

Aidan Nichols, *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben*

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Although this work first appeared a decade earlier from another press in 2010, Emmaus, an offshoot of Scott Hahn's publishing outfit, decided to reissue this book by Aidan Nichols, one of contemporary Catholic theology's most prolific authors. The work is hefty and, by covering the whole range of Matthias Scheeben's (1835–99) theology, it offers a systematic overview of Scheeben's main theological contributions.

Scheeben's reputation, long dormant (see the 1971 account in Eugen Paul's overview of Scheeben in the authoritative reference work, *Katholische Theologen Deutschlands*, where Paul laments that most students of his generation have noticed the frequent footnotes to Scheeben's work, especially *The Mysteries of Christianity*, but almost none have picked up Scheeben), has been on the rise since Hans Urs von Balthasar's laudatory summary of Scheeben in the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, where he calls him 'the greatest German theologian to-date since the time of Romanticism' (p. 104). Subsequent interest in Scheeben has mostly been downstream from Balthasar studies. In this light, it is no surprise that such an eminent Balthasar scholar as Nichols has turned his attention to Scheeben.

Romance and System is a synchronic work. Nichols does not focus on Scheeben's development or seem keen to demonstrate to his readers how Scheeben, finding different scholarly problems at a standstill, pushed them forward through his unique formation both under the Roman School and then Joseph Kleutgen, the dominant figure in German neo-scholasticism. Instead, Nichols presents Scheeben's teachings without attending to questions as to whether they were prompted by contemporary movements or subject to development or revision. This is surprising on two accounts: first, in the midst of his high praise for Scheeben, Balthasar's only real complaint is 'a certain ahistoricity in [Scheeben's] theological design' (p. 116). One might think such a devoted Balthasarian as Nichols would want to address this. The second surprise is that *Romance and System* is almost entirely absent of any real dramatic movement. One gets the impression of Scheeben scribbling away, largely oblivious to important historical and ecclesial events that surely affected his outlook, the most obvious being the First Vatican Council, the unification of Germany and the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. One learns Scheeben's conclusions but one is left to wonder at how Scheeben arrived at them.

The aforementioned overview by Eugen Paul was published over half a century ago, and it neatly summarises the different trends in Scheeben scholarship. Given the recent boom, exemplified by the special issue of *Nova et Vetera* devoted to Scheeben (2013, vol. 2), it would have been helpful for Nichols to provide a similar service, one he would seem to be able to deliver given his scattered references to both the German- and English-language literature. As it stands, the reader has little understanding about where Nichols' work fits within the conversation.

None of this implies that the book is not helpful and does not amply display Nichols's prodigious learning. Nichols clearly and reliably presents Scheeben's

contributions to mariology, the theology of grace, his nuptial metaphors and his deified soteriology, and his mystery framework, all of which influenced twentieth-century theology in important ways. No reader who cares about Catholic theology will fail to find herself moved by many of the arresting phrases, metaphors and unique insights that explain why Scheeben continues to be a subject of interest.

By my count, Nichols has authored forty-three books, and I imagine that number will only have grown by the time this review goes to press. It would be unfair to expect an author who produces at such a clip to also display the kind of meticulousness that marks careful work. One would think an author with these habits would seek a marriage with a press that could help on this front, especially when it comes to reissuing a decade-old work. As it stands, the book displays a sloppiness that can be briefly demonstrated. A major theologian should not confuse John Duns Scotus with John Scotus Eriugena, as Nichols does (p. 18, n. 63). Likewise, to state that Johannes Kuhn's primary philosophical influence was Jacobi and not Schelling (p. 24) is to fundamentally mischaracterise the thought of one of Scheeben's leading contemporaries. In discussing the relationship between history and faith, Nichols briefly mentions Lessing before quoting a short passage from Scheeben to the effect that Christianity's facts (history) have an abiding meaning (faith). Nichols begins his commentary on the quotation with the casual aside, 'Lessing's ditch bridged, Scheeben can return to the major theme of the distinctiveness of this science' (p. 53). A genius like Kierkegaard thought Lessing's proposal was serious enough to rethink the meaning of faith, but for Nichols it can be easily cast aside. Although these anecdotes come from early in the book, similar misgivings could have just as easily been taken from almost any of the later chapters.

The last anecdote raises a question: if the pressing problems that mark the modern era – problems raised by major thinkers like Lessing, Kant and Hegel – seem not to have much import for Nichols, did they matter to Scheeben? This is the real question at the heart of the Scheeben renaissance. Scheeben's mentor, Joseph Kleutgen, subscribed to a theology of infection: modern philosophy had infected different strands of modern theology, and the surest method to keep from falling into relativism or subjectivism was to return to the clear stream of Thomism, and especially to the philosophical commitments (i.e. Aristotelianism) purportedly held by Thomas. This was the approach adopted by neo-scholasticism. Others, meanwhile, judged that the hallmarks of modern thought – the turn to the subject in philosophy, basic Enlightenment norms about freedom and democracy, the emergence of ancillary disciplines like philology and the growing realisation of the hermeneutical implications of historical consciousness – demanded that theology find new idioms and arguments to make the faith intelligible. Nichols' Scheeben seems like a curious bridge-figure: eager to work in a new, non-scholastic medium, yet largely content to advance theology through innovative readings into pre-modern theology unfiltered by modern questions.

Readers of this book will learn a great deal about Scheeben. Yet if one follows Heidegger's dictum that 'questioning is the piety of thinking', then one will leave the book wondering whether Scheeben, who did so much to promote Marian piety, was a pious thinker.

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