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Books

Sacred and Secular Scriptures / The catholic Revival in English Literature

Reviewed by David Birch

SACRED AND SECULAR SCRIPTURES: A Catholic Approach to Literature
by Nicholas Boyle
(Darton Longman & Todd, 2004, 299pp, $49.95. Available from AD Books)

THE CATHOLIC REVIVAL IN ENGLISH LITERATURE 1845-1961
by Ian Ker
(Gracewing, 2004, 231pp, $39.95. Available from AD Books)

What constitutes a Catholic sensibility? Is this unchanging, or are there differing definitions pre- and post-Vatican II? Is the Catholicism expressed in the writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Henry Newman, Hilaire Belloc, and others before Vatican II, the Catholicism of today?

Furthermore, can we define what it means to be a Catholic through the Bible as sacred scripture or through secular literature like The Lord of the Rings, Moby Dick, Austen's Mansfield Park, and Pascal's Pensées and Goethe's Faust?

Defining Catholicism

Do we define Catholicism through the documents of the Church and its councils, encyclicals and the magisterium, written by Catholics, or is there a value in seeking to understand what it means to be a Catholic through the writings of non-Catholics like Paul Ricoeur, the Lutherans Hans Frei and Hans-Georg Gadamer; the Lutheran/Calvinist philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel and the Judaism of Emmanuel Lévinas?

As Catholics, should we read the Bible as literature, and should we read literature as the Bible?

Both authors under review here raise these, and many other questions, in these two books.

Armed with an array of scholars, mostly non-Catholics, Nicholas Boyle offers a Catholic reading of the Bible and secular literature, including detailed analyses of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, Melville's Moby Dick, Austen's Mansfield Park, Pascal's Pensées and Goethe's Faust.

Ian Ker, on the other hand, opens up the whole landscape of writing in the late 19th and early to mid 20th century, offering detailed analysis of the Catholicism of the works of Newman, Hopkins, Belloc, Chesterton, Greene and Waugh as a reading of post-Reformation Protestant England.
In *Sacred and Secular Scriptures* (itself a very challenging title), Nicholas Boyle openly puzzles over what the term "Catholic" actually means, but seeks from the very beginning "to give back to the word 'Catholic' something of its original ecumenical meaning" (Boyle, p. x).

He explores what I have constructed here as a syllogism, based on the comments by the Dominican Marie-Dominique Chenu in 1969 (who worked closely with Yves Congar at Vatican II on what eventually became *Gaudium et Spes*), that "literature is a site of theology"; "the Bible is literature" and so, "recovery of contact with the Bible É will bring Catholic theology back into contact with human culture in general from which it had sadly become detached in recent centuries" (Boyle, p. 3).

This raises a significant two-fold issue for active contemporary Catholics: what do we understand by the term "literature", if we are to include both the sacred and secular as a site of theology, and to what extent do we need to expect Catholic theologians to be "drenched in the Bible", in order to achieve this "new" theology?

My answer to this, and I realise not every contemporary Catholic, theologian or otherwise, would necessarily agree with me, is a very clear "No", if it assumes that the Bible is the unique source of revelation (the Protestant principle of *sola sancta scriptura*). Unfashionable though it may be to some Catholics, my highlighting of the continuing distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism is important, and lies at the very heart of both these books in varying ways.

This distinction is important to raise, because, as critical theorist Paul Ricoeur makes so clear (and which is why it is so interesting to see him used by Boyle in his book), a text is not complete in itself, nor ever will be.

The world of a company report is not just the world of a specific company, it is also the world of finance in general; of economics; of politics; of culture; of history and so on. So too with the Bible, literature and Church documents. So too with the world of the Catholic text overall, its people, institutions, teaching and revelations, living and dynamic, over the centuries.

**Literary criticism**

Following Ricoeur, Nicholas Boyle applies the concepts and categories of literary criticism to the Bible, and similarly argues that the concepts and categories of theology can be equally well applied to secular literature. He does this to develop what he calls "a Catholic reading" of the Bible and literature, predominantly (and very interestingly) using Hegel (a Lutheran/Calvinist) and Lévinas (a Lithuanian Jew) as the principal sources of his thinking.

Ian Ker, in *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1854-1961*, builds his opening arguments on a questioning of Newman's comments in *The Idea of a University* (1873), arguing that English literature, "is essentially Protestant literature and there is nothing that Catholics can hope to do to change the situation. A Catholic literature", Newman asserted, "is simply an impossibility in the context of English culture" (Ker, p. 1).

Ker sets out to demonstrate how wrong he considers this view to be, by analysing in some depth the work of leading English Catholic writers like Belloc, Newman, Hopkins, Chesterton, Waugh and Greene.
Both books challenge us. Not only for what we might think about the particular writers Boyle and Ker choose to analyse; about the value of seeking answers to Catholic questions through non-Catholic scholars and for bringing the sacred and secular together as one, but also, more importantly, I think, for what these challenges mean for our own understanding of what it is to be Catholic, and how we might articulate clearly, to ourselves and others, *cognitione, verbo et opere*, our own Catholic sensibility.

For example, we might consider the comments made by Hilaire Belloc in a letter (1923) to Ronald Knox (celebrated for his single-handed translation of the Vulgate into a three-volume English Bible), when he summed up Catholic sensibility as, "tre Catholique, c'est tout". Is this, we might ask, still the case for all Catholics?

Ian Ker engages with the populist perception of Catholicism (e.g., bells and smells, fish on Fridays, preoccupation with sin and guilt, Marian sentimentalism and so on), and seeks, "to make real the extent to which Catholicism informed and shaped a considerable and impressive corpus of literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Ker, p. 7).

**English culture**

In particular, he positions his analysis in the context of Newman's assertion that, "I do not disguise that Catholicism is a different religion from Anglicanism" (Ker, p. 21), raising as it does, a quite distinct understanding of what constitutes a Catholic sensibility compared to the more ecumenical critique of Nicholas Boyle.

Ker engages with an English culture (and its literature) which was still predominantly post-Reformation Protestant, though now rapidly changing, and rampantly anti-Catholic at so many times in its history, and with the Catholic sensibility of pre-Vatican II writers which can best be understood by the clearly non-Protestant view that, "Christianity is no longer something that you merely experience privately in your own heart or construct in your own mind from reading the Bible; it is a reality that exists independently of the subjective self É" (Ker, p. 21).

Central to this approach is a recognition that "One of the Reformation's results was to persuade people that religion was an individual thing É its object being É the salvation of the individual soul" (Ker, p. 60); whereas the very essence of Catholicism, for these writers (and for many of us still) is what Ker calls its "corporate quality".

In other words, the authority for understanding what it is to be Catholic in Protestant England, "is no longer oneself ultimately, but the Church" (Ker, p. 21). And throughout his readings of Belloc, Hopkins and others, he demonstrates the putting into practice of this sensibility by these Catholic writers in an essentially "hostile" environment, through secular literature.

At the heart, then, of both of these books is a critical engagement with what constitutes Catholic sensibilities. And, there is no doubt to me at any rate, that what comes through, is a sensibility in the writers chosen by Ker, of a Catholicism deeply rooted in an understanding of the crucial importance of the Church as institution; of the priest as a "doer of action" and not simply a preacher of words; of the centrality of the sacraments and of the reactions against the vested interests of the reformers of 16th century England in their arguing for a
Christianity based on justification by faith alone (sola fide) - a stridently anti-Catholic position, and one still widely held.

Boyle, on the other hand, engages through a range of very different scholars (Herder, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Frei, Ricoeur, and Lévinas, among others, with the redefining of this Catholic sensibility, which seems, theoretically at least to have much more in common, Hans KÜng- like, to a reforming, Protestant sensibility, but in practice, through his textual analyses, seems to offer little more than Ker's.

To that extent, Ker highlights a Catholic sensibility that rejects, and Boyle highlights a Catholic sensibility that is much more accepting of, the myth (totally rejected by Belloc, for example) that suggests we can talk of a "common Christianity". To that end, the term "Christianity" itself is very much a post-Reformation formulation.

For Belloc and Ker's other writers, "The Catholic Church was from her origin a thing, not a theory. She was a society informing the individual, and not a mass of individuals forming a society" (Ker, p. 65). In other words, a Catholic Church which, following Aquinas, is able to reconcile justification by faith, reason and works, not separating them as occurred at the Reformation, and all that meant for the resultant theology and liturgy of the reformers.

The Catholic sensibility, seen in the light of Ker's writers, then, is non-negotiable. It is not discretionary. As Waugh makes clear through his Catholic characters in Brideshead Revisited, being a Catholic is about "doing the job of being a Catholic - which eclipses all other jobs" (Ker, p. 182).

But, perhaps not surprisingly given his theoretical sources, for Boyle it appears to be considerably more fluid, though not always in his textual analyses. His "Catholic reading" of Frodo in Lord of the Rings, for example, indicates that Frodo's world, and that of his fellow hobbits, is not simply a fantasy world, or even one celebrating hobbit virtues, but "a combination of a sense of a personal vocation and a belief in the joint or collective nature of faith, in the indispensability of the Church and the love of Christians for one another" (Boyle, p. 258).

**Bearing witness**

To reach a reading like this requires an understanding of the state of Catholicism in post-Reformation England, and a recognition that Tolkien as a Catholic, together with his fellow English Catholics at the time, were signalled as "solitaries engaged in a common venture", namely, bearing witness to a Catholicism which had always marked them out as different from their non-Catholic English neighbours.

There is no doubt, to me at any rate, that the predominantly non-Catholic theoretical machinery Nicholas Boyle brings into play opens exciting and challenging windows on to who we, as Catholics are, although I'm not sure, in the end, whether a more satisfying, or effective, Catholic reading emerges in his work to that developed by Ian Ker. I don't think it does, but as an intellectual exercise it is well worth doing.

Like Boyle, I have absolutely no difficulty whatsoever in reading the Bible as literature, or literature as the Bible, or using Ricoeur or Lévinas to broaden my thinking. In fact I think it is
essential, so long as I am doing so as a Catholic with a sensibility that affirms the teaching of
the Church (both before, and reaffirmed at, Vatican II) that such a reading, "should always be
accompanied, or is at least always capable of being accompanied, by prayer" (Boyle, p. 28).

Prayer, nevertheless not afraid to recognise non-Catholic thinking and intellectual advances,
nor, also, afraid to articulate the inherent flaws of Reformation anti-Catholicism, and,
disagreeable I know to some who will read this, to the often equally flawed range of
interpretations and practices developed by some from the documents of Vatican II.

The challenge to all of us, as I read it through these two books, is: "What Catholic sensibility
and identity do we present to the world - a hidden, dormant one; one that many might be hard
pressed to distinguish from a Protestant sensibility, or one that still accepts, and is not afraid
to say so in any circumstance, that 'être Catholique c'est tout'?

As Gerard Manley Hopkins made so clear in his own understanding of himself as a Catholic,
"We are what we do, our identity lies, not dormant and hidden within us, but in our interface
with all other things" (cited in Boyle, p. 189).

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