

*Dominicans*, (Notre Dame, IN, 1998) 127–138.

- 12 See above, at note 4.
- 13 See R.J. Long, “Utrum iurista vel theologus plus proficiat ad regimen ecclesie: A Quaestio disputata of Francis Caraccioli, Edition and Study,” *Mediaeval Studies* 30 (1968), 134–162.
- 14 Augustinus Triumphus: Utrum dignus magistrari in theologia teneatur scire ius canonicum. ... Differunt tamen <scientia iuris canonici et theologia> in modo considerandi quantum ad quinque. ... Quinto, quia a theologo determinantur magis universaliter et in foro conscientie in quo agitur causa inter hominem et Deum. A canonistis vero magis particulariter applicando ad particularia negocia in foro exterioris iudicii in quo agitur causa inter hominem et hominem. Et quia sermones universales in materia morali parum sunt utiles ut dicitur i. ethice; ideo puto quod provida ordinatio esset ut dignus magistrari in theologia post lecturam libri sententiarum teneretur legere librum decretorum quatinus magis tritus et expertus assumeretur in his que sunt necessaria ad consulendum saluti animarum fidelium. ed. R. J. Long, *ibid.*, Appendix 2, 160–162.

## Why Medievalists should talk to Theologians

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Philosophers regularly debate with their predecessors, historians of philosophy are often astonished at the results, yet the two seldom exchange notes. *The Bounds of Sense*, published in 1966 by Peter Strawson, is one of the best books by one of the finest Oxford philosophers of our day: an interpretation of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, the author allows in the second sentence of the preface that, ‘as any Kantian scholar who may read it will quickly detect, it is by no means a work of historical-philosophical scholarship’. In the other philosophical tradition, Martin Heidegger brought out a study of Kant in 1929 which immediately sold out: in his preface to the second edition (1950), he allowed that the ‘violence’ of his interpretation, deplored by Kantian scholars, could indeed be substantiated from the text, but fended off the criticism by claiming that ‘historical-philosophical research is always justified when it makes this objection against attempts that want to bring about a thoughtful conversation between thinkers’. He goes on: ‘In contrast to the methods of historical

philology, which has its own task, a thoughtful dialogue stands under different laws'. In short, students of the history of philosophy have a job to do; but they have no part in the conversation in which philosophical thought takes place. Heidegger, and even Strawson, clearly regard the work of historians of philosophy as less than vital for the advance of philosophy.

University students of philosophy, in whichever tradition, learn within their first few weeks to rehearse the objections to Cartesianism; it is not an objection that, historically, Descartes may never have been a Cartesian. Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche are a key text in the grand narrative which ascribes the constitution of the western metaphysical tradition from Plato onwards to the 'forgetfulness of being' — a story now taken for granted in many university disciplines where postmodernism reigns, despite what, to practitioners of 'historical philology', would look (putting it mildly) like wild and groundless assertion.

No doubt, in many other disciplines, those who study the past history of a subject and those who want to push the subject forward are inclined to keep their distance from each other. In literary studies, for example, it would not be difficult to find books that interpret a text *contextually*, bringing to bear a whole lot of information about the cultural assumptions of the time, the author's biography, etc., and, on the other hand, books that interpret the same text by reacting as concentratedly as possible to the words on the page. Think of studies of Shakespeare, for example, that read the plays in the light of events of the day, the lay-out and architecture of the Elizabethan theatre, the cost of writing and employing actors, etc., and others (G. Wilson Knight, M. Bradbury) that focus on the imagery, metaphors, etc.

Turning to Christian theology, we can easily see the same lack of communication between scholars engaged in reconstructing what an ancient thinker thought and modern theologians who develop their constructions on the basis of a certain interpretation of that thought which the historians might regard as disputable and even obsolete — if they knew anything about what the theologians were doing.

Consider a couple of instances<sup>2</sup>. The principal argument in *Post-Secular Philosophy*<sup>3</sup>, an important recent collection of essays, contends that the post-modernist unmasking of the modern man of rationalist humanism need not yield to the 'playful' nihilism that comes from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida; rather, it is time to tell the old old story, in all its premodernity, about our being the gift of a transcendent source which grants all reality as truth, goodness and beauty. Theologians, excited by post-Nietzschean philosophy, are testing whether the deistic secularism of the Enlightenment can be swept out, without surrendering the house to the irrationalities either of

obscurantist fundamentalism or of sceptical relativism. The collection opens with a study of Descartes by Jean-Luc Marion, one of the leading Catholic theologians at present. He presents Descartes as the thinker who brought God into philosophy under the metaphysical name of *causa sui* : the inventor, in effect, of deism. Marion, in fact, is a theologian who is also an established scholar in early modern philosophy. The critical turn, however, Phillip Blond argues, was when theology surrendered to secular reason's account of nature — perhaps not so much in France, with Descartes, but 'in England, between the time of Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus'. The fateful innovation was that there could be an 'ontology without God' *prior to theology* — a 'simple elevation of an ontic understanding of Being over God as in Scotus'.

Long before Descartes, then, theology began to go wrong. With his doctrine of the univocity of the concept of being (God exists exactly as we creatures do, only more so), Scotus reduces God to the supreme entity among all the others.

Worse still, since this God differs from us only in intensity of being, theology soon falls prey to the Ockhamist doctrine that sees the moral law as the arbitrary exercise of divine power. The sound Thomist synthesis of reason and faith is thus sidelined in favour of the moral authoritarianism that has blighted the lives of generations of devout Catholics (Jansenism etc.).

Catherine Pickstock's brilliant book<sup>4</sup> also depends a good deal on a certain anti-Scotism. Her thesis is that language is primarily doxology, praise of the divine; and that eucharistic transubstantiation is the transcendental condition of all meaning on this earth. She argues that the philosopher-lover's praise of the beautiful, as Plato prescribes it, prefigures the praise of God in the medieval Roman Mass. Before defending that remarkable thesis, however, she has a transitional section where this doxological understanding and practice of the liturgy is shown to have been subverted from within, in particular by the theology of (surprise, surprise!) Duns Scotus. She plays his belief in the need for a 'form of corporeity' to dispose the body for a higher form (the soul) against Aquinas's thesis that, though the consecration of the bread and wine does not have as its term Christ's soul, his soul is included by 'real concomitance' — something that Scotus could not say. There is much else in Scotus's doctrine of the eucharist, Pickstock argues; but the main point is that, with his refusal of Aquinas's thesis that we do not have separate vegetative, sensitive and intellective souls, Scotus could — indeed had to — contemplate the presence, in the consecrated bread, of Christ's body *without his soul*. For Scotus, 'in the eucharist, Christ's soul is invoked as only partially present'. Again: 'the Body is more intensely present than the soul in the sacrament' — and here Pickstock

cites Gilson's *Jean Duns Scot*. Since the soul is not naturally present with the body, Christ's body, in the eucharistic change, 'is here effectively presented in the manner of a corpse'.

Much of Pickstock's story is familiar: 'the Scotist paradox whereby a univocally proximal God is also the most distant God is echoed in the way in which, for much late medieval piety, the increasingly extra-ecclesial directness of the relation of the individual to God only confronts the individual with an inscrutable deity who looks upon him with a juridical gaze akin to that of the post-feudal sovereign or the now more disciplinarily-defined clergy'. More dramatically, however, Pickstock contends that 'the loss of emphasis on resurrection and teleology [in the late Middle Ages] in favour of often morbid preoccupation with Christ's death' — 'the notion that the effective Christ is essentially the dead Christ' — should be seen as 'cognate with Scotus' reduction of Christ's eucharistic body to a "dead body"'.

Fine — but is the cult of the dead Christ in late medieval piety to be traced, as Pickstock suggests, to Scotus's theology of transubstantiation? Certainly, as Gilson notes, Scotus could have followed Aquinas among others, and developed a theory that 'accorded with the dogma' — suggesting that he regards Scotus's theory as less than properly Catholic. Most theologians at the time could not see how Christ's body would be one and the same before and after his death unless there was a *forma corporeitatis*, distinct from the soul and remaining one and the same throughout. Gilson quotes Scotus, in the *Opus Oxoniense* : at the consecration, the bread is changed into 'a *compositum* of matter and intellectual soul, though not as intellectual, nor as constituting the *compositum* "man", but as giving corporeal *esse* and constituting this *compositum* which is the body'. In other words, according to the plurality thesis, the hierarchical form of the intellectual soul contains all the other forms, vegetative, sensitive, etc., virtually, in such a way that it can in principle give *esse corporeum* without giving *esse intellectivum*. And, as Gilson says, Scotus brings up the notion of *forma corporeitatis* in connection with transubstantiation. Plainly, Gilson (as a good Thomist) regards it as philosophically incoherent and theologically unsound; but Pickstock takes it to its logical conclusion: if the soul of the risen Christ is indeed present in the eucharistic species, this (for Scotus) would be 'no more than an arbitrary decision on God's part', rather than a matter of natural concomitance, as Aquinas thought. Scotus, with the logical possibility that Christ's body might be present without his soul in the consecrated host, would thus have opened up a line of thought that leads to the 'morbid ethics' of Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida: Heidegger's 'necrophiliac urge', in his philosophy of 'being-towards-death', would just be 'a cover for an all too modern necrophobic desire to get to death before it gets to you'.

Perhaps. Yet, in this respect at least, Scotus was, like nearly everyone else, just unwilling to accept Aquinas's innovative theory. In general, given that the critical edition is still incomplete, that his writings were left in a confusing state at his early death, and that his ideas were worked out very much in interaction with his contemporaries, especially Henry of Ghent, and are not always intelligible on their own, perhaps rather too much is pegged to a certain view of 'Scotism'. There is, as the Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck noted in his long and valuable review of Gilson's book (*Review of Metaphysics*, March 1954), 'no figure in the history of Western thought, except possibly Ockham, whose views are so consistently misrepresented'. That perhaps overstates the case; yet, after all, his greatest disciple, Maurice O'Fithealaigh (1460-1513), was not even sure whether Scotus rejected analogy at all! If he did, he may have meant that there was no analogy in things but only in concepts, which would not distance him much from some modern Thomists — those who (unlike Pickstock) ignore the neo-Platonically derived metaphysics of participation.

The second part of Pickstock's book deals, in fascinating detail, with the pre-Vatican II Roman Mass (see 'A Short Essay on the Reform of the Liturgy', *New Blackfriars*, February 1997). Briefly, the unreformed Mass, with its apparently random accretions, uneconomic repetitions, abrupt lapses into silence, etc., far from being a decadent complication of a liturgical simplicity to which we needed to return, actually permitted the 'apophatic reserve' and 'ceaseless recommencements' the worshipper needs. Instead of being a muddle requiring to be streamlined to facilitate congregational participation (etc.), the Rite, 'riven with supplementations and deferrals', was a 'liturgical stammer', developed over centuries to betoken both distance from and proximity to God. The problem with the scholars charged with reforming the liturgy after Vatican II, however, was that they were not marked by 'the work of de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, and the influence of the restored Thomism of Etienne Gilson'. In effect, Pickstock is suggesting, what she (as an Anglican) regards as the misconceived rationalism of post-Vatican II liturgical reform was largely due to the failure of the reformers to pay attention to the results of medieval scholarship.

Both Phillip Blond and Catherine Pickstock handsomely acknowledge their debt to John Milbank, whose *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (see *New Blackfriars* June 1992) opened the space for these exciting new departures in English theology. *The Word Made Strange* [4] collects a dozen of his essays: beyond the sterile alternatives of deistic liberalism and antiphilosophical fundamentalism, he offers richly documented and brilliantly argued theology at an uncommonly demanding intellectual level. Once again,

however, the figure of Duns Scotus haunts the argument. For example, Aquinas's 'discourse of participated perfections' is expounded in contrast with Scotus, 'who makes perfection language belong to a pre-theological discourse concerned with "common being" indifferent to finite and infinite'. Heidegger's reading of the entire philosophical tradition as onto-theological in character often depends, as Milbank rightly says, on 'reading it through neo-scholastic spectacles'; but it 'seems at the least unclear as to whether this accurately describes Platonism, neoplatonism and Christian theology before Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus'. The problem with Jean-Luc Marion's theology is that, though he sees Scotus's 'idolization of God as univocal *ens*', he is himself trapped in 'lingering "Scotism"'. This is not surprising, given his acceptance of the Heideggerian story about the 'forgetfulness of being' in western philosophy: Heidegger's alternative of a non-theological and non-metaphysical *Seinsdenken* develops from the Scotist thesis of the univocity of being. Indeed, the post-Vatican II acceptance of 'pluralism' in the philosophy available to theologians, to the extent that they accept the priority of the 'question of being', 'is in itself a triumph of Scotism over Thomism'. Allowing that there have been attempts, following von Balthasar, to edge away from this, Milbank contends that, in Karl Rahner and many other Catholic theologians these days, 'human thought is allowed a pre-theological autonomy, and a pre-theological, Scotist-Heideggerian apprehension of a sheerly categorical *esse*'. Finally, in this Scotist *sottisier*, dispersed throughout his book, Milbank refers us to Gilson's *Jean Duns Scot*, claiming that it was Scotus's 'dissociation of the act of creation *ad extra* from the generation *ad intra*, and of the divine ideas from the filial *ars*, which really sealed the displacing of the Trinity from the centre of Christian dogmatics'.

These are exciting claims, by modern theological standards: what if medievalists fail to recognize this picture of Scotus? What if another school of modern theologians have a totally different story, in which Scotus appears not as adversary but as hero? According to T.F. Torrance, the Reformed theologian, the misbegotten neoThomist practice of splitting the treatises *de Deo uno* and *de Deo trino*, and thus of displacing the doctrine of the Trinity, to pick up Milbank's last claim, originates in Aquinas's decision to endorse Boethius's conception of person as rational individual, rather than the relational concept developed by Richard of St Victor and Scotus. The Boethian-Thomist view reappears, Torrance thinks, in Descartes and thus, ironically, becomes the disastrous picture of the autonomous individual with which our culture need never have been afflicted if we had paid heed, in this respect at least, to the Victorine-Scotist conception. Richard of St Victor, according to Torrance<sup>6</sup>, developed a concept of the person in opposition to the Boethian notion, out of the doctrine of the Trinity

(from Christian doctrine, then, and not from ancient philosophy). This conception was further developed by Scotus, and taken over by John Calvin, the result of which was to start modern theology on the right lines, 'in which the human subject is given an integral place in the knowledge of God as he is drawn into immediate relation with Him and is opened up within his personal being for communion with God in the Spirit'. In short, with the Reformation, the Victorine-Scotist-Calvinist line had the effect of 'restoring theological knowledge to the field of direct intuitive knowledge of God in His Word and Spirit and of giving it an essentially dialogical character instead of the merely dialectical character it had been given' (in neoThomism).

Other examples could easily be found, outside English-speaking theology. It is striking that Duns Scotus should figure in such a contrasting light in two such totally different theological 'programmes': Anglo-Catholic postmodernist neo-orthodoxy (with Milbank, Pickstock and others) and Scottish neoBarthianism (with Torrance), each no doubt adversarial and eccentric in its own terrain, yet each far more challenging intellectually than mainstream theology in either tradition. Perhaps modern theologians may treat medieval theologians in as cavalier (or creative) a style as Strawson and Heidegger treat Kant. Many Catholic theologians, particularly in the Thomist tradition, owe a great deal to the work of Etienne Gilson: the first to say he was not himself a theologian, for all his immense influence on theology; but certainly a historian of philosophy who was also a philosopher of great distinction. The historical reconstructions of medieval thought that he published are no doubt as open to revision as his insistence on realism in philosophy is still worthy of discussion. It will never be easy to combine historical scholarship with speculative argument, as Gilson did, of course usually on separate occasions. It would be a pity, on the other hand, if theologians and medievalists did not occasionally compare notes about the results of their respective inquiries: the use that theologians make of a medieval text might surprise a medievalist into asking productive new questions; the conclusions of ongoing medieval research might cast fresh light on the work of the constructive theologian.

- 1 Successor to Richard Fishacre OP as Regent in the Oxford Studium.
- 2 Here I am recycling reviews in this journal, July/August 1998, pp. 352-358.
- 3 *POST-SECULAR PHILOSOPHY: Between philosophy and theology* edited by Phillip Blond, Routledge, London, 1997.
- 4 *AFTER WRITING; ON THE LITURGICAL CONSUMMATION OF PHILOSOPHY* by Catherine Pickstock, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998.
- 5 *THE WORD MADE STRANGE: THEOLOGY, LANGUAGE, CULTURE* by John Milbank, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997.
- 6 *THEOLOGICAL SCIENCE* by Thomas F. Torrance, Oxford University Press, London 1969.