

Consensus

Volume 15

Issue 1 *Mission of the Church*

Article 18

5-1-1989

Faith, Reason and Theology: Questions 1-4 of His Commentary on the 'De Trinitate' of Boethius

Peter C. Erb

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Erb, Peter C. (1989) "Faith, Reason and Theology: Questions 1-4 of His Commentary on the 'De Trinitate' of Boethius," *Consensus*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol15/iss1/18>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

The Reformed tradition is depicted as the special inheritor of the Renaissance whereas Luther's theological breakthrough is interpreted as a special effusion within the late medieval spiritual tradition. In other words, the Reformed exegetical principle of *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* and the scholasticism which inevitably accompanied it is attributed to the humanist roots of Calvin and Zwingli. This leads McGrath to a series of unremarkable conclusions, such as:

The quest for the intellectual origins of the Reformation thus concerns not the identification of a single factor, nor even a group of factors, which may be said to have *caused* the movement, but rather concerns the unfolding of a complex matrix of creatively interacting intellectual concerns, whose precise mode of interaction was determined as much by local as by cosmopolitan, by social as by academic, factors (197-198).

These and other truisms blunt the edge of Occam's razor. McGrath's flare for finely textured argument and his erudition is ill-served in this overview of gargantuan historical-ideological problems. Lurking behind McGrath's able unpacking of vexatious historiographical points of contention is a monolithic understanding of the larger intellectual processes. There is, for instance, no mention of the Reformation radicals who alternately tantalize or bedevil similar analyses. McGrath's somewhat rigid and narrowly intellectual approach to the subject matter did not result in a compelling new interpretation of the origins of the Reformation. Instead, the prospective reader can await expert direction along some well trodden paths of Reformation research.

Timothy R. Cooke

St. Peter's Anglican Church, Brockville, Ontario

Faith, Reason and Theology: Questions I-IV of his Commentary on the "De Trinitate" of Boethius

Thomas Aquinas

Translated by Armand Maurer

Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987

[Medieval Sources in Translation, 32] 110 pp. \$6.50

One of the many common opinions clung to by Christians today insists that we can simplistically divide individuals into "head" and "heart". The "head", according to this pattern of thought, includes everything associated with reason, the intellect, systematisation in theology, and ivory-tower theory, and is depicted as negative; the "heart", on the other hand denotes the realm of faith, the feelings, intuitive insight, "praxis", the good.

This commonplace is unfortunately pervasive, and not only does it continue to misinform Christians in every vocation, but it shares along with

other corruptions of modern Christianity in the limitation and de-formation of their spirituality. One aspect of its destructive nature in particular is marked by the damage it has done to the character of a number of theologians, who are often described disparagingly as "scholastic" and cast aside even before the reader reaches a sentence more complex than the most naively constructed headline of a grocery-store tabloid.

Few theologians have been more fully sinned against in this regard than Thomas Aquinas, popularly caricatured in Protestant, Catholic, and secular circles as the worst example (next to what is claimed to be his primary authority, Aristotle) of a "patriarchal" (sic) technical theology, so intricate that, like contemporary machinery of the same complexity, it is seldom operative. For that reason, this splendid translation of the first four questions of Aquinas' commentary on Boethius' treatise on the Trinity will likely, most unfortunately, be ignored by all but those with a specific interest in thirteenth century philosophy. It is to be hoped that in at least a few instances, however, the translator's title, which links the supposed opposites, faith and reason, together with theology, will catch a wandering reader's eye and continue to direct it through the brief 110 pages and the wealth of insight they contain.

Faith, Reason and Theology completes a work begun by Father Maurer 35 years ago when he published his translation of the last two questions (V-VI) of Aquinas' commentary under the title *The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1953; fourth edition, 1986). In these two volumes we have now available a clear and carefully annotated translation of what is among the earliest theological works of Thomas, written at Paris between 1255 and 1259. Maurer's initial comments and notes to both these volumes provide readers with an excellent introduction for a study of the translated text. (For the uninitiated reader one of the best introductions to Thomas and his time remains Part Three of Father Maurer's excellent *Medieval Philosophy* [New York, 1962], a book which he refers to as the "undergraduate" version of Etienne Gilson's "graduate" *A History of Medieval Philosophy* [New York, 1955].)

Boethius' brief, six-section treatise *On the Trinity*, composed sometime before the author's death in 525 A.D., is most readily available in the Loeb Classical Library (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1973) and is fascinating in its own right. The questions Thomas raises on the first two sections of the piece, however, make particularly interesting reading in light of the faith-reason "problem" alluded to above. Reason in no way takes priority over faith in Thomas' system as is sometimes suggested in popular circles. Exactly the opposite: As the "Angelic doctor" states in the opening sentence to his commentary, "The natural gaze of the human mind, burdened by the weight of a perishable body, cannot fix itself upon the first light of truth." This first light, indeed, is that "by which everything can be easily known". Since "creatures which are our natural means of knowing God, are infinitely distant from him" and "because our power of sight is easily deceived by objects seen at a distance", error arises in the attempt to see

God. "Accordingly, God has provided for the human race another, safe way of knowing, imparting his knowledge to the minds of men through faith."

Thomas goes on to expand upon the principles outlined in this introductory paragraph in his literal commentary on the Boethian text and in the questions which the text raises and which he addresses in the remainder of his work. "Does the human mind need a new illumination by the divine light in order to know truth? Can the human mind arrive at a knowledge of God? Is God what the mind first knows?" Initial questions such as these are strikingly contemporary, as are those later ones which dare to raise the question of the possibility of a science of divine realities (by no means is this a foregone conclusion) which seek to investigate the necessity of faith for humanity, the relationship between faith and "religion", and the issues of plurality and individuation.

Nor will the question form of the commentary or the language unduly distract an intelligent and committed lay reader. Throughout the book, the translator has taken care to follow the admonishment of Thomas himself in the fourth article of Question 2 when he insists that there are truths which everyone should know and that in the case of these "a teacher should so measure his words that they help rather than hinder his hearer".

Peter C. Erb

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario

Grace and Power: Base Communities and Nonviolence in Brazil

Dominique Barbé

Translated by John P. Brown

Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987

150 pp. U.S. \$12.95

Since the emergence of an indigenous Latin American tradition of theological reflections in the late 1960s there has been a growing interest in, and occasional criticism of, Liberation Theology in North America. Some of this criticism has been openly ideological. To take just one example, the vigorous critiques of Michael Novak clearly owe more to his commitment to capitalism as the appropriate expression of Christianity than they do to serious theological reflection on the meaning of the gospel. At the same time, however, legitimately theological questions have been raised in other quarters concerning basic presuppositions and commitments underlying Liberation Theology. In particular, the emphasis on orthopraxis has resulted in pastoral practice that at times has seemed to extol social activism at the expense of spirituality and prayer life. Likewise, the identification of sin as being primarily social, embodied in unjust structures,