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# Dialectic and narrative in Aquinas; The soul as virgin wife; On evil (3 books)

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considered in itself (chap. 9), and so is the relationship between Father and Son (chap. 10). A contemplation in broad lines of the Athanasian doctrine of salvation and of its linkage with trinitarian and anti-Arian theology occupies chapter 11.

On a classical issue, which he treats with rather conventional methods, Widdicombe succeeds in providing a delightful reading. His smoothly linear exploration of concepts remains in all cases well organized. Thereby he provides very opportune help to many students, should they be eager or at least in need to understand a Patristic tradition. The direct contact with the analysed sources, and their assumption into a coherent interpretation testifying to their present relevance, are at the core of each chapter. Historical erudition, not being neglected, remains nevertheless marginal. In controverted matters, Widdicombe deliberately keeps a conservative stance, which entails a prudent balance in his style and judgment, at the cost of some misinformation about current scholarship. He reads his ancient authors with the devotion of a nineteenth century Anglican clergyman, even if some of his observations more than once reflect a more contemporary quest of identity in matters of faith. A "Postscript" tries even to face the feminist challenge, but only in recalling academically on the archaic foundations in Western culture and society of masculine metaphors used in traditional God-talk.

A short bibliography and three indexes complete the work. In the field of highly specialized Patristic studies such a monograph feels refreshing and enjoyable. It nurtures the dream of preserving a continuity of thought and language with the Fathers, a dream valuable as much as many others at a time of future-centred ideologies and brand-new technologies pervading all forms of traditional thinking.

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### **On Evil: Disputed Questions**

Thomas Aquinas

Translated by Jean T. and John A. Oesterle

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995

\$49.95 US

### **Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the *Summa contra Gentiles***

Thomas S. Hibbs

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995

\$34.95 US

## The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart

Amy Hollywood

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995

\$32.95 US

Among the many benefits of what has been tagged 'postmodernism' has been an increasing notice given to theories regarding the 'other'. A number of feminists, for example, working for the most part from post-modernist perspectives have taken up the subject and, in spite of different approaches (and often an unnecessarily confusing application of supposedly necessary jargon), they have directed our attention once again to that age-old and cross-cultural virtue: respect—respect not only for the other as individual, but for groups as a whole and for the animate and inanimate world about us—respect for the dignity of all living human beings and the dignity of those now present to us only in the extant cultural record.

Much earlier in this century Simone Weil took up the matter of respect for those others who remain to us only in their writings. In her 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God' (*Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Caufurd [New York, 1951]) she insisted that in study "will power has practically no place", that it is not the role of a student to approach a text with preformed questions (and therefore predetermined answers as well), but rather to 'wait upon' an author, to attend to his or her words: "The intelligence can only be led by desire... Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object" (p. 110–111).

Weil's proposal remains an attractive vision for some scholars, all of whom agree that the beginning, middle, and end of interpretation must be directed by a desire to understand the face of the 'other' before them and that unless there are immediately obvious reasons for not doing so, the best way to approach another human being is with waiting, attending, respect rather than suspicion.

Ironically, however, very often the persons who have pressed 'other-regard' to the fullest establish patterns which make such a virtue nearly impossible. In the case of some who insist most vociferously on concern for the 'other' there is a concomitant attack on earlier historical and theological methods and approaches as privileging the patriarchal scholar and thus as destructive particularly of women's stories and narratives of the disempowered generally. The result is inevitable: The 'other' is now lost in a negative victory on the part of patriarchs and imperialists; thus the sexual abuser provides a final meaning for the once brilliant poetic and religious voice of Christina Rossetti, and Kateri's saintliness is rejected as the triumphalistic fiction of arrogant ecclesiastics.

This incongruity is often evident even in the case of good studies. The appearance of Hibbs' and Hollywood's books at the same time, from the

same press, and both on medieval religious subjects sharpens the paradox. Thomas Aquinas, one supposes, is among the last individuals who deserve comment in our supposedly enlightened age. After all he did claim (like Aristotle and the Christian tradition as a whole), did he not, that women are not persons and that they will gain all necessary male appendages with their resurrected perfect bodies? (Readers interested in the facts behind such apocryphal urban folktales are directed to Michael Nolan, "The Defective Male: What Aquinas Really Said," *New Blackfriars*, 75 (March 1994), 156–166.) And yet, despite the antagonism often directed Aquinas' and later Thomists' way, it is Hibbs (and the Aquinas as read by him) who manages to prove himself the most respectful of 'other'. Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart as they appear through Hollywood's glass—albeit carefully focussed, deeply insightful, and consistently stimulating—inevitably have their being solely in "the liberating appeal [they have (I am creatively misreading here; Hollywood is throughout this passage referring directly to Eckhart's writings)] for women, [their] power to subvert traditional authoritative structures, and the ability for women in theory to be granted enormous spiritual prestige on the basis of the identification with the divine" (203).

Hibbs' study provides a fascinating entrée into Thomas' world. He reads the *Summa Contra Gentiles* rhetorically. The book, he demonstrates, was not written as an apologetic against Islam nor does it support a manualist doctrine that revelation takes up where reason leaves off. 'Gentiles' refers, Hibbs points out, to 'pre- or non-Christian man', and the argument of the *Summa* is developed on the principle that the end to which it is directed is not knowledge but wisdom and that the philosophical wisdom as described in the first three books, 'made possible by the first gift of God through creation' (16), reaches its climax in a sense of its own incapacity to fulfil its desire for God and to accept the address (in Book Four) of revelation which in turn inflames the desire upward (136). The first mode is that of faith seeking understanding, the second that movement of faith inflamed toward the love of God in its fullness, and the book as a whole serves as an excellent means not only for providing the readers with a profitable method for reading Thomas but for leading the individual, who attends to its argument, more fully toward the wisdom(s) Thomas himself sought.

But the book has its problems. Coming as it does within the series "Revisions" edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair McIntyre, Hibbs' work, not surprisingly, links its reading of the *contra Gentiles* with recent discussions of narrative and tradition-framed concerns as treated respectively in Hauerwas' *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame, 1977) and McIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, 1990). Fortunately Hibbs does not have a great need to note the links between these two modern authors until the final chapter which recapitulates the argument, drawing parallels between the *contra Gentiles* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* and demonstrating that Hibbs too has read René Girard.

Whereas Hibbs tends to limit his need to prove he has done his secondary reading on his topic, Hollywood is not quite so judicious, shifting



rapidly at times from more directed secondary medieval studies to contemporary theories on gender, genre, body, and the like. All this tends to mask the 'others' of her study and the masking is increased by the book's structure: Hollywood has chosen a broadly comparative approach. She does devote chapters to each of her characters specifically, but even in these the reader is regularly reminded of the end toward which the book is directed, thus further separating us by her 'thesis' from the sparkling souls she ostensibly sets before us. As the press release for the volume far too bluntly states Hollywood's argument, the mystics whom she is treating "articulate a mysticism of everyday life...challeng[ing] the sexual ideologies in their culture and claiming a union without distinction between the soul and the divine."

But *The Soul as Virgin Wife* is far more nuanced than the press release would have it and my own reactive complaints cannot deny Hollywood's attentiveness to her medieval conversation partners nor the striking insights she has gained in her listening to them. And that attentiveness arises continuously throughout the book, allowing readers to set to one side those late twentieth century themes which will almost certainly die with this decade and to meet these medieval fellow-pilgrims one to one. Indeed, it is when Hollywood reflects directly on the text before her in and for itself that we hear her distinctive voice and have pleasure and gain in our listening, despite any lingering disappointments with some limited readings (of Augustine's *Confessions*, for example) or a general lack of close attention to the broader theological framework within which her authors flourished.

A part of that framework can be clearly see in the Jean and John Oesterle's excellent translation of Aquinas' disputed questions, *On Evil*. The eleven page introduction by John Oesterle (who died before its publication) to the crisp 535 page translation of Thomas' text provides all the reader needs to meet the Angelic Doctor directly. Although the translators clearly are aware of 'the most recent criticism' neither has any need to prove this to readers or to defend the translation in light of some new-hatched theory. All sources are fully provided in both their critical edition and their English translation (where such exists) and cross-references to other of Thomas works are offered where useful. We are as a result introduced to questions on evil generally, on sin, its cause, original sin, human choice, venial sin and the seven capital sins, and demons.

Readers of the Hollywood book in particular may well find Question V of the *On Evil* of special interest for better understanding the ends which drew Mechthild, Porete, and Eckhart: "...when a person by sinning casts away from himself [inclusively intended throughout the translation] that by which he was disposed to acquire some good, he deserves to be deprived of that good for the obtaining of which he was disposed, and the very deprivation of that good is a fitting punishment for this. And therefore the fitting punishment for original sin is the deprivation of grace and consequently of the vision of God, in which man is ordained through grace" (211-212).

One wonders how the comparative argument concerning the soul as virgin wife might be changed if worked out immediately in the context of the

Christian commonplace, here enunciated by Thomas. Certainly the reader would then at the least be required to consider the depth of the 'real' differences between Mechthild, Porete, and Eckhart and the reasons which led to one of that number being declared a heretic *ad sonam* and another to be executed. Whatever one might think of such actions in any era or society, they are indicators of the seriousness with which their contemporaries viewed any "deprivation of grace and consequently of the vision of God", a seriousness directing us to think more fully about the significance of such deprivation than it does about contemporary moralizing over general liberal freedoms.

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### **The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering**

Yacob Tesfai, editor  
Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994  
155 pp. \$24.50 Cdn.

In May of 1992, Yacob Tesfai, an Eritrean Lutheran researcher at the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg, invited theologians from around the world to reflect on the meaning of suffering and the significance of the theology of the cross. The theological concern underlying this study was the human divisions caused by suffering, especially those divisions imposed by the expansion of the global capitalist economy. Each scholar was asked to reflect on the cross as a symbol of suffering and as the means of overcoming the divisions caused by suffering.

While a diversity of views was sought, the one unifying theme that continues to recur in each piece is that the theology of the cross cannot be restricted to comforting the troubles of individual consciences, but must also be a means of critique of the social consequences of global economic activity. Above all, the cross must address the suffering of those most dispossessed by the expansion of capitalism. From the conquest of the Americans, through the slave trade, down to our own day, the cross has been a tool of domination, robbery, and economic imperialism. If it is to retain its power as a symbol of new hope and new life in Christ, the cross must also symbolize Christ's (and consequently Christ's church's) identification with those who are forced to suffer.

Although typically uneven, this slim volume has some gems that should not be overlooked. The best of the collection is the feminist treatise by Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel who seeks to restrain some of the excesses