

AQUINAS by Brian Davies, OP, *Continuum*, London, 2002, xxiii+ pp. 200, £12.99 pbk.

DISCOVERING AQUINAS: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS LIFE, WORK, AND INFLUENCE by Aidan Nichols, OP, *Darton, Longman & Todd*, London, 2002, x + pp. 214, £12.95 pbk.

THOMAS AQUINAS: THEOLOGIAN OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE by Nicholas M. Healy, *Ashgate, Aldershot*, 2003, xiii + pp.168, £16.99 pbk.

In the Prologue to his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas states that 'trusting in God's help, we shall try to pursue the things held by *sacra doctrina*, and to be concise and clear, so far as the matter allows.' A superficial reading of Aquinas would suggest that his work is indeed 'concise and clear' in such a way that his texts are almost self-interpreting. Yet it goes without saying that ever since his death, readers of Aquinas have detected profound learning, wisdom and spirituality behind the sometimes terse character of his work. The discernment of that intense vision requires a particular intensity of engagement with and, crucially, interpretation of Aquinas' texts in order that we might realise the meaning and implications of his work. The three authors of the books which are the subject of this review have engaged intensely with Aquinas' work. At the same time, they represent three very different interpretations, or, to coin a phrase, 'versions of Thomism'

Aquinas, which appears as part of Continuum's 'Outstanding Christian Thinkers' series, is the latest work by Brian Davies, OP, a well known expositor of Aquinas' work and the author of the widely read introduction *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Here Davies offers another very concise and clear introductory commentary on some of the central themes in Aquinas' thought for those who 'want quickly to learn something about him without wading through many volumes.' This book will be much valued by students and general readers for its rigour and simplicity of expression. Davies includes a useful brief biography, comprehensive bibliography and brief assessments of Aquinas' contribution and importance as a thinker. The remaining eighteen chapters each treat a particular theme, with the overall emphasis broadly reflecting the central concerns of the *Summa Theologiae*. The paucity of references to primary and secondary texts is perhaps a weakness, and one might wonder what Davies offers in *Aquinas* that is not already available in his earlier work. Before raising questions regarding Davies' reading of Aquinas, it should be emphasised that this book, together with his earlier work, represents the finest exposition of its type currently available. For many, his reading of Aquinas will be very attractive and his writing highly conducive to the needs of the beginner

Those familiar with Davies' work will know that he understands Aquinas to be a theologian in whose writings one can find a good deal of 'pure philosophy' (p.140). That philosophy is put to work 'so as to straighten the way to a solid and intelligent grasp of what revelation teaches.' (*ibid.*). In an important sense, Davies, like many other commentators schooled in analytic philosophy, understands reason and faith to be quite distinct for Aquinas. Of

Aquinas, Davies writes 'if we take philosophers to be people prepared to try to think clearly without necessarily invoking religious doctrines as premises in their arguments, Aquinas is unquestionably a philosopher.' (p.12). So apparently Aquinas can think 'outside' religious doctrines such as the Trinity or the Incarnation. In viewing philosophy as a separate handmaiden to theology, quite reasonably one might think that the integrity and value of philosophy is preserved. Apparently, one also preserves philosophy's apologetic value. For Davies, this is Aquinas' approach. However, this lends a very negative value to philosophy: it is reduced to the apologetic task of demonstrating that the articles of faith are not unreasonable. In his chapter on the Trinity, Davies states that, for Aquinas, philosophers 'should content themselves with seeking to show that there must be a mistake in attempts to prove that the doctrine is somehow impossible or disprovable.' (p.133). Yet the well known text which Davies cites regarding this reading of Aquinas suggests a far more positive role for the reason we associate with philosophy: '*sacra doctrina* uses human reasoning, not indeed to prove the faith, for that would take away from the merit of believing, but to *make manifest some implications* of its message.' (ST 1a.1.8.ad 2, my emphasis). So reason might help to clarify the Christian teaching and help us to realise its implications, and therefore be much more intertwined at every moment with the divine reason as this is expressed in revelation.

Seeing this kind of distinction between revelation and reason in Aquinas, Davies can emphasise Aquinas 'the philosopher' (but not at all exclusively – Davies is quite clear that Aquinas is first and foremost a theologian). Yet this emphasis leads to an exposition which owes much to the agenda of modern philosophy of religion or natural theology. One wonders if this domesticates Aquinas' work within a modernist framework in such a way that the radical aspects of his thought – those elements which might truly challenge and excite us – remain veiled.

Reading *Discovering Aquinas: an introduction to his life, thought and work* by Aidan Nichols, OP, one gains a much greater sense of the pre-modern character of Aquinas' thought, and particularly of the integration of faith and reason. There is also more indication of the many traditions – Arabic, Jewish and pagan – which contribute to Aquinas' vision and indicate his "intellectual charity" which formed so distinctive an aspect of his sanctity.'(p.6). Like Davies, Nichols offers a brief biography of Aquinas before commencing his main discussion. However, whereas Davies begins with a discussion of some Aristotelian philosophical distinctions before proceeding to a consideration of the divine being and the Five Ways as 'ways to God' after the fashion of natural theology, Nichols (with equal anachronism?) begins with revelation. He points to Aquinas' insistence (following Hebrews 1.1) that revelation has come by many and various means, and yet revelation is fundamentally unitary. However, revelation cannot be simply reduced to certain public events such as the Exodus or even the Incarnation. Rather, for Nichols, Aquinas understands supernatural knowledge to work through the patient and agent intellect in a way analogous to natural knowledge, yet with a divine *lumen fidei* which

intensifies the *lumen naturale* in such a way that one can discern the true salvific significance of particular events and narratives. Borrowing terms from von Balthasar, Nichols sees in Aquinas two associated movements of knowledge to God: the anabatic (rising) and katabatic (descending). The clearest form of theological intelligibility is found when these are interwoven within the single divine illumination (p.38).

This interweaving of numerous strands to form Aquinas' integrated theological vision is a constant theme of Nichols' book (although the odd and disjointed structure of *Discovering Aquinas* rather belies this thrust). At its best, this work points to the aspects of Aquinas' thought which identify him as theological and radical in relation to present-day philosophical concerns. For example, Nichols emphasises the convertibility of the transcendentals (p.153) and hints at Aquinas' more aesthetic construal of truth as *convenientia* – harmony or fittingness (p.171).

Those radical and challenging elements of Aquinas are much more evident in Nicholas Healy's excellent *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life*. It is necessary to mention that, unlike the other two books here reviewed, Healy's book is not intended to be an introduction to Aquinas, so he can be more bold in his exposition. Nevertheless, Healy – who is clearly influenced by French Dominican scholarship, and particularly by Jean-Pierre Torrell – shows in an accessible way some of the character, extent and complexities of Aquinas' mature theology.

For Healy, Aquinas is a thoroughly pre-modern, evangelical and pastoral theologian whose aim is 'to help preachers preach on Scripture better and Christians to live the Gospel more truly.'(p.x). The book begins with a brief history of Thomism and progresses to a fascinating consideration of the character of the Dominicans and possible reasons for Aquinas joining the followers of St. Dominic. This part of Aquinas' biography reveals something of his overall motivation as a theologian: Healy sees in Aquinas a simple, deep yearning 'to follow the naked Christ in nakedness' (p.28). This informs all of Aquinas writings and entails at every moment the centrality of Scripture and Christ.

For Healy, Aquinas is most certainly not a scholastic rationalist. His thought extends well beyond syllogism or argument by necessity because 'one does not penetrate God's reality by necessary arguments, since God could have done everything differently.' (p.39). Rather, Healy focuses on the theme of *convenientia* briefly mentioned by Nichols (pp.36ff.). This aspect of Aquinas' thought (which has recently been explored in detail by the French Dominican Gilbert Narcisse and deployed by John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock) reveals how divine action hovers between forced necessity and mere caprice. The Incarnation, for example, is neither necessary nor arbitrary, but is the most 'fitting' or 'harmonic' means of God bringing about our salvation. This places 'beauty' at the heart of Aquinas' theology in a way that forms a stark contrast with, for example, Kantian transcendentalism (p.39). The theme of *convenientia* in Aquinas is, for Healy, linked intimately with Scripture where analogies and connections between things, events and people are constantly noted. Healy's continual emphasis on Aquinas'

reading of Scripture is refreshing: one finds references to Thomas' scriptural commentaries – and not just the two Summas – at every turn.

There is much else to be commended in this book, not least Healy's reflective structuring of his work which does not seek to follow slavishly the form of the *Summa Theologiae*. The emphasis on the dialectical relationship between faith and reason is fascinating and there are some interesting proposals, not least the claim that Aquinas' ethics of virtue is quite different to that of today's neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists (pp.153-154). Healy shows consistently that all knowledge for Aquinas is illumination by the Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and testified in Scripture. This makes apparent some of the more exciting and 'radical' elements of Aquinas the pre-modern theologian.

These three 'versions of Thomism' will appeal to very different students of Aquinas. Healy's contribution adds significantly to the recent secondary literature on Aquinas and, for the present reviewer, he offers the most compelling reason for engaging intensely with Aquinas' deceptively 'clear and succinct' writings: one might learn how to be a more faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

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CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT: TWILIGHT OR RENAISSANCE? Ed by J.S. Boswell, F.P. McHugh and J. Verstraeten, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium CLVII*, Leuven University Press and Uitgeverij Peeters, Leuven 2000, xxii + 308 pages, £42.00 pbk.

This book grew out of collaboration between the Von Hügel Institute in Cambridge and the University of Leuven. Together they organised a conference at Cambridge in 1999 on 'Catholic Social Thought in Transition'. The papers of the Conference, re-worked in the light of the work that took place at it, make up this book.

The papers are gathered in five sections, the first of which offers two interpretations of the last hundred years of Catholic social thought / teaching. Jean-Yves Calvez gives an autobiographical account of his engagement with 'Catholic Social Thought', speaks of the strengths and silences of the great 'encyclical tradition', and believes that there is still significant life for this kind of Papal contribution. For Staf Hellemans of Utrecht 'Catholic Social Teaching' as traditionally understood is irredeemably tied to 'ultramontane mass Catholicism'. The demise of the latter brings the former also to an end. This does not mean that 'Rome' no longer has a contribution to make but the situation to which it must speak, and how it can effectively do so, are radically altered. Attention to the structural base of social problems is one aspect of this new situation as is a readiness for political risk.

Already a difficulty emerges which is part of the complexity and richness of this book. Are we to refer to Catholic Social 'Thought', 'Teaching' or 'Thinking'? 'Teaching' is taken here to refer to the encyclical tradition, the others to contributions from what is variously called 'independent' or 'non-