

from the secular academy. (Interestingly, and perhaps tellingly, Rice has never been recognized at Notre Dame with a chaired professorship.)

Many owe Professor Rice a great debt of gratitude. That is certainly true of his students and those at Notre Dame who read his columns or who have heard him defend the truth on so many issues over so many years. This book provides a glimpse of those efforts and of Professor Rice's personal qualities that have made him such a valued friend and mentor to many.

This book is well worth a read as a window on some of the controversies that the Church in the United States has faced over the last forty years. The essays, even those that are decades old, have a surprising freshness. The issues that we faced in 1970 are the same ones we face today. The Church's answers—which he sets forth with great clarity—are all the more needed. Also needed are his frequent requests for prayers and for Eucharistic Adoration. But more importantly the book helps the reader to learn more about a great Catholic who has served the Church with distinction for so long.

Richard S. Myers
Ave Maria Law School

Philip A. Rolnick, *Person, Grace, and God*, in the series *Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007. 270 pages.

Throughout this fine book, Prof. Rolnick captures well the twin “poles” of the human person: a uniqueness that is incommunicable, and a relationality that is no mere extrinsic addition to the person. These twin poles of the human person are grounded in the Trinity, in whose image human persons are made, for there we see “the divine pattern of movement toward the other as gift of one's own self” (7). For this reader, Rolnick's book unraveled with great erudition the three great anthropological claims of Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*: that God created human persons for their own sake, that Christ reveals man to himself, and that we only find ourselves in the total gift of self.

Parts I and III of the book, taken together, fully immerse the reader into the Trinity/person connection. Part I adeptly shows how the very etymological and historical roots of “person” are found in the Trinitarian and Christological struggles of early Christianity. This is a fascinating development, for the early church “was not looking for the treasure they

found” (15)—it happened behind their backs, as it were, something they “stumbled upon” while working with the tangle of terminology (complicated by misunderstandings between East and West) that would culminate in the notion of person. In following that trajectory, Rolnick explores Nicea through Chalcedon, with a detailed section on Augustine, and then approaches the medieval period with a treatment of Boethius and Richard of St. Victor.

Part III continues into the medieval period with a competent treatment of Thomas’s “daring reassessment of relations” by which the Trinitarian relations are not mere appendages but part of the divine essence. How can this be? If there is a gift-giver, there must be a receiver, and receptivity implies potentiality. Not a problem in the human sphere, but if there is to be genuine relationality—giving and receiving—in God, the divine simplicity would seem to be violated by that presence of something potential. With help from just the right source—the creative and daring Thomism of W. Norris Clarke, S.J.—Rolnick shows that receptivity need not be a helpless passivity (mired in potency) but can be an *active* receptivity. Rolnick adroitly illustrates the point with a phenomenological analysis of listening as a personal action (203), leading the reader to perhaps a central insight of the book: “the Son’s absolute receptivity is not the violation of simplicity, but its perfection and a clue to the mystery of the Son’s non-sequential origin” (203). (Rolnick alerts the reader to Steven A. Long’s disagreement with Clarke on this point, but does not explore the matter.) Once receptivity is located as constitutive of the divine essence, the gift-giving of the immanent Trinity is a gift-giving “than which none greater could be conceived,” and now the Trinity is “the basis, the referent, and the hope for human personhood” (206).

In a word, *personal* life for us is possible because of the Trinity. No longer is transcendence an alien, heteronomous imposition on humanity, but the true friend, indeed the very ground, of our personhood. Rolnick’s study exemplifies what John Paul II called a “participated theonomy,” transcending the sad arbitrary options of heteronomy and autonomy. And he devotes Part II of the book to letting that participated theonomy confront the challenges of postmodernism and materialistic neo-Darwinism. The Christian claim is only as strong as its capacity to handle its most strenuous critics, and by taking these twin challenges seriously, and not merely scoring debater’s points against them, he shows Christianity’s true mettle.

With a civility equal to his boldness, Rolnick takes on the likes of neo-Darwinists Michael Ruse, Richard Dawkins, E. O. Wilson, and Daniel Dennett, showing that their very own viewpoint—that morality is a shared illusion that fosters group survival—serves to unwittingly attest to

the very (Christian) claims they wish to defeat. (Or put more boldly, with a delightful turn of phrase I borrow from A. Plantinga, their positions are “fatally ensnarled in self-referential absurdity.”) Consider:

[A]ll of these neo-Darwinians call for some sort of morality. But if the moral behavior that we often observe among humanity is fostered by an *illusion*, then we have come upon a decisive moment of evolution; for agents, the ‘robot vehicles’ of the ‘immortal genes’ have become self-conscious of the illusion. . . . [I]s it not the case that to the degree that [these theorists] publish this theory and persuade others of it, they undermine the future effectiveness of the illusion? (75)

Or:

[T]he very act of investigating genes indicates that we have to some degree transcended genes, for genes did not discover genetics. . . . [T]he kind of consciousness that can discuss evolution, even in those who deny transcendence, actually indicates a relationship between evolution and transcendence.” (76–77)

In a positive vein, Rolnick moves on to show how altruism and a qualified self-love are compatible: we are to love our neighbor as we love our selves, which means that we must be as dedicated to seeking the good of the other as we are to seeking our own good—in both cases the good is something transcendent. “Having been touched by someone who utterly transcends nature, we may learn to love others beyond what any strictly biological theory would predict” (89).

Rolnick next turns his attention to postmodernists—Nietzsche, Lyotard, Derrida, and Rorty—who would “shake down the certainties of the modernist self.” He notes that such a critique can actually be medicinal, for, given the inexhaustible mysterious depth of “person,” it is always worthwhile to re-open what might tend to become a closed, settled, and defined concept. And so, instead of a mere paleomorphic retreat into the premodern past, Rolnick moves into and through postmodernity, thereby blazing a trail that Paul Vitz and others have termed “transmodernity.”

Rolnick spends a chapter summarizing the various strands of post-modern thought, giving special place to Derrida. (This chapter would be an excellent introduction for newcomers to postmodern thought.) Readers early on begin to suspect that postmodern thought may be self-refuting as they watch unfold a creative meta-narrative that is supposed to convince them that there can be no meta-narrative! If everything is arbitrary and

relative, if Derrida is right that there is “no first word” and that we must “begin by responding,” if there is nothing but Lyotard’s “blank at the center,” then one *has* an orientation, “a larger sense of things than one’s current position and location” (131).

And so, to be true to its desire to be a (welcome) opening to new questions, postmodernism must escape its own imperialistic “hegemony of questioning,” a questioning that “forms its own enclosure.” With such an enclosure, postmoderns create an unbridgeable gap between subject and object and thereby unwittingly “replay” the very modernist representational subject that they had set out to dismantle (137)!

How to escape this “ossification” in which “rupturing tradition becomes its own tradition” (135)? “What is needed, not only for creativity, but especially for the flourishing of personhood, is an understanding of finite ontology that permits a unity flexible enough not to be shattered by the incorporation of novelty, and a novelty that is not immune to becoming part of a greater unity” (135–36). If I may have my try at this same key point: we need to participate in something transcendent that will give a profound unity to our lives without heteronomously stifling uniqueness and individuality, and that uniqueness must not devolve to an autonomous individualism that locks us out of a genuine participation in the transcendent. We need a participated theonomy. Put still another way: postmodernists rightly rebel against constructing a “perfect biographical narrative” that would redound to a heteronomous imposition, a cumbersome perfect “map” that would “be the same size as the actual land depicted” (136). They rightfully want to free us from the illusion that we can capture the unique mystery of the self in a neat modernist bottle. But “there is no reason to draw the inference that we cannot know anything about ourselves” (136). Just because we cannot know the self exhaustively does not mean that we cannot know the self at all.

In a word, we need some kind of tool whereby we can have *accurate but inexhaustive* insight into the self, and Rolnick proposes just the right tool: the analogical concept of being found in a creative “participation metaphysics.” It is “inherently non-totalistic,” “never tied down too tightly” (128), and hence can meet well the postmodern quest to recapture mystery. But alongside a sense of the unknown and the dissimilar, it is able simultaneously to yield genuine knowledge and a proper unity between the person and the transcendent. (In a dense section, pp. 178–83, Rolnick shows analogy to be the needed corrective in the rich thought of Levinas.) Rolnick comes up with perhaps the perfect analogy for grasping analogy: the key role that rests play in a musical score, as juxtaposed to a piece

consisting of all rests (John Cage actually directed such a piece!) or to a piece with no rests.

Having already established a) that altruism is compatible with a qualified self-love, and b) that receptivity is active, Rolnick returns to the theme of “gift” by c) confronting Derrida’s challenge that if a gift is recognized (by either donor or recipient) it vanishes into the realm of the impossible. To the contrary, says Rolnick, recognition *enhances* the quality of gift-giving and gift-receiving: “enjoyment is a concomitant good, a sign of the goodness of the relationship” (166). Otherwise, the full transcendence of *gift* is missing, since we are *supposed* to find ourselves in the authentic gift of self (and this dynamic is true for the receiver as well, since reception is active and is itself a gift to the gift-giver). “Person” and “gift” are mutually constitutive (167)—an apt summary of Prof. Rolnick’s project.

One could quibble with minor defects here and there, but Rolnick more than makes up for them with his sheer breadth of vision that in turn makes his book accessible for an exceptionally wide audience. Those versed in neo-Darwinism or postmodernism will find a refreshing and at times startling encounter with Christian thought, presented in eminently reasonable fashion. Christian thinkers hitherto overwhelmed by or hesitant toward the complexities of neo-Darwinianism or postmodernism will find just the right opportunity to both sympathetically and critically engage these thought patterns and come out with a richer understanding of Christianity. As well, the book would be an excellent required or recommended text for graduate courses in several different fields, and might be the ideal interdisciplinary faculty discussion book.

If one were to step even further along the person/Trinity/gift trajectory of this fine book, one would encounter the principle of sacramentality in at least two ways. First, Trinitarian self-gift is stamped right into our bodies, grounding the possibility of complete marital self-donation, and rendering intelligible (with a full Trinitarian theology of the body) those aspects of sexual ethics that otherwise appear mired in physicalism. And second, the complete embrace, as both cause and fulfillment, of the intensely rich phenomenon of “gift” so well adumbrated in this book is to be found in the historically concrete particularity of the Eucharist.

Mark Lowery
University of Dallas