

Reviews

DECONSTRUCTING RADICAL ORTHODOXY: POSTMODERN THEOLOGY, RHETORIC AND TRUTH edited by Wayne Hankey and Douglas Hedley, Ashgate, Aldershot and Burlington, Vt, 2005, £50, Pp. xviii + 191 hbk.

Radical Orthodoxy defers to no experts and engages in no dialogues. Radical Orthodoxy does not recognize other valid points of view outside the theological. Radical Orthodoxy believes that nihilism is nearer the truth than humanism. Radical Orthodoxy utterly rejects the cynicism and pseudo-adulthood of the present age. Radical Orthodoxy relishes the task of sharing a delight in the hermetic with uninitiated others. Radical Orthodoxy detests evangelicalism, because it is creepy, voluntaristic and therefore nihilistic. Radical Orthodoxy rejects the idolization of academic politeness as part of that legacy of civic humanism which substituted manners for a true liturgical order grounded in a collectively shared vision.

The above statements are not excerpts from a spoof manifesto of Radical Orthodoxy produced by the movement's detractors, but taken from its own Twenty-Four Theses which enunciated its founding principles. Its love of rhetoric and paradox, hostile construction of modernity, revisionist intellectual historiography, and intense collegiality all mean that few people who have encountered Radical Orthodoxy have responded neutrally to it.

This collection is the first thorough critical response, and as such presents a way into Radical Orthodoxy which appropriates its own methodology: exposition by means of critique and subversion. Many of the British and Canadian contributors focus on the often contentious readings of various figures in the movement's pantheon of heroes and villains, including Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Scotus, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Derrida. Others explore specific themes, such as subjectivity, politics and the eucharist. The essays are varied. John Marenbon's on Aquinas is brilliantly lucid, and Eli Diamond's on Platonic liturgy, George Pattison's on transubstantiation and Steven Shakespeare's on Kierkegaard each have much to commend them. Douglas Hedley and Wayne Hankey both explore, appropriately, wider implications of the critique, and their contributions help to make the collection far more than an exercise in fault-finding.

The volume does not include an essay examining Radical Orthodoxy's treatment of modern French catholic thinkers like Maurice Blondel and Henri de Lubac. This partly reflects a curious preference amongst Anglo-American theologians for modern French philosophers with often tenuous commitment to the Christian faith. The Blondelian perspective lies, however, at the roots of Radical Orthodoxy's strident anti-secular and anti-modern rhetoric and its hostility to any form of self-validating philosophical discourse. De Lubac features above all *via* his theology of the supernatural, in which he demonstrates the dependence of nature on divine action. The movement's use of these ideas poses large questions, however. In the case of Blondel, how convincing is the transposition of his critique of secularity from the Third Republic into the British, American or German intellectual and political traditions? Is his critique not itself founded on a particular set of contingent socio-political circumstances which are now of primarily historical interest and need to be overcome by a more Pauline vision of the *polis* ordained to exercise functions of government autonomously within a limited yet extensive sphere? In De Lubac's case, to what extent does talk of the dependence of nature on the supernatural which

infuses the world slip too easily into the completely different notion of an easy passage from nature to the supernatural achieved by nature itself? De Lubac is quite clear that nature's desire for the supernatural can only be a divine gift. He also has his own particular target in view: the strict observance Thomism of the earlier twentieth century, endorsed by the official commentary of Cajetan republished with the Leonine *Summa Theologiae*. How relevant is this historic attack on scholasticism to present-day church and theology?

Any thoroughgoing critique of Radical Orthodoxy needs, however, to offer constructive alternatives. It is easy to identify the movement's weaknesses, with Procrustean historiography and a reluctance to learn from competent scholars in the numerous fields it traverses being among the more obvious. Radical Orthodoxy has nevertheless succeeded in capturing imagination and revivifying the often sterile world of theological debate. Its ingenious use of postmodern packaging, and the intangible yet pervasive aura of authority, exclusivity and intrigue emanating from it, have attracted many younger scholars, particularly those in Anglican ministry of catholic persuasion. Radical Orthodoxy justifies the continued existence of churches and church ministry in a postliberal world: the Church is the only true community, theology is the discourse on which all others depend, liturgy is the consummation of the whole of human life, and secularity needs to be undermined comprehensively. Any challenge to such clear, simple principles as these needs to be prosecuted with similar verve and panache if it is to gain wide acceptance.

The early growth of Radical Orthodoxy was very much a phenomenon of Cambridge theology, with members identified and principles transmitted by means of the one-on-one tutorial system, and its novelty and interactive character prized as much as thorough research or rigorous scholarship. Since then, the movement has diffused both geographically and intellectually as personalities have moved on and ideas have spread. It will be interesting to see how long it is able to preserve any coherent identity.

DAVID GRUMETT

POETS AND GOD: CHAUCER, SHAKESPEARE, HERBERT, MILTON, WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE, BLAKE by David L. Edwards, *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London, 2005, pp. xv + 256, £12.95 pbk. ISBN: 0-232-52577-3.

This book examines seven poets, six of whose work rests at the heart of the English literary canon, whilst that of George Herbert occupies a humbler – though still highly esteemed – place there. Very many of us would agree with David Edwards that these writers 'can come to be valued as useful and even enjoyable – indeed, even loved – escorts for life' (p. ix), and this is why he wishes to extend their readership. His approach is mainly biographical, exploring each poet's work in that context, and his style is clear and relaxed; a 'non-academic presentation' intended to 'persuade more readers to go not only to the texts but also to some of the scholarly literature which has added richly to knowledge and understanding' (p. xiv). He hopes that this poetry will 'stimulate some serious thoughts about life as a whole, for here is literature of the highest quality and of immortal power, and that may have a more lasting and profound influence than most of the material usually offered to us for our improvement or pleasure' (p. ix).

Strongly implicit in the religious bias of this book is a claim that these poets can help people in their spiritual quests. However, the content of *Poets and God* does not really justify its title: we are told rather more about these poets' attitudes towards the institution of the Church and to some of its doctrines than about their relationships with God. A closer study of how their spirituality both informed and was nourished by their personal experience and creative endeavours would be more interesting and potentially more beneficial.