



Reviews

PRAYING TO A FRENCH GOD: THE THEOLOGY OF JEAN-YVES LACOSTE
by Kenneth Jason Wardley, *Ashgate Publishing*, Farnham, 2014, pp. ix + 246,
£60.00, hbk

According to polls and statistics, Christianity is in terminal decline in Western Europe. Paradoxically, academic theology flourishes more creatively than it has done for centuries. The Church of England may be as enfeebled as the media portray but, with Rowan Williams, David Brown, John Milbank, Douglas Hedley, and N.T. Wright, to name a few, we have an array of authors each of whom has a major body of work to his credit. On the other side of the Channel, with the so-called theological turn in French phenomenology, there is something comparable: consider Michel Henry (died 2002), Jean-Luc Marion (now mostly at Chicago), and Jean-Louis Chrétien (perhaps the most significant, though little known in Britain). With these we may justifiably associate Jean-Yves Lacoste, the subject of Dr Wardley's book.

Based in Paris, Lacoste holds a life membership at Clare Hall, Cambridge. Born in 1953, educated at the *Ecole normale supérieure*, ordained priest in 1981, Lacoste is currently on the staff at St-Pierre-de-Chaillot in Paris. His best-known book, *Experience and the Absolute* (1994, English 2004), argues against the current prizing of 'religious experience', defending the view that God is knowable as lovable but does not give himself by way of experience or feeling, whatever some folks believe. He is editor of the 3-volume *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology* (Routledge 2005), generously ecumenical in authorship albeit configured by Lacoste's Catholic allegiances. *From Theology to Theological Thinking* has just appeared (University of Virginia Press 2014), hailed on the sleeve by Milbank for erasing the distinction between philosophy and theology. Joeri Schrijvers has provided a good introduction to Lacoste's work (Ashgate 2012), though the best starting point for new readers remains his essay 'Jean-Yves Lacoste: A Phenomenology of Liturgy' (*Heythrop Journal* July 2005).

Kenneth Jason Wardley was born in 1976. Afflicted by a malignant brain tumour, he completed his doctorate thesis, graduated at the University of Edinburgh last summer (supported by his wife Morven), turned the thesis into this book but (alas) died on 14 April 2014, days before advance copies became available. While he of course acknowledges the 'ambitious and pioneering work' of Schrijvers (a friend), this book, fronted by his own photograph of Lacoste's untenanted study, not only constitutes a worthy memorial to a fine young scholar, it may even prove the most accessible approach to Lacoste. (Wardley's very readable prose shows no trace of a certain tendency to the opaque favoured by Schrijvers).

Starting from Heidegger's notion of our 'being-in-the-world', Lacoste contends that liturgy is 'the most human mode in which we can exist in the world or on the earth' (chapter 1). Quoting John Webster, Wardley ascribes 'vigilance' to Lacoste, 'a spirituality of reticence' (chapter 2). Calling in Donald MacKinnon as well as Kierkegaard, Lacoste acknowledges a certain 'ambiguity' in our liturgical disposition *coram Deo* (chapter 3). Lacoste's admiration for the *Chronicles of Narnia* plays a decisive part in Wardley's exposition of the role of imagination in prayer (chapter 4). It is as an embodied self that the liturgical subject prays (chapter 5). In contrast to theologians who like to connect God with caring, loving

relationships, and so on, Lacoste highlights theology as ‘silenced’ in the face of the suffering of others (chapter 6). Of course praying ‘takes time’ (chapter 7). Finally, Lacoste’s work should be placed in the context of (Heidegger style) ‘meditative thinking’, displacing ‘ontotheological’ thinking, in line with exponents of *la nouvelle théologie* particularly Hans Urs von Balthasar (chapter 8).

Such a sketchy outline does little justice to this remarkable book. Given the extensive bibliography on which Wardley draws, and the complexity of the themes he explores, it would be easy to come up with a significantly different but equally informative summary. Obliquely but unmistakably, the book gives us Jason Wardley’s own vision of contemplative prayer in the Christian life. With the focus on liturgy, and against the background of his impressive knowledge of Continental philosophy, Wardley gets to the core of Lacoste’s thinking. Augustine is cited occasionally, Thomas Aquinas never (Lacoste: ‘I am personally too far from any kind of Thomism’). This does not mean, however, that Lacoste is out to undermine or replace classical Catholic theology. Rather, he brings theology, philosophy and liturgical prayer together in a way that has long been underplayed in Catholic institutions.

Wardley might have done something with Lacoste’s beautiful essay on *les anges musiciens* (1984); and perhaps made more of the essay on angels, hobbits and ‘possible worlds’ (1989). As it is, he records many of Lacoste’s provocative asides — as, for example, that, whatever influence Wittgenstein had on theology and *vice versa*, ‘no Cambridge theologian ever came into contact with him, either as a colleague or a student’. In sum, Jean-Yves Lacoste belongs in the line of great French scholars who have contributed so much to the renewal of Catholic theology, as Jason Wardley’s fine study shows.

FERGUS KERR OP

PERCEPTION, SENSIBILITY, AND MORAL MOTIVATION IN AUGUSTINE: A STOIC-PLATONIC SYNTHESIS by Sarah Catherine Byers, *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. xviii + 248, £60.00, hbk*

This admirably clear book will be of interest and value primarily both to scholars of Augustine, and scholars of the later history of thought on the relationship of grace to human freedom and moral decision-making. As the title suggests, it carefully explores how Augustine drew upon, synthesized, and developed largely Stoic and Platonic theories of perception and judgement. The book starts with Augustine’s famous account of his conversion at Milan in Book Eight of the *Confessions*, but ranges over a wide range of texts and makes good use of Augustine’s sermons to test proposed interpretations of specific terms. A picture emerges of Augustine’s initial and lasting debt to earlier philosophers, but also of three phases of development in Augustine’s thinking as he struggled to integrate his account of moral decision-making with his understanding of God’s omnipotent grace: between 394 and 400 (a period already much studied by others); between 411 and 421; and a third period from 426 onwards.

Chapter One introduces us to Stoic epistemology, and the notion that all human perception carries with it a linguistic dimension: even a first impression strikes us in at least one of several ways that have a specific linguistic form. Every impression we receive, even a false impression, includes the assertion that it is what we think it is, but there may be other types of ‘sayable’ thoughts as well: several sorts of question, imperatives, assertions, and exclamations (p. 9). It is then for the person who has received the impression to respond, to withhold