

RETHINKING FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY. By Gerald O'Collins, S.J. New York: Oxford University, 2011. Pp. xiv + 363. \$65.

Having written three monographs and numerous articles on this topic, and also having given lectures and classes on it around the world, O'Collins now revises and summarizes his thinking in this new, excellent text. As the author notes, exactly what fundamental or foundational theology consists in, what this discipline studies and why, is not well known. Classes on this topic are not always found as such in seminary curricula. O'C. begins both with a historical survey of the rise of fundamental theology as a discipline, noting several of the major authors in this field. He further distinguishes between the tasks of a Christian fundamental theology from those of similar disciplines, like apologetics, philosophy of religion, natural theology, and systematic theology. Fundamental theology may draw upon philosophy, human sciences, or doctrinal theology, yet its goals and methods remain its own: to survey the reasonableness and reality of ideas and realities that make theology possible, and that shape theological method, from a specifically Christian theological point of view. The volume covers such foundational topics as the character and existence of God; the nature of experience (including religious); general and special revelation; tradition, Scripture, truth, the church, and world religions. Clearly these are vast domains in and of themselves. The work is a survey of general results, drawing on recent research but always having its own perspective. Writing in clear, scholarly prose and consistently keeping in mind the needs of the reader, O'C. provides regular summaries and useful references in each chapter. The result is a very fine text that should be welcomed by teachers, scholars, and students of all kinds.

Given the nature and scope of this theological discipline as laid out by O'C., it seemed odd to find a chapter on the nature of God under the title "faith in a personal God." Many of the topics of this chapter would seem to belong more properly to systematic theology. Rather than a final chapter on world religions, perhaps a more useful conclusion would have been a survey of recent works on the many types of theism and how a Christian belief in a single, personal triune God who is infinite and ultimate makes good rational sense in comparison with other approaches. A brief definition of the trinitarian God of orthodox faith would then be all that a fundamental theology (drawing from symbolics and dogmatics) would need.

The chapter on "the human condition" (3) may be a bit too ambitious, even given the nature of this book. O'C. surveys four general philosophical proposals for characterizing the human condition as a whole (*homo dolens*, *homo interrogans*, *homo historicus*, *homo symbolicus*) before proposing his own view, using "experience" (*homo experiens*) as a big-tent idea to cover them all. Over the years, I have found any such attempt to name

human existence as such to be one-sided or limited. Human being is too polyvalent, too diverse, for such formulae. Still, what O'C. has to say about human experience in this chapter is solid and informative. He broadly draws on Rahner here (as in many places in the book), seeing "the basic dynamism of the human spirit as creating the conditions for the possibility of religious experience" (53). I agree with this, but with a proviso. It must be made equally clear that the word and the spirit of God, working in the life and mind of the believer, have to break down barriers to genuine encounter and saving faith. In the chapter on revelation, O'C. rightly points out that "revelation proves both informative *and* effective" and that "God's word always brings with it healing and transforming power" (71, emphasis original). Would it be too much to claim that the power of God's revelation in word and spirit is even more radically transcendental than human existence itself, at least for genuine Christian faith and life? I wonder if we might need to say that God's manifold works of grace create the possibilities for any genuine experience of God, and that the *existenziell* characteristics of one's existence may need transformation and healing before such experience is possible.

The chapters on Jesus and revelation are models of clarity and learning, as we might expect from this author. His surveys of various options on faith and reason and on the character and need for tradition are also very fine. As an evangelical I thought I might have a problem with the chapter on the church (11), but it was a pleasure to read such a well-founded and ecumenical treatment. I likewise found the chapters on Scripture to be solid and informative, but must object to one point consistently made: that "revelation" is an interpersonal event. This common view, found in many theologians influenced by Heidegger, Buber, and the like, is rather dubious when made into a general claim. A telescope, for example, can "reveal" things about distant objects in the sky without any personal element involved. But perhaps O'C. wants to limit his remarks to divine revelation to humans, which would, of course, be interpersonal. Even then, however, "revelation" can be *what* is revealed as much as the *event* of revelation itself. In other words, in my view divine revelation, like faith in Christ, has *both* propositional *and* existential, interpersonal elements. Experiences or words can alike be "revelation" (e.g., Deut 29:29; 1 Cor 14:6, 26).

This is an outstanding and impressive survey, written by one of the leading experts in the field. One has to marvel at the author's ability to summarize complex positions and problems in admirably clear, succinct prose. O'C.'s deep learning is obvious throughout, and anyone interested in fundamental theology can learn much from this work.