

## Reviews

**SCRIBE OF THE KINGDOM. ESSAYS ON THEOLOGY AND CULTURE**  
by Aidan Nichols OP; 2 vols. *Sheed and Ward*, London 1994. £24.95  
each vol.

The variety is extraordinary, and very inviting: Eliot to Boff, R.H. Benson to Scheeben: the Celtic church and the Russian church; liberation theology, sacred art, and, not surprisingly, von Balthasar. These essays are vivid and clear, never boring and never dryly academic, though there is a great range of learning behind them. But, for all the variety, there is a very definite thesis here, set out at the beginning in the piece on 'Intelligent Conservatism as an Ecclesial Stance'. This is more than simply a matter of reflective fidelity to tradition informed by contemporary culture; Fr Nichols assumes that no-one who calls themselves a Catholic at all would really diverge from this. The full sense of the term is spelled out in the acknowledgement that the Church's assured teaching has an epistemological priority over the deliverances of other sources of knowledge, and in the nuanced awareness that the tradition of the Church is articulated in several media or styles, in art as in philosophy, so that theological renewal or *ressourcement* has to be a *cultural* enterprise in the widest sense.

These basic points are amply illustrated in what follows. The long and valuable paper summarising Dreyfus's proposals on hermeneutics makes much of the epistemological role of tradition and worship in sifting the work of the academic professional in Scripture studies. The several essays on aspects of the Eastern Christian world recall that we have some 'worked examples' of a more integral approach to theology and culture. Even the brief discussion of Robert Hugh Benson's fantasy, *The Lord of the World*, is effectively a plea for the imagination to work on the matter of doctrinal commitments. Lonergan is found a little wanting, Kasper is in the end quite warmly approved, and Balthasar remains paradigmatic in the light of the overall vision of theological method assumed. Thomas, though represented by a lucid little account of his teaching on the passion of Christ, is not as much in evidence as one might expect. And, if there is a philosophical presence to be identified looming over the whole collection, the most plausible name is that of Schelling. For the sensibility revealed here is (as Fr Nichols acknowledges more than once) quite close to that of the nineteenth century Catholic thinkers of Tübingen, with their generally organicist understanding of church and tradition, and their commitment to historical revelation as testifying to the temporally unfolded liberty of God, who reveals himself not in the timeless conclusions of reasoning, but in the

specifics of an historical world. This perspective is certainly indebted to Schelling, as is that of some of the Russian thinkers Fr Nichols touches on (Bulgakov above all); and, in its inclination towards the aesthetic, its evocation of mystery beyond intellectual schematizing, and its consequent high valuation of the givenness of historically posited authority, it anticipates Balthasar at least as much as Kasper.

Would it be right to call such a theological sensibility 'romantic'? Not, obviously, in any sense that suggested an individualistic tendency, or even an exaltation of feeling as such; but perhaps in relation to the recurring impulse to *argue* from or through impressionistic and evocative patterns (look, for example, at what is said about sexuality on p. 79 of vol.II, or the slightly eyebrow-raising passages on the Habsburg monarchy scattered here and there). Nothing wrong with this as such; but it may leave some readers with an uneasy feeling that rather a lot of epistemological corners are being cut. The sensibility I have been describing is rich and resourceful; but it doesn't lend itself easily to a genuinely *public* process of conversation and contestation. I do *not* mean submission to reputedly timeless standards of rational discourse; only the sense of venture, risk, even vulnerability that belongs to a human discourse for which *seeing* is not necessarily the paradigm for all 'real' knowing. Talking about mystery can be an invitation to further converse or a proscription of certain sorts of converse or both. I am not always sure how Fr Nichols is using it in this regard.

An example.His admirable piece on Dreyfus includes an approving summary of what P.Dreyfus says about the actualisation of types, the re-reading of a narrative so as to bring it into an analogical relation with a contemporary situation or problematic (I, pp. 42ff.). And we are told that it 'is generally agreed' that Scripture contains instances of just this process—the Deuteronomist reworking older themes from the Pentateuchal deposits of tradition, the Chronicler reworking the Deuteronomist. Excellent: this is a splendid account of how to embark on a biblical theology that is neither fragmentary and rationalistic nor woodenly fundamentalist. But there are two unspoken problems. The reworking itself contains, shallowly buried at best, elements of sometimes sharp conflict, and this has to be faced and included, with the implications that carries for the Church's reading now. And, more awkwardly, such a reading of scripture, in terms of redactional processes constantly turning over their own heritage, takes for granted a whole range of conclusions about the Bible largely unfamiliar to pre-twentieth century readers, and frequently opposed in the strongest terms by ecclesiastical authority of an earlier day. We shouldn't forget *too* quickly what the Pontifical Biblical Commission said in the first half of this century about the composition of the Pentateuch or the unity of the text of Isaiah. Granted that, can the issue of, say, the perpetual virginity of Our Lady be settled quite as briskly as proposed on p. 73? The Church teaches with certainty the perpetual virginity of Mary, and this provides a firm perspective in which to read material in scripture that appears to be

capable of another interpretation. The example is a difficult one: I'd actually be prepared to accept the principle in the case of something where dogmatic substance seemed to be at stake and where the conclusions of disinterested textual study were genuinely open—the empty tomb is the obvious instance. But when the Church commits itself in its public utterances to conclusions about matters of fact whose dogmatic substance is unclear, I'm far from sure that this is legitimate. Now is the perpetual virginity of Mary like the unity of Isaiah or like the empty tomb? More like the former than the latter, I think, though the case could be argued. And if so, isn't this unhappily close to simply denying the proper integrity of intellectual disciplines? We are not talking of the general epistemological priority of revelation here, but of theology—or rather the decision-making processes of the ecclesiastical institution—offending against what I believe some might call a principle of subsidiarity in the intellectual realm. Dreyfus and Nichols ought, I believe, to be more haunted than they are by the ghosts of the pre-1950 PBC.

In short, I am not wholly happy with the short-cuts and premature resolutions that may be present in a full-bloodedly aesthetic theology with its affinities so firmly in Schelling's camp. But of course I am writing as someone who owns at least in part to a Reformed theological legacy in which impressionistic *vision* is expected at times to yield to the *hearing* of something potentially disruptive. I want to summon both Hegel and Barth (not such a bizarre coupling as all that) to challenge Schelling. And I think also of an essay of 1914 by the Anglican J.N. Figgis on 'Modernism versus Modernity', in which, in effect, Figgis concludes that what Fr Nichols calls intelligent conservatism can only be made and kept *intelligent* by the presence of elements in the theological and ecclesial conversation that have a different colouring. To deny the legitimacy of that presence (which has been tried often enough) dooms the traditionalist to defensiveness and repetition. Now these are not characteristics of Fr Nichols' writing; and that they are not is due in part, I guess, to his own appropriations of methods and conclusions that are not always so smoothly incorporated into the synthesis of the intelligently conservative consciousness as he or we might like.

It is a major strength of this collection that it poses questions of such large methodological import; it would be a grave mistake to read these books as a bundle of jottings. I have argued that they represent a variety of ways into a coherent and profoundly attractive position; and I wouldn't be arguing with it like this if I didn't in considerable measure share Fr Nichols's interests and concern for a proper and creative fidelity to the dogmatic and liturgical past through which God has blessed the Church. But the overall perspective is one in which I miss certain significant notes of struggle (not just plurality) and of the laboriousness of being truthful in the Church. That can and should be said even while expressing, as I gladly do, gratitude for the broad sympathies and searching insights so often displayed in these pages.

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