

medieval universities was precisely a training in listening to, and even rephrasing, the best and not only the worst arguments of your interlocutors. Defence of orthodoxy then is not a matter of proclaiming 'a faith as unchanging as a mammoth trapped in ice'.

The balance to be found (and here we get a hint that being Master of the Dominicans involves more hard graft than the occasional waft of spiritual uplift) is that between confidence and humility — 'the *confidence* that we have in the revelation of the truth and the *humility* that we have before the mystery' (p.139).

I have already trespassed into the topics of the second half of the book, which shows how neatly these form a unity with the first. The autobiographical section in taking the form of a conversation in which the French reporter, initially dispassionate and direct, is increasingly probing—Is the Church in crisis? Do we need a new Council?—is an excellent case of style displaying content. We the readers overhear a genuine conversation; the author is speaking to someone, perhaps a friend, and hearing their questions and concerns.

In the book's second half we are reminded that Fr Timothy is a biblical scholar, and the 'stock' which is native to him is not just English and Dominican, but profoundly that of Scripture. The book's title, *I Call You Friends*, reflects Aquinas's conviction that friendship, with its stress on equality, is at the heart of divine love and the love we have for each other. At the same time it is a quotation from Scripture. Jesus himself says 'I call you friends'. In case this is all too cozy, Fr Timothy points out that Jesus does so just before he is betrayed, denied and crucified. It is because Jesus comes to us again as friend, even after our betrayal, transcending our cowardice, that we can be sure that this is a friendship which is 'God's own life'. Life, in the end, is what it is all about—*salus*—and life is what, from this book, being a member of the Order of Preachers is all about. 'The goal of preaching', their Master says here, 'is not to communicate information but life'.

JANET MARTIN SOSKICE

THE COMEDY OF REVELATION: Paradise Lost and Regained in Biblical Narrative by Francesca Aran Murphy, *T&T Clark*, Edinburgh, 2000. Pp. xvii + 365, £29.95 hbk.

Francesca Aran Murphy lectures in systematic theology at the University of Aberdeen. The originality of her interests and width of her scholarship have already been demonstrated in her remarkable book *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (1995). In that book, the argument moves from Kant's concept of imagination, first by way of expounding Maritain's Thomistic aesthetics, then by comparison with the work of the 'Fugitives' (Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, John Crowe Ransom, and William Lynch, associated with Maritain in 350

later years but originating in friendships at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee in the 1920s), and culminating in the Christological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Ranging as it does over philosophy, American literary theory and criticism, as well as Maritain's Thomism and Balthasar's theology of divine glory, it is a book that librarians find hard to catalogue.

Hans Urs von Balthasar is cited in *The Comedy of Revelation* twice as frequently as anyone else; but Robert Alter, Walter Brueggemann, Cheryl Exum and Gerhard von Rad appear so often that one can guess even from the index that this book is a contribution to the flourishing discipline of narrative criticism in biblical interpretation. Dr Murphy's aim, as she says at the outset, is 'to find out whether a literary approach to the Bible can help us to see the imaginative basis of our doctrines of revelation and inspiration'. Her interest, that is to say, is principally in these doctrines, regarded until recently as essential prolegomena in theological studies; but her approach radically revises, indeed totally subverts, any traditional course *de revelatione*, Catholic or Protestant—without however taking the by now fairly familiar path of post-Gadamerian hermeneutical theorizings.

Indeed, quite explicitly, Murphy wants to do as little theorizing as possible. Rather, she wants only to remind us that the Bible is written imaginatively, and to persuade us that the best way to understand what it is about is to dramatize it. Essentially, in a twist on Balthasar's *Theodramatik*, she wants us to see that Christian revelation is 'a comic drama between God and human beings'. This, obviously, is easy enough to say; the insight comes only in the detail.

Chapter 1 examines the genre of comic drama in ancient Greece: Aristophanes in particular. 'Drama does not argue', Murphy says (page 21), 'it *shows*'. Whereas, so she claims, Aristophanes left it to Socrates to reason philosophically for the divine in human nature, and to Aristotle to explain what the common good of the city entails, the dramatist exhibits a truth 'through the conflict in which the hero engages'. What is more, since we laugh at his comedies there is no occasion to go on interminably about the incommensurability of cultures (etc.): indeed, Murphy thinks, Aristophanes would enjoy Woody Allen. Her main point, here, is that, whereas we often suppose, in fundamental theology, that the way of analogy from the world to God always goes through reasoning, 'there are also *experiential* analogies, perhaps more fundamental than their rational counterparts' (page 28). In short: 'The loss of self in the roar of laughter and the loss of self in religion are friends'.

It is perhaps less unusual than it would once have been to find much in the Bible that is comic. Dr Murphy cites the uncomprehending remark by the philosopher-mathematician A.N. Whitehead about 'the total absence of humour from the Bible', 'one of the most singular things in all literature'. While we have (on the contrary) several recent studies of the comic side of certain biblical books and episodes, she wants to

bring out the unity of the plot, borrowing a good deal from the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye's book *The Great Code* (1981).

Chapter 2 details the interplay of ethics and comedy in the Pentateuch. Chapter 3 deals with the comedy (often, of course, very black) in the political history from Judges to Samuel ('the ironies of history'). Chapter 4 reads Job, wonderfully, entertainingly, drawing in most of the recent studies (notably William Whedbee), but also comparing Job to Kierkegaard and, less conventionally, to John Cleese (as the punctuality-obsessed headmaster on his disastrous way to lecture colleagues on time management). Chapter 5, with help from J.A.T. Robinson, unfolds, among much else, Mark's 'cinematic' techniques and John's 'slowly building drama in carefully staged acts'.

Chapter 6 reminds us that nothing (or little) of all this is original: Amalarius of Metz (780-850) dramatized the Mass as Passion and Resurrection narrative; the *Regularis Concordia* (970) has stage directions; in the later Middle Ages monasteries and parishes staged mystery and morality plays; in Fielding's *History of Tom Jones* and Handel's *Messiah* ('Anglican comedies', page 294) the tradition of dramatizing continues after the Reformation; and, in our own day, Murphy reminds us of dramatizations of the Jonah story.

Finally, in chapter 7, Dr Murphy considers epistemic and propositional theories of revelation (Thomas Aquinas), revelation as encounter (Martin Buber), and concludes with an illuminating, revisionary and freshly documented reconstruction of Balthasar's conception of revelation as dramatic comedy ('kenosis *con bris*').

Obviously, nothing can be said in a thesis-like way to encapsulate Dr Murphy's reconception of the doctrine of revelation; the book is not exhaustive or comprehensive, it is (so to speak) a set of exemplary readings which invites us to change our whole attitude to the doctrine.

The book is lucidly written, in an appropriately witty and humorous way. Isolating some of Dr Murphy's sallies from their context may make them sound more wry ('since the Second Vatican Council, even some cradle Catholics have got the general gist of the more well-known biblical episodes', page 61) or impertinent ('I need hardly remind the readers of a work of philosophical theology that the world's most famous cross-dresser is not Edna Everage but his Holiness the Pope', page 28) than in fact they are. The two just cited indicate that Dr Murphy writes as a Catholic theologian and that her book is intended as an exercise in philosophical theology. On the dustwrapper Professor David Jasper welcomes it as making 'a real contribution to the field of biblical studies'. While that is surely true, Dr Murphy is after all engaged in teaching systematic theology, and the book makes an even more remarkable contribution to the reconsideration of fundamental topics in that discipline. It could also be read with enjoyment by people who have no background or interest in systematic theology as conventionally understood.

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