



REVIEW

Oliver O'Donovan's *Moral Theology: Tensions and Triumphs* by Samuel Tranter, T&T Clark, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2022, pp. 288, £28.99, pbk

Servais Pinckaers, in his 1992 article 'Aquinas on Nature and the Supernatural', observes that our contemporary understanding of nature is not that of the thirteenth century and when we read Aquinas, we should be aware that we do so through our modern lens. Despite this warning, Pinckaers makes extensive use of Aquinas's theology of nature, whereas other Catholic moral theologians have jettisoned or significantly transformed Aquinas's understanding of nature.

Thirty years on from Pinckaers's article, we might add another note of caution. For those who inhabit the world in which the revival of natural law and virtue in moral theology is taken as a starting point, it can be difficult to envisage the philosophical and theological landscape Pinckaers' was addressing, a landscape in which the traditional use of nature as a central category in moral theology was seen by many as a dangerous and oppressive attempt to return to a past the Catholic Church should leave behind.

It is 36 years since the publication of Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order*, a work which stands among the most brilliant and influential texts in moral theology of the last 50 years. For those Catholic moral theologians working in the Thomistic natural law tradition, O'Donovan's emphasis on the centrality of the created order for moral theology has provided not just the support of a fellow traveller but also a valuable resource for the renewal of moral theology. Meanwhile, O'Donovan's use of Scripture and tradition provides a great deal for Catholic moral theologians to reflect upon in their attempts to recover a scriptural and doctrinal basis for moral theology.

Although O'Donovan is one of the most significant influences on contemporary moral theology Samuel Tranter's book, *Oliver O'Donovan's Moral Theology: Tensions and Triumphs* is the first full-length engagement with O'Donovan's thought. Tranter's book is not a beginner's guide to O'Donovan's theology, nor is it a primarily a summary of O'Donovan's key contributions to moral theology for an unfamiliar reader. The book does cover a wide selection of O'Donovan's corpus, focusing on the major works, but also including significant engagement with some of the less well-known works. Tranter's narrative, however, places an emphasis on critical engagement, such that O'Donovan's thought is introduced in the context of the theological controversies his theology has generated over the years.

The subtitle of the book contrasts tensions and triumphs in O'Donovan's works and it is important while reading the book to keep in mind the latter. Tranter's critical engagement with O'Donovan's works tends to emphasize the tensions, while the reader is often left to look for the triumphs. However, just as an inheritor of the works of MacIntyre and Pinckaers may critically engage with their thought from the perspective of the world they gained, so Tranter's engagement with O'Donovan is itself made possible by the theological landscape O'Donovan gained. In a sense this is the

real triumph the book proclaims; that the very terms of critical engagement have been largely made possible by O'Donovan's evangelical ethics.

The book begins by examining the groundwork for O'Donovan's moral theology in an ethics of nature, with Tranter introducing various themes and the tensions he claims run through O'Donovan's works. Tranter argues that central to these tensions is O'Donovan's emphasis on restoration of the created order at the expense of transformation of the created order with the coming of the kingdom. Such criticisms of O'Donovan are not new, and Tranter quotes Stanley Hauerwas' famous summary of *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 'Too much moral order, not enough resurrection' (p. 162). Tranter runs through the debates between those who defend O'Donovan against this accusation and those who find it an irreparable breach in his presentation of the Christian life. Part of the issue, as Tranter notes, is whether we read O'Donovan within a broadly Augustinian/Thomistic theology of creation and nature in which the restored created order is also transformed through Christ, or as closer to the view presented by N.T. Wright in which emphasis is placed on the restoration of creation.

The question of restoration *versus* transformation provides a unifying thread for Tranter's presentation of O'Donovan's theology, in which he traces three primary stages of development. Chapters two and three cover *Resurrection and Moral Order*, chapter four moves on to O'Donovan's political theology, and chapter five examines O'Donovan's 'remapping' of this moral theology in his more recent trilogy of books *Ethics as Theology*. Although Tranter argues that the tension he perceives between restoration and transformation is generally resolved in favour of the former, in his presentation of O'Donovan's development he acknowledges an increasing, if uneven, emphasis on transformation. The unifying thread may be seen by some readers as a helpful guide through the intricacies and complexities of O'Donovan's thought, whereas others (particularly those who do not see a tension between restoration and transformation) may find it a distraction or as claiming too much attention.

Whether or not the reader agrees with Tranter's approach, there is a great deal to gain from the book, as he skilfully weaves through the complexities of O'Donovan's thought and brings O'Donovan into conversation with wider debates. Criticism in itself is not incompatible with holding a thinker in the highest regard, and Anscombe once commented that Wittgenstein would have been better served by a critical engagement with his work, rather than by those who came to identify themselves as Wittgensteinians (which is not to say that all criticism is just).

Alasdair MacIntyre remarked once that before writing *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* he had read through a great deal of contemporary work in moral philosophy, but found little of it conducive to his project. Those who work on the level of MacIntyre often transcend the parameters of contemporary debate, in a manner which can open that debate to new questions and perspectives. Moral theology owes a great deal to O'Donovan's work, and Tranter's book provides a valuable starting point for an engagement with his works.

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