

# Reviews

**IDEAS IN GOD ACCORDING TO SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS** (Studies in the History of Christian Thought 69) by Vivian Boland OP.  
*E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1996. Pp. xii + 353. US\$ 128.50*

There are many angles from which one could review this book. Those of the metaphysician or systematic theologian first come to mind: the questions of the structure of being and the relationship of God to the created order are the common concerns of both. And, for the theologian there is the added concern that the actual life of theology continually recalls themes from earlier thinkers such as Augustine, the Pseudo-Denis, and Thomas—all of whom figure centrally in this work—which affect theology today, and this book revisits topics such as the nature of the divine knowledge, the divine goodness, and theodicy, as expressed in the tradition. Yet another angle would be that of the exegesis of Thomas and his patristic sources. This approach might seem particularly appropriate given the book's subtitle: ('Sources and Synthesis') and lay-out: a survey (Part 1: Sources) of c.190 pages devoted to the notion of supra-mundane/divine ideas in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, followed by (Part 2: The Synthesis) a detailed examination (c. 210 pages) of the works of Aquinas observing how he absorbed that legacy as transformed into a Christian theme by Augustine, and other Christian writers. Another point in favour of this approach is that having examined the elements of various later Christian formulations of this theme, Dr Boland does not give us a history of the theme in Christian writers, but only deals with the topic in so far as it surfaced in the thought of Aquinas.

Other thinkers (e.g. Augustine) are discussed only as part of Thomas's past. Thus, for example, Johannes Scottus Eriugena who made the created-and-creating ideas in God (*rationes primordiales*) the Second Division of Nature, and who can thus be seen as the most important writer in this tradition in the West, is only mentioned in passing as a representative of the 'Dionysian Tradition' (pp. 143-46). Incidentally, note that the bibliography for this writer (p. 143, n. 283) does not mention M. Brennan, *A Guide to Eriugenian Studies: A Survey of Publications 1930-1987* (Fribourg/Paris 1989). However, none of these approaches can do justice to the crisp freshness with which Boland approaches the topic as an historian of ideas, hence it is from this perspective I believe we should view this book.

Boland's starting point has an elegant simplicity: whether one likes it or not, it is a fact that Christian writers have discussed this topic. He states openly his conviction that this was a topic which did not have to enter Christian discourse, but once having done so, then it began to have a new Christian life of its own, and so has to be studied by those who wish to understand Christian thought. Boland does not enter into the topic with an agenda of defending Christian Platonism or some notion of a *philosophia perennis*, nor with the intention of exposing an alien corruption that has infected Christian faith: the book begins with a 'fact,' seeks to adumbrate its origins and extent, and then study its consequences in one major thinker. This neutrality is to be welcomed as it gives us an account in which

one does not suspect special-pleading. 'At an indeterminate date, long before Augustine, the originally transcendent ideas of Plato were placed within a divine intelligence' (p. 315): this is his starting point. Later, Christians adopted this either because they thought it identical to Christian faith, or useful for Christian belief, or simply without thinking about it, and remodelled these notions to agree with other elements of their belief system. This also is a 'fact.' Once it was part of the thought-system of Christians it began to grow in precision and link itself to other aspects of Christian thought until it became a complex of related and developed concepts. As such, it influenced many thinkers, including Aquinas who is the focus of attention. This method of taking the phenomena and then seeking out their origins and implications without invoking a metaphysic or marshalling the arguments in favour of a metaphysic is that of the historian, and Boland is to be commended for it.

The poles of the research are (1) the origins of the notion of transcendent ideas in Greek thought; and (2) how they became a significant and wholly embedded part of the larger system of Aquinas. Just as in the first part Boland follows the development from Plato to Proclus watching these notions change their focus and fields of questioning; so likewise he follows arguments from their earliest appearance in Aquinas until the works of his mature years where they cease to be borrowings and become fully assimilated aspects of his own highly articulate view. The medium through which these notions were transmitted to him was the Christian tradition, and in each instance of their use in Aquinas we are shown in detail how the actual form of the influence in Thomas bears the marks of its transmission route. The way that the material was handled by Augustine (in *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII*, 46, for example, which Boland holds to have been central to the development of the theme in the West) affected how it arrived with Thomas and disposed him to use it in particular ways. Likewise, the transformation of the Platonic material by the pseudo-Denis to answer a different set of questions finds Aquinas reacting in a different way; and so on with the other writers upon which Thomas drew. These strands are then studied for how they interacted with one another to become his own vision as the various elements of the tradition were fashioned into a theology of the creation that reflects the Trinitarian life of God. Now, for Thomas the theologian, the 'ideas' in God become the meeting point between his theology of the Word and his doctrine of creation; while for Thomas as philosopher, the ideas become central to the relationship of cause to effect since they enable an ontology of participation. Yet for Thomas this existence 'here' is not simply some shadowy reflection, for other influences such as the 'solider Aristotle' were also at work. Boland shows Thomas transforming his whole inheritance and relocating it within a new systematic view. Elements that were mutually exclusive prior to his taking them up, for example 'Aristotelian' and 'Platonist' ontologies, are presented not as re-used isolated items but as the roots of a new Christian theology and ontology which gradually emerged in the course of Thomas's writing career.

By now you realise that Dr Boland is not neutral on the question of Thomas and his views, and probably that this reviewer is not neutral in either his liking for Thomas nor in his appreciation of this book; but does it not challenge my praise of this work as a work in the history of ideas

rather than one pleading a case? Historians must flee bias, but neutrality is too much to ask: one can only devote this amount of research to a topic with which one has a sympathy and a passion. Both are in evidence here: he reveals the nuances of Thomas with the greatest care, and moves the argument forward with a passion that affect the reader. When finished, one feels the satisfaction of having spent one's precious reading time well and as having gained a new insight into Thomas. We are thus in Dr Boland's debt.

So who is this book for? It will obviously be of interest to those who work on Thomas, and to the devoted band of scholars who keep the flame of Christian Neoplatonism alive. But it is also a work using one of the classic methods of the history of ideas, watching how an idea arises and evolves in a sequence of thinkers, each of whom re-use the tradition in a web of inter-textual relationships. This phenomenon of a change within a continuity of borrowing is well exemplified here. As such it deserves attention from scholars of the larger fields of medieval philosophy and theology. Certainly, no one in future will be able to study the issue of 'the Platonism of St Thomas' without reference to it. Incidentally, those who still refer to Thomas 'baptising Aristotle' (or anyone else for that matter) might like to know that this is probably the best antidote to such crudities available in English.

The work is doctoral research reworked as a monograph, and as such the quotations from Thomas are left in the original. This will limit the appeal of the book, as a whole, to students; however, I know of no work where the various strands of Greek non-Christian thought on the ideas as exemplars is so concisely and conveniently treated than in part 1 and teachers of undergraduates in classical philosophy will no doubt find this section, read on its own, of value for students. Lastly, in this area the ability of language to communicate precisely is pushed to the limit and often passages have to be read and reread to make sense. However, here the author has a fluency and skill of communication that are enviable. The book is clear, well-written, and only on the very odd occasion does one have to retrace the argument. The result is that a most difficult question in the history of Christian thought becomes accessible and the reader is delivered directly to the questions at issue rather than faced with another obstacle: the reading of the book!

THOMAS O'LOUGHLIN

**LOOKING AT THE LITURGY: A CRITICAL VIEW OF ITS CONTEMPORARY FORMS**, by Aidan Nichols OP, *Ignatius Press*, 1966. Pp. 126 £8.95

This work is based on a series of lectures given by the author to the Australian Confraternity of Catholic Clergy in 1995. In it Fr Nichols turns his attention to the history of the Liturgical Movement and its contribution to the reformed liturgy following the Second Vatican Council. He then offers an anthropological and sociological critique of modern liturgical theory and practice. He deals with issues relating to spontaneity, intelligibility of word and symbol in liturgical action, the active participation of the faithful in liturgical celebration, and the implicit Pelagianism of much modern, popular liturgical activity. A considerable portion of the third section, on the idiom of