New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Offbeat Thomism*

Gerald Vann died on 14 July 1963, aged 56. Educated at the apostolic school then run by the Dominican friars, he entered the Order in 1924. He studied theology in Rome, graduated in English at Oxford in 1934, and taught at the school, by then moved to Laxton Hall, Northamptonshire, until 1952, concluding with a stint as headmaster. Then, still only 46, he was free to expand his already extensive ministry of preaching, lecturing, and writing. He never taught in the Dominican study house at Oxford. He published several polemical works on just war theory. Books such as *The Divine Pity* (1945), *The Water and the Fire* (1953), and *The Son's Course* (1959), to name only three out of a score, are classics of English Catholic spirituality.

Saint Thomas Aquinas (Hague and Gill, 1940), his first book, offers an interpretation of Aquinas, which was offbeat back then and is still perhaps rather eccentric. It has been reprinted as *The Aquinas Prescription: St Thomas's Path to a Discerning Heart, a Sane Society, and a Holy Church* (Sophia Institute Press, 1999): a title with little bearing on the content of the book.

Vann's purpose was to interest the non-Catholic who finds himself 'repelled by what he conceives as too exclusively rational an approach to reality'. In contrast, he wants to show how Thomas's 'speculative thought and his mysticism were of a piece': his mysticism, like his theology, was a synthesis of the Pseudo-Dionysian *via negativa* and the Fourth Gospel's insistence that the Light has come into the world. Borrowing freely from famous older Thomists such as Gilson and Sertillanges, and allying himself with up and coming contemporaries, particularly Josef Pieper, Victor White and Yves Congar, Vann presents Aquinas as a theologian who belongs to Eastern Orthodoxy as well as Latin Christianity, but whose legacy has been obscured in rationalism, clericalism, and anti-Protestantism. He blames this on the 'radical infidelity' of self-styled Thomists: 'In the main … the history of Thomism is … a history of failure'.

Vann spells out the influences upon Aquinas's thought, not just Aristotle (as everyone thinks) but Jewish, Islamic, Greek patristic, and other sources, only being rediscovered. In particular, he appeals to the work of Gabriel Théry OP (1891–1959), one of a remarkable generation of French priest-scholars, in support of the claim that Thomas's mind was permeated by the ideals of 'Dionysian "intellectual" ascesis'. Moving rapidly through Eckhart, Tauler and Suso,

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Dominican mystical writers in the wake of Aquinas, Vann clinches his interpretation, unexpectedly and perhaps over optimistically, by appealing to the then highly regarded Ceylonese thinker Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), who, according to Vann, appreciated 'the presence of this trend in Christian thought'. Indeed, 'the Hindu "deification" is precisely what is meant', so Vann says, by Jesus (Matthew 5:48) and Paul (1 Corinthians 6:17) — surely rather a contentious assertion.

Aristotle does appear, though in relation chiefly to the *secunda pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, in which, so Vann insists, the Aristotelian ethics, on which Thomas relies, is 'essentially changed' by his insistence on the primacy of the beatific vision. Vann stresses Aquinas's interest in the virtues, and his 'long and subtle treatise on the emotions': areas of interest at last again today. He insists strongly on Thomas's discussion of the suprarational mode of knowledge in general, and on the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit. As regards the former, he argues that the place of intuition in Thomas's theory of knowledge has not received the attention it deserves. While agreeing that Augustinian illuminationism is rejected, Vann insists that the first principles on which all reasoning depends are a 'participated likeness of the divine uncreated light' (*ST* 1a 84.5). He specifies the 'connaturality' with moral principle that allows one to judge intuitively, without the necessity of reasoning, what the right course of action is. He highlights the way of knowing that is 'suffering divine things', in Pseudo-Denys's phrase — all of which shows, anyway, that Thomism is 'far from being the philosophy of Aristotle with a pinch of Plato'.

In short, with reunion with the Orthodox primarily in mind, Catholic theologians need to recover the contemplative dimension of Thomas Aquinas's theology, its patristic and especially Pseudo-Dionysian content, its openness towards Eckhartian mysticism and (even) to the perennial wisdom of the East. This was a very different reading from the Aristotelian Thomism that was standard in Catholic universities and seminaries 60 years ago; it still seems pretty exotic.

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