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Book Review: Stanley M. Burgess: The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions (Sixth-Sixteenth Centuries)

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Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions (Sixth-Sixteenth Centuries)*. Peabody, MA. Hendrickson Publishers, 1997.

While identifying the precise nature and work of the second person of the Trinity has been one of the most vexing issues in the history of theology, explorations of the nature and activity of the third person likewise continues to be a complex subject of great uncertainties. Theological reflections on the Holy Spirit share the conceptual difficulties inherent in contemplating the mysteries of the Trinity (as seen, for example, in the patristic debates over the terms *homoousion* and *homoiousion*, which were crucial for the subsequent development of Christian doctrine). Moreover, there are many theological and ecclesiastical problems focussing rather more directly on the Holy Spirit. The *filioque* remains an important obstacle to uniting Eastern and Western churches, and the Spirit's transformative power remains a constant source of contradictory appeals from reformers, radicals, and revolutionaries alike. The ongoing unpredictability of the Spirit stands in contrast to the decisive action of God in Jesus Christ which, however mysteriously, seems to be a fixed, documented event of the past. A book which can provide solid, clear guidance in discussions of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is always welcome.

Stanley M. Burgess' *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions (Sixth-Sixteenth Centuries)*, the third volume in his trilogy on the Spirit, provides a lucid overview of theological discussions of the third person in the West from Gregory the Great to Menno Simons. The first two volumes, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions* (1984, formerly *The Spirit and the Church: Antiquity*) and *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions* (1989) examine earlier teachings and Orthodox theologians. Together these three offer an important resource for initial explorations in the historical dimensions of Christian pneumatology.

While he treats authors individually in separate chapters, Burgess introduces his third volume with comments on what he identifies as the two main themes of theological reflection on the Holy Spirit in the West during this Middle Ages and Reformation: the *filioque* and the gifts of the Spirit. Does the Spirit proceed from the Father, as for Eastern Christians or from the Father and the Son, as for the West. As Burgess' subsequent considerations of medieval theologians demonstrate, the debate over the procession of the Spirit entailed serious consequences both for the articulation of the Godhead and for the devotional practices dependant on such an articulation. (More sustained comparisons between the authors in volumes 2 and 3 of his trilogy would have made this more apparent.)

The Spirit's bestowing gifts of supernatural understanding, peace, joy, prophecy, and/or tongues seems to be a fulfillment of the promises made in *Isaiah* 11:2 and *1 Corinthians* 12. As Burgess notes, the presence of these gifts in specific men (and, less frequently, in women) could also serve to legitimate certain teachings and confirm sainthood (and hence to authorize cults and feast days). It is no wonder then that many Protestant theologians felt compelled to argue that miracle-working ceased soon after the apostolic age. Moreover, discussions of such distinctive workings of the Holy Spirit in human history perpetually raise the basic dogmatic questions of the Trinity. How can we speak distinctly of one divine person acting without separating that person from the Trinity? How can we avoid the dangers of Modalism, a tantalizingly sensible view that the distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are simply different modes of one being's operations, not real distinctions of persons? Simultaneously adhering to the unity of God and the Trinity of God is not easy, but the history of Christian doctrine and the writers discussed by Burgess have shown that it is absolutely crucial.

Burgess divides the book into seven parts: early medieval Catholic theologians (Gregory the Great and Bede); Catholic scholastics of the High Middle Ages (from Anselm of Canterbury to Aquinas); Catholic women of this period (including Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich); millenarians and dualists (Joachim of Fiore and the Cathars); magisterial reformers (Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin); Catholic reformers (Ignatius of Loyola, John of Avila, and John of the Cross); and radical reformers (Thomas Müntzer and Menno Simons). Beginning his treatment with Gregory the Great, the standard transitional figure

between the ancient and medieval worlds, Burgess provides a brief biographical summary and short discussion of each figure's major works, particularly those pertaining to the Holy Spirit. In concise discussions, he succeeds in integrating a person's teachings on the Holy Spirit with the important ecclesiastical, soteriological, and devotional issues of the writer's day. Such an approach leads to clearer presentations of individual authors' views, though it often makes it difficult to see how the different traditions concerning the Holy Spirit developed through the centuries. Some themes appear distinctive of certain authors: Gregory the Great identifies the importance of miracles in the spread of Christianity; Aquinas articulates the most thorough distinctions between the gifts of the Spirit, the virtues, the fruits of the Spirit, the beatitudes, and the charismatic graces; and Richard of St. Victor offers the image of the overflowing love of husband and wife producing a child as a beautiful image for understanding the double procession of the Spirit in the inner life of the Trinity. But sustained topical contrasts between authors would have provided an important synthetic historical portrait of the Holy Spirit in the Middle Ages and Reformation as a whole.

Significantly, Burgess does not limit his sources to the formal theological treatises of his authors. Naturally, a range of such works are prominent: commentaries on *Acts*, sermons on Pentecost, separate texts on the gifts of the Spirit, devotional treatises and scholastic summae. Saints' lives, too, he demonstrates are crucial sources for studying medieval beliefs about the third person because these texts offer normative descriptions for Christian living and, indeed, optimum cases for what Christians can aspire to. To understand what Bernard of Clairvaux thought about the Holy Spirit requires a consideration of his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and his *Life and Death of Saint Malachy the Irishman*. Hymns, too, receive some treatment, but more extensive considerations of the liturgical contexts and monastic or other practices would have helped to clarify the ways in which such hymns and the experience of the Mass permeated the lives of medieval writers. Priests, for example, could perhaps sense the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in their hands at the *epiclesis* (that the Spirit transformed the Eucharistic elements was a belief more common in the East, but it was held by some in the West as well).

While one strength of the book is Burgess' inclusion of a great variety of figures, including the heterodox and heretical, it does render his

use of “traditions” in the title somewhat problematic. Because of both patristic usage and Reformation-era debates, the term “tradition” has a technical meaning in theology (which itself has changed over time) and Catholic self-understanding is ultimately inseparable from its understanding of this term and how it incorporates Christians into the church and the witness of the apostles. Employing the plural “traditions” does allow for distinctive Protestant teachings particular to different churches, and the link between church and tradition surely is one of the defining aspects of the theological significance of tradition. If a particular view is not a living part of an ecclesiastical community’s ongoing witness, it is hard to see why it should be called a tradition rather than, say, a teaching. The distinction is particularly important for the Holy Spirit, since, as the theologians discussed in the book all agree, there are authentic and inauthentic pneumatologies, and concord with tradition and the church (however understood) is one of the most important marks of authenticity.

For quite a long time, there were indeed readers of Joachim and Fiore who drew on this Trinitarian view of history (which stated that the age of the Holy Spirit was about to replace the age of the Son, a view quite susceptible to apocalyptic and revolutionary readings), and until they were wiped, out the Cathars practiced the *consolamentum*, a ritual wherein the Holy Spirit would cleanse and perfect a person. But to call these traditions in the same sense that one refers to the tradition which developed from Augustine’s widely-followed exploration of the Trinity through analogies with the human soul seems somewhat misleading. Theologically speaking, I believe that the term “tradition” belongs to living communities. This is an argument, perhaps, that I would lose with most historians and many theologians, but it is a debate worth having for it reminds us of the basic questions of to what extent we may interpret historical texts in terms of contemporary faith commitments and how we do so while recognizing that these commitments may well entail conflicting or even contradictory readings.

Finally, what is perhaps most striking in this book is the range of topics which considerations of the Holy Spirit evoked in the Middle Ages and Reformation. Mysticism, sacraments, prophecies, angels, miracles, ecclesiastical condemnations, poetic imagery, the relationship between reason and revelation, history, exegesis, friendship, love, and ecstasy—each of these become part of medieval and Reformation Christianity’s

attempt to understand the workings of the Holy Spirit, and it would be quite easy to miss some of these. It is in Burgess' conveyance of these many diverse issues through concise presentations of individual authors that makes this book a useful completion to his trilogy. ◀

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Peter Milward. The Catholicism of Shakespeare's Plays. The Renaissance Institute, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan. 1997. 144 pages.

Peter Milward's book, *The Catholicism of Shakespeare's Plays* discusses how "Shakespeare fits into the pattern of religion in Elizabethan England." How far did Shakespeare go with the religious changes in England? Milward raises the question of whether Shakespeare agreed or disagreed with the Protestant Anglicans, the puritans and the Catholics. His conclusion is that Shakespeare was really a Catholic (and a Jesuit!) recusant, opposing the religious domination of the Anglicans in his country. Milward's conclusion is derived from the critical analysis of what literary critics call "Topical Allegories" in Shakespeare's plays. The topical allegory is a deeper level of meaning than that of the mere literary text. Critics define topical allegory as "an extended metaphor in which objects, persons and actions in a narrative are equated with meaning which is outside or beyond the narrative itself." There may be no literal statements in Shakespeare's plays about his Catholicism, but that Catholicism is revealed in much of his narration and comments of the characters in his plays. For example, Milward says that Hermia faces the death penalty in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" according to the law of Athens for refusing to obey her father who wants her to marry Demetrius and not Lysander whom she loves. Milward interprets this as a topical allegory of the martyrdom of the Catholic priests in England who incurred the death penalty for refusal to obey the laws of the country. His conclusion is therefore that Shakespeare's account of

Hermia's threat of death is really a statement of Shakespeare's stand on anti Catholic Anglicanism.

Textual Interpretation

The interpretation of topical allegories depends on the background and the context of the literary texts. Milward analyzes seven of Shakespeare's plays in his book as manifestations of Shakespeare's Catholicism and Jesuitical attitudes.

Milward says that *The Merchant of Venice* is notable for its religious content and serious biblical theme. He says that the play is not really anti-Jewish, as many critics have interpreted it, but it is really anti-Puritan and therefore Catholic. It is, he says, "an exposure not just of Catholic recusants, but more precisely of priests and especially Jesuits." Milward says that *As You Like It* also has frequent religious references, but they also become the plight of the Elizabethan Catholics. *Hamlet's* problem, Milward says, also reflects the situation of Elizabethan Catholics, especially of the upper class, who were faced with a dilemma (as Hamlet was confronted with his dilemma) to go on enduring persecution of the government or to take up arms against the government.

Milward asserts that *Measure For Measure* is "the most openly Catholic of all Shakespeare's plays." He says that "the allegorical meaning of the title—*Measure For Measure*— is from the "Sermon on the Mount" in the *Gospel of St. Matthew*. In the "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus says: "The amount you measure out is the amount you will be given." Milward also says that in *Macbeth* when Ross says: "Alas, poor country, almost afraid to know itself" that is precisely the lament of Catholics in Elizabethan England. "*Macbeth* is a justification of both Catholics and Jesuits against the equivocation of Government anti-Catholic propaganda."

Milward affirms that *King Lear* is also "Shakespearean England seen from a Catholic viewpoint. Of all Shakespearean plays *King Lear* is undeniably his greatest masterpiece. It is also the play of Shakespeare not calculated to touch the hearts of a Catholic audience. From a Catholic point of view, we may say that *King Lear* is a lament for the passing away of Catholic England." Milward also says that *The Winter's Tale* is, no doubt, also full of relevance for the Catholic audience. "From a Catholic viewpoint it may point to the conclusion not so much that the Catho-

lic cause is lost in England, as that the Catholic cause can now be saved only by a miracle.”

Milward's *Appendix* to his volume is entitled "The Papist and His Poet" (i.e., Shakespeare!) and comments on the Jesuit background of Shakespeare's plays. He says that "in scholarly research on the history of the Jesuit background of Shakespeare's plays, scholars have detected allusions to Jesuit writings and activities in Shakespeare's plays. All these allusions, most of which are admitted by the majority of Shakespeare scholars, serve, no doubt, to bring the lays close to the Papist and the Jesuit background."

Hidden Meanings

Milward himself admits that these interpretations of Shakespeare's plays are what he calls "hidden meanings." He quotes Milton who says: "More is meant (in Shakespeare's plays!) than meets the ear." There are meanings in Shakespeare's plays that are not obviously evident in the text of his plays, but are discovered through the analysis of the topical allegory of his plays. Milward states: "There is a layer of hidden reference to the recusants in England (especially Catholics and Jesuits) in Shakespeare's plays." Milward quotes one scholar who says that Shakespeare dies as a Papist (i.e., as a Catholic) but another says that is just a bit of "mere gossip." Milward also says that "Those who reject the recusant (Papist-Jesuit) interpretation as sectarian, are unwilling to admit deeper dimensions of the "recusant" interpretation of the Shakespeare plays." He also says: "Jesuits like myself will see Shakespeare, not just as a recusant, but even as a secret sympathizer with Jesuits. A friend of mine said: "Shakespeare must have been a Jesuit novice during his "hidden years." We can't help seeing Shakespeare in our own eyes and our own point of view." That is Milward's interpretation of Catholicism in the plays of Shakespeare. Although it is not obvious in the text, (it is a hidden communication!) Milward's critical interpretation is that Shakespeare was really communicating his own Catholicism and attitude towards the anti-Catholic stand of the Anglicans and the English government in his plays.

These interpretations of Milward are clearly subjective. Other scholars interpret Shakespeare's plays in many different ways. The classical critics, Wellek and Warren, affirm that there are two ways of interpret-

ing a piece of literature. They affirm that literature is the experience of the reader—his own conscious and unconscious experience and reaction to the text. Literature may therefore be interpreted in terms of social and personal experience. But Wellek and Warren also maintain that the fundamental interpretation of literature is the interpretation of the author. What does the author intend to say in his writings? That, too, may be conscious or unconscious. Milward has interpreted Shakespeare's plays from a subjective point of view and a personal experience as Catholic and Jesuit. Others, of course, may interpret Shakespeare in a very different way. But Milward is correct when he says that his interpretation of the Catholicism of Shakespeare is an interpretation of the "topical allegory" and the "hidden meaning" of Shakespeare's plays.

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