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## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Catholic Theology. By Tracey Rowland. Pp. 256, London, T&T Clark, 2017, \$20.89.**

**Author: Thomas V. Gourlay**

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The latest offering from Australian theologian Tracey Rowland is sure to cause somewhat of a stir in theology faculty lounges. Her recent and somewhat boldly titled *Catholic Theology* is published as part of Bloomsbury's *Doing Theology* series and pulls no punches, as she offers readers her take on the landscape of Catholic theology leading up to and since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

Taking inspiration from Fr James V. Schall S.J.'s *Another Sort of Learning*, Rowland's book is written particularly for the interested lay person, or the beginning student or seminarian, wishing to familiarise themselves with the 'lay of the land' as they undertake their theological studies.

Humorously, Rowland jests that an appropriate subtitle for her work would be "How to do Catholic Theology" even if one is bored stupid in a seminary or in any other ostensibly Catholic educational institution', (5). If this is her goal, then Rowland proves to be an adept guide, manoeuvring across the various landscapes of what can seem to the newcomer to be the perilous jungle of contemporary Catholic theologies and movements.

Rowland begins her work analysing two key documents of the International Theological Commission (of which she is currently a member) pointing out that, in the lead up to the Second Vatican Council, the seemingly monolithic system of Catholic theology was, in fact, crumbling into what came to be understood as a plurality of legitimate approaches. Using these ITC documents as a guide, Rowland sketches what could be considered the boundaries for faithful Catholic theology, all the while maintaining cognisance that the mystery of the faith exceeds any system.

Identifying key guideposts or what she terms 'distinctive family traits of Catholic theology' (23), Rowland provides an articulate and erudite, but eminently readable account of the 12 principles to which an authentically Catholic theology adheres to, as reiterated in the 2012 ITC document *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*. She then moves on to provide pithy accounts of key themes in Catholic theology, particularly pertaining to dualisms which have become operative in various contexts, including Christ and the Trinity, Christology and Mariology, nature and grace, logos and ethos, Scripture and Tradition, dogma and history. Rowland concludes this chapter with a brief treatment of the relationship between the Magisterium and theologians. Guided by various ITC documents throughout, Prof. Rowland deftly guides her readers through these themes, dropping a veritable breadcrumb trail of key texts and authors who have contributed to these discussions.

Chapter two provides an account of the various movements within the Thomist tradition(s). Here she offers a treatment of the various 'species' of Thomism and their defining features as they have developed over the centuries, and particularly in the twentieth century. Rowland's treatment is thorough but not overly dense, and she deftly avoids being caught in academic hair-splitting exercises, instead offering an account of the various fault lines and contested topics which run through what others might consider a monolithic Thomism. By offering such a chapter up front, Rowland cleverly positions her readers to accept the narrative tradition that she favours a la Alasdair MacIntyre. It is important for Rowland that students coming to theology are aware of the various Thomisms operative within Catholic theology and how the personal favourite of one's professor or school might come to impact one's own education.

Throughout chapters three and four, Rowland offers her readers an account of the two major theological milieu's which evolved in the post-Vatican II era, the *Communio* and the *Concilium*. As a member of the editorial board of the English language edition of the *International Catholic Review: Communio*, Rowland does not leave much room to guess where her allegiances lie, but this does not mean that her treatment of the *Concilium* group is unfair. Instead, Rowland presents an adequately,

but not overly detailed birds-eye view of the 'theological star wars' that evolved following the Second Vatican Council between the two camps. Rather than fall into the tired and well-worn ruts of liberal/conservative caricatures, Rowland offers a nuanced understanding of both the *Communio* and *Concilium* projects, offering definitive points of distinction between them, particularly pertaining to each groups understanding of and response to the growing secularization of Western culture, magisterial authority and the vocation of the theologian, and the stance of the Church vis-à-vis the world. Brief narrated bio-bibliographies of key players in each camp are given, as well as an assessment on the success of their various projects. To be sure, Rowland does not conceal her admiration for scholars of the *Communio* school, most notably the founders of the *Communio* journal, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Joseph Ratzinger/BXVI. Her critique of the Concilium project and its foremost proponents such as John Baptist Metz, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx, and those contemporary voices such as Lieven Boeve who have followed in their paths is fair, but ultimately unsympathetic. For Rowland, and for theologians who have a tendency to follow the various pronouncements of the ITC as a guide, the Trinitarian and Christocentric focus distinctive amongst scholars associated with the *Communio* school offers much more by way of faithful and fruitful theological offerings for the Church in the (post)modern world.

By way of an interesting aside, Rowland offers a fascinating account of the convergences between scholars of the *Communio* school and the various projects associated with those scholars operating within Radical Orthodoxy circles, describing shared genealogies of secularism, as well as accounts of attempts to dialogue with culture in a way that does not bow to hegemonic forms of secular reason. Ultimately though, as Rowland points out, scholars associated with the *Communio* journal are often at work on intra-ecclesial and pastoral matters, whilst those of Radical Orthodoxy sensibilities are often involved in debates with secular interlocutors within the academy more broadly.

Rowland's final chapter seems to be something of an afterthought. One would think that the bones of this book were sketched out prior to the abdication of Pope Benedict XVI and the ascension of

Pope Francis (Jorge Bergoglio). The addition of the chapter on Liberation Theology may well have been omitted had this book been published prior to March of 2013. That being said, Rowland's work on what many in Catholic theological faculties may have considered the 'dead horse' of Liberation Theology offers a nuanced account of various trends with the predominantly South American theology. Her situating of Bergoglio/Francis within a strand known as 'People's Theology' gives the reader an understanding of the priority which Francis give to the experience of 'plain persons' as a mode of hearing the voice of God.

Rowland is careful to point out that a certain contemporary re-emergence of Liberation Theology is a different breed to that which has been, rightly, under a cloud in orthodox circles of Catholic theology. She points out that while certain dominant (and Marxist) aspects of liberation theology have been deemed at odds with orthodox Catholic theology (see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology," (1984). more recent work in this field have taken heed of the criticisms of the CDF and sought to 'bleaches out the Marxist elements typical of the early years of Liberation Theology' (200), and replace it with 'hefty doses of Trinitarian Christocentrism'. Here she cites particularly the work of Cardinal Müller, current prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the 2007 joint declaration of the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean known as the 'Aparecida document.'

In her Catholic Theology Rowland provides a solid narrative and even occasionally humorous style, offering much to both the beginning student seeking something of a guiding star as they undertake their studies, and for the seasoned academic looking for a solid and readable reference work for their students or a take on the current lay of the land from the perspective of an Australian Catholic theologian with strong Trinitarian and Christocentric leanings and a robust aversion to secular modernity.

While each of the chapters contained within could be read in a single sitting, each section holds within its references an abundance of readings lists nowhere else in captivity to be found, which

would repay careful and studious attention. What is perhaps most unfortunate about this work is the editorial choice to use endnotes rather than footnotes makes such a study more tedious than it should be.

Rowland's book is encyclopaedic in its scope but it does not read as a dry textbook – instead she offers what amounts in many passages to what is essentially of a ripping yarn. Her presentation of the various veins and cross-currents of Catholic theology offers an insight into a veritable dramatic which develops over the course of the twentieth century. It seems that, for Rowland, much of the story hinges on how various theologians or schools of theology respond to the universal call to holiness consistently taught by the Doctors of the Church throughout the ages, and re-emphasised with special importance at the Second Vatican Council (see *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter V). For those theologians who have faith in the efficaciousness of this call to sanctity, the admonition of St Paul to 'not be conformed to this world,' but to be 'transformed by the renewal of your minds' (cf. Rom 12:2) opens up new vistas and fruitful theological horizons. For theologians who are part of this milieu the work of theology is bound up with the adventure of a life lived deeply imbedded within the struggle for sanctity, and it is these theologians, those whom Rowland would see as operating particularly within the *Communio* milieu, that are identified as the most exciting group active throughout the twentieth century and continuing today.

This is indeed another sort of theological learning, and a work which deserves wide readership.