

Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe. Volume I: Foundations

Review Number: 13

Publish date: Friday, 1 November, 1996

Author: Richard Southern

ISBN: 9780631191117

Date of Publication: 1995

Price: £55.00

Pages: 330pp.

Publisher: Blackwell

Publisher url: http://bookshop.blackwell.co.uk/jsp/id/Scholastic_Humanism_and_the_Unification_of_Europe_v_1/

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: David d'Avray

After leaving Balliol, Sir Richard Southern had the compensation of daily contact with the early seventeenth-century collection of medieval scholastic writings which William Laud had built up at St. Johns. Presumably Laud was concerned to recover religious and intellectual values with which he felt in sympathy, although he could not wholly share them. An analogous impulse would seem to lie behind this splendid book. The intellectual personality of the author permeates the interpretation. Sentences like the following are symptomatic: 'Scholastic arguments ... performed many of the functions of arguments in political assemblies today: they brought the issues of faith and behaviour before a continuing stream of men, many of whom would one day have to administer what today they discussed'; or again: 'As late as 1930 no Oxford graduate went willingly "into trade" except in pursuit of a political, objective or to inherit a grand old firm'. Southern thinks with the whole of his mind and experience, not just specialised section.

This intellectual personality developed its individuality in the context of a group originally brought together by another famous Balliol medievalist, Sir Maurice Powicke. Though Southern was himself a pupil of V.H. Galbraith, he evidently felt a close affinity with the informal school which after Powicke's time gravitated around the office in Bodley of another Balliol man, Richard Hunt. The trilogy of which this is the first volume can be regarded as the last and finest product of a collective enterprise: the sympathetic exploration of medieval thought and religion in its relation to society and government. The trilogy's subject is one of the great movements in intellectual history, the effort the 11th to the 14th century to '... demonstrate the dignity of the human mind by showing that it can know all things', and 'to make man appear more rational, the divine ordering of the universe more open to human inspection and the whole complex of Man, nature and God more intelligible, than the bitter experience of either the earlier or later centuries of the Middle Ages made at all likely'. No other member of the group chose to paint so large a canvass - the combination of synthesis with fresh and vivid work on detail is one of Southern's particular gifts - but the spirit of humane scholarship which animated these Oxford medievalists is very present in this book.

One sign of this intellectual setting is the chapter on 'The Bible', special field of his older colleague Beryl Smalley, even though a narrower conception of 'scholastic humanism' might have excluded it. Southern explains how the masters of the high medieval schools took over the symbolic tradition of biblical exegesis

and systematized it, collecting and arranging the spiritual interpretations of the past, producing manuals, and popularising doctrine through biblical imagery. A development which was closer to 'scholasticism' as usually defined was the method of resolving contradictions between Biblical authorities by means of verbal and logical analysis. Southern elegantly shows how discussion of the problem of 'Fear' (Proverbs 1:7 and Psalm 19/18:10 versus 1 John) developed in sophistication into a solution elaborated by Peter Lombard; and then how the Lombard's teaching was passed on by an ex-pupil to Henry II of England.

A sensitivity to the setting in political and social life of medieval religious has been characteristic of those members of the group who taught Oxford's perhaps rather conservative history syllabus: Miss Smalley, W.A. Pantin, but Southern most of all. There was perhaps a creative tension between, on the one hand, their research interest in intellectual history, and on the other, their teaching which Oxford tradition pulled towards the history of government and wider historiographical fashion towards social history. In chapters four and five the history of thought and life are more successfully integrated than in any previous history of scholasticism that I can think of. We are shown how a society in which the appeal of the church lay in its ritual powers, where secular rulers legislated on religious matters, reacting to short-term crises, and where the rules about such matters as marriage and penance were inconsistent and confusing, gave way to a society where the Schools, and governments run by the scholastically educated, made rules intended to organise life for all time. Southern reminds us that although scholastic training was a path to success, it could not guarantee a good job without connections and luck. It is typical that he brings the outcomes for the losers sharply to mind. As for the successful, they bought a sharp combination of broad systematisation with mastery of detail to the practise of government. A former Balliol tutor is peculiarly well equipped to bring out the connection between academic excellence and action outside the ivory tower. The human and personal aspects of the professional academics world are also skilfully evoked: loyalty of pupils, a growing sense of the place in history of contemporary intellectuals, the stories told about well-known teachers. Southern is able to turn the twelfth-century scholastics back into people.

He is even more original about places. First, (in chapter Two), he reasserts against various critics his thesis that the famous school of Chartres was never a significantly distinctive centre at all. Southern enjoys controversy, one suspects, and his ability to carry it on without innuendo or animus makes him a model for anyone engaged in the modern equivalent of scholastic disputation.

In addition to breathing new life into an old debate, Southern proposes two new (and this time positive) theses about places. He explains why Leon failed to compete with Paris, after a promising start, by pointing out that there was simply not enough physical room for expansion. Then - and this is the newest big idea in the book - he proposes a striking antithesis between the smooth and almost inexorable development of Paris into the scholastic metropolis of northern Europe, on the one hand, and the sudden prominence of Bologna as the centre of legal scholasticism on the other. Paris is structure, Bologna event, the event in question being the appearance of Gratian's Decretum (admittedly in a town which already had the advantage of proximity to the papacy). Before that, there was no academic school of law in Italy. Aficionados of Southern's work will feel the usual thrill as they realise that he has discreetly removed the pin of another grenade.

Before Gratian, Canon Law did not exist in a form capable of serving as the 'software' for a hierarchy of working Church courts. Gratian made the difference not only by synthesising the mass of past ecclesiastical decisions, but above all by incorporating procedural systems borrowed from Roman Law. As for Roman Law, that too was a novelty as a subject for systematic academic teaching. The well-known specialists before this time had been practising lawyers, not academics. The novelty of the argument is not the emphasis on Gratian's importance, but the contrast with the situation before him, and the implication that but for one man the great studium of Bologna might never have been. Some may argue that it is not certain whether Gratian himself bought the Roman Law into his synthesis, but even if he did not, the essence of the thesis could be preserved by substituting 'one work' for 'one man'.

The Decretum not only made Bologna the southern metropolis of thought, but began the process of transforming the scholastic vision of the world into practice backed by government sanction. Southern sees

Theology and law as closely allied, and it is with the triumph of Bologna that he finishes the first instalment. The proportions of the book will fit harmoniously into the overarching structure outlined at the start of the book, but this volume can also stand just as well on its own - already a classic.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/13#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/186> [2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>