

Reviews

I CALL YOU FRIENDS by Timothy Radcliffe OP, *Continuum*, New York, 2001. Pp. vi + 225, £9.99 pbk.

Anyone reading this book will quickly learn that Timothy Radcliffe is interested in the truth—in the finer points of whether the divine existence is the divine essence no doubt (although we read little of that here)—but also the common or garden kinds of truth questions that all believers face. Are the gospels true? Are the teachings of the Church true? Is there truth in other faiths? These are questions which preface *I Call You Friends* and which run throughout it. It was his interest in truth which first led him to the Dominican Order whose motto is *Veritas* (surely a startling testimony to the success of branding in advertising), and it is his interest in truth which has sustained him during his Dominican life—as teacher, scholar, Provincial and Master—truth and friendship, the last being the particular ‘flavour’ of Dominican life as he sees it.

This book is, appropriately given its ambient author, a translation into English from the French original, *Je Vous Appelle Amis*, which won the French religious book prize for 2001. It falls into two halves. The first, autobiographical, is in the form of an interview with a highly effective (and theologically literate) French journalist. The second is a selection of talks and lectures to groups as varied as the Sant’ Egidio community, London head teachers and the world congress of Benedictine abbots. Both halves are excellent and what is more illuminate each other—the first providing the ballast which weighs the second selection of talks.

In keeping with Fr Timothy’s culinary metaphor of friendship as the ‘flavour’ of Dominican life, we should say that the autobiographical section gives an account of the slow simmering of a rich English and Dominican ‘stock’ into which the intellectual salts and spices of his peripatetic life as Master, not to mention a range of exotic fruits and vegetables, have been tipped. The reporter begins with Gallican directness: Where were you born? What was your background? Most English readers will know something of Fr Radcliffe’s family background; one of comfort, formality and deep litter Catholicism. Country houses, private chapels, endless uncles and cousins who are variously monks, abbots and priests (few of whom, however, left-leaning Dominicans). His family were not surprised when, apparently without warning or predisposition, he decided to become a priest; they were quite surprised that he wanted to be a Dominican. What is nice about his brief account of childhood

is that he feels no need to beat his breast and decry the privilege he knew (even though, as a child, he could not know how privileged it was). Instead he paints a moving picture of stability, warmth, Catholicism and Englishness intertwined and taken for granted—all of which is summarised in a complimentary sketch of his own father, 'an utterly honest man' and model for his own search for truth.

Fr Radcliffe has a gift for succinct summary: a thumbnail which tells you all you need to know about a moment or a person. Of his own decision to enter the Dominicans he tells us that he had to question for the first time after leaving school the faith he had taken for granted. Either it was true and if so worth giving one's all for, or it was not true, and in that case worth nothing and to be cast away. At the promptings of the French reporter he speaks of the tensions of entering religious life in the Sixties by remembering a conversation with the ancient and scholarly Gervase Mathew OP: 'I said to him, "It must be very hard for you, Gervase, to see all this going on". To which he replied, "Oh, it was worse in the fourteenth century."' That generation of older, brilliant English Dominicans appears in the role of Zen Masters in this book, peering up from their manuscripts to say the most improbable things to the young Dominicans, but above all letting the young be free to be themselves while giving themselves wholly to God. Timothy recalls Cornelius Ernst OP opening one of his lectures by saying he intended in it to consider the Prologue to John's Gospel in the light of the later poetry of Rimbaud and some recent mathematical theory.

It was just such daring leaps of imagination in the often eccentric English Dominicans that captured my heart when first I read and later met some of them. And the conviction that if Christianity were really true, then you could both throw anything at it and expect it to stand, and throw Christianity 'at anything' (mathematics, modern poetry, social theory) and expect to be enriched by it. Fr Radcliffe, like his English Dominican mentors, finds his intellectual friends everywhere—poets, economists, philosophers, feminist theorists, all jostle here. We find references to D.H.Lawrence, Mary Midgely, J.K.Galbraith, Vaclav Havel, Emily Dickinson, Julia Kristeva, as well, of course, to his Dominican brothers and sisters living and dead and the guild of biblical scholars. He learned most of his theology, he tells us, from the sermons of Herbert McCabe OP.

The insight that seems to have gone deepest, and which again seems distinctive of the English Dominicans, is that tradition and creativity need not be opposed to each other. Gospel and tradition are always new, always fresh and always true—we have nothing to fear from listening to or reading the strangest modern voices. The Spirit has been given to the Church at Pentecost; it will not be taken away. Indeed to be a good preacher means, in his Dominican understanding, to be a good listener. The *quaestio disputata* of the

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