

Reviews

LANGUAGE, MEANING, AND GOD: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe, OP
edited by Brian Davies, OP. *Geoffrey Chapman*. London, 1987.

These varied and almost always challenging essays are a worthy tribute to the original and independent thinker in whose honour they have been collected. Of the thirteen, six might be classed as philosophical: 'Classical Theism and the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity' by Brian Davies, 'Distinguishing God from the World' by David Burrell, 'Feuerbach, Marx and Reductivism' by Denys Turner, 'Aquinas on Knowledge of Self' by Anthony Kenny, 'Taking away the Sin of the World' by Brian Wicker, and 'The Theory and Practice of Autobiography' by J. M. Cameron. Three are on theological topics: 'Charity as Friendship' by Fergus Kerr, 'Prayer, Humpty Dumpty, and Thomas Aquinas' by Simon Tugwell, and 'Some Seventeenth-Century Disagreements and Transubstantiation' by P.J. Fitzpatrick. Three are on scriptural topics: 'The Genre of the First Gospel' by Margaret Davies, 'The Coming of the Son of Man' by Timothy Radcliffe, and 'Faith, Objectivity, and Historical Falsifiability' by Hugo A. Meynell. One cuts across disciplinary lines: 'Prayer, Poetry and Politics' by Enda McDonagh.

Of the philosophical essays, Davies and Burrell both deal carefully and insightfully with the simplicity of God as inseparable in Aquinas both from the incomprehensibility of God (which makes it more of a negative than a positive attribute) and the pure subsistent act of existence as content of this essence (which removes any static connotations of the term). Turner distinguishes in an illuminating way between Feuerbach, who made the exaltation of man dependent on the rejection of God, and Marx, who insists that authentic socialism is built on a positive human self-consciousness, which does not need to pass first through the negation of religion. Some of the further implications he draws, however, in line with his obvious sympathy with Marx, remain enigmatic and unconvincing to this reader without further development.

Anthony Kenny expounds, then criticizes, what he considers St. Thomas' flawed arguments for how the human intellect knows itself. Although his technical discussion is often illuminating and does spot lacunae in Aquinas' arguments here and there, it seems to me that he makes the problem unnecessarily difficult. The only reason the human intellect has difficulty knowing singular individuals by itself is that this singularity is rooted in matter and a material agent cannot act directly on the intellect as spiritual. Hence our intellect by itself can know only the abstracted form of the material thing. But the human intellect can know directly whatever is immediately present to it in a spiritual mode. Hence it has no difficulty in directly knowing itself as actively thinking about material things (with the help of its senses), i.e. as active source of its own operations, as St. Thomas says, when actually engaged in these operations. Kenny gives me the impression of being so absorbed in the technical details of Aquinas' argumentation that he lets slip out of focus the large central fact that the human intellect is not just a faculty for dealing with abstract forms and the relations between them, but a faculty of being, *capex entis*, ordered toward the grasp of existential being, which is always necessarily singular. Thus it is a spiritual 'perceiver' (an expression of St. Thomas which baffles Kenny) of whatever is actually present to it in a spiritual mode, e.g. its own active singular self as spiritual agent.

Brian Wicker, in 'Taking away the Sin of the World,' invites us to a probing meditation on the intrinsic paradoxes of nuclear deterrence from a moral point of view. We must come to see 'the historical significance of where we are: that nuclear weapons have an obsolete

meaning—geared to the old system of beliefs about the winnability of war—but also an emergent meaning, which is sacramental rather than moral: they show up our world for what it really is—a world “structured by violence and fear” in such a way that it is *radically* unstable, because it is founded on a self-contradiction.’ Cameron’s fascinating essay on Autobiography sets this whole genre—implying the uniqueness of the self and its value and interest as such to others—in its context in the history of culture, as nourished, if not made possible, by the Christian esteem for the individual and its history, where alone the drama of redemption is played out.

Among the theological essays, Fergus Kerr shows how St. Thomas, after doing his commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics*, refocusses his whole discussion of the supernatural virtue of charity in the *Summa Theologiae* around the notion of friendship, drawn from Aristotle. This is a daring and original move, shifting the emphasis from man’s absorption in God as his good to friendship as a relation between equals—God has made us His equals in a sense by the elevation of sanctifying grace that makes us His adopted sons and daughters. This friendship relation is based on mutual love and esteem for the intrinsic goodness of each, which means not only that we let God be himself, but God lets us be ourselves. The author feels that later Christian theology and spirituality have left this rich vein in St. Thomas largely unexploited, which I think is true. Simon Tugwell shows well how Aquinas defends without apology the meaningfulness of petitionary prayer as the original and still basic form of prayer.

In the scriptural section, Margaret Davies insightfully compares Matthew’s Gospel with the contemporary literary genre of biographies of heroes, noting both the similarities and the differences. Timothy Radcliffe shows how Mark’s Gospel can be looked at as in part ‘a subversion of the apocalyptic imagination’, i.e., an indirect answer to the crisis produced by the failure of the apocalyptic predictions about the end of the world to come true. Hugo Meynell, in another example of his always refreshing, critical-minded common sense, insists that no sophisticated theories of literary genres or special ‘Gospel truth’ can get us off the hook of facing the challenge that either the Gospels contain substantial historical truth, which could be falsified, or else anything like traditional Christian faith cannot reasonably be maintained.

The final piece, by Enda McDonagh, on Prayer, Poetry and Politics, is a creative and stimulating exploration of the relations between these three basic forms of human activity in nourishing the critical technical work of the theologian. Prayer is the basic contact of man with God; poetry (and art in general) is concerned with giving adequate symbolic expression to the lived mysteries of man and his cosmos, and in the end ‘must self-transcend to the ultimate, or self-destruct’; and politics expresses our necessary concern, to be fully human and Christian, with the wider human community. The would-be theologian neglects any one of the three at his peril. A fitting conclusion to an unusually stimulating collection in honour of an unusually stimulating thinker.

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GOD IN HIMSELF: AQUINAS’ DOCTRINE OF GOD AS EXPOUNDED IN THE *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, by W.J. Hankey. Oxford University Press, 1987. Pp. x + 196. £20.

Since St. Thomas was the heir of a rich platonist tradition, a great deal of his thought remains untouched if he is read only in terms of Latin translations of Aristotle and his Greek and Islamic commentators. As Prof. Hankey intends, in his scholarly, reflected and courteous book, to survey the Neoplatonist element in Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 1–45, it is a work of importance.

The Neoplatonism which, above all, he wishes to exhibit in Thomas is that of Proclus’s *Elementatio Theologica* (cf. pp. 8–9, 25, 68, etc.). But this is scholarly wilfulness to the degree of indiscipline: the whole of the 1a pars of the *Summa* was written between