

# Reviews

## **CONTEMPLATING AQUINAS: ON THE VARIETIES OF INTERPRETATION** edited by Fergus Kerr OP, *SCM*, London, 2003, pp. 224, £30 pbk.

To describe this as a collection of studies from the Anglo-Saxon world would be too narrow (as well as incorrect) and to describe it as representing the European world would be too broad (as well as incorrect). The contributing scholars are from The Netherlands, Germany, Britain, Ireland, the United States, and Canada. No attempt has been made at comprehensive treatment but the collection is sufficiently wide-ranging to cover most of the areas of Aquinas's thought getting attention at present, and the fundamental question of 'faith and reason' is considered in each chapter.

Two major trends in Aquinas scholarship in the past fifty years are given due emphasis. One is the study of the sources other than Aristotle, in particular the Neoplatonist sources that were significant for Aquinas in his understanding of being and of creation. The two most fascinating chapters here (from the perspective of this reviewer) are those by David Burrell on the Creator as 'cause-of-being' and Fran O'Rourke on Aquinas and Platonism.

The other significant movement in Thomist studies is the one that seeks to rescue him from the clutches of rationalising neo-scholastics and Anglo-Saxon philosophers of religion, in order to appreciate him again (for some, it seems, for the first time) as a Christian theologian, whose understanding of reason within faith remains a key point of reference (and perhaps more) for current reflection in the light of John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998). It is the moralists, interestingly, who see most keenly this need for valuing Aquinas as, in the first place, a theologian. They are represented here by Mark Jordan who writes on the *Summa's* failed attempt to reform moral teaching and by Susan Parsons who writes on contemporary interpretations of Aquinas on natural law.

There are four 'geographical' chapters surveying the panorama of interpretations of Aquinas, a view from Edinburgh and Oxford by Fergus Kerr, a view from Utrecht by Herwi Rikhof, a view from Hamburg by Otto-Herman Pesch, and a view from Texas by Robert Miner. The collection is completed by chapters on the opening question of the *Summa* by Rudi te Velde, on the question of truth in Aquinas and Heidegger by Laurence Hemming, and on Aquinas's understanding of Christ's causality by Philip Reynolds.

O'Rourke's article is now the best short introduction to its theme, Aquinas and Platonism. Its strength lies in adopting a speculative rather than a historical approach, moving beyond a 'sources and influences' kind of hermeneutic, to one where the distinction between a position adopted and the reasons why it is adopted is crucial (a distinction whose significance is already noted by Robert Henle in *Saint Thomas and Platonism*, 1956). This allows for a more nuanced positioning of Aquinas in relation to the Platonist tradition, many of whose positions Thomas accepted but for Aristotelian rather than Platonist reasons.

The speculative themes considered are knowledge, being, participation, and the divine good. On knowledge O'Rourke says that Aquinas 'defly harmonises the twin interpretations of Plato and Aristotle of knowledge as a lighting process' (p. 254) combining the motif of natural light with that of transcendent light. Biblical texts suggest that this is what the theologian ought to do and Aquinas does it. This single example already illustrates how properly philosophical understanding may be

stimulated by the requirements of the faith. On being, O'Rourke begins with some thoughts about Plato's 'intuition of being' (as Jacques Maritain called it) compared with Aristotle's blindness to it. Yet it is Aristotle who provides the resources for valuing 'the ontological density of ordinary reality' (p. 257) since Plato, in spite of his intuition, 'misidentified the true locus of being'. Nevertheless, O'Rourke argues, there is much in the later dialogues of Plato that anticipates Aquinas's teaching on being, notably the conviction that being according to its fullest meaning is alive and intelligent. Aquinas read this, of course, not in Plato's later dialogues but in *Metaphysics* XII, and was aware of the Neoplatonist doctrine of the threefold levels of reality (being, life, intelligence) which, since it permeated ancient and patristic thought, was simply common sense in the Middle Ages.

On participation (that 'useless metaphor' according to Aristotle) 'Plato and Aquinas share comparable principles, applied analogously within distinctive intellectual and existential environments' (p. 268). Aquinas transforms the notion, however, by equating it with the efficient causality of creation. He is greatly helped by a text in *Metaphysics* II, whose importance for Aquinas cannot be over-estimated. This text enunciates the principle that whatever is first in a genus has the characteristic of that genus to the fullest extent and is moreover the cause of it in all other members of the genus who have it 'by participation'. O'Rourke overlooks the significance of this Aristotelian text to which Thomas appeals again and again. In his contribution Philip Reynolds notes how Thomas even uses this principle to speak of the causality of Christ's resurrection as well as of Christ's headship in the realm of grace. (Dominicans will be interested to learn that Reynolds draws on two articles on the *Metaphysics* II text that were published in 1954 by Vincent de Couesnongle, later Master of the Order (1984–1993).)

On the divine good O'Rourke shows how Aquinas is closer to Plato than to Aristotle although, once again, 'platonist' texts in Aristotle (*Metaphysics* II and XII, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7), as well as Neoplatonised interpretations of Aristotle, help to explain Aquinas's view that the two great pagans shared the doctrine of a universal cause of the existence of all things.

Burrell's chapter is concerned specifically with the question of such a universal cause. Aquinas's encounter with the *Liber de causis* offered him a vehicle for introducing the creator as cause-of-being. None of Aristotle's four causes could describe the act of creating but the *Liber de causis* intimated another conception of causality that could do so. The difficulty with this conception was in maintaining the distinction of creator from creation – fears of pantheism led western thought, Burrell argues, to reject the notion of emanation which for Aquinas remained the best metaphor for creation. But the upshot of those fears has been a dilution of the specific assertions of Jewish-Christian-Muslim faith in a creator, demoting the creator to 'the biggest thing around' and promoting a secular ethos (p. 77).

This is a very exciting thesis and Burrell draws on the work of Robert Sokolowski, Bernard McGinn and Sara Grant ('confessions of a non-dualist Christian') in developing it. They point him back to Scotus Eriugena and Meister Eckhart as better guides to what Aquinas was trying to articulate in a 'cause-of-being' than 'what has often passed as canonical Thomist interpretation' (p. 78). If the being of living things is to live, as Thomas says, (understanding being and life virtually rather than additively, in other words the being of living things is not first to be and then to live), then the simplicity of God whose essence is to-be should not be conceived as 'mere being', but as the fullness of being, simpleness denoting plenitude rather than lack. Even so-called 'existential' readings of Aquinas can unwittingly turn *esse* into a feature but, once again, Burrell believes it is *Liber de causis* that provides a better way of thinking about this, a way that avoids the dangers of separating creator and created. The picture (too briefly summarised here) is completed, he says, in fully intentional or free agents, whose freedom is a hunger for the good, a responding desire for their source (since intelligence also is introduced virtually and not

additively). Furthermore since for Aquinas the manner of being of the creator is triune, 'in creating it freely communicates the manner in which it naturally communicates' (p. 81). Burrell concludes by describing how his explorations led him back, 'to appreciate the mode of reflection enshrined in *emanation* to illuminate the uniqueness of the creation-relation, while realising that we shall never adequately articulate it' (p. 83). His chapter is the shortest in this collection but (it seems to me) is the one that will most fruitfully repay the contemplation to which the book invites its readers.

Mark Jordan argues that the institutional readings of the *Summa*, its reception and use, mostly run counter to its own project of curricular and community reform. He accepts Leonard Boyle's thesis that the *Summa* was 'directed at expanding the pastoral and practical curriculum of Dominican houses by placing it within the frame of the whole of theology' (p. 43). But what it offered was refused from the beginning, he says, a point he illustrates with examples from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century to the present time. Perhaps its pedagogy was too demanding, its movement too subtle or too slow, its intended audience (at once academic and pastoral) too rare or even non-existent. Whatever the reasons, the extensive use and institutional endorsements of the *Summa* have distorted what Aquinas was trying to do, he says. This is seen particularly in its fragmentation into a series of distinct 'treatises' and the effective refusal (even on the part of Dominicans) of its proposal that moral teaching subsume Greek philosophy into a unified theological wisdom. How then ought it to be read? It is read whole, Jordan says, 'when it is enacted as a single theological teaching, with morals at its centre and the Passion of Christ as its driving force, before a community committed to sanctification through mission, with the consolations of sacraments and liturgy, in the illumination of contemplative prayer' (p. 53). A book, then, that demands a theological way of living if it is to be read properly.

Jordan picks out recent misconstruals of the notion of natural law as an example of the negative effects on its interpretation of 'canonising' the *Summa* as well as the difficulty of receiving it faithfully in later intellectual contexts. Susan Parsons illustrates these issues here by considering recent interpretations of Aquinas on natural law. Things have happened to shape our way of thinking, she says, things associated particularly with Kant and Nietzsche, which make it difficult for us to appreciate Thomas's achievement in regard to natural law. For in modernity we can only hear the debate under the form of power, where nature and reason are at odds, and nihilism sets the agenda, even for those who have made the most telling critiques of it. The work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Jean Porter, as well as the moral goods theory associated with John Finnis and Germain Grisez, are all vulnerable to criticism on this score, she believes. The way forward, she suggests, is to attend to what Thomas can say to us about the grasp of reason and the manner of its producing, in particular by seeing the nature of 'nature' disclosed as creation. Reason needs to be unburdened of its instrumentalising and to stand before what cannot be produced, natural law considered as a further working out of the doctrine of creation (p. 181).

This re-reading of Thomas as primarily a theological and pre-modern thinker is emphasised again in what I have called the 'geographical' papers. At Utrecht, Thomas is explicitly read theologically continuing a tradition associated with names like Kreling and Schillebeeckx but inspired in a new direction particularly by the work of Burrell and Corbin. So Thomas is approached as a biblical theologian and a negative theologian, as a theo-logian (one in whose discourse about God a concern with the status of that language itself is always uppermost) and as a systematic theologian. Pesch gives a valuable summary of Aquinas scholarship in the twentieth century identifying a number of stages from 'Aquinas as Christian philosopher' (Gilson, Pieper) to 'Aquinas as theologian' (Congar, and Le Saulchoir as a whole), from Aquinas as 'historically contextualised theologian' (Chenu), to, finally, Aquinas as a 'real conversation-partner for Protestant theology'. The latter is

made possible by freeing Aquinas from the situation where his reputation had 'authority without weight' to one where it once again has weight even if not the same institutionally endorsed authority as before. So work proceeds, Pesch says, and in a more favourable atmosphere, particularly on Aquinas's understanding of faith, his anthropology, and his theological ethics (in view of the crisis in the thinking on natural law). Pesch's own interests, discussed at greater length, are Aquinas's usefulness for Catholic dogmatics, for fundamental theology, and for ecumenical debate.

All four 'geographical' chapters identify the question of theological language as one for which Aquinas remains the key figure and this from the variety of their perspectives. Rikhof discusses it in speaking of Thomas as a 'theo-logian'. Pesch chooses it as a specialist issue to illustrate how Aquinas's contribution to contemporary theological thought operates in practice (particularly in regard to ecumenical dialogue with Protestant theologians). Miner highlights the important work of John O'Callaghan (*Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn*, 2002) and Kerr's chapter will be considered below.

Miner looks also at two recent works on Thomas's anthropology, Robert Pasnau's *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (2002) and Thomas Hibbs's *Virtue's Splendor* (2001). From Miner's account of it Hibbs's book seems clearly to be preferred not only as a less tendentious reading of Aquinas but because it leaves open the possibility that the anthropology developed in the first two parts of the *Summa* requires completion in the third part's consideration of Christ. Miner chooses Matthew Levering's wonderful book, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple* (2002), as the main text discussed in the final part of his chapter. This book not only obliges us to relate the second with the third parts of the *Summa* in a way that is obvious once it is proposed, but also highlights the *Summa*'s salvation-historical structure as well as the relevance to current debates about the relationship of Christianity and Judaism of what Aquinas says about the old law and the temple.

Fergus Kerr already offered a book-length evaluation of current interpretations of Aquinas in *After Aquinas* (2002). Here he attends in the first place to the shrunken 'theistic proofs and natural law' reading of Aquinas in British *academe* and shows (as Pesch's chapter does also) how much was already happening in Continental scholarship to counter a rationalistic reading of Aquinas. He offers a quick but well informed tour of 20<sup>th</sup> century Thomisms from Transcendental Thomism, through Gilson, Maritain, and Le Saulchoir, to the questions posed by Henri de Lubac in his work on nature and grace, to evaluations of Aquinas by Barth, Rahner and Balthasar (evaluations that served to back the 'standard British account of Thomas'). Once again (as at Utrecht) David Burrell is identified as a key figure in proposing an alternative reading of Aquinas to the one that sees him as precursor of post-Enlightenment apologetics. Aquinas is something much more interesting than that, as Burrell's own chapter here shows: 'what Burrell questions', says Kerr, 'is the point of ever attempting to treat of God whilst prescinding from the specific religious tradition in which the understanding of God arises' (p. 34). From there Kerr speaks about 'Wittgensteinian Thomism' (Anscombe, Geach, Kenny) and the more recently identified 'Analytical Thomism' (Haldane), each valuing Aquinas for providing resources for recovering from 'deeply entrenched and widely influential modern philosophical myths about the self and about our cognitive situation in the world' (p. 36).

Rudi te Velde's chapter on the opening question of the *Summa* is a welcome addition to the rich bibliography on that subject. At a time when there is enthusiasm for re-appropriating Aquinas's understanding of *sacra doctrina* as sapiential, it is important that its 'scientific' status, and its need for philosophy, should continue to be given due emphasis. This is what te Velde does here, although with the (by now familiar) warning that 'there is no external standpoint from which the way reality is pictured in the Christian tradition might be compared to reality itself' (p. 60). In considering the necessity of revelation he concludes that, for Thomas, that necessity

is mainly of a moral and practical nature: to know in what our eternal happiness consists, God must reveal it to us. Hence the need for the scientific/sapiential knowledge that is *sacra doctrina*.

Laurence Hemming re-evaluates the relationship between Aquinas and Heidegger on the question of 'being'. He believes that Aquinas does not have a 'philosophy' and so cannot fall into that confusion of ontology and theology of which Heidegger accuses the western tradition generally. At the same time Heidegger and Aquinas are concerned with incommensurable things in their investigations of 'being', and what they say cannot be compared either on their own terms or on any other one might set for them. Their understandings of 'truth' are a better basis on which to place them in confrontation with each other, Hemming thinks. But Aquinas's account of truth, like his account of being, is theological, so it is not clear how this is a good alternative. But a review of what Heidegger says about Nietzsche, Plato, and Aquinas sheds light on what Aquinas is undertaking in his thinking.

Philip Reynolds considers what he calls 'a conspicuous example of the intrusion of philosophical concepts and vocabulary into the realm of faith: Thomas's doctrine that Christ is an efficient cause of salvation and of the final resurrection' (p. 218). His treatment is a fine reminder of the role Thomas sees for the humanity of Christ in the work of salvation and in the sacramental economy of the Church.

Rich as this book is, and useful as it is for gaining an overview of Thomist studies today, there are (inevitably) significant 'thomisms' not represented. The most striking absence is Francophone scholarship, particularly what we may perhaps begin to call the 'school of Torrell' and its most able younger representative, Gilles Emery. One of the strengths of the Torrell school is that it does not confine itself to *Summa theologiae* (as many of the chapters here do) but looks also at other works of Aquinas, including, and in particular, the Scripture commentaries. But it is simply to endorse the book's agenda to point out that the contemplation of Aquinas is nourishing still further varieties of interpretation in places and modes that could not be considered here. And there is plenty to be getting on with in what is considered here.

VIVIAN BOLAND OP

**THE WRECK OF WESTERN CULTURE: HUMANISM REVISITED by John Carroll, *Scribe*, Melbourne, 2004, Pp. 278, Aus.\$31.82 pbk.**

This is an imaginative, at times brilliant book of vision and ambition, a rare example of sociological wrestling with the theological implications of culture. Carroll's earlier work *Puritan, Paranoid, Remissive: A Sociology of Modern Culture* (1977) marked him out as 'bright'. *The Wreck* well vindicates this reputation. In Australia, the book has aroused considerable critical response. Originally published in 1993, this new edition with an ending reflection on 9/11 fits in well with recent English works, notably from Bauman, Gray and Eagleton, that fret over the endemic fracturing of culture and the consequences of its de-spiritualisation. Not quite as Manichean in tendency as some other treatments, Carroll nevertheless offers a scathing treatment of the belief in humanism that has so dominated the past 500 years of European culture. To read Carroll is to make a stunning contrast with the assumptions of culture in *Gaudium et Spes* on its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

For Carroll, humanism dies because it cannot cope with the metaphysical challenge of death. Treating the soul of the West and the failure of its spiritual history since the Renaissance, he taunts humanism with the failure to 'find a credible alternative to Christ crucified' (p. 6). Its cadaverous effect is expressed in a narrative that deals with the displacement of the *I*. Carroll provides an astute account of the shifting sands the *I* is placed on to fulfil the promise of humanism. Unfixity of stance