



Reviews

GILLIAN ROSEMARY EVANS, *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers*, Routledge Key Guides, London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Pp. xxxiv, 183. ISBN: 0-415-23663-0. \$18.95.

In the first sentence of her Preface, Ms. Evans puts forward a number of philosophical and theological questions which 'have proved to be of perennial importance': 'Is there a God? What is the purpose of human life? What is a person? For whose benefit should society be organised?... How do words mean things?' (p.vii). She continues: 'This book is concerned not only with what medieval thinkers contributed to these long-standing debates but also with the interconnectedness of their work and its place in the heritage of western thought. For that reason, the focus is mainly upon the "Latin West."' Indeed, this is a worthy program for a much-needed history of medieval philosophy in English, but it is wide off the mark for what is offered in this book's brief annotations on fifty medieval thinkers (the table of contents gives forty-nine, missing out Peter Lombard, thus causing the page numbering to go awry after p.101). The author is well aware that fifty is an arbitrary number and she gives various reasons for her choices: an author may be 'outstanding in any age,' such as Anselm of Canterbury; they may be 'supportive players,' such as Bede, or 'intellectual explorers,' such as Peter the Venerable and Adelard of Bath. But her rationale peters out, and epithets for heroes from the later period are not given. Neither is she clear about the 'end' of the Middle Age, merely stating that 'something was changing' and that 'this series of little studies taken as a narrative of the intellectual life of a millennium tells its own story' (p.x).

The problem with this book is not really in the lemmata dealing with these fifty thinkers nor in their selection, although one might object to the virtual exclusion of Arabic Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers (except for Maimonides and Ibn Rushd). Alain de Libera, for example, in his ground-breaking studies and 'histories' of medieval philosophy has demonstrated just how important this thought was for the development of medieval Latin thought, devoting about a third of his *Penser au Moyen Age* (1989) to it. Ms Evans goes off the mark by claiming her secure biographical and bibliographical entries—which offer just about as much as those in the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, *Lexikon des Mittelalters* or similar works—as a narrative of intellectual life and claiming for them insight into the problems which she succinctly put out at the beginning of her Preface. There is in this book neither a sustained philosophical narrative nor a clear, logical exposition of problems and how these medieval intellectuals answered them. Except for some brief mention

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now and then of precursors or followers there is also hardly any demonstration of 'interconnectedness' with them, except for the avowal in some case that there is. A case in point is the entry on Anselm of Canterbury, on whom Ms. Evans is an expert: the only interconnection with another non-contemporary thinker—in this case Thomas Aquinas—is phrased in a single sentence in parenthesis. Without any further demonstration, this lemma asserts that 'the sheer durability of his ideas meant that philosophers and theologians have kept his arguments in play not for their antiquarian interest, but for their intrinsic value and importance' (p.71). The reader must take the author at her word.

In sum, this book falls short of Ms. Evans's stated purpose. The individual entries are useful for their bibliographical references and suggestions for further reading, but students of medieval intellectual life are better referred to the internet and to dictionaries and encyclopedias of the Middle Ages.

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