

Reviews

GRACE AND REASON, A Study in the Theology of Luther, by B. A. Gerrish; Clarendon Press; 30s. od.

Mr Gerrish's learned study on a central theme of Luther's theology, that of grace and reason, is an excellent work, well documented, convincing and lucid, which deserves the widest circulation. Since detailed theological studies on Luther are comparatively rare in English, this work is a real contribution to ecumenical discussion.

For Catholics the work is particularly useful. Many of our arguments against Protestantism are aimed at what are believed to be Lutheran principles. A detailed study of Luther's thought however, reveals that his positions are really more subtle and hence are not always reached by our arguments. A parallel discovery will be made by Protestant readers of the book, since Mr Gerrish, contrasting Luther's and St Thomas's position on justification, gives a good introduction, not only to the nominalist teaching opposed by Luther, but to the classical Catholic doctrine as well.

Luther's denigration of reason as the devil's whore is notorious, yet the author shows that this does not make Luther an irrationalist. Luther speaks of reason in a three-fold context: reason attempting to understand and control the things of this world, and here it is competent and useful; reason encroaching upon things divine, ready to judge the word of God, and here it is an instrument of the devil; and reason regenerated by faith, seeking a deeper understanding of the divine wisdom, and here reason is holy. When Luther condemns reason with the vehemence proper to him, he refers to the second context in which reason sets itself up as an arbiter of things divine.

Luther's hostility to reason, however, is not due to a purely epistemological concern. Luther thinks of one area in particular in which reason acts as the enemy of what he believes to be the core of the gospel; man's justification by faith. Reason constructs the image of a just God who accepts the good and rejects the wicked, while the whole point of the gospel is that God has loved those who hate him.

Throughout the first part of the book the informed Catholic reader will be almost unable to detect where the doctrine of Luther differs from the tradition of Augustine, St Thomas and the Council of Trent. Only towards the end does it become clear that Luther identifies what we usually call justification and sanctification. For the Church the unmerited justification by faith is the starting point of a transformation in Christ, in which man is to be creatively and salvationally involved. This is a most significant theological area for Catholics, since our own classical doctrine on justification by faith and the primacy of God's initiative is not what usually inspires our preaching.

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