

Book Review

Fergus Kerr,

Twentieth-century Catholic Theologians

Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Pp. ix, 230. £17.99.

Imagine carrying out this task over the range of the Christian churches: take any dozen books, commonly estimated to represent a particular church's style of theology, from the first quarter of the century and then a similar number from the latter quarter. Then ask how different, relatively, as two groups? If this test were carried out for the 20th century, I suspect that no group would show more change in assumptions, style, and content than Roman Catholic theology. The first batch of books would be characterised by a rigid and arid formalism, a notion that theology was somewhat like physics (minus the experimental component), and that there was no need to dialogue with new disciplines, the riches of the past, nor other Christians. By the end of the century there had been a revolution, albeit not one that did not generate many reactionary movements, nor one that had met with universal praise.

The key people in breaking with that Neoscholasticism were all formed, in one way or another, by it, and their new theology was to a large extent formed by recognising its short-comings and rejecting it. However, in the Catholic Church of the early 20th century such a rejection was not merely a shift in academic perspective, it was an act that required moral as well as intellectual courage: the Church viewed 'its' theology in much the same way that totalitarian states relate to their official ideology. So this book has a sub-theme – how these new voices were treated by the Roman authorities and how those same authorities sought to use force to uphold their views.

Against this background were are given chapters on Chenu (now mainly known by medievalists), Congar, Schillebeeckx, de Lubac, Rahner, Lonergan (the only one whose first language was English), von Balthasar, Küng, Wojtyla (better known as Pope John Paul II), and Joseph Ratzinger

(now better known as Benedict XVI). Each of these theologians' works are studied by locating their writings within their biographies and the more general scene at the time. This manner of presenting a survey of theologies is not only effective, but makes the book a joy to read. This set of surveys is set between a most valuable opening chapter on the state of Catholic theology at the beginning of the 20th century, and a less successful chapter that tries to give an overview of the scene at the present which does not sit well with the rest of the book reading more like the work of a journalist.

This is an important book for no matter how well one knows these theologians' works, to have their creators set within a contextual gallery makes all the parts more comprehensible. To those who do not know these writers, this is an authoritative introduction which draws out not only their individual areas of interest but how they relate to the whole theological endeavour, and, hopefully, it will show to those who refer to 'Catholic theology' as if it were a monolith that such was never the case (although in the early 20th century there was an influential group within Catholicism which were trying to create such a monolith). Lastly, anyone even vaguely familiar with the notion of history will wonder at the sequence in which the theologians are addressed. The key lies in that the first three (Chenu, Congar, Schillebeeckx) are Dominicans, the next three (and partly von Balthasar) are Jesuits, and the rest 'PBI' (diocesan clergy); Kerr, incidentally, is a Dominican!

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