# Reviews

**POST-SECULAR PHILOSOPHY: Between philosophy and theology edited by Phillip Blond** *Routledge,* **London, 1997, pp. 376, £50 hardback, £15.99 paperback.**

**AFTER WRITING; ON THE LITURGICAL CONSUMMATION OF PHILOSOPHY by Catherine Pickstock** *Blackwell* **, Oxford, 1998, pp. 292, £50 hardback, £16.88 paperback.**

**THE WORD MADE STRANGE: THEOLOGY, LANGUAGE, CULTURE by John Milbank** *Blackwell* **, Oxford, 1997, pp. 298, £45 hardback, £14.99 paperback.**

Despite the frequently heralded demise of mainstream Christianity, and particularly of Anglicanism, theology in England has never been so challenging this century as it is now. *Post-Secular Philosophy* , which started as guest lectures in Cambridge, contends that the post-modernist unmasking of the modern man of rationalist humanism need not yield to the 'playful' nihilism that comes from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida; rather, it is time to tell the old old story, in all its premodernity, about our being the gift of a transcendent source which grants all reality as truth, goodness and beauty. Theologians, excited by post-Nietzschean philosophy, are testing whether the deistic secularism of the Enlightenment can be swept out without surrendering the house to the irrationalities either of obscurantist fundamentalism or of sceptical relativism.

This collection of essays on 'the foremost thinkers of the modern philosophical tradition', all fifteen of them, opens with a study of Descartes by Jean-Luc Marion, currently the leading French theologian, a layman with distinctly Balthasarian theological views (see *New Blackfriars* , July/August 1995). He presents Descartes as the thinker who brought God into philosophy under the metaphysical name of *causa sui* : the inventor, in effect, of deism. The last essay, by Andrew Wernick, deals with Jean Baudrillard. Though his books have been translated since the early 1970s, he became famous in 1991, briefly, in the London broadsheets, only when he claimed (or so it seemed) that the Gulf War never happened but was media-induced. Independently of the Heideggerian story that Marion takes for granted, about the theological component in metaphysics ever since Plato, many theologians would agree that something decisive happened to the Western concept of God in the early 17th century, whether



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instigated or exemplified by Descartes or not: God became the *causa sui* before whom, famously, Heidegger could neither kneel nor dance. Baudrillard, exposing the absence of anything 'real' in the media-created world of late-capitalist consumerism (etc.), appeals to an earlier (albeit more local and focused) instance of the enthralling 'effects' of something non-existent, as he thinks: namely, the simulated effects of a departed God in the spectacular theatricality of Baroque-Catholic sanctuaries and ceremonies. Thus, each of these two projects is driven by theological considerations, in the latter case, perhaps misappropriated.

In one way or another, the religious agenda keeps surfacing. Heidegger's work, John Peacocke rightly contends, becomes intelligible only if the theological background is acknowledged. He argues, more surprisingly, that there is a 'neurotic striving to find God' which undermines the genuinely religious 'openness to the mystery' that Heidegger evokes. We can do no more than list the other essays here: Kant (by Howard Caygill), Hegel (Rowan Williams), Kierkegaard (John Milbank), Nietzsche (Michel Haar), Levinas (Blond), Jean-Luc Marion (Graham Ward), Wittgenstein (Kerr), Derrida (Kevin Hart), Freud (Regina M. Schwartz), Lacan (Charles Winquist), Kristeva (Philippa Berry) and Irigaray (Alison Ainley).

By any standards, this is a brilliant collection. As that litany of names suggests, however, the 'modern philosophical tradition' is entirely 'Continental'. Some of the essays would barely make sense to people formed in universities where analytic philosophy, however indirectly, sets the bounds of rational discourse. For that matter, a 'philosophical tradition' culminating in Baudrillard (more McLuhan than Frege) would raise doubts about what counts as philosophy, in Paris too. To the extent that Wittgenstein's later work has had 'the consequence of reinventing a pragmatist variant of ontic realism' (as Blond puts it, disapprovingly, in his lengthy and valuable introduction), it might have become possible to include in the conversation those (including many theologians, not all of whom are of pensionable age!) who owe far more, intellectually, to Anglo-American philosophy. More to the point, arguably at least, the line from Hegel that leads through F.H. Bradley, William James, Russell and Collingwood, to such contemporaries as Rorty, Putnam, T. Nagel, Cavell, Dummett, Davidson, and McDowell, is as deeply involved with religious matters, albeit far less exotically and much more obliquely, as the philosophical tradition celebrated here.

Thus, there might be an alternative story. Even this one might start farther back. The critical turn, according Blond, was when theology surrendered to secular reason's account of nature — perhaps not so much in France, with Descartes, but 'in England, between the time of Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus' (p.6). The fateful innovation was that there could be an 'ontology without God' prior to theology — a 'simple elevation of an ontic understanding of Being over God as in Scotus' (p.



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33). Long before Descartes, then, theology began to go all wrong, going from Scotus to Ockham, nominalism, Lutheranism and the rest.

That sounds like music, if of a now far distant drum, to the ears of a Dominican educated before Vatican II. With his doctrine of the univocity of the concept of being (God exists exactly as we creatures do, only more so), Scotus reduces God to the supreme entity among all the others. Worse still, since this God differs from us only in intensity of being, theology soon falls prey to the Ockhamist doctrine that sees the moral law as the arbitrary exercise of divine power. The sound Thomist synthesis of reason and faith is thus sidelined in favour of the moral authoritarianism that has blighted the lives of generations of devout Catholics (Jansenism etc.).

Catherine Pickstock's utterly brilliant book also depends a good deal on a certain anti-Scotism. She takes as epigraph John Mason's great (if now seldom sung) hymn: 'How shall I sing that majesty/ which angels do admire', with its disturbing interplay between the massed choirs of heaven, rapt in their self-transcending alleluias, and the voice of the solitary individual trying hard to join in — 'Ten thousand times ten thousand sound/ Thy praise; but who am I?'. Briefly, her thesis is that language is primarily doxology, praise of the divine; and that eucharistic transubstantiation is the transcendental condition of all meaning on this earth. The reader needs to hold on to this beautifully simple thesis to avoid getting lost in a very dense and complex argument.

To simplify. Jacques Derrida, building on Heidegger's metanarrative of western philosophy, claims that Plato's preferring oral communication to writing, in the *Phaedrus* , betrays commitment to a mythical self-presence of the self (thinking as 'conversation the soul holds with itself'). Our practical relationship with the world is replaced with what is world-independently going on inside one's head. In turn, a privileged realm of eternal realities is substituted for the no longer recognized manifest world (Heidegger, *Vom Wesen des Grundes* ). Either way, as Derrida sharpens the issue, philosophy since Plato becomes a 'metaphysics of presence', in the sense that it desires to do without historical, social and sexual relationships in order to indulge a dream presence (to self and/or to the eternal) free of all such encumberments.

Those who understand all this, whether theologians, philosophers, or literary and cultural critics, usually seem to believe it. Pickstock must be one of the few who understands what Derrida means and thinks it is all wrong. She re-reads the *Phaedrus* , in the first part of her book, arguing that, far from revealing a determination to devalue written language in contrast with supposedly natural, authentic and spontaneous self-present speech, as Derrida claims ( 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination* ), Plato favours orality in virtue of its open-endedness and its links with the body and the passing of time. Derrida's misrepresentation of Platonism 'perfects, and does not refute,



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the Cartesian abstraction from embodiment'. It is Derrida, not Plato, who is purveyor of, and prey to, the so-called metaphysics of presence.

In the second part of her book Pickstock argues that the philosopher-lover's praise of the beautiful, as Plato prescribes it, prefigures the praise of God in the medieval Roman Mass. Before getting to that remarkable thesis, however, she has a transitional section where this doxological understanding and practice of the liturgy is shown to have been subverted from within, in particular by the theology of Duns Scotus (who else?). She plays his belief in the need for a 'form of corporeity' to dispose the body for a higher form (the soul) against Aquinas's thesis that, though the consecration of the bread and wine does not have as its term Christ's soul, his soul is included by 'real concomitance' (*Summa Theologiae* 3a.76, 1) — something that Scotus could not say. There is much else non-Thomist in Scotus's doctrine of the eucharist, as Pickstock shows; but the main point is that, with his refusal of Aquinas's thesis that we do not have separate vegetative, sensitive and intellective souls, Scotus could — indeed had to — contemplate the presence, in the consecrated bread, of Christ's body *without his soul*. For Scotus, 'in the eucharist, Christ's soul is invoked as only partially present'. Again: 'the Body is more intensely present than the soul in the sacrament' — citing Gilson's *Jean Duns Scot* . Since the soul is not naturally present with the body, Christ's body, in the eucharistic change, 'is here effectively presented in the manner of a corpse'. Thus, Pickstock concludes, 'here, in the very heart of piety, the cult of necrophilia is begun' (p. 134).

Much of Pickstock's story is familiar: 'the Scotist paradox whereby a univocally proximal God is also the most distant God is echoed in the way in which, for much late medieval piety, the increasingly extra-ecclesial directness of the relation of the individual to God only confronts the individual with an inscrutable deity who looks upon him with a juridical gaze akin to that of the post-feudal sovereign or the now more disciplinarily-defined clergy' . More dramatically, however, Pickstock contends that 'the loss of emphasis on resurrection and teleology [in the late Middle Ages] in favour of often morbid preoccupation with Christ's death' — 'the notion that the effective Christ is essentially the dead Christ' — should be seen as 'cognate with Scotus' reduction of Christ's eucharistic body to a "dead body"' (p. 150).

Fascination with death, whether necrophilia or necrophobia, is another version of the metaphysical desire for the pseudo-eternity of permanent presence. Fine — but is the cult of the dead Christ, if it is visible in late medieval piety and if that is really what it is, to be traced to Scotus's theology of transubstantiation? Certainly, as Gilson notes, Scotus could have followed Aquinas among others, and developed a theory that 'accorded with the dogma' — suggesting that he regards Scotus's theory as less than properly Catholic. Most theologians at the time could not see how Christ's body would be one and the same



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before and after his death unless there was a *forma corporeitatis* , distinct from the soul and remaining one and the same throughout. Indeed, Aquinas's innovative thesis about the unicity of form was on the list of philosophical doctrines censured in Oxford in 1277. Gilson quotes Scotus, in the *Opus Oxoniense* : at the consecration, the bread is changed into 'a *compositum* of matter and intellective soul, though not as intellective, nor as constituting the *compositum* "man", but as giving corporeal *esse* and constituting this *compositum* which is the body' (p. 491). In other words, according to the plurality thesis, the hierarchical form of the intellective soul contains all the other forms, vegetative, sensitive, etc., virtually, in such a way that it can in principle give *esse corporeum* without giving *esse intellectivum* . As Gilson says, Scotus brings up the notion of *forma corporeitatis* in connection with transubstantiation. Plainly, Gilson (as a good Thomist) regards it as philosophically incoherent and theologically unsound; but Pickstock takes it to its logical conclusion: if the soul of the risen Christ is indeed present in the eucharistic species, this (for Scotus) would be 'no more than an arbitrary decision on God's part', rather than a matter of natural concomitance, as Aquinas thought. Scotus, with the logical possibility that Christ's body might be present without his soul in the consecrated host, would thus have opened up a line of thought that leads to the 'morbid ethics' of Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida: Heidegger's 'necrophiliac urge', in his philosophy of 'being-towards-death', would just be 'a cover for an all too modern necrophobic desire to get to death before it gets to you' (p. 111).

Perhaps. Yet, in this respect at least, Scotus was, like nearly everyone else, just unwilling to accept Aquinas's innovative theory. In general, given that the critical edition is still incomplete, that his writings were left in a confusing state at his early death, and that his ideas were worked out very much in interaction with his contemporaries, especially Henry of Ghent, and are not always intelligible on their own, perhaps rather too much is pegged to a certain view of 'Scotism'. There is, as George Lindbeck noted in his long and valuable review of Gilson's book (*Review of Metaphysics* , March 1954), 'no figure in the history of Western thought, except possibly Ockham, whose views are so consistently misrepresented'. That perhaps overstates the case; yet, after all, his greatest disciple, Maurice O'Fithealaigh (1460-1513), was not even sure whether Scotus rejected analogy at all! If he did, he may have meant that there was no analogy in things but only in concepts, which would not distance him much from some modern Thomists — those who leave aside the neo-Platonically derived doctrine of participation.

The second part of Pickstock's book deals, in fascinating detail, with the pre-Vatican II Roman Mass (see 'A Short Essay on the Reform of the Liturgy', *New Blackfriars* , February 1997). Briefly, the unreformed Mass, with its apparently random accretions, uneconomic repetitions, abrupt lapses into silence, etc., far from being a decadent



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complication of a liturgical simplicity to which we needed to return, actually permitted the 'apophatic reserve' and 'ceaseless recommencements' the worshipper needs if he is 'to mingle his voice with that of the supernumerary seraphim', as in Mason's hymn. Instead of being a muddle requiring to be streamlined to facilitate congregational participation (etc.), the Rite, 'riven with supplementations and deferrals' (in Derridean jargon), was a 'liturgical stammer', developed over centuries to betoken both distance from and proximity to God. The problem with the scholars charged with reforming the liturgy after Vatican II was that they were not marked by 'the work of de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, and the influence of *the restored Thomism of Etienne Gilson*' (p. 175, my emphasis).

Pickstock's account of the eucharist as doxology requires, as 'its logical conclusion' (p. 246), the doctrine of transubstantiation. P.J. FitzPatrick's dismissal (in *In Breaking of Bread*) of Aquinas's version of the doctrine is mistaken: by leaving out the participation ontology, he makes Aquinas a Scotist, reducing transubstantiation to 'an unnecessary, arbitrary, and scarcely comprehensible mystery' (pp. 259-61). Jean-Luc Marion (in *God without Being*) shows that modern transignification theories are 'crudely metaphysical' in a way that the doctrine of transubstantiation properly understood avoids: as dependent, that is to say, 'upon the idea that Christ's body and blood are "present" only in the sense of the ecstatic passing of time as gift, and *not* in the mode of a punctual moment abstracted from action, under the command of our gaze'. Against Marion, who thinks that the eucharistic presence is something extra-linguistic, Pickstock contends that it is not only language that creates the sacrament but that the eucharist is the transcendental condition of all language, 'in carrying the secrecy, uncertainty, and discontinuity which characterize every sign to an extreme (no body appears in the bread), it also delivers a final disclosure, certainty, and continuity (the bread is the Body) which alone makes it possible now to trust every sign' (p. 262). Indeed, the words 'This is my body', at the consecration, far from being problematic, 'are the only words which certainly have meaning, and lend this meaning to all other words' (p. 263). That contention needs rather more unpacking than it gets here; but this 'labyrinthine treatise' is, as John Milbank says on the back cover, a 'supremely important book'.

Both Phillip Blond and Catherine Pickstock handsomely acknowledge their debt to John Milbank, whose Theology *and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (see *New Blackfriars* June 1992) opened the space for these new departures in English theology. *The Word Made Strange* collects a dozen of his essays, three of which, in earlier versions, appeared in this journal (July/August and September 1983, January 1993, and July/August 1995). Once again, beyond the sterile alternatives of deistic liberalism and antiphilosophical



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fundamentalism, he offers richly documented and brilliantly argued theology at an uncommonly demanding intellectual level. Once again, however, since we are on this trail, the figure of Duns Scotus haunts the argument. For example, Aquinas's 'discourse of participated perfections' is expounded in contrast with Scotus, 'who makes perfection language belong to a pre-theological discourse concerned with "common being" indifferent to finite and infinite' (p. 9). Heidegger's reading of the entire philosophical tradition as onto-theological in character often depends, as Milbank rightly says, on 'reading it through neo-scholastic spectacles'; but it 'seems at the least unclear as to whether this accurately describes Platonism, neoplatonism and Christian theology before Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus' (p. 41). The problem with Jean-Luc Marion's theology is that, though he sees Scotus's 'idolization of God as univocal *ens* ', he is himself trapped in 'lingering "Scotism"' (pp. 47-8). This is not surprising, given his acceptance of the Heideggerian story: Heidegger's conception of a non-theological and non-metaphysical *Seinsdenken* develops from the Scotist thesis of the univocity of being (p. 191). Indeed, the post-Vatican II acceptance of 'pluralism' in the philosophy available to theologians, to the extent that they accept the priority of the 'question of being' (or of meaning?), 'is in itself a triumph of Scotism over Thomism' (p. 191). Allowing that there have been attempts, following von Balthasar, to edge away from this, Milbank contends that, in Karl Rahner and many other Catholic theologians these days, 'human thought is allowed a pre-theological autonomy, and a pre-theological, Scotist-Heideggerian apprehension of a sheerly categorical (*sic* — read 'categorial'?) *esse* ' (p. 175). Finally, in this little Scotist sottisier , referring us to Gilson's *Jean Duns Scot* , Milbank claims that it was Scotus's 'dissociation of the act of creation *ad extra* from the generation *ad intra* , and of the divine ideas from the filial *ars* , which really sealed the displacing of the Trinity from the centre of Christian dogmatics' (p. 177). That reminds us of the other theological story in which Duns Scotus figures not as adversary but as hero. According to T.F. Torrance, the misbegotten neoscholastic practice of splitting the treatises *de Deo uno* and *de Deo trino* , and thus of displacing the doctrine of the Trinity, originates in Aquinas's decision to endorse Boethius's conception of person as rational individual, rather than the relational concept developed by Richard of St Victor and Scotus. The Boethian-Thomist view reappears, Torrance thinks, in Locke and thus, ironically, becomes the paradigm of the autonomous individual with which our culture need never have been afflicted if we had paid heed, in this respect at least, to the Victorine-Scotist conception. But whether as scapegoat or tulchan, the intellectual energy that 'Scotism' releases in Milbank's book, as in Pickstock's, helps to place them among the finest works of constructive theology for many years.

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