

Review of From Hermes to Benedict XVI: Faith and Reason in Modern Catholic Thought by Aidan Nichols OP (Gracewing: Leominster, 2009) 254 pages. 14.99 pounds sterling.

This is the latest work from Fr Aidan Nichols, the English Dominican who was regarded as an outside chance (because he belongs to a religious Order) for the post of Archbishop of Westminster. He resides at Blackfriars' Priory in Cambridge with his cat Leo who was profiled in the popular coffee table book *Cloister Cats*. He is arguably the most prolific writer of orthodox Catholic theology in the UK and someone who is as much at home in the world of Continental thought as he is with Anglo-American scholarship.

This book is not for the uninitiated. Anyone who thinks that the relationship between faith and reason is something so straight-forward it might be explained to any tutorial group in a one hour session would find this work very confronting. It begins with a summary of the ideas of Georg Hermes (1775-1831) – a kind of “Catholic Kantian” (if that is not a contradiction in terms) and works through the positions of Anton Günther, Louis Bautain, Gregory XVI, Pius IX, Leo XIII, Joseph Kleutgen, Etienne Gilson, Maurice Blondel, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II) and finally Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI). Numerous other authorities such as Jacques Maritain and Pierre Rousselot are addressed in the commentary along the way and appear in the extensive footnotes. Students could in fact mine the footnotes for a treasury of references to this topic in French and German.

Having begun with a treatment of an author sympathetic to Kant, the work concludes with the decidedly anti-Kantian position of Ratzinger for whom ‘pure reason’ simply does not exist.

While almost every page is crammed with insights which would provide valuable material for anyone undertaking research in this field, what is particularly valuable is his treatment of the perspectives of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. He concludes that Benedict XVI is working within the tradition of Etienne Gilson (and in some ways advances it) and he uses quotations from David L Schindler, the Dean of the John Paul II Institute in Washington DC, to summarise the Gilsonian principles.

Nichols also makes the rather acute observation that whereas John Paul II spent his formative years in Poland fighting the “Old Left”, Benedict XVI spent his formative years in German universities fighting the “New Left”.

The “Old Left”, hard-core Stalinists and the like, were rationalists. They believed that Marxism was ‘the truth’ and that they could demonstrate this in intellectual disputation. The “New Left” was more romantically inclined. They were more interested in human emotions than dialectics, more interested in sex than the class struggle. Most significantly, they were convinced that rationalism was the myth that drove Germany into two world wars and the shameful Nazi experiment. By 1989 the “New Left” had taken a

decidedly post-modern turn. An interest in traditions, hermeneutics, myths and idols replaced any residual “Old Left” fascination with scientific rationality.

Benedict XVI’s frequent shots at the notion of Kantian ‘pure reason’ often upset those self-styled ‘Aristotelian Thomists’ for whom faith and reason must be kept chastely apart. But from the perspective of apologetics, Benedict’s ‘Gilsonian Thomism’, or preference for reading the faith-reason relationship in a Gilsonian manner, is actually more likely to be received with respect by the post-moderns than any appeal to ‘pure reason’. There is no surer way to offend a post-modern than to treat him or her as an eighteenth century rationalist.

Thus Nichols concludes that Benedict seems to desire to unite ‘philosophy and theology in a single, internally differentiated but also internally cohesive, intellectual act’. What one finds in Benedict’s many publications is a ‘convergence of the mainly philosophical disclosure of logos with the chiefly theological revelation of love’. “Love and Reason”, he writes, are the ‘twin pillars’ of reality. This in turn gives rise to a theological anthropology which pays equal attention to the head and the heart, to objectivity and affectivity.

Conversely, Nichols summarises the Christianity of the Hermesians as ‘morally serious and dialectically engaged’, ‘distanced from popular piety, skeptical of liturgical richness’ and ‘filled with a Kantian sense of duty’. He suggests that it could be considered as ‘the ecclesial version of the ethos of the Prussian state official’. This was my favourite paragraph in the entire work.

The next time I meet a Catholic intellectual who tries to tell me that the human heart, beauty, love and liturgy have nothing to do with morality, and that philosophy and theology should never be mixed, I will send them a photograph of Bismarck and refer them to Nichols.

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