

Christianity from a Catholic perspective.

Dulles frames his exposition of Christian faith with chapters describing 'the present situation of faith' and 'the new world and the light of faith.' The book may therefore be seen as giving an account of how one may move, through faith, from modern scepticism and confusion to the vitality of faith. The two states are presented as radically different to the degree that he speaks of a 'new world', though this is in no way to discount the largely secular world about us. Rather, the difference empowers and obliges the believer to a commitment to the world in order to transform it. It would seem for Dulles that in order to expound Christian faith it is necessary not only to present its doctrines and their significance to the believer but also to emphasise the radical boldness of the Church's mission.

This thrust is evident in the emphases given by Dulles throughout. Out of twelve chapters of similar length, in addition to the chapters describing the present situation and the new world of faith, there are chapters dedicated to how we receive the faith and our mission to evangelise as well as chapters on moral and social teaching and on ecumenism. Those chapters dealing with the central doctrines of Christology, the Trinity, the communion of saints, redemption and eschatology balance the demands of presenting them in themselves and their more immediate relation to the life of faith.

Some of the chapters are excellent, such as those on the transmission of the faith, ecumenism and eschatology, where balanced and succinct accounts of the current state of these issues are given. Delicate subjects such as inter-communion, women priests or even modern approaches to biblical exegesis are discussed frankly, though always in measured tones. In addition, Dulles has managed with great success to give a comprehensive and straightforward account of the Christian faith in a short space. As a work for catechesis or general apologetics it can be readily recommended. Nevertheless, if there is a problem with the book it resides more in the specifically doctrinal sections.

Despite the author's avowal that he has tried to write the book as much as possible in his 'own name', the cost of clarity and equanimity has perhaps been a certain impersonality and prosaic style. However, given the number of works available, especially in the 'popular market', where a tendency to excessive authorial intervention may arguably be discerned, giving the reader too much of the author and too little of the content of faith, the many positive qualities of this book might count as precious virtues.

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RADICAL ORTHODOXY? — A CATHOLIC ENQUIRY edited by Laurence Paul Hemming, *Ashgate*, Aldershot, 2000. Pp 171, £47.50 hbk, £16.99 pbk.

This is a thought-provoking collection of essays, guaranteed to ensure that the debates concerning the merits or otherwise of this recent movement in (primarily Anglican) British theology will have much to fire them for the foreseeable future. The editor's introductory 'Radical
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Orthodoxy's Appeal to Catholic Scholarship', in contrast to his second contribution, gives the impression that he has difficulty in making his mind up — concerning both where he stands in relation to Radical Orthodoxy (he admits that, despite contributing to the original volume, the label sits uncomfortably with him, pp. 6, 76) and what his definitive evaluation of the movement, its ideas and their proponents actually is. The chapter fluctuates between laudatory praise and stringent criticism.

Hemming identifies various challenges that have been put to the project of Radical Orthodoxy. These include the shallowness of its ecclesiological aspects and the related rootlessness of a theology which lays claim to be the true postmodern heir to and interpreter of '*the tradition*' (my italics). Hemming touches upon questions central to any and all theology: authority, legitimation and hence relevance.

It would appear, to this reader, that Radical Orthodoxy's adherents believe that postmodernism permits them to fashion their own authority (authorisation), hence constructing their own legitimation and thus manufacturing and then proclaiming their own relevance. Hemming points out, rightly, that 'Christ is not a style' and argues (following John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*) that philosophy should be allowed a full and proper role in theological discourse, rather than being usurped or rejected, as much of the material from Radical Orthodoxy might have it. It is all the more a pity, then, that Hemming usurps his own critique by saying it is part of the genius of Radical Orthodoxy that it gives rise to the very questions which undermine its key ideas and methodology.

We may all be postmodernists now, but who would praise one for having the faults which give rise to one's own downfall? For example: if Radical Orthodoxy's appeal to Catholic doctrine has been largely un-self-referential, it has thereby exposed the need for self-reflexion in all thinking, including theology. (p 12). Would any philosopher credit Freddie Ayer with the ingenuity of promoting the principle of verification to such an extent that it became evident that the said principle does not meet its own criteria? Indeed, Hemming seeks to let Radical Orthodoxy 'off the hook' (or least allow a potential escape route) in the case of most of the criticisms raised in this essay.

Perhaps one clue as to where Hemming sits in relation to the movement lies in his own (rhetorical) 'style' and methodology. Much of what Hemming states here, impressive and stimulating though it may be in parts, is far too tentative and elliptical. The disputation never gets going — too often bold assertions are left standing, terms are left undefined and one feels cheated of a good argument. This is not to deny that much of what Hemming says in his critical voice is valid, to a point. What is significant is that those who identify themselves with Radical Orthodoxy display such tendencies, also, in many of their writings. One suspects this is a major reason for the tone of much criticism aimed at the movement. Often true dialogue and debate are stifled, indeed closure is the norm if one does not agree.

What, then, of the other contributions to the volume? David Burrell makes a heroic effort to produce a pertinent and relevant essay out of a title one suspects he was given: 'Radical Orthodoxy in a North American

Context.' Some might, in 1999, at least, have been tempted to follow this with a blank page. Burrell, however, sketches a portrait of the various 'audiences' within the United States, both academic and ecclesial, which Radical Orthodoxy might find. His essay is a very cleverly subtle methodological reminder to the Radical Orthodoxy project. Burrell, whilst seemingly offering praise to Radical Orthodoxy, states a methodological premise, building upon comparative and developmental theological precepts which he must have known to be anathema to the leading lights of Radical Orthodoxy: every attempt to 'teach theology' will involve a fresh discovery of one's tradition and with that a new face of the Christ who is our revelation. Again, is not that the reason why 'retrieving the tradition' must be endemic to the teaching of theology and can never be mere repetition or a vain restoration, but always discovering something new? (p26).

One suspects Burrell has his tongue firmly in cheek and is mocking the vanity of the Radical Orthodoxy project. Nowhere does Burrell appear more tongue in cheek or show his preference for what he believes should shape a 'fresh perspective' when he suggests a 'fruitful opening' existing in the 'fledgling field of comparative theology' (p 28). Burrell would not be blind to the fact that others have seen comparative theology as the precise antithesis to Radical Orthodoxy in shaping a theological method in the postmodern era. He is advocating an open and dialogical approach for theology today, whilst nonetheless learning the lessons of its dealings with modernity. Radical Orthodoxy offers no such hopeful and pluralistic dynamic.

Turning to the second part of the book, we are given John Milbank's 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', followed by Fergus Kerr's 'Catholic Response.' The pair provide an interesting exchange. Milbank is typically bombastic and provocative. He states that the movement is equally against assertions of pure reason and of pure faith, equally against denominational claims for a monopoly of salvation and against indifference to church order, equally against theology as an internal autistic idiolect, and against theology as an adaptation to unquestioned secular assumptions. (p 33).

What he does not tell us is where or when we might have found manifestations of such positions in anything like a 'pure form'. He pronounces, even, that Radical Orthodoxy is unique because it unmasks the fact that such extremes are 'in secret collusion' – both the pursuit of pure faith and pure reason and their attendant consequences are both aspects of the modernity which Radical Orthodoxy purports to challenge. Thus, Milbank contends, can Radical Orthodoxy be said to be moderate and extreme at one and the same time — a *via media* in the first instance and an 'extremism' refusing to be polarised as conservative or liberal in the second. There follows an amazing and brutal assault upon a series of 'straw men.' For example, it is 'unmasked' that Barth was really availing himself of the methodological tools of modern reason in the construction of his theology so often characterised as fideistic — but who ever said otherwise other than the blandest of textbooks? What would one expect from the author of *From Rousseau*

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to *Ritsch*? It is not clear to whom the 'rediscoveries' achieved by Radical Orthodoxy are meant to appear as 'new theology'. The essay is characteristic further of the neo-exclusivism which Radical Orthodoxy espouses. Strange, also, that the leader of a movement that claims to be influenced by MacKinnon should reject here two of the leading themes found in many of MacKinnon's works: the similarities between Kant's moral philosophy and the *via negativa* and the emphasis upon the tragic in theology.

Fergus Kerr's response to Milbank offers a lucid summary of Radical Orthodoxy's programme and is valuable in contextualising the central themes of the Radical Orthodoxy project in relation to the debates within Roman Catholic theology, most notably those concerning grace and nature and faith and reason — although he entices the reader before leaving the issues 'on the table' (thus letting Radical Orthodoxy off the hook) in both cases. One significant point, which might almost be taken for an aside, is that Kerr reminds the reader that Vatican II championed a 'long-forgotten theological pluralism' (p 57). Kerr feels there is a 'need for a hermeneutics of suspicion as well as of retrieval' (p 58).

Part three — 'Radical Orthodoxy's Retrieval of Theological Sites' — is a very good and stimulating debate and these two chapters hang together very well. Pickstock's 'Radical Orthodoxy and the Mediations of Time' is elegant at times and yet wistful in its rhetoric and elliptical (again) in content. Pickstock's substantive argument concerns how human knowing is related to the mind of God — divine 'knowing'. In essence her debate with Hemming's '*Quod Impossibile Est! Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy*' centres on the notion — as Pickstock phrases it — of 'Bumpkinhood'. Pickstock believes Aquinas's argument entails there is something closer to the divine way of 'knowing' in the way in which a 'country bumpkin' (*rusticus*) knows by 'seeing' things. Hemming counters that Aquinas means no such thing — God knows not simply as the *rusticus* does, but as the astronomer does, as well (hence Pickstock's privileging of the former manner blatantly misrepresents Aquinas). Hemming is closer, I think, to a correct interpretation of Aquinas' own understanding but both provide idiosyncratic interpretations whilst pretending otherwise and perhaps both are wide of the mark in their treatment of the '*rusticus*'. Only a bourgeois interpretation could produce such patronising accounts of the *rusticus*. Perhaps Aquinas was referring to the humility of the land dweller who labours manually. What Aquinas could be highlighting is an existential 'closeness' to being, because of the '*rusticus*' closeness to the land, the soil, the 'stuff' from which humanity came to be (humility's literal meaning — close to the earth — means one with nature, with existence itself). Hence our reason and will are both subordinated to God.

Nonetheless, this debate illustrates further key issues central to the Radical Orthodoxy debate. Hemming reiterates the oft-voiced criticism that Radical Orthodoxy is guilty of a serious ahistorical engagement with its beloved 'tradition'. He borders on accusing the movement of suffering from the 'Humpty Dumpty' syndrome (words mean whatever I want them to mean): Radical Orthodoxy constantly

seeks to install a linguistic immediacy where terms simply mean what they are declared to mean. Language thereby installs truth by assertion. (p 82). Hemming chastises Radical Orthodoxy for daring to presume it has 'surpassed philosophy'. He believes the postmodern era calls theology to a renewed engagement with philosophy to confront the abandonment of commitment to (a) God as guarantor of truth, rather than Radical Orthodoxy's uncritical and ahistorical re-assertion that truth is guaranteed by God because Aquinas said so.

Graham Ward's 'Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics' offers strange accounts both of the nature of belief and the notion of authority. His claim that Radical Orthodoxy can address current crises of legitimization, ontological foundationalism and representation — where '[c]redibility is being stretched towards incredulity', serves only to demonstrate that Radical Orthodoxy suffers from each of these difficulties in itself. Its claim to authority lacks legitimization, any coherent and consistent ontological foundations and suffers from a confused methodology which hinders the representation of its primary ideas. Incredulity, as many critics have testified, is the result. Surprisingly, Ward is aware of the many methodological pitfalls that Radical orthodoxy can fall into, but it appears his fellow-travellers in the movement are not so enlightened.

What Ward understands to be Radical Orthodoxy seems very different from the project as conceived by others, including Milbank and Pickstock. Both Oliver Davies (advocating 'dialogism') and Lucy Gardner (who identifies a litany of paradoxes, disharmonious voices and unanswered questions in the project) help reinforce such views in their responses to Ward. They are courteous but incredulous, nonetheless. James Harvey's brilliant conclusion, for its pertinence and insight should be required reading for anyone interested in the Radical Orthodoxy debate. His riposte to Radical Orthodoxy's notion of tradition is particularly incisive.

In brief, alas, Radical Orthodoxy seems to ignore any conception of a development of doctrine. 'The tradition'? There can only be a tradition or the tradition of x, y or z etc. Only an arrogant theology would argue otherwise. Radical Orthodoxy needs to address its many methodological foibles but perhaps it should start by giving due attention to that which some suggest is a methodological prerequisite, especially in disciplines such as theology and philosophy. It is found in (methodological) abundance in the works of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, so Radical Orthodoxy's adherents need not fear they are being diverted from their track. It is the single disposition which Radical Orthodoxy's scribes need to cultivate if they are not to go the way of so much scientific literature in the modern and postmodern periods, where overt self-sufficiency and assurance in one's own resources allowed a totally insular and closed outlook to develop. It is humility—those concerned with the religion of the incarnation in Christ cannot venture to utter any logos of its *Theos* without it.

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