The Pseudo-Dionysius and Christian Platonism

The Complete Works of the Pseudo-Dionysius is necessary reading for any serious student of the fight within Christianity against the philosophy of Aristotle. The importance of the Commentary written by Paul Rorem, is limited to the light it sheds on the influence of Platonism on St. Thomas Aquinas, who is falsely portrayed as an Aristotelian, and on the historical influence of the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius on Christian aesthetics. Otherwise, Rorem’s commentary reflects the fact that, as he writes, he is “a theologian within the tradition of the Lutheran Reformation.”

The story behind the Pseudo-Dionysius is one of the most interesting in the history of Christianity. It was long thought that the writings attributed to him were those of the Dionysius, whom the Apostle Paul converted through his speech on the Unknown God in Athens at the Areopagus (Acts 17:34). However, as Rorem points out, by the Sixteenth Century it was discovered that Dionysius was a pseudonym adopted by an unknown Christian Platonist who lived sometime in the Fifth or Sixth Century AD.

Interestingly, in his speech Paul refers to the opening lines of the poem “Phaenomena” by Aratus of Soli. “From Zeus let us begin; . . . full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. For we are also his offspring. . . .” This poem is based upon the prose work bearing the same title by Eudoxus, a pupil of Plato who pioneered the method of negative proof through exhaustion.

Although Rorem fails to note the above connection, perhaps the most important contribution his book makes is to further expose the lie that Thomas Aquinas was an Aristotelian. This reviewer has documented elsewhere that Aquinas was a Christian Platonist in the tradition of St. Augustine and Dionysius (see “Why St. Thomas Aquinas Is Not an Aristotelian,” Fidelio, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring 1993).

Rorem points out that, from 1246 to 1252, Albert the Great lectured on the entirety of Dionysius’ writings, first in Paris and then in Cologne. Thomas Aquinas was his student and scribe. Thomas’ lecture notes (the earliest work from his hand) were transcribed and became Albert’s written commentaries. Aquinas himself later wrote a full commentary on Dionysius’ The Divine Names. Rorem further reports that one student counted 1,702 explicit quotations from Dionysius spread through Aquinas’ works. Rorem concludes, “Until recently, Thomist scholarship has tended to emphasize the impact of Aristotle upon Aquinas, an emphasis that has unnecessarily minimized the Neoplatonic and Dionysian influence.” He also writes, “In general, there were more, and more significant, avenues of Neoplatonic influence upon Thomas than most scholars, especially Thomists, have been willing to acknowledge.”

Rorem correctly emphasizes the influence of Dionysius on St. Bonaventura and also on Ruysbroeck, a close associate of Gerard Groote, the founder of the Brotherhood of the Common Life. However, the most disappointing weakness of his commentary is that it gives only passing reference to the influence of Dionysius on the founder of modern science, Nicolaus of Cusa. A more thorough treatment of the influence of the Dionysian works on Cusanus would have rendered his commentary more substantive.

Impact on Cusanus

Anyone serious about studying the works of Dionysius would be well advised to begin by reading Cusanus’ On the Not-Other, which includes extensive quotes from The Celestial Hierarchy, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, The Divine Names, The Mystical Theology, and the Letters.

The influence of Dionysius on Cusanus is also evident in the latter’s early work, On Catholic Concordance, where he develops the idea of national
there are no doubt many more cover-ups locked away in the dusty closets of Her Majesty’s Government, and in the musty attics of Britain’s landed aristocrats. Here’s one that has been brought to light after the passage of a mere four hundred years. The death of playwright Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare’s contemporary, author of the biting dramas, The Jew of Malta, Doctor Faustus, and Tamberlaine among others, is now proven beyond doubt to have been murder, and not the casual accident of a “bar-room brawl” which was the standing cover story until now.

Charles Nicholl’s book is thoroughly researched, from sources in England and Continental Europe, and very well documented. For one who has known for years that murder was, so to speak, the name of the game, the book is a real delight to read. One to put away for the autumn, as the daylight hours draw shorter, and evening becomes the time to relax with a good book that is a bit unusual.

Not one for the beginner perhaps, but well worth the effort.

Nicholl is not satisfied with clearing up the question, “murder or not?” He also takes a stab at getting to the proverbial bottom of things.

There he finds—no surprise for anyone who has been around over the last couple of generations—Her Majesty’s Privy Council and the intelligence network put together by the Venetian eminence grise, the thug Elizabeth I called “my Moor,” Francis Walsingham.

Yes, it seems that Marlowe’s murder was sanctioned by Elizabeth’s Privy Council; his presence in the town of Deptford, one mile up river from the Queen’s favorite palace at Greenwich, arranged from within the Privy Council; his companions at Mistress Bull’s house (Frizer, Skeres, and Poley), all part of the shadowy underworld of Walsingham’s plots and counter-plots. And, Mistress Eleanor Bull herself,

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