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***Thomist Tradition: Avoiding  
Scylla and Charybdis***

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The controversies over the liturgy which have troubled the Church since the Council, and which have grown in intensity recently, are fundamentally not about the liturgy itself. Rather, they are about different conceptions of how to be a Catholic in today's world, how the Church should believe, think and live at the beginning of the third millennium. And *that* brings with it a host of other disputes and controversies: about what modernity is and how either to confront it or adapt to it or both, about what development of doctrine means, about the relationship between faith and reason and grace and nature, even about whether and how language—always and necessarily a manifestation of a particular time and place—can express truths in a manner that is valid for all time. And to make things more complex, among Catholics it is not a matter of two competing notions of how to answer these questions, but three or four or even more.

In this wide-ranging book Donald Boland, an Australian philosopher and attorney, addresses himself to a sustained and often sharp critique of fellow-Australian Tracey Rowland's 2003 book, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition After Vatican II*. But Boland's book is more than an extended review of Rowland, for he discusses how the Church should understand the modern world, how best to deal with the perennial questions of faith and reason, what has been the legacy of the Vatican Council for the Church, and so on. Without endorsing every position that Boland takes or every criticism he makes of Tracey Rowland, one can say that his book raises important questions that no Catholic can afford to ignore.

The fundamental charge that Boland makes against Rowland is that she overvalues faith at the expense of reason and that "in her determination to expose the error of Rationalism and Liberalism [she] has sailed too close to the other extreme to the one she contends with." Rowland and those thinkers she follows "have in the end erred by adopting a position that is equivalent to a false supernaturalism."

With these words Boland opens or reopens a debate that

goes back at least to the 1930s. In France a school of theologians often called the *Nouvelle Théologie* came to be regarded as in opposition to the reigning Thomism or Neo-Thomism that began with the revival of St. Thomas in the nineteenth century, and which received official endorsement with Leo XIII's 1878 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. For about a hundred years, until the very eve of the Council, theologians and philosophers endeavouring to work according to the mind of St. Thomas erected an impressive edifice of Catholic learning, embodied in so many books and in educational programs at all levels and which coloured the entire Catholic approach to intellectual matters and was diffused throughout the Church even on a popular level. As the revival progressed the genuine thought and vocabulary of St. Thomas were increasingly understood, and Catholic philosophy acquired a distinctive note that even gained a certain amount of respect in the secular world. But two things disturbed this steady appropriation and exposition of the thought of Aquinas. One was the modernist crisis of the turn of the twentieth century, the other a reaction against what was held to be the excessive rationalism of the Thomistic revival

and against the mechanical manner in which it was charged that Thomism was often taught.

Modernism is often presented as a movement against an obscurantist and medieval approach to Catholic doctrine that ill befits a modern world whose outlook on things is framed by reason and science. But in fact the very opposite is true. Modernists saw the essence of religion as arising from spontaneous and irrational impulses and needs of the human soul. After the manner of Kant they denied the ability of the human mind to penetrate to the essences of things. Contrary to what Scripture itself teaches (Wisdom 13:1 and Romans 1:19-21), that our reason is capable of perceiving the Creator himself by means of his works, Modernists held, as St. Pius X wrote, that "human reason is confined entirely within the field of *phenomena*." Our religious knowledge originates not from outside our minds, but from within ourselves, from "a movement of the heart."

It was Pius X, not Modernists, who gave the greater dignity and importance to human reason. For all its supposed exaltation of reason, in fact modern thought denigrates the ability of the

human mind to know truth. Philosophy becomes at bottom a game played with mental concepts, and the natural sciences, since they obviously *work*, are all we need concern ourselves with. Their truth value, however, is irrelevant. It is the instinctive philosophy of the Catholic world, Thomism, that holds human reason in high esteem. It was the Modernists who wanted to found faith on what they called the religious sense, whereas it was Pope Pius who gave credit to the crucial role of human reason in recognising and embracing the foundations of Catholic faith.

There were many, however, who were by no means adherents of Modernism, who likewise criticised the Thomist synthesis that ruled Catholic thought during those years. Aside from those who made justified criticisms of the sometimes mechanical way in which philosophy and theology were taught, there were those who advanced more fundamental critiques of the Thomist intellectual edifice, such as the *Nouvelle Théologie* already mentioned. This movement at its best sought merely to supplement the study of Thomas with that of the Fathers of the Church. At its worst, it embraced certain positions which

were judged by the Magisterium to be false or dangerous, some of which are enumerated in Pius XII's 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*.

The *Nouvelle Théologie* can hardly be labeled simply as Modernism. But both it and Modernism may be seen as examples of a turn away from a concern with grounding the Faith in philosophically natural knowledge to a more theological account which emphasises faith at the expense of reason. Hence Boland's charge that Tracey Rowland tends toward fideism in her effort to avoid the rocks of rationalism. And it would seem to be the case that in Western intellectual history there has been, broadly speaking, a recurring tendency to turn away from a grounding of human thought in reality as perceived by reason toward a more mystical approach to knowledge. Even before the Incarnation, Aristotle's philosophic synthesis soon gave way to a new and even more mystical Platonism which exercised considerable influence within the Church herself. As Chesterton put it in his biography of St. Thomas,

The truth is that the historical Catholic Church began by being Platonist; by being rather too Platonist. Platonism was in that very

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golden Greek air that was breathed by the first great Greek theologians....St. Augustine followed a natural mental evolution when he was a Platonist before he was a Manichean, and a Manichean before he was a Christian. And it was exactly in that last association that the first faint hint, of the danger of being *too* Platonist, may be seen.

And as after the death of Aristotle there was a resurgent Platonism, shortly after the death of St. Thomas the fideism of Ockham became dominant in European universities until with Luther we reach an explicit rejection of philosophy and reason itself, followed by the riot of modern philosophies, with their frequent rejection of any direct encounter with reality itself—especially as in Descartes and Kant. It seems that the human mind cannot sustain for too long a direct philosophical encounter with being itself, and therefore takes refuge in various forms of fideism or excessive supernaturalism or otherwise sets metaphysics aside as something beyond the capacities of the human mind. We are in one such episode of supernaturalism today, and even the crude reductionist materialism of the New Atheists

witnesses to the demeaning of reason and its native capacity to know metaphysical truths with certainty, which is simply the counterpart of the fideism that Boland seeks to uncover and criticise.

A chief factor that complicates discussion of these issues at present is the existence of four or five different currents of thought within the Church in competition with each other. On the one hand there is simply a resurgent Modernism, a conception of the Faith that regards doctrine as unhinged from reality, as a plaything of clever theologians. Thus doctrine, especially moral doctrine, can change. Morality has nothing to do with being, with man's nature, it is simply a reflection of current fashions and fads, and as these change, so should it. The philosophical presuppositions of this approach are rarely made explicit, but if they were they would necessarily turn out to be some form of the idealism that limits knowledge to the endless regurgitations of the human mind and a technical mastery over the natural world. Knowledge for the modern mind may be power, but it is certainly not knowledge.

Then there are those who are trying to continue or bring back

the Thomism of the Leonine revival. But even among these there are divisions, with some suspicious of or rejecting the Second Vatican Council, while others see its teaching as largely unproblematic or even helpful. Boland himself adopts a favorable attitude toward the Council and the post conciliar papacy, pointing out the numerous statements of these popes in accord with a Thomistic approach, including that of the subtitle of this book, taken from Paul VI's 1974 letter, *Lumen Ecclesiae*, addressed to the Master General of the Dominicans, in which that pontiff warns against the excesses of rationalism and supernaturalism, the "Scylla and Charybdis" of those who investigate the relations between faith and reason but without "the clear vision and balance which the great doctor [St. Thomas] possessed in a supreme degree."

But to continue our taxonomy of contemporary Catholic thought, the successors of the *Nouvelle Théologie*, sometimes styling themselves as Augustinian Thomists or as the *Ressourcement* school of theology, and grouped around the journal *Communio*, among whom Tracey Rowland is numbered, are likewise seeking to avoid the shipwreck of Scylla

or Charybdis. (Joseph Ratzinger himself, as one of the founders of *Communio*, has clearly been associated with this group, but Boland sees him as having avoided the errors associated with its theological stance.) That they have not been successful in this, however sincere, is our author's thesis, as he attacks not only Rowland but other important figures associated with this school, such as Henri de Lubac and Alasdair MacIntyre. These are the chief intellectual camps with which we shall have to deal, for the so-called Whig Thomism of a Michael Novak or a George Weigel hardly merits attention as a serious intellectual endeavor.

Implicit in Boland's critique of Rowland and other thinkers is the cardinal but often overlooked point that in a particular but still very important sense, philosophy is prior to theology. A bad philosophy necessitates a tainted theology. If human thought is limited to eternally musing over the cogitations of our own minds or if philosophy is reduced to simply an effort to rigorously examine verbal formulations, whence comes theology or even religious faith? Obviously it must come directly from God, to be received immediately by an act of the

will or a leap of faith. What we used to call the preambles of the faith are downplayed or ignored. The effort to show the rational grounds of the Faith, of the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the historic credibility of revelation, are hardly thought to be important anymore. Hence a turn toward fideism which goes hand in hand with a shift toward idealism in philosophy, and which allows the theologian to neglect the rational roots of the Faith. Boland traces the lineage of our current philosophical idealism to long before Kant, in fact to the Spanish Jesuit philosopher and theologian Suárez.

In connection with controversies over faith and reason is that about nature and grace. This indeed is one of the most complex of current intellectual controversies in the Church. Those thinkers who broadly stand within the *Nouvelle Théologie* hold that the concept of "pure nature," except as a mere intellectual abstraction, is dangerous and has in actual fact led to secularism and the divorce of the social order from Christian principles. This of course is disputed by the more traditional Thomist school, and in *Humani Generis* Pius XII condemned those who deny the "gratuity of

the supernatural order" or that "God...cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision." At issue here as well is the interpretation of the Angelic Doctor himself and what stance he takes, or would take, toward these contemporary questions, and whether his thought was misunderstood by his later commentators and interpreters, such as Suárez.

Now human nature, whether understood as "pure" or as inherently ordered toward grace, is at the root of all the activities of man, all of which can be conveniently included in the category of culture. Hence perhaps the major concern of both Rowland and Boland is culture, a subject explicitly discussed in the Vatican II constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the first such sustained reflection on this topic in the Church's long history. And this is hardly surprising. Although a recognition that there exist different ways of life, in fact, different *cultures*, can be found in numerous writers even in antiquity, the explicit anthropological term was not enunciated until the mid-nineteenth century. As an all-encompassing concept that denotes, in the words of Christopher Dawson, "a common way of life...embodied in its institutions,

its literature and its art,” culture includes all the other departments of human life and society, many of which, such as the political order or the economy, the Church *had* devoted considerable attention to. But the new term gave an added focus to these reflections, for it tended to highlight the inner connections between all aspects of this “common way of life.” No longer could someone reasonably discuss a country’s politics or economy without attention to its religion, for example. So when anthropologists had isolated and labeled the culture concept, it was only natural that theologians would turn their attention to it.

The treatment of culture in *Gaudium et Spes* (nos. 53-62) is the subject of critical remarks by Tracey Rowland. She writes:

When taken together, the fact of compromise, the multiple contrasts, the unprecedented form, the absence of a clearly defined theological framework for its interpretation, the alternation between dogma and pastoral appeals and the terminological looseness all contributed to the complexity of the ‘explosive’ problematic.

Boland, however, will not agree to these criticisms. Speaking

generally, he defends the Second Vatican Council and the popes beginning with John XXIII, and in particular the treatment of culture in *Gaudium et Spes*, criticised by Rowland as opening the way to secularism. But Boland counters that human nature apart from faith has a standing of its own, and along with that, certain legitimate demands, such as the need to ground the act of faith in a reasonable setting, to make of it the *obsequium rationi consentaneum* that Vatican I defined.

As I said earlier, it is the Church’s response to modernity or postmodernity that is the issue at the root of our current theological and ecclesiastical perplexities. During the period from the beginnings of the Thomistic revival to the Council, the Church carried on her thought and her life according to the pattern begun after the Council of Trent. Especially after Leo XIII’s sponsorship of the budding Thomistic revival she acted with confidence and did not fear to make statements utterly at variance with the views of the world outside her bounds. But despite this—or perhaps because of it—she appeared to thrive and it seemed as if the trajectory of the modern world was actually being checked. Converts, and those of



high quality, were not lacking and Catholic thought gained a grudging respect from contemporaries.

But many were dissatisfied with this approach. As suggested above, many saw the Thomism that was the intellectual and spiritual soul of this revival as itself a difficulty, and it seemed that, however, successful, a boredom was developing with the course adopted by Leo XIII and continued by his successors. It is difficult to suppose that it was any strength in modern thought itself that swayed so many Catholics to make significant intellectual compromises, but rather simply intellectual fashion. But the near collapse of so many indications of the Church's health and growth after the Council naturally led not just to analysis and discussion but to recrimination as well. Who or what was responsible for the decline, so different from the new Pentecost that John XXIII confidently called for? Rowland sees the post-Conciliar decline as in part stemming from *Gaudium et Spes*'s remarks on culture which appeared "to give the Church's approval to the culture of modernity" and which "were formulated without reference to a theological framework within which the concept of culture could be 'eschato-

logically situated.'" But for Bolland, she has adopted an "all or nothing approach" and "has reacted from one extreme position (the endorsement of the modern culture as a whole...) to the other extreme ..."

Probably no one would assert that modern culture must be rejected *tout court*. But still one may object that no culture is simply an assortment of disparate elements that happen to coexist in time and space. One thing that the formulation of the culture concept helps make clear is that a culture has a *form* of its own, so that, in the words of St. John Paul II,

At the heart of every culture lies the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 24)

A culture's most fundamental theological attitudes influence the other aspects of its life and thought, even down to everyday activities. As the Jesuit George Bull wrote in 1938:

In recent years, Catholics have become increasingly

conscious of the clash between Catholicism as a *general* culture, and the culture of the world around them. The work of men like Belloc, Maritain, Christopher Dawson and others, has shown that we differ not in religion alone, but in the whole realm of unspoken and spontaneous things, which color even our daily routine.

Thus any culture is a whole, with a unique structure and principles. Modern culture, while obviously complex and hardly uniform in every place, does have at its heart an attitude toward God and toward "personal existence," toward how we should live. One can recognise the errors of its way "of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence," and at the same time concede the accidental presence of more favorable elements.

In her conclusion, Rowland discusses Cardinal Walter Kasper's encomium of the modern age as "a new kind of *preparatio evangelii* such as at one stage was provided by the Hellenistic civilisation of the Roman Empire." She rightly criticises his views and notes that the secularisation of the culture of Christendom "has

not made it any more 'universally communicable,' [but instead] it has led to a widespread loss of faith within Europe itself...." Boland, however, calls this "the all or nothing approach that she adopts with regard to modern culture, or the culture of modernity." But in his laudable desire to avoid the currently all too common error of fideistic supernaturalism, I think that Boland fails to give sufficient weight to the glaring fact that modernity, taken as a whole, has hardly been a friend to the Catholic faith. The causes and ramifications of this are beyond the scope of this review; however, Boland is correct that regaining a healthy balance between reason and faith is necessary in order to provide an ultimately convincing and attractive alternative to the juggernaut of modernity. The fact that his specific criticisms of Rowland are sometimes lacking does not invalidate his fundamental thesis, the dangers, especially today, of downplaying reason and the natural life of mankind.

If we are to admit the reality and goodness of human nature and its legitimate spheres of operation, then while we cannot condemn human culture as such, we can note the objective realities of any particular culture. To ac-

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knowledge the claims of human nature is not to pave the way toward a social order divorced from the divine. Likewise to affirm the proper domain of human reason does not lead to a kind of intellectual autonomy that is inimical to Christian faith. Reason can arrive at the existence of God and other metaphysical truths, and if we do not recognise this we seemingly make it impossible for human beings to talk to one another across the boundaries of different cultures or worldviews. Thus the pressing importance of the issues discussed by both Tracey Rowland and Donald Boland can be comprehended if we simply consider the state of today's world and of the numerous conflicts, religious, cultural, ethnic, and even military, which are occurring, and which we struggle to make sense of. Hence the subjects raised in both books are as interesting as they are complex, and as complex as they are timely. This reviewer would recommend Boland's book as a companion to Rowland's, sometimes as a corrective, yes, but more often as a supplement which offers another vision and other arguments concerning the direction which the Church should be headed at the beginning of her third millennium.

*Thomist Tradition* is a tome of nearly seven-hundred pages and an index would have been a welcome feature. A more serious lack is that when Boland quotes Rowland he gives no page citations to her book, although the fact that Boland's chapters move in step with those of Rowland considerably alleviates the difficulty of locating the sources of the quotations from her book.

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