

to explore, but Anderson provides a beginning and much to help us along the way.

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AN AVANT-GARDE THEOLOGICAL GENERATION: THE NOUVELLE THEOLOGIE AND THE FRENCH CRISIS OF MODERNITY by Jon Kirwan, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018, pp. viii + 311, £70.00, hbk*

The movement of *ressourcement* continues to attract attention, if, increasingly, of a controversial kind. Since the Second Vatican Council, mainstream Catholic scholarship had assumed that *nouvelle théologie* – a return to the texts and spirit of the Fathers combined with a certain opening to modern philosophy as the Fathers were likewise open to its ancient equivalent – was altogether benign. But a revival of Thomism, notably in the United States and France, has rather dented confidence that this assumption is well-founded: in particular, the lack of an agreed metaphysics in post-Conciliar Catholic theology – of the kind once represented by the *philosophia perennis* – has not assisted clarity in subsequent doctrinal teaching. At the same time, the willingness of theologians from the stable of the journal *Concilium* to argue for real continuity between the *nouvelle théologie* and start-of-the-century Catholic Modernism has removed one of the defences of the theological inspiration behind the Council – namely, that accusations of ‘semi-Modernism’ brought by Roman curialists against the renovation of theological studies in France in the late 1930s were contemptible slinging of mud.

In France... France was the centre of this movement, as is indicated to students by the fact that both the phrase ‘*nouvelle théologie*’ and the word ‘*ressourcement*’ so often remain untranslated in English-language accounts, and that despite the ready availability of English equivalents (‘The New Theology’, ‘The Return to the Sources’). Hence the importance of the study under review here which seeks to find an explanation for the emergence of *nouvelle théologie* in inter-generational tensions in French society and culture in the first half of the twentieth century. It would of course be an example of the genetic fallacy to assume that an explanation of the origins of a set of ideas can also count as an adjudication of their truth. Yet the existence of non-theological factors in promoting the success of innovation in theological life must inevitably be taken into account in any assessment of that innovation as a whole.

An ‘Introduction’ rehearses material well enough known to historians of twentieth-century Catholic theology – the role in transforming the atmosphere of theological study played by the French Jesuit theologate at

Fourvière, outside Lyons, and the Dominican study-house of Le Saulchoir, first over the Belgian border at Tournai and then outside Paris. But Jon Kirwan, as well as introducing the reader to a generous *galère* including relatively minor figures who might otherwise be overlooked, also places them in the context of a wider effervescence in French society, which quite reasonably suggests to him the need for the ‘deeper, inter-disciplinary sensitivity to the larger French political, intellectual, religious and cultural landscape’ he aims to embody. The method he chooses is that of ‘generational history’ – to this reviewer a new concept or at least a new vocabulary: that of ‘generational theory’.

Studying history in terms of biological generations makes sense up to a point – but the point where the sense breaks down consists in the inconvenient refusal of mothers to extrude their infants at precisely timed intervals of twenty (or, for some historians using this method, thirty) years. The difficulty of consolidating individuals into well-defined generations is not mitigated by the failure of generational theorists to decide whether, for any given historical agent, what is crucial is date of birth or date of maturation – an evident source of confusion when an author who has opted for one convention on this matter cites critics who are working with the other. What of course any historian must allow is the likely effect on individuals of the more cataclysmic historical events such as the First and Second World Wars and the Great Depression. But were these events more formative for those who lived through them as adults cognizant of an earlier state of the world than for those who came to consciousness in a world which had absorbed their undeniable facticity? The question might well be thought not easy to answer by generalization.

According to Gertrude Stein (referred to though not cited), the twentieth century happened in 1920s Paris, the formative age if not always place for the ‘generation of 1930’ which forms the ‘avant-garde’ referent of the title of this book. Two chapters on the generations of 1860 and 1890 prepare the way, considering, respectively, the ‘cultural memory’ inherited by the 1930 generation, and its educators. From the generation of 1860 (calculating by birth), the Catholic Modernists (including here Blondel, rightly or otherwise) take pride of place, while the rise of *Maurrasisme*, official anti-clericalism, and the emergence of a public intelligentsia in the wake of the Dreyfus affair are only lightly sketched. The educators of 1890, calculating by maturation, and blocked together with, on the same calculus, the ‘generation of 1912’, include the Dominican Gardeil and the Jesuits de Grandmaison, Rousselot, and Teilhard de Chardin. One notes the comparative lack of attention to conservative analyses from the 1890 crop (the young Maritain, for instance), and the ill-assorted nature of the 1912 collection who have little in common other than indifference to commentatorial Thomism. It seems impossible to tell, except by hindsight, what course the generation of 1930 (referred to by maturation) would take in the aftermath of the Great War in France on the basis of such inspirations as these.

Five chapters on the 1930 generation show evidence – as does the book as a whole – of impressively wide reading, unsubmerged in its own wealth of information. Against the background of the rise of Communist and Fascist ideologies, and the inability of liberal democracy to integrate the working class, the key generation's representatives shared with their secular counterparts a sense of crisis for the *humanum*. Three themes emerged: the search for a new historical narrative; the desire for a philosophy that was more 'concrete' and 'existential', and a refreshment of social and political engagement. All of these would find their place when the 1930 generation 'triumphed' – meaning, at the Second Vatican Council.

A moment's reflection suffices. Immense is the manner in which the orchestration of these themes might vary. That in a very short time after the Council ended the alliance of interpreters fell apart (for the post-Conciliar de Lubac the post-Conciliar Chenu is 'absurd') should not surprise, nor should the resurgence of a Traditionalism conscious of insuperable disagreements among its own critics. A new criteriology is needed. There was once a pope who sought to provide it.

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