

# Reviews

**ST THOMAS AQUINAS, SUMMA THEOLOGIAE: A CONCISE TRANSLATION**, edited by Timothy McDermott. *Eyre and Spottiswoode*, London, 1989. Pp. lviii + 651. £40.00.

Unless they are professional medievalists, people with an interest in the *Summa Theologiae* are in a bad way. If they read Latin, they can come to Aquinas at first hand. But they have an enormous amount of text to wade through and they may not want to do so. If they have no Latin (and assuming that they really do want to read the text in its entirety) they are dependent on the 60 volume Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae* or on the earlier edition published by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province in 1911 and recently reprinted, both of which have blemishes. The Blackfriars edition (to which McDermott's edition is linked) varies enormously in quality (some volumes provide excellent translations, some provide poor ones). The earlier edition is a reliable translation (analogous to the R.S.V. translation of the Bible); but it does not make for easy reading since its prose is a bit archaic and since its concern with literal accuracy often results in less than idiomatic English.

For reasons such as these one can welcome the present volume. If they are determined enough, those interested in Aquinas can find detailed published paraphrases of the *Summa Theologiae*. An example is the (sometimes disparaged, but in my view commendable) *A Tour of the Summa* by Paul J. Glenn (Herder, 1969; Tan Books, 1978). But they will not find anything trying to reproduce the sense, content and atmosphere of Aquinas's text as McDermott (successfully) tries to do. In less than 600 pages he provides an accurate synopsis of the *Summa Theologiae* written as a continuous document (i.e. no divisions into questions and articles). He also provides excellent introductions to sections of the volume together with a helpful index of quotations.

My main reservation with the volume is expressed in my above phrase 'accurate synopsis'. McDermott calls his text 'a concise translation'. In my view, there is no such animal. Either you translate a text word for word, or you do not. If you try to give the substance of a text, without actually translating, then you are providing a synopsis or a summary. Sometimes McDermott actually seems to be translating sections of the Aquinas text (e.g. in his rendition of the Five Ways). But for most of the time he is providing a synopsis or summary, albeit one which frequently passes on the language of Aquinas. His aim, he explains, is to 'try and say all that Thomas wanted to say, in his own words, but in a text condensed to about one sixth of its length ... to express the whole sense of Thomas's arguments in as few words as possible: those words being Thomas's own, readably but faithfully translated into modern English' (p. xiii). While wanting to register a quibble about 'in his own words', I think that McDermott has done just that. But I

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remain thoroughly puzzled by his calling the result 'a concise translation'.

Be that as it may, he has done an extremely good job of work and he has given readers a splendid means of acquainting themselves with the *Summa Theologiae* as a whole. Aquinas was a genius. He had more philosophical and theological profundity to offer in his average page than most of his successors manage to cram into an entire book. Maybe McDermott's text might help people to see this.

BRIAN DAVIES OP

**PAUL AND HIS CONVERTS** by Ernst Best. *T & T Clark*. 1988.  
Pp vii + 177. £11.95.

This book began life as the 1985 Sprunt Lectures in Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, delivered to an audience composed mostly of pastors. As a result the book is one that non-specialists may read with enjoyment. It is not another book about Pauline theology; though it is inevitable that aspects of this are sometimes discussed (e.g. the idea of imitation), they are strictly subordinated to the main purpose.

Any book that attempts to deduce the character of an ancient from his/her writings is taking risks. There is the risk of judging someone from another time and culture by our criteria, and the risk that what is observed tells more about the observer than about the object. There is also the difficulty of using a source for a purpose that goes against its grain. Professor Best's book is about the relationship of Paul to his converts, and inevitably therefore it becomes at times a book about the sort of human being Paul was. Does he avoid the risks? One must say that he does so remarkably well. As one of the most lively and learned New Testament scholars in these islands, he is much too old a hand to fall into the traps I have mentioned. He knows just how much he can legitimately deduce from texts that were written for purposes quite other than providing self-revelation whether as pastor or man, and he does not go beyond that.

Paul has, of course, often been heartily disliked not only on theological grounds but also on personal. The most striking recent example of this has been the section on Paul in Graham Shaw's *The Cost of Authority* (which at any rate gives the impression of dislike). Readers who conceded valid points to Shaw, but thought he showed a certain lack of proportion, tending to assume the worst of Paul's motives and character, will find a valuable corrective in Best. He does not judge, is never one-sided, always strives above all to understand, and yet is ruthlessly honest.

So, we see Paul exercising authority, being willing to receive as well as to give; we see him using parental *and* brotherly models for his ministry. He deals in one way with opponents (roughly), and in another with those he regards as his own flock (carefully and with love). We do not find him always living up to his own standards, nor always aware that sin may lie in the violence of his own reactions as much as in the activities of those whom he condemns. We see a credible human being.

For those who spend time studying Paul, but who are not at all sure they would have *liked* him, the good sense, careful scholarship, charity and balance of this book can only be welcome.

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