

## ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

### Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection

Louis Dupré

William B. Eerdmans, \$20, 147 pp.

### Edward T. Oakes

Over fifty years ago Monsignor John Tracy Ellis sounded his tocsin, warning the world of Catholic higher education that it had been mired too long in the mastodon-pits of mediocrity. Since that famous trumpet blast (and perhaps largely because of it) Catholic intellectuals have grown in stature, and several Catholic universities have departments that are among the best in the nation.

But all too often, when Catholic scholars become leaders within their fields, they remain just that: leaders *within* their fields. Occasionally a Catholic intellectual (even one who works inside the academy as a professor) will have influence among the wider educated public: for example, Avery Dulles, Walter Ong, and, increasingly, Mary Ann Glendon; but their number still strikes me as remarkably small.

Whether this lamentable dearth is

cause for discouragement or is simply a sign of talent's rarity can be disputed, but with this volume under review at least Catholics have the occasion to celebrate in their midst one of the most significant philosophers of religion of the twentieth century, Louis Dupré of Yale. Moreover, as this slim but remarkable book of essays makes abundantly clear, its author bids fair to have an influence that will last into the next century, at the least: there is something about his philosophy that seems not just nourishing for a day or hour but perennially satisfying.

In contrast, philosophy of religion as currently pursued by most other practitioners tends to content itself with endlessly chewing on the same meatless bones. Can God foresee the future and still leave free agents free to make their own choices? Can God be omnipotent and all-good and still permit evil to coexist with the good? How can God intervene in a world that seems to operate just fine according to the laws of natural causality?

As Dupré makes clear in a good number of these essays, philosophy of religion never seems to make progress in resolving these and other issues because of its habit of accepting the legitimacy of the questions as formulated. Partly this is attributed to the continued isola-

tion of Anglo-American analytic philosophy from Continental efforts; and partly to the habits of the academy, which tends to farm out different topics to different specialties, so that philosophers of religion talk only to philosophers of religion, philosophers of science to their colleagues in the philosophy of science, etc.

Fortunately, none of this professional astigmatism afflicts Dupré: blessed with a remarkable command of languages (he was born in Belgium and thus grew up equally fluent in Dutch and French; studied German when in doctoral studies; learned English, his fourth modern language, with a native's fluency when he came to this country in the 1950s; and later learned Danish to write his famous book *Kierkegaard as Theologian*), he has become one of the great mediators of European intellectual history in this country (his recent *Passage to Modernity* was widely praised). Moreover, he has a remarkable command of the sources and can find an apposite quote of one or two sentences from, say, a multivolume edition of Hegel that exactly fits his point. And unlike so many other scholars, Dupré does not pour out all of his reading onto the page and end up, as they say, "all over the place."

All of these habits are, of course, useful in any scholar; but they could never alone account for the creativity of a writer's work—and for a direct insight into the nature of Dupré's own wondrous originality there can be no better volume than this work of collected essays, which, unlike some instances of the genre, is in fact a cohesive body of work that flows easily from one chapter to the next.

Perhaps best of all is his chapter on theodicy, the attempt (in John Milton's words) "to justify God's ways to man" in the face of the self-evident evils of the world. First, Dupré openly admits that theodicy is a failed experiment. Voltaire liked to make fun of Leibniz's insistence that this is the best of all possible worlds; but nowadays, in a century filled with genocide and almost interminable ideological warfare, even that kind of village-atheist mockery, however deserved,



sounds unpleasant and inappropriate, like an adolescent giggling at a funeral. But more crucially, Dupré can see just why the experiment failed, and here one discovers an analysis that all philosophers of religion should take to heart. Building on the eminently valid Thomistic point that it makes no sense to talk of God (who is pure actuality) having a prior set of possibilities from which to choose a world, Dupré shows that the idea of a "best possible world" imposes on the Creator a subjective, human standard: "Both theodicy's adversaries and advocates," he says, "hold a concept of freedom that from the start sets the discussion on the wrong track."

Whenever freedom is set forth as the power to choose among various options, philosophy of religion will go astray. Only when freedom is understood as the expression of creativity, both divine and human, will rational reflection on religion get off the dime: "To be effective in theodicy the idea of redemption must be integrated with that of creation as one continuous, active relation of God to his creatures."

But how can that be done in our post-Newtonian, post-Enlightenment times when God seems so distant and, if existent at all, only faintly so as Comforting Idea? As Dupré says, for the answer to that question we must meet religious people and see how they in fact confront the world's evil; only then can we ever grasp the resources religion has for coping with suffering and malice. Or as he says in his manifesto: we must expand philosophical theology "beyond the rationalist limits within which a purely causal, basically deist philosophy has constrained it." And what would that look like? Well, for the answer to that question, the reader need look no further than right here in *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, one of the most satisfying works in philosophical theology that I can remember reading for some time. □

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## RELIGION BOOKNOTES



### Lawrence S. Cunningham

A generation ago a group of theologians from the Roman universities and the regional seminaries of Italy met to discuss urgent tasks facing theology in the post-Vatican II period. There was consensus that a history of theology was badly needed. That effort, which was de-

#### History of Theology The Patristic Period

edited by Angelo di Berardino and Basil Studer

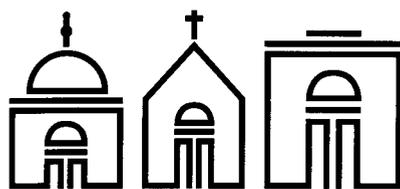
Glazier/Liturgical Press, \$99.95, 632 pp.

signed to be one of collaboration, has now come to fruition. The intention of this collective effort was to focus on the conditions, incentives, and agents of theological work in terms of the places where theology was done and the results achieved. More positively, the authors set out a long series of questions that

were to be kept in mind as they proceeded. Those questions ranged from methodological ones to issues of the relationship of theology to liturgy, philosophy, church teachings, and the culture of the day, as well as questions about the relationship of theology to spirituality. Eventually, this will be a four-volume work.

Ably turned into English by veteran translator Matthew J. O'Connell, this is not a handbook for beginners. The writers presume a certain level of theological and historical knowledge (even though they do provide a handy chronological table to help situate the flow of their story), a mastery of some technical vocabulary, and at least a nodding acquaintance with the *dramatis personae*. They also expect the reader to be familiar with the standard surveys of patristics.

The volume traces the development from the apostolic fathers down to the sixth century when the great councils had finished the basic work of the church on issues of Trinitarian and Christological definition. A fundamental motif emphasizes the role of scriptural interpretation, since "the most famous theologians of the patristic age were also exceptional interpreters of the sacred Scriptures, beginning with Irenaeus and Justin, and especially with Origen." In-



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