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Reviews

Aquinas and the Supreme Court: *Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas's Biblical Commentaries*, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 326 pp, £68.50 hbk

The US Supreme Court consults a form of Aquinas' account of natural law in its judgements on human rights. Aquinas' story of natural law, Rogers tells us, is a story of failure. It *cannot* lead to justice. This is his urgent message to the US Supreme Court. What could be more important than that?

A reviewer struggles when an author fills them with delight. Has anyone since Austin Farrer written on Aquinas with such penetrating, teasing wit? Rogers risks paying the heavy price that Farrer paid – that the scholarly community, not amused by his playfulness, will not take what he has to say nearly as seriously as it ought.

To achieve justice, the courts need objectivity as regards ethnicity, spirituality, gender and culture. No doubt most readers (save perhaps from the USA) will be astonished to learn how frequently in recent years key US Supreme Court deliberations on matters broadly relating to human rights (sexuality, human relationships, ethnicity, just warfare etc) have examined a very specific natural law theory ascribed to Thomas Aquinas in the hope of achieving necessary neutrality. A corpus of scholarly work has appeared defending a reading of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* that endorses the theory. Rogers writes to show how this is, in his view, a dangerous *mis*reading. Aquinas, he believes, is *always* ethnic (in a special sense), theological and culturally related. Natural law is not a matter of our acting out our lives by rationally applying eternal moral principles equally applicable to all humankind. Rather, Aquinas held, we act out culturally specific virtues (Christian or otherwise) taught by example and

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habit, and applied (in the most part) unreflectively in the heat of the day. In itself, this is, of course, no more than the classical Thomist view restated for present purposes.

Rogers greatly strengthens this classical understanding by following Aquinas' explanatory references in the *Summa* to his *Commentary on Romans*, thus leading your average Aquinas reader (and this reviewer) over totally new and fascinating ground. He claims he is the first modern to do this systematically, and, to this reviewer's knowledge at least, he is right. When Rogers has finished, one cannot possibly doubt that for Aquinas everything stands or falls by the workings of divine grace and the Christian story of redemption. The language of natural law, in its numerous guises, is but a formal cipher. Separate and objective it is *not*!

Eugene Rogers' book consists of three new chapters directly related to the present task, plus nine additional chapters which are revisions of pieces previously published (the earliest in 1996). Rogers does his best to edit his material into a coherent whole, but the end product is disappointingly messy and uneven. In particular, excellent though it is, revision cannot disguise that the material on same-sex sexuality and Romans 1 was developed long ago for a totally different campaign. That said, this is, nevertheless, high-order scholarship, and for those equipped to struggle through to the end and live with the unevenness, it is deeply rewarding.

Michael Wilson

Towards a Theology of Universality: John Wesley's Socio-Economic, Political and Moral Insights on British Class and Indian Caste Distinctions, Joseph. B. Suray (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2015), 486 pp, £20.00 hbk

I welcome this book from the hand and scholarship of an Indian Methodist living and working in Britain. This is a courageous, commendable, insightful and important piece of work.

Joseph Suray develops a theology of universality drawing on the teachings of John Wesley. He particularly offers theological reflection on the disgrace of caste discrimination and class discrimination, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and slavery today, including bonded labour. He reflects in the light of John Wesley's doctrine of 'prevenient grace', though Suray acknowledges that Wesley never visited India.

For Wesley, prevenient grace is the insistence that God blesses all people with the gift of grace. Grace is the initiative and gift of God, and prevenient grace is a sign of the 'light which enlightens everyone' (John 1:9). This is a special Methodist reflection on religious experience, and an important eighteenth-century contribution relevant to inter-faith dialogue and theology today. The concept of prevenient grace challenges us to acknowledge the presence and work of God beyond the Christian faith, and to examine what evangelism means in a world of many religions. Sri Lankan Methodist theologian Wesley Ariarajah has suggested that the evangelistic task is to help all people to move 'from grace to grace'.

Joseph Suray recognises that the issues he reflects on are not confined to the past and have not gone away. To these we can also add child labour, cheap migrant labour, cheap house cleaners, cheap hand car washers, sex tourism, sex trafficking, sexual oppression, rape and the monstrous scale of sexual abuse of the contemporary world. Some 50 million people are displaced within their own countries, or as refugees in other countries, as a result of persecution, poverty, war and climate change. Caste and class discrimination continues to exclude people from belonging and benefitting equally in society. Racism, sexism and homophobia oppress the lives of many people. The contemporary world can

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hardly be understood without taking this legacy into account. These matters are a scar on humanity, and an assault on the image of God in human beings.

Suray argues that the doctrine of prevenient grace empowers people who have been politically, economically, socially and theologically oppressed and exploited. It further offers a theology around which people of different backgrounds can work together for common causes like freedom and human rights. This is a rich theme that merits further development.

This book makes Joseph Suray's doctoral thesis available for wider readership. It is not autobiographical theology, but Joseph brings his Indian background and spirituality to bear on his Methodist heritage and scholarship. Suray's research would have been strengthened with reference to the regular use of the concept of grace in Indian thought and theologies. The language of his book could be more inclusive also, but merits wide readership and response internationally, and in inter-faith circles.

Inderjit Bhogal

The Letters of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition, with Introduction and Notes, Volume 1: 1728–1756, Kenneth G. C. Newport and Gareth Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xxxvi + 472 pp, £140.00 hbk

Historians of Methodism and of the wider eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival have been slow to appreciate the significance and contribution of Charles Wesley. Despite his elder brother's gnomic obituary tribute that 'his least praise was his talent for poetry', it is as 'the sweet singer of Methodism' that Charles has most often been remembered. Considerable efforts have been made to redress the neglect of Charles Wesley as an evangelical leader in his own right, and to tease out the sometimes fraught relationships between the Wesley siblings and between Charles and other early Methodists, and the editors of the present volume have already published seminal work in this field. As they acknowledge in the Introduction to this magnificent critical edition, scholarship has hitherto been hampered by the lack of reliable primary texts. Thomas Jackson, the assiduous nineteenth-century editor of Charles' journal and selected letters, adopted a creative approach to his task, and his silent omissions and emendations rendered the work of his successors even more difficult than it might otherwise have been. Professor Newport and Dr Lloyd are therefore to be congratulated on persevering with a massive project, comprising the collation of the extant letters (including some published texts and transcripts by the late Frank Baker drawing on now lost originals) and their presentation in a scholarly edition. This volume, the first of two, includes 331 letters covering the period 1728–1756. At the beginning of the volume Charles is a student at Oxford, writing a rather pert letter to his brother John; by the end he is a husband and father, dealing with family troubles and Methodist politics. The letters are spread unevenly across the years, with more than a third of the collection dating from 1748 to 1750, the period of Charles' courtship and marriage to Sarah Gwynne; Sally is naturally the recipient of many letters. As the Introduction makes clear, the editors have laboured with varying and contradictory lists of letters, Charles Wesley's habit of not dating or signing his correspondence, and his use of abbreviations and shorthand. This edition establishes the corpus of letters, and offers for each an addressee, an archival or other source, a documentary type, a date, an address and a location.

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Additional explanatory notes are included; references and allusions are explained in endnotes to each letter; and the main characters in the correspondence are elucidated in a comprehensive biographical appendix. There are indexes of people, places, subjects and scriptural references. The character emerging from these letters is thoroughly human, expressing deep affection for Sally, admiration and exasperation with his brother, misery and despair in Georgia, excitement at the impact of Methodist preaching, and trenchant opinions on the trajectory of the movement and the attitudes of other evangelicals (Moravians and Calvinists coming in for fierce criticism). This is a triumph of careful critical scholarship, and it will be an indispensable source for the early history of the Wesleys' Methodism.

Martin Wellings

Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith, Matthew Guest, Kristin Auna, Sonia Sharmer and Rob Warner (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 256 pp, £65.00 hbk

It has become accepted wisdom that today's young adults are uninterested in church or faith commitment, and that academic institutions exercise a broadly secularising influence on those who live and study within them. There is, however, little contemporary research which engages with the ways in which students actually practise their faith. This book by Guest et al. is already, therefore, becoming a valuable resource for university chaplains and student workers alike.

The authors present the findings of extensive quantitative research, supported by qualitative research on a smaller scale. Undergraduate students were asked to declare their faith affiliation, if any, and to answer questions examining their understanding of the divine, their acceptance of various credal statements, and their social conservatism or liberalism.

The book outlines a useful – if inevitably imperfect – categorisation of universities and examines variations between the different types of institution. Its categorisation of Christian students, however, may well be controversial. It does not attempt to define the limits of Christianity, but allows for self-definition. Those students who so define themselves, it then classifies by patterns of church attendance, including variation between vacation and term-time attendance. However, to be classified as 'actively engaged', a student must attend at least weekly, which does not necessarily allow for enthusiastic participation held in tension with the many complexities and demands of student life.

The main finding is that student engagement with church is declining, but that faith commitment is not necessarily adversely affected by the supposedly secularising atmosphere of university life. Student faith is reasonably stable, but is not necessarily lived out in the context of a church commitment. This will not come as a surprise to most of us engaged in student ministry, but it is valuable to have the challenge set out starkly and supported by actual data. Interestingly, and again not surprisingly, the trend of declining church attendance is found to be less marked among evangelical students, although it does not seek to answer the question of why this might be.

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There are some key questions raised by the research. It does not examine in depth the different patterns of chaplaincy found in the different models of university, to question whether, for instance, a church-like chaplaincy on an out-of-town campus engenders different patterns of participation from a less visible chaplaincy in a more dispersed institution. Admittedly, its focus is on churchgoing, not engagement with chaplaincy, but for some students church and chaplaincy are the same thing, and this must surely have an impact. The timing of the research is also unfortunate; it was completed just as university fees payable by students were trebled and the 'university experience' began correspondingly to focus more narrowly on grades and employability. This may well render many of the authors' observations somewhat dated, more quickly than they may reasonably have expected.

While the book cannot give the whole picture, however, it presents some useful answers, opens some interesting questions, and is surely essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand and engage with the student faith journey today.

Catrin Harland-Davies

Into All the World: Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches, A Report to the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Methodist Council by the Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2014), xiv + 104 pp, £10.99 pbk

This report of formal conversations between Anglicans and Methodists at a world level in the period 2009–2013 builds on the theological foundations laid in an earlier round of dialogue, summarised in *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* (1996). By investigating the significant regional developments in Anglican–Methodist relations since the earlier report was published, 'This dialogue has attempted to discern which barriers have been broken down, and which remain to be surmounted and how' (Preface).

The report is in three parts. 'Part One, Being and Becoming Apostolic Churches, represents the core theological work of the Commission' (p. xi). After a brief description of the two communions, the report investigates a number of theological topics that are central to the idea of being and becoming apostolic Churches: 'The shape of unity in mission'; 'Describing the goal of unity'; 'Discerning the apostolic tradition'; and '*Episcope* and episcopacy' in Anglicanism and in Methodism. This part concludes with a number of recommendations and a summary of 'Agreements in the area of ordained ministry'.

Part Two, 'Monitoring Dialogues', surveys a number of places in the world where there are bilateral agreements and/or continuing dialogue between Anglicans and Methodists. Besides the United Churches in the Indian subcontinent, these include the covenant relationship between Anglicans and Methodists in Ireland, in Great Britain and in New Zealand, as well as the relationship of interim eucharistic sharing between Episcopalians and United Methodists in the United States.

'Part Three, Tool Kits for Anglican–Methodist Conversations, contains practical advice for Methodists and Anglicans who want to further their relationship, and provides a number of questions that they might want to explore together. It also has some suggestions regarding ecumenical theological education' (p. xi).

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The commission is clear as to what it considers should be the next stage in Anglican–Methodist relations: 'We believe that our local and regional churches need now to decide when and how to move into closer relationships for the sake of the gospel' (Preface). According to the commission, 'Those who know Anglicans and Methodists from the outside truly wonder what prevents us from taking the next steps' (Preface).

Be that as it may, the most sensitive aspect of relations between Anglicans and Methodists concerns unresolved questions surrounding the ordained ministry, the nature of oversight, and what it means to be an apostolic Church. Methodists, in particular, will wonder what lies behind the idea of 'becoming' an apostolic Church in the context of Anglican–Methodist relations. Nevertheless, the report contains much to stimulate continuing theological dialogue and also to encourage Anglicans and Methodists to harvest the fruits of that dialogue in the shape of closer relations on the way to visible unity.

David M. Chapman

Music as Theology: What Music Says about the Word, Maeve Louise Heaney, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 320 pp, £32.00 pbk

There is momentum gathering around theologians and musicologists which is taking seriously the possibility that their two disciplines are mutually inclusive. *Music as Theology* is a comprehensive account of recent developments in this exciting area, and a convincing 'apologia' for the validity of the conversation between theology and music which has been dormant for too long in recent years. Hence Heaney's insistence upon the title of her book – *Music AS Theology*.

Heaney confronts head on those theologians who regard the study of music as a 'Cinderella' discipline, and who see it as something too trivial to consider, or as something almost impossible to engage with, largely because of its notorious resistance to words and concepts.

This ambitious, almost overwhelming work employs a thoroughgoing study of musical meaning, of hermeneutics, semiotics, epistemology and aesthetic theory, and brings them together with the passions and concerns of mainstream doctrinal theology. Heaney introduces the reader to significant writers and forerunners in their fields, including Susanne K. Langer (musical meaning), Jean-Jaques Nattiez (hermeneutics), Willem Marie Speelman (semiotics), Bernard Lonergan and Rosemary Haughton (epistemology) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (aesthetics). Many of these names betray Maeve Heaney's Roman Catholic background, but she is quick to recognise this, and her style and approach to her work acknowledges the huge contributions of other non-Catholic traditions, most notably in the area of hermeneutics.

Jeremy Begbie, one of that rare breed of scholars who combines theological excellence with profound and practical musical knowledge, known to many British and American readers, is well represented, and his ground-breaking studies in 'Theology through the arts' is generously acknowledged. However, there is one significant strain of thought which appears to be lacking – the unique contributions of scholars such as Geoffrey Wainwright, Daniel Hardy and David Ford, with 'doxology' at the heart of their theological enquiry. Their involvement in Heaney's study would have appealed to many Methodists who

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should be interested in the relationship between the proclamation of the Word and the expression of music. Perhaps Heaney has unwittingly exposed the need for more work to be done in this area?

Within the penetrating christological application to music in Heaney's sixth and final chapter, it would have been interesting also to learn how she might have found a connection between the pursuit of Wesleyan Scriptural Holiness and the development of harmony and counterpoint or even the emancipation of the dissonance (as expounded by Schoenberg and others).

Although Heaney is convinced that music must not be in competition with linguistic or conceptual articulation, let alone redefine any traditional modes of theological language and thought, she is however equally and overall convinced that music is a valid means of coming to terms with the world, a genuine and unique vehicle of world disclosure, and, as such, can generate a particular form of 'understanding'.

If it is true that 'there are things which God may only be saying through music' then it is surely incumbent upon the theologian (and indeed all Christians, and perhaps all 'truth-seekers') to listen with care.

Harvey Richardson

Exodus: Gods and Kings, director Ridley Scott, music Alberto Iglesias (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD and Blu-ray April 2015, 150 mins, English, 12A

Exodus: Gods and Kings is an epic drama based on the biblical Exodus narrative. The work of acclaimed British director Ridley Scott, it comes with high expectations, and to some extent it is an engaging and often spectacular film.

In some respects *Exodus* can be readily identified with the biblical text; in others it seeks to flesh out the story where the text is silent: for example, the prominent issue of how Moses came to be aware as an adult of his Israelite birth.

The film features strong performances from its lead actors: Christian Bale (Moses) and Joel Edgerton (Pharaoh Ramses). The script is well thought out and the story is told in a way that is fluent, realistic and broadly portrays its characters as three-dimensional and not simple caricatures.

In light of some of the critical response to *Exodus*, it is worth stating that the biblically literate viewer will benefit from viewing it as a film on its own terms. With any kind of book-to-film adaptation, certain aficionados cry foul at significant cinematic deviation from the words on the page. *Exodus*, as a Bible-to-film adaptation, has garnered criticism on a similarly dry, pedantic basis. However, the creative licence that the film inevitably employs in bringing the story to the screen is underpinned by a commendable sense of theological sensitivity and awareness.

Exodus reckons in a thoughtful way with some of the tensions and ambiguities that are there in the biblical text. A point of particular interest is God's part in the story, and the relationship between God and Moses. The film ostensibly depicts God's character as a rather sinister and petulant child, which has raised hackles for some; however, viewed carefully, the film doesn't purport this to be the true embodiment of God's nature – rather, it imagines (as can only be imagined) the construal of God that might have been present in Moses' mind's eye. Moses himself displays self-awareness in this respect, at one point admonishing the perceived 'God-child', saying, 'I am tired of talking with a messenger!'

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Some feel *Exodus* seeks to over-naturalise the events it depicts, not taking God seriously, even portraying God as little more than a figment of Moses' imagination; but this misses the subtlety of what it actually does. At the outset, the film sets a firm marker in the sand that it treats God as a genuine player in the drama, with an opening caption stating of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt that they have 'not forgotten their homeland or their God', and 'God has not forgotten them'. The parameters thus set, the film depicts Moses' turbulent but ultimately faithful relationship with a God whose ways are often difficult to understand; and it does so reasonably intelligently, in a way that will resonate with the experience of many who 'wrestle' with God today.

Exodus: Gods and Kings is not an exceptional film. It doesn't arrest the audience and linger long after the credits have rolled; but it is well made, entertaining while it lasts, and provides some interesting angles on the Exodus text for the open-minded viewer. It raises legitimate questions: about how people really visualise God for themselves; about the theological challenge of horrors that are attributed to God on a plain reading of the biblical narrative; and – in light of some of the criticism it has received – about where ownership of the story lies.

Steven Cooper

Calvary, director John McDonagh, music Patrick Cassidy (Entertainment One, 2014), available on DVD and Blu-ray, 102 mins, English, 15

Calvary, from Irish director John McDonagh, is a film unlike any other. Its powerful and arresting story is one of modern-day Christian discipleship which, as the title implies, gets as close to the meaning of the Cross as can be imagined. It is almost impossible to assign it a genre: the medium is one of dark comedy – brilliantly sharp, witty, politically and culturally astute, in the blackest, driest way. At the same time it is a tremendously sensitive and dignified film, and its unique – one might say pastoral – amalgam of sensitivity and ultra-dark humour is perhaps the only way that it could tell its story. For behind its fictional narrative lies the deep and enduring real-life wound of the experience, so deeply felt across Ireland following recent years' revelations, of many who have suffered childhood sexual abuse at the hands of the Church.

The story is of a Catholic priest, a genuinely good priest, played outstandingly by veteran Irish actor Brendan Gleeson. This character is confronted at the film's opening by an encounter with an unseen parishioner who declares that a week later he will kill him in order to get back at the Church, having been sickeningly abused by a (now-dead) priest as a child. Moreover, the parishioner is deliberately targeting this priest *because* he is good: 'There's no point in killing a bad priest – that'd be no news; but killing a good one – that'd be a shock.' *Calvary* follows the priest through the days that follow, set in his close-knit rural Irish community, replete with an array of dysfunctional characters, and thought-provoking and unsettling encounters and events. Moreover, the film's cinematography, its interplay with the rugged Irish scenery and its use of music are masterful and beautiful.

It is a highly symbolic film. The majority of the peripheral characters are deliberately something of caricatures of various types – but they make possible a very slick and intelligent script, which captures profoundly something of the contemporary Irish zeitgeist. Real issues – of abuse, the economic crisis, a culture of nihilism, of disillusionment with an outright antipathy towards the Church, among others – are writ large for the viewer. At the heart of all this is

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the Christian disciple, Gleeson's good priest. His is a wonderfully rounded character, with great depth of humanity.

In many ways, the story runs as an allegory of Christ's Passion, with theological insight to match. Human brokenness, trust and the challenge of forgiveness are key themes, and there are points where the film evokes the pain of Jesus saying on the Cross, 'Father, forgive them; they don't know what they do.' The film could be apt for a church to show (for an age-appropriate audience) on Good Friday.

The film will strike a particular chord with anyone pursuing any kind of Christian vocation, and in the character of the priest it offers a portrayal of priestly vocation that is deeply sympathetic and realistic about what true Christian vocation can look like.

Calvary will leave you speechless. Watched recently with a group of clergy, none had any words when the film ended, the room silent for several minutes, with some quietly weeping. For me, it is the film of the century.

Steven Cooper