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# Review of Tracey Rowland's "Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II"

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**Tracey ROWLAND, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition After Vatican II*.** London: Routledge, 2003. pp. 226. \$125 (\$39.95 pb). ISBN 0-415-30526-8.  
Reviewed by Jason Paul BOURGEOIS

This text, written by Tracey Rowland as part of the Radical Orthodoxy series, holds as its main thesis that many post-Vatican II Thomists and other theologians have uncritically accepted the ideal of adapting Catholic theology to modernity, without an adequate understanding of the radically secular nature of modern culture.

In the first part of the book, she attributes this problem to ambiguous language about the relationship of religion and culture within *Gaudium et Spes* itself, which yields at least two interpretations. The first is John Paul II's belief that the key to interpreting GS is paragraph 22, which states that all of human culture is subsumed through the Incarnation into the realm of Christ, who is its source and goal. Rowland herself accepts this Christocentric reading of GS. The second stresses the autonomy of culture from religion, and Rowland identifies Rahner and Courtney Murray as Thomists (among others) who contribute to this interpretation. While recognizing that this second interpretation contains the hope that an autonomous culture, through natural law and the drive for transcendence, can be subsumed within a Christological and soteriological framework (that is, nature can be subsumed by grace), Rowland holds that in practice it leads to secularization and the exclusion of religion from culture (politics, education, and the arts).

In the second part of the book, Rowland unpacks her assertion that modern culture is antithetical to religion. She examines modern culture through a—somewhat artificial—tripartite division of *ethos*, *nomos*, and *logos*. The *ethos* of modern culture is based upon bureaucracy and the loss of the "intransitive" (i.e., subjective or spiritual) dimension of work. The *nomos* of modern culture is based upon "mass culture" which enjoins mediocrity and conventionality rather than the noble striving towards the formation of a "beautiful soul" required by Christian self-development or *Bildung*. For Rowland, the lack of striving for the ideal of beauty, combined with a rejection of the concept of memory (that is, an appreciation of past traditions), leave modern culture without any theological vision of the future and thus without hope.

Finally, the *logos* of modern culture is based upon the false claim to be "theologically neutral." For Rowland, modern culture is imbued with Liberal philosophy, which emphasizes individual autonomy, a church-state separation that leads to secularism, the Enlightenment notion of progress through rejection of tradition, and an emphasis on human rights independent from any religious foundation. Like David Schindler, she believes that such a philosophy leads to a radical privatization of religion that effectively eliminates its influence upon culture and eventually even individuals. Its effect is practical atheism and hence it is not "theologically neutral" at all. Rowland's

critique here and throughout the book is against those Thomists (and other theologians) who think that the Catholic natural law tradition is, or can be, compatible with such Liberal philosophy.

In the third part of the book, Rowland pushes for a form of Thomism that sees natural law and the Liberal "human rights" tradition to be radically incompatible. Her ideal candidate for this is Alisdair MacIntyre, whom she identifies as a "postmodern Augustinian Thomist." This school of thought would recognize that all thought patterns (even those that have universal significance) are intrinsically bound within the language of particular traditions, and would thus seek to preserve the language of natural law in its Greco-Roman and Christian cultural context, rather than "accommodate" it to secular notions of natural rights and autonomous freedom.

In the end, Rowland's book offers an interesting perspective on several debates within Catholic theology: the nature-grace debate and its effect on the understanding of autonomous modern culture, the interpretation of natural law, and the interpretation of Vatican II itself. Her caution against the wholesale adaptation of Catholic theology to an essentially secular and post-Christian modern culture is very apt. However, her solution rejects so many great names and ideas of twentieth-century Catholic theology that it becomes more a recommendation of what "ought not to be" rather than a positive prescription for what ought to be. If taken to its logical conclusion, it not only offers a critique of individual theologians or schools of theology, but also even of some teachings of the magisterium, for example those contained in the Catholic social encyclicals of the popes from Leo XIII to John Paul II.

The book itself is written in highly academic prose, frequently using shorthand labels like "Liberal" and "Genealogical" to represent broad (and sometimes unidentified) schools of thought. It is only recommended for those graduate students or professional theologians who have a particular interest in the theological debates listed above, or who have a particular interest in the thought of David Schindler and Alisdair MacIntyre.