

**PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION IN THE RENAISSANCE** by Paul Richard Blum, *Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2010, pp. 222, £50

Oliver Wendall Holmes once wrote: 'I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the far side of complexity'. Having read Blum's book, I would suggest what this text lacks is simplicity, a simplicity that the author needed to ensure the work contained in order to make difficult concepts real and immediate to his readers. The major stumbling block in attaining this simplicity is in the very premise that Blum sets out as his goal.

In the Preface Blum writes: 'A purely theoretical book on faith, reason and religion could be written, but not by me. For in my view, a philosophical problem is constituted by its history, so that its historical stages enable us to understand what troubles us today' (p. vi). One has to bear this premise in mind before beginning Blum's text, a text that is essentially a scan of a dozen religious minds of the Renaissance, examining how each philosopher spawned a new idea or reacted to the ideas of another. Blum has collected this group of philosophers suggesting that their Great Conversation, has helped shape the religious intellectual climate of modern times. One of the text's great strengths lies in how Blum selects not only some of the well-known philosophers of the age, such as Montaigne, Raymond Lull, and Nicholas of Cusa, all of whom have found their way to some extent into contemporary parlance, but he also re-emphasizes the importance of others such as Plethon and Salutati, towards whom posterity has not been so generous. The text's weakness is that it is certainly questionable whether justice could be done in such a brief work to philosophers whose intellectual acumen was so great. The great danger of doing this is that one risks losing the reader by throwing at them a great diversity of thought without providing adequate humus in which these ideas might germinate.

There is also the problem of abstruse language in Blum's text which is certainly not a reader friendly book. Granted, every scientific discipline has its own way of communicating to their own, but surely there are better ways of conveying meaning, then extraordinarily long sentences such as: 'Marsilio Ficino's attempt at salvaging Christianity and converting neopagan Aristotelians branched into extremely abstract speculation in order to capture the transcendence and absoluteness of God and a moral religiosity that in the end could only lead to a quasi-pietistic interiorization or spiritualization of the mystery of the divine by making the theoretical ascent an essential feature of being human' (p. 126). This sentence may sound erudite to some but it makes one wonder why the book was written: was it to publish a doctoral thesis, or a collection of lectures, or to inform the public? If the first, so be it, if the second, more support material was required, if the latter, then the author must serve the reader better by making the text, perhaps not rivetting, but at least stylistically interesting.

A further point is that – as with any discussion of the history of ideas – a map or chart would have been useful, perhaps a progressive map, showing how the author is connecting the myriad of ideas to which he is providing an exposition. For although one can be certain that the author has a grasp of this interconnectedness of ideas, he must endeavour to ensure that the meaning is clear to the reader by text's end. Blum's Epilogue goes a distance in creating some intellectual coherence, but a chart would have been far clearer.

So now for the particular gems of Blum's work. Blum's opening chapter, 'From Faith and Reason to Fideism: Raymond Lull, Raimundus Sabundus and Michel de Montaigne', is well-constructed and highly thought-provoking. He introduces the reader to Lull's quite radical notion that God desired humanity to love him in a variety of ways, thus explaining the diversity of religions (cf. p. 3). This

is a key point to the chapter, for Blum uses the notion of revelation taken up by one of Lull's followers, Sabundus, who sees religious belief as that which 'dignifies' humanity. Montaigne appears soon after, for in his *Essays*, the French skeptic writes an 'Apology for Raymond Sebond' which, as Blum argues, is laced with irony and vivid critique. Blum concludes the chapter, by describing how Montaigne stands against both Sabundus and Lull, for Montaigne is convinced that the world is ultimately unintelligible, and that natural theology will ultimately leave the spiritual pilgrim in a cataclysm of faith and doubt.

Coluccio Salutati is the subject of Chapter Four, and the reader is exposed to some wonderful ideas from this 14th Century Italian philosopher. We read one of Salutati's letters where he debates action and inaction, and comes to the somewhat tenuous conclusion that a person is torn in life between planning for a future that may never come and surrendering to Providence for whatever shall be, the latter tending almost to pious indolence. As the chapter progresses, Boccaccio and Petrarca are included in the discussion to assess the role of poetry in theology with the conclusion that Salutati envisages literature as having a theological dignity, something that is inherent to linguistic form. This concept is important for, taken to another level, one could argue that the pagan fables of the Ancient World could have an almost Christian application, a return to what Cusa calls different Rites of religious revelation.

In Chapter Five, we see Blum extend the notion of religion and language through the writings of Lorenzo Valla. Blum opens the chapter powerfully with what he perceives as the crux of Valla's thought: piety through grammar. As Blum states in the conclusion of this chapter, Valla's approach was 'to penetrate each word for the sake of reaching the referent, the meaning itself, the truth' (p. 92). If Shakespeare questioned what was in a name Valla's question was far broader – what power is held in the word? According to a sliding scale of importance as to what the word denotes, 'God' is the most powerful of all possible names, and all words refer back to that highest Word, in order to establish their place in the genealogy of language.

So what can be said in sum of Blum's text? There are many aspects of this text to like but they all relate to the wonderful ideas it contains from so many great minds. Blum should be congratulated for this. It is a joy to read through these ideas and to be exposed to such a treasure. However the book is thoroughly undermined by its brevity, which forces so much that must be said into such a confined space. The text is also constrained by a convoluted style of communication. This being said, *Philosophy of Religion in the Renaissance* should find a respected place in academic libraries as a useful source book which points toward other avenues for future research.

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**THE ANNALS OF THE FOUR MASTERS: IRISH HISTORY, KINGSHIP AND SOCIETY IN THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY** by Bernadette Cunningham, *Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2010, pp. 348, £45*

The *Annals of the Four Masters*, compiled in the early seventeenth century, were established two hundred years later as the text which perhaps best encapsulated the vitality and precociousness of the indigenous civilization swept away by English conquest. Bernadette Cunningham in her meticulous study shows why the later reputation was acquired. It owed much, she suggests, to cursory – or even no – reading of the work. This is not a failing of which she can be accused. Better than any previous scholar, she uncovers the complex processes through which the *Annals* emerged and the multiplicity of sources on which they were