Consideration

Words are ciphers, but they are also windows.

Elizabeth Jennings

Fr Fergus Kerr graduated in English language and literature before entering the Order of Preachers, thereby transforming a fascination with language into a Christian ministry of the spoken and written word. A concern with language is very much a feature of his manifold contributions to philosophy and theology.

After joining the Dominicans in 1956, Fr Kerr soon came under the influence of Fr Cornelius Ernst OP at Hawkesyard, then one of the study houses of the Province. By the early 1960s, Fr Ernst was pointing to deep affinities between certain themes in Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and, in his characteristically brilliant but allusive way, talked of the bonds between human beings and language, 'the nativity of the word', the Church as linguistic community, the hidden God, and the nature of limits and of transcendence. He thereby traced several of the trajectories of Fr Kerr's work over the next forty years.

As we have seen, in Fr Kerr, personal aptitude has combined with membership of a religious Order whose work centres on the word; the combination has both nourished and sustained a life of preaching, writing and teaching. This way of life has given him ready access to books and libraries, the comparative freedom to think (away from the constraints of a full-time academic post in a secular university), and the fraternal fellowship of brethren consecrated to the same ministry within a liturgical rhythm that celebrates daily the incarnate Word of God. This way of being intertwines remarkably with several of his philosophical and theological preoccupations.

The intertwining of his kind of life and the intellectual problems that preoccupy him can be seen in *Theology After Wittgenstein.* Aspects of Wittgenstein's thought are indicated there by Fr Kerr as a remedy for several ills that affect prevalent ways of living and thinking, not least among Catholics. The daily common life of religious brethren helps to alert its participants to certain human

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possibilities increasingly neglected in the contemporary world. In Wittgenstein, Fr Kerr finds a therapy to cure humanly inappropriate senses of the self, spiritual transcendence, the scope of mind and body, the place of language and community. When Fr Kerr recommends understanding human life as necessarily communal and enjoyably pervaded by ceremonial he speaks out of experience. The life of a friar involves the acceptance of given boundaries, limits and belongings that do not stifle freedom and make space for encountering the divine. Living like this must have predisposed Fr Kerr to side with those who wish to subvert that metaphysical tradition which is constituted by rancour against the physical and historical conditions of human life. We might say that he wants us to value the goodness of fragility.

The fascination with the bounds of materiality and language, the attention to finitude, goes deep and guides much of Fr Kerr's reflections. The relatively little that Fr Kerr has published on Heidegger probably does not reflect the extent of his significance for him. This interest too goes back to Fr Kerr's early days in the Order, and the muted public engagement may be due in part to the vast amount of material to be considered, only slowly made available, and in part to the difficulty of finding a place for Heidegger in the British cultural world. As with Wittgenstein so with Heidegger: the kind of valuation Fr Kerr desires is unlikely to be easily accepted.

One of the never-forgotten lessons that Fr Kerr learned from Donald MacKinnon was to scrutinise the philosophy of theology—meaning much more than the construction of natural theologies or Christian apologetics. For Fr Kerr, this is one of the many tasks neglected in the English-speaking world. In fact, Fr Kerr's two books to date constitute a kind of diptych. The volume on Wittgenstein gives philosophy an important place in theology, whilst *Immortal Longings* draws out the religious motifs within recent philosophy. Much of what Fr Kerr has to say is critical. He wonders just how much theology Wittgenstein knew, he is saddened that Heidegger allowed his acquaintance with a rationalistic natural theology to block any deeper understanding of Christian revelation, and in the philosophers he examines in his second book he often finds the assumptions about theology to be inadequate.

As well as this kind of philosophical and theological reflection, Fr Kerr has also constantly adverted to the place of language itself in life and thought as a whole. His discussion of charity as friendship, written to honour Fr Herbert McCabe OP in 1987, but incorporating some of his studies in Paris in the early 1960s, illustrates this. In discussing Plato's *Symposium* Fr Kerr notices that its literary form allows Plato to distance himself at times, and that the dialogue is not

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just a string of set speeches. On the contrary, one line of thought is extended or undercut by another, and it is important to know who is speaking and with what interests. By such attention to literary form Fr Kerr casts doubt on the reliability of what came to be regarded as 'the' Platonic theory of love, with its fateful effects on Christian spirituality and asceticism. He can also vindicate the intellectual claims of literature by an aside which castigates philosophers who regard the *Symposium* as mere 'literature', as if it did not contain enough philosophical content for them to explore. On the theological side, Fr Kerr can refer with ease and effectively to Shakespeare and the ballad-singing traditions of Scotland to throw light on the requirements of good liturgy.

The achievement of Fr Kerr is both in the quality of his contributions to a whole cluster of issues, especially where philosophy and theology intersect, and in the sheer breadth of his close reading of texts. The achievement is greater when set in the context of what is generally called Anglo-American culture; then, his philosophical range has been described by one colleague as 'nothing less than spectacular'.

Fr Kerr has not on the whole tended towards speculative originality or sustained conceptual analysis. He prefers to interweave his own thought with consideration of the texts of other writers. Some of these writers feature prominently among his publications: Wittgenstein and Rahner above all, then Heidegger, Lonergan and Girard. Aquinas has been a constant interest but there has been a reticence when it comes to writing about him. The scarcity of writings on Barth will surprise those who have heard Fr. Kerr's lectures and talks over the years. The absence of sustained engagement with Balthasar is cause for some wonder. Very much in the tradition of the Dominicans of the English Province, his preferred form of publication has been the article and since the 1990s the contribution of chapters to books. This approach is so rooted in him, and such are his standards, that he only published his first book at the age of 55. Still, we have every reason to expect that more writings are on the way. His forthcoming book, *After Aquinas: Conflicting Versions of Thomism* helps to answer his own call back in 1965, when he remarked on the proliferation of often incompatible interpretations of St Thomas since around the beginning of the twentieth century and added: 'It is time somebody undertook a hermeneutic of these interpretations: comparative Thomology, as we might call it, or higher Aquinatics'. The time has been somewhat long in coming but the 'somebody' has turned out to be himself.

Fr Kerr has been engaged without too many prolonged interruptions for almost half a century in study in different academic

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settings, but with Edinburgh and Oxford becoming abiding poles, and community life as a Dominican friar as a constant. Within these bounds, and the kind of life and responsibilities (some markedly pastoral) that they involve, through his teaching, preaching and writing, he has created windows for many. Fr Kerr can be relied on to situate and dialogue with significant movements or positions, past and present, and to keep theologians philosophically alert and secular philosophers less closed to religion. His reaction to the 'Radical Orthodoxy' project is instructive.

The movement that has come to be known as Radical Orthodoxy can be said to have been started in Cambridge in the summer of 1997. It is basically a challenging way to be radical towards modernity whilst staying within the orthodoxy of Christianity. It gives philosophical thought an important place in theology. Fr Kerr soon joined the debate—he is, after all, as much indebted to Donald MacKinnon as the new movement is and he is as given to mediating different positions as it is. In giving a Catholic response to the movement, Fr Kerr was quickly able to locate it, historically and textually, in terms of a controversy internal to Roman Catholic theology throughout most of the twentieth century. We should note how his response was characteristically based on the history of thought and the examination of texts. It also drew out of him one of his infrequent but revealing autobiographical remarks:

> 'I detect in Radical Orthodoxy writings a desire to overcome, or to sideline, the sixteenth century: to retrieve that biblico-patristic Christian Platonism (exemplified in Augustine and Aquinas) which some of us find it such a pleasure to inhabit...'

This is not a wholly predictable statement from Fr Kerr about himself, and we can only hope that he will be more forthcoming in future. It looks as if the trajectories of his own thinking are arranging themselves in a striking constellation.

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