

Reviews

RECEIVED WISDOM?: REVIEWING THE ROLE OF TRADITION IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS by Bernard Hoose. *Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1994. 186 pages. £12.99.*

There is something very odd about the notion of a 'constant unchanging tradition'. It sounds like having a constant unchanging history, in which nothing counts as happening unless it has already happened before. The heart of the idea of tradition is that the gospel exists, not simply in a text but in the handing down of that text in the Christian community through history. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in the preacher and in the hearer. What is preached is, of course, a text, the text of scripture; but it was only sixteenth century Europe, intoxicated by the new techniques of printing, that produced the belief that the circulation of printed texts might be a substitute for the living tradition of the ecclesial community: the sacrament of the Spirit's presence in history. Of course from the fifteenth century, with the spread of literacy, the circulation of such printed texts became a vital part of the tradition itself; and Eamon Duffy (in *The Stripping of the Altars*, 1992) has shown us just how enthusiastically this was taken up by laity and clergy, first in the Catholic and subsequently in the Protestant churches.

In theology, as in liturgy, to be truly traditional is not to repeat past formulae (though it is important to know about and be interested in past formulae) it is to be in organic continuity with the worship and forms of understanding of two thousand years of Christian life. At times of crisis the Church sometimes gathers herself together as an ecumenical council and, amongst other things, discusses and decides whether some particular way of formulating her teaching has turned out to be unacceptable and incompatible with the life of the Spirit in the Church. (Vatican II was, I believe, the first council not to do this). From then on, it becomes the sin of heresy to preach the rejected formulation in conscious defiance of the council's decision. The point to notice is that in such rare conciliar pronouncements, it is heresy that is defined and excluded. No Christian would presume to define orthodoxy. There are no theological formulations of the faith which can be said to be exclusively fixed for all time. What St Thomas called '*sacra doctrina*' — meaning, as Victor White and others showed, not a set of religious tenets, but God's active work of teaching, in which prophets, evangelists, bishops,

theologians and all the people of God in their various ways participate, — is an historical process of development: and this is what tradition is.

Bernard Hoose, who lectures in Christian ethics at Heythrop College, London University, has written a short and lively book subtitled: *Reviewing the Role of Tradition in Christian Ethics*, which is aimed at those 'traditionalists' who take a rather more static view of tradition. For these, it is important that their formulation of the faith, especially in the matter of morals, should be essentially a repetition or translation of what was taught by the councils, Fathers of the Church, and other authorities. They think that only so could their teaching be part of 'what the Church has always taught'. Hoose deals in successive chapters with what ancient and later authorities have had to say about authority itself, about sex, and about killing of various kinds. There is a rather different fourth section about the notion of punishment which reads like a separate essay only loosely attached to the general thesis about tradition, though it is full of insights and one of the most interesting parts of a very interesting book. I was only sorry that he did not consider the unfortunate effect on soteriology of mistakes about punishment — especially it's being 'demanded' in justice. ('Christ on the cross paid the debt of punishment that was owed for our sins'..etc) For a future edition he might like to know that there was a Pope (I think Benedict XIV) who was appalled by the cruelty of using imprisonment as a punishment for adults: prisons were solely for people awaiting trial on remand and, perhaps, for young offenders, prison might be used as a school. (There being, I suppose, very little, then, to distinguish the two institutions). But that is a digression.

It is clear, from *Veritatis Splendor*, that Pope John Paul II is not a traditionalist in the 'repetitive' sense, for he plainly regards the absolute prohibition of torture as a traditional teaching; and so it is, on a sane historical view of tradition; but the Pope must know, as well as the rest of us, that this has not been the consistent teaching of past ages.

In the tradition of moral philosophy and theology, as in the tradition of, say, historiography, what we aim at is, in Alasdair MacIntyre's phrase: 'the best that can be said so far.' As Charles Taylor put it recently: 'the gains of practical reason are all within a certain grasp of the [human] good, and involve overcoming earlier distortions and fragmentary understanding. The certainty we gain is not that some conclusion is ultimately valid, but that it represents a gain over what we held before . . . what we are confident of is that our present formulations articulate better . . . what we were never entirely without some sense of . . . Moral knowledge, unlike that gained in natural science, does not deal with the wholly new.' Hoose's book is a sort of updated version of Abelard's *Sic et*

Non: a critique of simple 'reliance on authority' which shows how very much the 'authorities' have differed. In both cases the point was to argue that we need also some creative thinking of our own in order to profit from tradition. In neither case was there the suggestion that the past thinking is simply mistaken and irrelevant. However, Hoose might have given us a little more of the positive value of tradition.

What he gives us is good rousing stuff, but largely a matter of comparing and contrasting texts, rather than an historian's attempt to understand the processes, social, cultural, political, which gave rise to these variations and conflicts amongst highly intelligent and honest men. It seems curiously old hat (not to say 'traditional') to try to give an account of the text of St Jerome in terms of his psychology and speculation about his sexual hangups. (Whatever would Terry Eagleton say?) More seriously it is a pity that a discussion of early Christian sexual views makes no use of Peter Brown's classic *The Body and Society* (1989). Although he quotes Alasdair MacIntyre, it is from a book published in 1966; he does not refer to what we might call the *After Virtue* trilogy which has made such an impact on moral philosophy in the last fifteen years, with its profound analysis of the central place of tradition, not only in ethics, but in any rationality. Perhaps Hoose would disagree with MacIntyre (and I would guess he hankers a little, still, after the 'disengaged reason' of the liberal) but no writing on 'the role of tradition' nowadays can afford to ignore him.

That having been said, *Received wisdom?* will serve a most useful purpose if it disabuses readers of the idea that Vatican II had just the same teaching about sex as St Jerome, St Augustine or even St Thomas Aquinas (all of whom, in any case disagree amongst themselves); and the same holds for the other topics he discusses. He is, by the way less than accurate about St Thomas, who on several occasions made clear his complete rejection of Augustine's idea that all sex had an element of sin in it because of the vehement pleasure which inhibited the use of reason. Aquinas is insistent that there is no sin of any kind in sexual activity as such — though, of course it may be an occasion of sin, like almsgiving or saying Mass or any other human activity. He says, in the actual passage that Hoose refers to but doesn't quote, as well as in other passages, that if inhibiting the use of reason were venially sinful we should never go to sleep. Moreover he says (1a: 98; 2, ad 3) that one of the things that restricts our sexual pleasure is our fallen state: in the state of innocence, he says, it would all be much more fun. Hoose also gives credit to the ludicrous idea of D.S. Bailey that 'ordinary men and women of medieval time' would be unable to appreciate the 'subtle' difference between doing evil and suffering evil (between, say, torturing and being

tortured).

However, I guarantee that the vast majority of readers (and I hope it will be vast) will find this little book refreshing, enlightening and entertaining. There is certainly recognition of the positive value of tradition in its true sense; it is just that I think so much more could have been said about that in these recent days. He does have a quotation, packed with discreet dynamite, from Jean Porter (whose excellent book *The Recovery of Virtue: the relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* [SPCK, 1994] I hope to be allowed to discuss at some length in a future issue.) She says: "The current debate in Catholic moral theology concerning the foundations of moral obligation might more fruitfully be cast as a debate over rival accounts of the human good, than as a debate over the moral significance of particular goods." This takes us right out of the intramural squabbles of a group of essentially casuistical moralists into a wholly different and Aristotelian critique of human behaviour where neither 'traditionalists' nor 'proportionalists' are at home.

HERBERT MCCABE OP

SOME BODIES: THE EUCHARIST AND ITS IMPLICATIONS by Jonathan Bishop, *Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1992. Pp.xiv + 244.*

In this book Jonathan Bishop thinks about bodies and their relationships. Precisely as bodies human beings are related to each other and to the physical world around them in a number of ways. We are not isolated fleshy monads but form parts of wider wholes, greater bodies. Thoughts similar to this are heard often enough after Thatcher, when we know that there is such a thing as society and that we are much affected by the natural environment upon which we ourselves have such a profound influence. It is only by realising that we form, as individuals and as a species, part of larger systems, which might be termed larger bodies, that we can hope to survive.

But Bishop's interest in various types of body is not only social or environmental; he is concerned more with the religious and the metaphysical. This is indicated in the structure of the book; while it contains chapters on individual, erotic, metaphoric and communal bodies, it ends with a chapter on the cosmic. The thesis being evolved throughout appears to be that ultimately there is but one body, the "body indeed", which constantly reproduces itself on a number of levels:

The body there is nothing other than is bound to show itself always and everywhere as a reproduction of itself, which is already, we