

## Reviews

### **REASON, TRUTH AND THEOLOGY IN PRAGMATIST PERSPECTIVE by Paul D. Murray (Peeters: Leuven, 2004). Pp. xiv + 270, €35 pbk.**

The author teaches systematic theology at Durham University, where he is, among other things, engaged in facilitating Catholic Studies. The product of doctoral research at the University of Cambridge, more than ten years ago, this book brings American pragmatist philosophy together with issues in theology which become more overtly Catholic as the argument unfolds, all in the context of challenges in recent thought to so-called foundationalism. Questions of truth, reason, decision making and discernment, and so on, come up and are dealt with in the Church at the level of practice, and not just of theory – which is no surprise to anyone familiar with the pragmatist tradition in philosophy.

Dr Murray brings three thinkers into conversation. First up is Richard Rorty, who died last year at the age of 75, the only American philosopher known to the wider public, at least to readers of his essays in *The London Review of Books* and such like. According to Murray, Rorty was not the thoroughgoing relativistic non-realist that his image would suggest. On the contrary, lying behind his doctrine that what is true is what is deemed so by those best qualified to judge, there is a constructive concern to recall the constraints and conditions of finite human existence in order to block off scepticism about all knowledge. However, Rorty fails to do justice to the possibility (to say no more) that our language is fitted to the articulation of reality.

Interestingly, Rorty had a background in Christian theology. Though he died long before he was born, his grandfather was the famous Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, the principal exponent of ‘Social Gospel’ Christianity in North America.

As a complement or (rather) a corrective, Murray directs us to the work of Nicholas Rescher, much less well known outside professional circles. Born in Germany in 1928 Rescher was brought to the USA when he was nine. Rescher defends a view of truth not unlike that of British idealists such as F.H. Bradley and the American Josiah Royce: truth is what comes out of the most inclusive and harmonious understanding that we can have of the world. Rescher’s explorations in the area of philosophical theology, so Murray judges, are in the end constrained by an ‘insufficiently Trinitarian understanding’. Indeed, Rescher has ‘deistic inclinations’. This does not rule out theological appropriation of his philosophical work. On the contrary, he provides an account of the ‘dynamics of human rationality’, which, according to Murray, reflects – analogously – the ‘Trinitarian dynamics of the being of God’. Rescher’s ‘pragmatic idealism’ allows for a ‘richly Trinitarian appropriation’, with ‘ecclesial implications’, which Murray indicates sketchily.

Nicholas Rescher contributed to our issue on ‘Thomism and the Future of Catholic Philosophy’ (*New Blackfriars*, April 1999), which Murray seems not to have noticed, though he lists the follow-up essay in *Philosophy and Theology* a year later: ‘God’s Place in Philosophy (*Non in philosophia recurrere est ad Deum*)’. Rescher noted how illuminating he found the contrast between Thomas’s emphasis on the power of reason and the seemingly contrary emphasis of Nicholas of Cusa – ‘my great namesake’ – on the inherent limitation of the human mind: ‘it must surely be counted as one of the most remarkable tokens of the power of reason that it is able to recognize and clarify its own limitations and to elucidate their source and nature’.

However, like most philosophers who are Catholics in private life (so to speak), Rescher is no great shakes theologically.

It is not very clear that Donald MacKinnon (1913-94), the third figure whom Murray brings on stage, would have relished hearing his writings hailed as 'exemplifying a pragmatic-idealist approach to theology'. He frequently inveighed against all forms of philosophical idealism, deploring its deleterious effects, as he judged them, in much contemporary theology. Interestingly, though the name of Michael Dummett occurs early in the book, Murray has no occasion to mention it in the chapter on MacKinnon, notwithstanding that MacKinnon often cited Dummett's work on realism and anti-realism when he wanted to reaffirm his own commitment to full blooded realism.

MacKinnon, however, as readers of *A Study in Ethical Theory* (1957) would know, the product of his lectures at Aberdeen, constantly related moral philosophy to epistemology. In this sense, as Murray rightly insists, MacKinnon treated the cognitive and practical dimensions of human rationality together and may be said, then, to have combined 'a sustained attempt to think through the tensions between empiricist realism and idealist constructivism with a concern to bring ethical questions arising from the practical-political dimensions of human life to the fore in any treatment of truth and knowledge' (p. 165).

MacKinnon's work as a philosopher, as Murray now demonstrates, cannot be separated from the Christological focus that influences it throughout. The truth claims regarding the reality of the historical individual Jesus of Nazareth, including the resurrection, are not to be watered down and wished away in rhetoric about inspiring symbols. Far from fitting theology into philosophy, MacKinnon's metaphysical realism begins to seem embedded in the contingent details of Jesus's life and death.

While Murray is well aware of the problems associated with MacKinnon's assumptions about Kant and Barth he does not extend his discussion into any very radical critique. In the end, MacKinnon's 'practice of Christian theology in pragmatic-idealist perspective' offers an example of theological rationality from which Catholic theologians in particular have much to learn. As far as taking the project forward, Murray points in the concluding sentence of the book to the title of a recent book by Nicholas M. Healy: *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*. It's the subtitle that he likes.

Fertile suggestions abound throughout this fascinating book. For example, what might seem an unlikely parallel between MacKinnon's procedures and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist readings of texts leads down to a footnote in which Murray insists that 'contrary to the interpretation that has frequently been placed on them, Derrida's writings can be read as aiming more at the liberation of truth through radical critique of all proffered notions than its dissolution into linguistic free-play' (p. 174). MacKinnon articulated the same 'sense of dialectical tension' in his 'counterpointal studies of the respective strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism and ethical intuitionism'. Here, as in a score of similarly diverting sallies, Murray makes you think – even if you are not always entirely persuaded. The book is a pleasure to read.

FERGUS KERR OP

**ECUMENISM & PHILOSOPHY: PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS FOR A RENEWAL OF DIALOGUE** by Charles Morerod OP (*Ave Maria University Press: Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2006*). Pp. xxiii + 199, £13.95 pbk.

Fr Morerod has made a refreshing and fruitful contribution to ecumenical theology. Perceiving the history of ecumenical dialogue since Vatican II as having fallen