

Paul J. DeHart. *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry*. New York & London: Routledge, 2012. ISBN 9780415892414 (cloth). pp. xvi + 237. \$125.

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Paul DeHart teaches theology at Vanderbilt University's Divinity School. He got his doctoral degree from the University of Chicago in 1997, where he was David Tracy's student. He is Catholic; and this is his third book. The first, *Beyond the Necessary God* (1999), was a study of Eberhard Jüngel's theology; the second, *The Trial of the Witnesses* (2006), was an analysis and critique of postliberal theology. The book under review here is an extended exegetical engagement with John Milbank's and Catherine Pickstock's depiction of the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Its purpose is to show that what Milbank and Pickstock present as Thomas's positions on the nature and purpose of metaphysics and of truth is distant from the positions he actually held, and is, instead, a reprise of Milbank's and Pickstock's own positions (not in every respect identical with one another) on these matters, arrived at and held on grounds quite other than close engagement with Thomas's work.

In addition to these claims about the relations between Thomas's thought and that of Radical Orthodoxy *in personae* Milbank and Pickstock, DeHart also argues that on the great majority of points at which Milbank and Pickstock differ from Thomas, the latter's thought is greatly to be preferred. So, DeHart makes a double claim: first, that Milbank and Pickstock get Thomas wrong, and that this is demonstrably so; and second, that they are wrong substantively on every question of importance, and Thomas right. The book thus takes its place as the latest in a now-long series of Catholic counterblasts to Radical Orthodoxy in general, and Radical-Orthodoxy-on-Thomas-Aquinas in particular. I think of Nicholas Lash, Laurence Hemming, and Reinhard Hüter as other relatively recent instances.

I've made the book sound harsher than it is. DeHart disarmingly disavows any deep expertise in either Radical Orthodoxy or Thomas Aquinas, and consistently presents the points he makes as tentative rather than definitive. But this is disingenuous. DeHart has clearly read with close attention the works canonical to Radical Orthodoxy, especially *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), *After Writing* (1998), and *Truth in Aquinas* (2001), as well as the essays collected in *The Word Made Strange* (1997), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1999), and *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (2009); and while he has not made an academic specialty of Radical Orthodoxy he is much better informed about it than most if those who write about it. And so far as Thomas is concerned, while DeHart is no Gilles Emery or Joseph Wawrykow, he has read widely and deeply in Thomas,

including not only the relevant parts of the two *Summae*, but also the disputed questions on truth and on power, and the commentaries on Boethius and Aristotle (the *Metaphysics*, especially) – and in Latin, too. The rhetoric of tentativeness need not be taken very seriously. DeHart has every confidence, I should say, at least in Radical Orthodoxy's wrongness about Thomas, and an only slightly lesser degree of confidence in his own rightness about Thomas.

What is really going on here? Three things, I think, two of which DeHart sees clearly and is mostly right about, and one of which he scarcely seems to see at all, and, so far as he does, is mostly wrong about. The first is the question of what Thomas means; the second is the question of why the radically orthodox find it important to argue about what Thomas means; and the third is the question of whether there is a single right way, ecclesially and theologically speaking, to read texts such as those from Thomas's hand. There is a fourth: the question of normative theological rightness about the disputed issues, but, for the purposes of this review, I'll leave that aside, interesting and important though it is. Brief comments now on each of the first three.

As to what Thomas means. On metaphysics-without-theology (though of course incorporatable and incorporated by theology), DeHart takes Thomas to affirm its necessity and possibility, and its exemption from any of the structural deficiencies attributed to such an enterprise by Milbank. On cognition and predication, DeHart's Thomas is "more realist than idealist," and therefore, with respect to judgments about what there is in the world and what it is like, more akin to a twentieth-century correspondence-theorist than to the aesthetically-driven performance artist that Radical Orthodoxy makes of him. And on the old-fashioned dualisms of faith-reason and grace-nature (inter alia), DeHart's Thomas is a defender and deployer rather than a dissolver into spectra of intensity. About all this DeHart is right: reading Thomas as a positivist exegete with interest in a rational reconstruction of his thought intimate with the letter of his texts, this is what you get. You don't get what Milbank and Pickstock present.

As to why so much effort is put by Milbank and Pickstock into re-reading Thomas. Hart thinks that Milbank and Pickstock find Thomas too important to be left aside, too important to be relegated to the post-apocalyptic desert of conceptual devastation to which they are sometimes happy to consign Scotus and his epigones. He's surely right about this. Milbank, especially, is a genealogical rupture theorist: there was a point, a crux, he thinks, at which it all went wrong conceptually speaking, a point at which errors were made in fundamental ontology that infect everything subsequent. The radically orthodox enterprise is to recover the truth (if it is one) that individuation construed on a Platonist model goes all the way down, that there is no ontology that is not also a theology of participation, and that all metaphysics is and must be a mode of theology – or, better, of theologizing; and in recovering it they want to overcome

the fundamental ontological error (Scotist, Lockean, Kantian) that opposes it. But the radically orthodox don't want the error to go too far back, and they don't want it to have affected too many of the church's doctors. They don't, that is, want to appear as a sect, offering a construal of Christianity held by few before them; no, it's proper to their enterprise to show their position to be the *theologia perennis*, perhaps not quite taught *semper, ubique, ab omnibus*, but still as close to that as possible. Thomas, therefore, must be saved for Radical Orthodoxy. DeHart has all this right, and he puts it with eloquence.

As to how Thomas may be read and ought to be read. DeHart assumes, it seems to me, that a historicist-positivist mode of reading the authoritative texts of the Christian tradition is the only defensible one. He excoriates (well, not in tone but certainly in effect) Pickstock, especially, for not abiding by the canonical methods of such reading. She doesn't get her footnotes right; it's often difficult to be sure just which texts she's providing exegesis of; and she seems to care less about the particulars of Thomas's texts than about the trajectory of her argument. Well, yes; anyone who's tried to relate what Milbank and Pickstock write about the texts they comment on to the particulars of those texts knows what DeHart means. But why assume that a mode of reading and exegesis governed by those norms and hewing to those methods is the only or the single best one to be used by those making use of the work of the doctors of the church? The way that Milbank, especially, performs the act of reading his predecessors is very far, in both norms and method, from what would have been thought scientific at the University of Berlin in the nineteenth century. But it's not clear to me that this is a problem. It's at least arguable – I think more; I think almost certainly true – that Milbank's and Pickstock's mode of reading and commenting and arguing is more like that of their premodern Christian forebears than it is like that of DeHart. A radically orthodox reading of Thomas is more rabbinic-monastic than it is scholastic-historicist: particular texts are taken and held up to the light for the prismatic radiance they might yield, for the power they might have to provoke thought. And why not? The radically orthodox Thomas is a set of thoughts prompted by having read something of the words Thomas wrote; it is not an attempt to read Thomas's mind. DeHart doesn't tell us what's wrong with this mode of reading, and seems not to have thought about the matter.

DeHart's book is a thoughtful, careful, lucid, and significant work. Given his assumptions about what it is to read, and what it is to make claims about the thought of another, he achieves his principal goal, which is to show that the radically orthodox reading of Thomas cannot be defended.