sigel’s personal letters and diaries.
It helps, of course, to be born at the right place and time in history. Behr-Sigel came to her living faith in the risen Christ at a time when the ecumenical movement was newborn and tremendously energetic. Her first entry was via the youth movement, but she stayed the course through the many years of exciting developments: the initial meetings of Life and Work, and Faith and Order; the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC); the dawn of bilateral dialogue; the growing awareness of the world church; and the startling new roles and opportunities for women in every corner of Christianity. Behr-Sigel was certainly a pioneer as both an ecumenist and a woman active in public Christian discourse. She participated in all the major gatherings during the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women sponsored by the WCC and as often as not was the Orthodox voice. It is no accident that she was invited to present the keynote speech at the first-ever international gathering of Orthodox women at the Agapia convent in Romania in 1976. Notably, this occasion was the first time, at least on the written record, that she raised the question of female priests. Her answer at the time was no, but within five years she would reverse herself and begin to build her powerful case for a creative but faithful development of holy Tradition.

Women in the Church

It is hard to imagine anyone better situated to make this controversial case than Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. Blessed with a supernatural measure of serenity, and having attained the stature of years to put her beyond the usual dismissals issued to young women, her writings on women in the church are extraordinarily calm, measured, and peaceable. She did not hesitate to identify the concrete sins of sexism in the church or to dissect the traditional practices that betrayed the fundamental convictions of the church about the full humanity of women and men alike. But there is never a note of rage in her tone – occasionally, at most, of frustrated impatience.

Yet even then her confidence that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the church into all truth is the final word. She is not troubled that God takes time – centuries and millennia even – to re-form and re-mold the church and the societies of which the church is the leaven. It is a long work and the eschaton is always on the horizon. Con-
fidence in the present activity of the divine in our midst allows theologians the necessary courage to take up new challenges – whether of the role of women, or searching for peace in a violent world, or groping toward the reconciliation of divided churches.

Likely it is the serenity of her tone, alongside the force of her arguments that has influenced the course of her reception. There are many who, initially skeptical of what they saw to be only civil and sociological demands for equal rights imported into the church, came to be persuaded by Behr-Sigel’s point of view: Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, and Olivier Clément among them.

But this is by no means a majority perspective. Plenty remain skeptical if not outright hostile to the notion of women priests. Yet, to this day, not a single sustained refutation of her arguments has appeared. At most there is the occasional snide dismissal, but no genuine engagement. One suspects that attacks would have been forthcoming if she had been any more virulent in her own writings, but the quiet confidence of a grandmother has silenced any potential screeds. This may be the best testimony to her insights: they are so good and so reasonable that they are dangerous to toy with and may ultimately demand real change.

Nevertheless, it is high time to see a more sustained engagement with Behr-Sigel’s work. Neither quiet affirmation nor irritated avoidance is the response she deserves. It is, furthermore, important to recognize the whole arc of her reflection on the topic of women in the church. Although she came to favour the ordination of women soon after she began reflecting on the topic, her reasons for favouring it underwent a dramatic development. She came to reject her initial reasons for supporting it. It is essential to set her final support of the possibility of women priests within the context of her mature thinking on personhood.\(^2\) Happily, in this volume, we include two essays that take up the challenge of the reception of Behr-Sigel’s work on this very topic.

\(^2\) This is the basic argument of Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, *Woman, Women, and the Priesthood in the Trinitarian Theology of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2013), to date the only book-length study of Behr-Sigel’s theology.
The Russian Religious Heritage

Although Behr-Sigel remains virtually without peer on the question of the ordination of women, the mentality from which it arose is by no means unique. Here it is essential to see Behr-Sigel not as a lonely heroine traversing uncharted territory without help or support. Quite the contrary, she was and knew herself to be an heir to and participant in a long line of innovative Orthodox theologians.

Still little known to the West, where the neopatristic revival under Florovsky remains basically synonymous with modern Orthodox theology, the stream of thought originating with Vladimir Soloviev and Alexander Bukharev in the 19th century is the one that formed Behr-Sigel. The brightest light of this tradition was and still is Sergius Bulgakov – who, as it happens, was Behr-Sigel’s confessor and one of her most important mentors early in her Orthodoxy. Her friends Paul Evdokimov and Lev Gillet also identified themselves with this stream, sometimes provoking severe criticism from the neopatristic party.³

As in most intellectual traditions, there are many twists and turns in the one under discussion here. But to distill it down to the simplest point, Behr-Sigel, her predecessors, and her friends sought not to repristinate a corrupt Orthodoxy through recourse to and repetition of the church fathers, but rather to develop and extend Orthodoxy in the spirit of the church fathers for the sake of witness to

and engagement with the wide world. For this reason Behr-Sigel was so fond of Jesus’ charge to “discern the signs of the times.” The times and the world are not simply innocent, not simply right; but they do have their own integrity, questions, yearnings, and insights on which the gospel and the wisdom of its long Tradition must be brought to bear. The faithful Christian does not flee but meets the challenge, offers counter-challenges, and radiates the joy of the resurrection. Behr-Sigel asked her fellow Orthodox countless times in her writings to respond to the “here and now.” Soloviev, Bukharev, and Bulgakov would have been proud.

Behr-Sigel’s glad adoption of the Russian religious heritage for herself was expressed in a number of ways. Her engagement with the pressing questions of modernity was one but certainly not the only way she lived out the sophiological tradition. Impressively, in adulthood she learned to speak and read Russian – no doubt aided by her Russian-born husband – and did primary research in Russian sources. These included reviews of Russian novels, studies in Russian spirituality (the Jesus Prayer in particular), and a master’s thesis on Russian holiness, which remains the standard typology in the field. Her doctorate on Alexander Bukharev reviewed his spiritual practice, outlined his life, and translated a number of his letters into French. Even in 1960s France, her thesis was controversial enough to be pulled from publication early on and never reissued.

The Range of Behr-Sigel’s Interests

There is no substitute for reading Behr-Sigel (or any other theologian) herself. With very few exceptions, all of her work was composed in French, but English readers have a substantial number of her most important works available in translation. These are The Ministry of Women in the Church (Oakwood, 1991); The Place of the Heart: An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality (Oakwood, 1992); Lev Gillet: A Monk of the Eastern Church (Oxford: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1999); with Kallistos Ware, The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church (WCC, 2000); and Discerning the Signs of the Times (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001). Only available in French are her first book, Prière et Sainteté dans l’Eglise Russe (rev. ed. Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1982), and her dissertation, Alexandre Boukha-

The books, however, represent only a portion of Behr-Sigel’s writings. There is a large corpus of her articles that have not yet been collected into a single volume. A significant number of these articles were book reviews; Behr-Sigel was an extraordinarily devoted reader on a wide range of theological topics, including books by Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians in addition to Orthodox ones. Another category of her relatively unknown articles are short pieces for Bulletin de la Crypte, the parish newsletter she started and edited for her Paris community. These range from reports on her own activities at conferences and church events to spiritual reflections on holy days. Other such reports, often variations on those for Bulletin de la Crypte, appeared in Service Orthodoxe de Presse. Furthermore, as editor of the theological journal Contacts, Behr-Sigel made many lengthier contributions, from theological studies of such figures as Gregory of Palamas and Tikhon of Zadonsk to her forays into biographies of Mother Maria Skobtsova and Lev Gillet. She published numerous reflections on ecumenism as well, both in Orthodox journals and those of other churches, and both wrote about and participated in theological education. Many and various of her articles have been translated into other languages besides English, including Russian, Bulgarian, Italian, and Portuguese.

Behr-Sigel was, overall, far more of an occasional writer than a systematic one. In such cases, the reading of the original texts is greatly enhanced by knowledge of the wider context and background of the occasions that provoked the writings. Therefore, the essays collected in this volume will offer indispensable guidance to Behr-Sigel’s theology and its wider significance.

The Conference and Its Findings

From August 31 to September 3, 2011, Orthodox and Lutheran theologians gathered at the Centre St. Thomas in Strasbourg, France,

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to participate in a conference entitled “Being Human, Becoming Divine: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s Contributions to the Church.” In cooperation with the Women in Church and Society Programme of the WCC and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Greece, the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg hosted this event to consider Behr-Sigel’s life, thought, and ecumenical impact.5

The setting was particularly appropriate, since it was in Strasbourg that Behr-Sigel was born and raised, was baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran church, enjoyed the fruitful mentoring of leading Reformed pastors in the youth movement, and was among the first women to enter theological studies at the University of Strasbourg. Important friendships with Russian and Romanian Orthodox émigrés and a love for the liturgy and ecclesiology of the East led Behr-Sigel to enter the Orthodox Church as a young adult. Although it is commonly thought that Behr-Sigel converted upon marriage to a Russian Orthodox, in fact she met her future husband on the occasion of her chrismation, which took place in the young man’s apartment. Her decision to enter the Eastern Church was a matter of spiritual conviction, not marital convenience or influence.

The papers presented at the 2011 conference are collected here, engaging various aspects of Behr-Sigel’s life, theology, and witness. The foundation is set with an examination of important developments in Behr-Sigel’s personal life. Elisabeth Parmentier offers a glimpse into the situation of the Protestant faculty in Strasbourg during Behr-Sigel’s studies in the 1920s and the growing acceptance of female lay and ordained pastors in the church of Alsace. While Behr-Sigel was not the absolutely first woman to study theology or exercise a public ministry in the French Protestant churches, she certainly was among the first to do so. Parmentier illustrates the internal struggle of these churches to allow women to take on such a role and the limitations still imposed upon them – for instance, only single women were allowed to serve as lay pastors, despite the fact that the blessing of clerical marriage was a major theme of the Reformation.

5 It was a particular privilege of the conference to welcome among its participants several of Behr-Sigel’s descendants: her son Nicolas Behr, her daughter Nadine Arnould, and two of her grandsons, Cyrille Arnould and Michel Arnould. The first evening of the conference was devoted to hearing their memories of their beloved mother and grandmother.
Olga Lossky, Behr-Sigel’s biographer, relates how the young theologian formed an ecumenical resistance circle during World War II. Here if anywhere Behr-Sigel found the “new community” that she had been looking for since her youth. Her initial attraction to Orthodoxy was very much based on its ecclesiology, “a communion lived in faith and love,” in contrast to the hierarchical structure she perceived in her Protestant community. There was much to disappoint her in the reality of lived Orthodoxy, but the solidarity and strength in her circle in Nancy during the war years remained a lifelong inspiration. Lossky also reports how Behr-Sigel helped refugees and on occasion hid Jewish children from the Nazis.

Two essays in this volume delve more deeply into the historic precedents of Behr-Sigel’s work. Michel Evdokimov examines its deep roots in the Russian spiritual tradition, particularly the countercultural witness of controversial Russian ex-monk Alexander Bukharev. Evdokimov brings to light the common themes of longing for a new community alongside frustration with the lived reality of church in both Bukharev and Behr-Sigel. The two were deeply moved by the doctrine of theosis and the full humanity of God, applying these profound realities to the social issues around them.

Antoine Arjakovsky continues in this vein, but with a focus on Sergius Bulgakov instead. Behr-Sigel wrote the earliest study in French of Bulgakov’s sophiology, defending her mentor amidst an explosive dispute about the topic in the Russian church that reached all the way into France. Arjakovsky concludes with a consideration of contemporary Roman Catholic theologian Celia Deane-Drummond, who in her own way picks up the themes of sophiology and extends them into a wider ecumenical setting.

From there the essays turn to a closer examination of Behr-Sigel’s own innovative work. Teva Regule examines Behr-Sigel’s holistic, ecumenical vision of the church. This opens up fresh approaches to ecclesiology, which in turn has implications for theological anthropology. Naturally, Behr-Sigel was particularly concerned to develop the interconnections of ecclesiology and theological anthropology where women are concerned, but ultimately her vision is for all people created in the image of God.

The next two essays follow logically on these insights. Valerie Karras explores Behr-Sigel’s creative retrieval of the patristic tradition. Contrary to popular perception, the fathers did not take men
and women to be radically “other” but emphasized their common humanity in Christ. Karras defines this as the “non-gendered character of Greek patristic theology,” both building on and in places gently critiquing Behr-Sigel’s use of the patristic sources. Maria Gwyn McDowell draws out further the implications of Behr-Sigel’s writings on the ordination of women in showing how the Eastern Church’s use of icons points to the ability of each individual to become transparent to Christ. She draws on the writings of Theodore of Studios, one of the only early church theologians to consider the maleness of Christ as a distinct topic, and then turns to consider the femaleness of the Theotokos. These call into question conventional assumptions about masculinity and femininity, which in turn have implications for the practice of ordination in the church.

The following two contributions dwell on questions of spirituality in practice. Amal Dibo analyzes Behr-Sigel’s commitment to “discerning the signs of the times,” exhorting Christians and especially the Orthodox churches to follow in her footsteps. Dibo notes Behr-Sigel’s courageous willingness to engage with pressing political and social questions in the creative tension between authority and liberty in the church, a gift that can be offered to a world suffering from nihilism and despair. Heleen Zorgdrager, though not present at the conference, offers a valuable insight into Behr-Sigel’s personal and theological witness regarding kenosis and suffering. The incarnation is the central point of hope for creation – God took humanity into his own life – and it transforms both our understanding and our experience of suffering.

The volume concludes with my own contribution, in which I analyze Behr-Sigel’s hagiographical studies, an important though somewhat more neglected aspect of her life’s work. Already in writing her master’s thesis on Russian saints, Behr-Sigel began to see women in the church with new eyes. Her unflinching willingness to face the sinful side of the saints as well as her profound understanding of personhood prompts me to make some suggestions about how a renewed discipline of hagiography could take root in my own Lutheran tradition. As an accompaniment to this discussion of hagiography, the final entry in the book is Behr-Sigel’s own essay on the Russian saint Juliana Lazarevskaya, which has not hitherto been published in English.
Several of the conference papers were published in French by the journal Contacts (Issue 246 [2014]) under the title Élisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907–2005): Une théologienne bâtisseuse de ponts; namely, those by Parmentier, Evdokimov, Regule, Dibo, and Wilson.

Ecumenical Implications

Behr-Sigel’s theology has gained a hearing well outside of her native Orthodoxy. It has enriched the discussions about the ordination of women in Western churches. Protestants are challenged to look beyond language of rights and justice, while Catholics are challenge to look beyond notions of natural resemblance. She remains a standing challenge to feminist theology, as one who both made use of its critiques and yet issued her own critiques in turn, convinced as she was that the dogmatic foundation of the church in the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ are assets, not liabilities, for Christian women. As the ecumenical movement itself is, in a certain sense, really a multifaceted debate about the nature of Tradition, Behr-Sigel’s faithful yet flexible approach has much to teach all parties. On a less controversial level, her introductions to the Russian saints and to the spirituality of the Jesus prayer remain invaluable resources to all Christians seeking to live more authentically in the light of Christ.

In one of the discussions that took place during the conference, an Orthodox colleague asked me whether I, as a Lutheran theologian and pastor, had any regrets that Behr-Sigel had left the Protestantism of her youth to become Orthodox. It was a thought-provoking question for me. Given her importance and signal witness to the Orthodoxy she embraced, I could not feel any real sadness that she made her move to the Eastern Church. But on a deeper level, I came to realize, the question betrays a mindset that all of us are still working to break free from. The underlying assumption is that by joining and serving the Orthodox Church, Behr-Sigel was no longer a sister in faith to me or one of “my own.”

But the ecumenical discovery is precisely the opposite: we do not exist in strict isolation from one another. We are all part of the one body, in ways that often defy understanding, in ways that we defy with our competitive and slanderous treatment of one another. If anything, Behr-Sigel was a gift to me precisely as an Orthodox theo-
logian in a way she never could have been had she remained in the Lutheran or Reformed Church. We are both baptized into the one body of Christ, and so we belong to each other. And so do those who participated in the conference, whatever their church affiliation; and so do those who read her works, whether they react with delight or anger. We are one, like it or not. May God grant us the grace to like it, and may Behr-Sigel’s theology help form us into the kind of people who do.