

## *Theological Retrospect*

**Faith Seeking Understanding: Essays Theological and Critical**, by Robert E. Cushman, *Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1981. xv + 373 pp. \$19.95.*

WHAT IS THEOLOGY is a question that has always exercised the mind of theologians. Contemporary theologians often seem to function on the thesis that theology is what theologians do. They are therefore open to the criticism that they have renounced the age-old ambition of exploring cognitional theory. In other words, a point has been reached, in the evolution of theological thought, where one cannot know what theology should be and what theologians should do. Theologizing has become irrational, as one can well see by reading a number of contemporary authors, from

Thomas Altizer to Hans Küng. Over the years, however, Dr. Robert Cushman has maintained and pursued an older project, for which the task of theology is both rational and faithful. Hence the title of his collection of essays: *Faith Seeking Understanding*. This is of course Saint Anselm's *Fides quaerens intellectum*, a medieval conception which itself owed much of its impetus to the thought of Saint Augustine, and which therefore goes back, in its roots, to the theological method of the Fathers of the Church.

Thus the intent of Cushman's *Essays Theological and Critical* (the subtitle of the collection) is both clear and traditional. However welcome this will be, however, the very genre of a gathering of essays written between 1945 and 1978 does not assist the stated purpose of the author. This must have been felt by the author himself, for the titles of the four sections of the book do not entirely correspond to their content: "Historical Studies"; "Contemporary Theology in Review"; "Aspects of Christian Doctrine"; "The Ecumenical Movement." There are historical studies in all four sections; there is a paper on Ecumenism in the Contemporary Theology; all four sections treat aspects of Christian doctrine. At least one point can be gathered from the somewhat haphazard order of the book: the author has not planned to give us an insight into his own historical development. I take this to mean, more positively, that he intends to lead us into a consistent, if open, system, which should be envisioned synchronically, as a whole. Yet this itself is made difficult by what these essays show to be a basic characteristic of Cushman's thought: his theology emerges from reaction to other authors. Among older writers, Cushman reacts chiefly to Plato, Spinoza, and Kant among philosophers, to Augustine among theologians. Among recent authors, he reacts to Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, John Knox, Rudolf Bultmann. Between the ancient and the modern there is an enormous gap, which is only partially plugged by reference to Anselm, Luther, and Calvin, and by more

extensive studies of John Wesley. The essays on the ecumenical movement and the Second Vatican Council are more anecdotal than theological. Biblical material holds a sizable place in the overall picture, but, again, largely by way of reaction to recent hermeneutics, especially that of Bultmann.

There is no theology without a philosophy. Robert Cushman has both the discernment and the grace to acknowledge it. He differs in this from most contemporary theologians, who hide their philosophical assumptions as though these were a sort of intellectual underwear, the very existence of which it would be shameful to admit in public. Plato has pride of place. This is a welcome change from the Marxism of the liberation theologies that have lately flooded the market. And it is most traditional, since Plato has had considerable influence on Christian theology, though more through Plotinus than directly. Yet I tend to agree with the scholastics that Platonism serves theology better when it has been doctored with a sizable dose of Aristotelianism. Cushman does pay attention to Aristotle, as when he tries to understand Augustine's conception of time and history. But he would presumably not admit that Aristotle formulated something like a *philosophia perennis*. Yet Cushman does work on the basis of some elements of basic Aristotelianism. He maintains, much against the contemporary mood, that theology cannot be merely functional; that it does imply an ontology; that theological method "requires, as a presupposition, an ontological context." And he blames the Reformers, whose reaction against scholasticism led them to neglect "the world" or "a theology of Creation" as a *tertium quid* that is necessary to place in proper perspective their two main concerns: to know God and to know self.

One may wonder if this critique of the Reformers does not lead to a contradiction or at least an inconsistency, or simply a one-sided view of the history of theology. I am not referring here to Cushman's lack of acquaintance with most medieval authors.

In this he shares the handicap of most Protestants, a handicap which growing ignorance of Latin is fast spreading among Catholics too. I am alluding to his assessment of John Wesley. It would of course be ungracious to find fault with a United Methodist for his interest in Wesley, not only as a major figure of Christian history but also as a significant and influential thinker. But I write "thinker" rather than theologian. For whatever theology Wesley was able to do in his crowded life was necessarily of a non-professional nature, though he must have had plenty of opportunity to think as he was riding his horse here and there. Through his encounter with the Moravians and the Aldersgate experience, Wesley "really recovered the Reformation standpoint" over against pelagian tendencies in Anglicanism. This may well be true. But the question needs to be faced, whether the doctrine of Christian Perfection—which Cushman calls "one of the four pillars of the Wesleyan revival"—is compatible with the Reformation standpoint. Cushman is well aware of the problem: part of Wesley's greatness was his rejection of "the practically absolute distinction between Nature and Grace—that philosophical and theological ineptitude of the Reformation." But if the distinction between nature and grace is not absolute, then justification may indeed be by grace, but must also be a little bit by nature. And this, precisely, was denied by the Reformation standpoint—and, I might add, by the Council of Trent, too, though in another language and problematic.

Cushman is generally careful to explain and substantiate his statement. Yet he has left some puzzling exceptions. Is it truly necessary to think, as though it were an obvious Christological implication, that the ministry of Jesus on earth was led in "continuing temptation"? or that, at the Last Supper, "Jesus did not himself partake of either the bread or the wine"? But I have more problems with such trenchant assertions as: "Transubstantiation is the tendency to objectify or substantialize grace come to completion or full realization. It is the domestication of God." One can indeed

discuss the implications of a theology of transubstantiation; but "domestication of God" could hardly be found in Thomas Aquinas. In the same essay, "the formula *ex opere operato*" is identified with "the view that the communication of divine grace in Holy Communion was effectual independent of human conditions appertaining either to its administration or its reception." *Ex opere operato* has in fact never meant anything of the sort: it means only that the effect of the sacrament is independent of the state of grace of the minister.

My last remarks will concern what Cushman writes of the Vatican Council, which he attended during the last three sessions as a Methodist observer. Undoubtedly, this was a major event of our century, and of unmeasurable importance in the life of its participants, including my own. Cushman's essays on this topic were written shortly after the event. They show the freshness of first impressions. By the same token, they would have been improved by some rewriting. They contain a few elementary mistakes; e.g., "Monsignor Dupré" should read Father Duprey. More importantly, a proposition is attributed to the Council which cannot be found in its decrees or constitutions: "The one true religion *subsists* in the Catholic and apostolic Church." What Vatican II said is both less banal and ecumenically more sensitive: "This Church (*i.e.*, the one Church of Christ), as a constituted and organized society in this world, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him..." (*Lumen gentium*, n.8). Likewise, Cushman finds it unfortunate that the Roman Church "by long tradition, has failed to distinguish between the *esse* of faith and the *bene esse* of order and of mores." But, in reality, the distinction between dogma (the *esse* of faith) and discipline (the *bene esse* of order and of mores) is one of the most universal principles of both Catholic theology and Roman canon law.

These are flaws in a volume which will remain as a good example of serene

theologizing. Cushman is not carried away by the fads of the moment. He is eager to preserve the continuity of Christian thought even as he wishes for repristination through better knowledge of the Scriptures. He is a generalist in theology rather than a specialist. And this should be a healthy lesson for all of us, who are assailed from so many sides by special interest theologies.

Reviewed by GEORGE H. TAVARD