

Denis O’Keeffe (1882-1952)

Born in Dublin in 1882, O’Keeffe attended Marino CBS. Entering Clonliffe College in 1899, he became an MA in Philosophy of the Royal University in 1904 and was ordained priest in 1908. He was appointed to the newly-established lecturership in Scholastic Philosophy at Queen’s University, Belfast, in 1909, following an interview, but had to ride out two appeals, made against the post, to the Irish Universities Committee of the Privy Council. The appeals were dismissed, and O’Keeffe was to remain at Queens’ until his appointment to the Chair of Ethics and Politics at UCD, in 1925. He died suddenly on 21 April 1952. His acknowledged gifts of scholarship, tact and *savoir-faire* won over his colleagues at Belfast. There he lectured principally on scholastic metaphysics, logic and ethics while developing wide interests in the German idealists and the contemporary figures of Nietzsche and Bergson, whom he studied in the original languages. He had a keenly-developed literary sense and was a devoted reader of Dante, on whom he published an article. He became dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at UCD, and he served for three terms on the Senate of NUI. In 1950 he was appointed chairman of the newly-established national Council of Education. His output was small by comparison with the esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries for his learning, and also that ‘dignity and fun, wisdom and charm, which endeared him to all who knew him’ (Ryan, p. 316).

Frequently, his publications began as book reviews (e.g. his contribution on Dante, 1924, and on Duns Scotus, 1927). His opinions on the books in question were liable to be trenchant in a way that would not be acceptable nowadays. His political judgements were both acute and realistic. Writing on the Nazi movement (1938) he denounced a principle which its apologists seemed to share with Communism: ‘the materialistic concept of history... a principle which enables the Communist to explain everything and understand nothing... Historical causation is too manifold for any simple formula’ (p.2). ‘The totalitarian idea, apart altogether from the pagan movements [associated with National Socialism] involves of necessity a conflict with Christianity’, he argued (p.3). Racism, in his view, inevitably resulted in the persecution of the Jews, and it led directly to what he called ‘an aristocracy of the

strong.' He opposed to this evil of totalitarianism in Germany two doctrines: 'the assertion of the dignity and value of human personality and the theory of natural rights', both of them developments owed to Christianity (p.9). Incidentally, he wrote as a self-professed Germanophile. Writing on 'democracy' and 'equality' during the early years of the war he defended both political ideas, and pleaded, 'Unless there are individual family and group rights independent of the State, it seems impossible to escape from the multiform tyrannies with which modern man is threatened. This is the Catholic philosophy of organised society' ('Equality', p. 172).

O'Keeffe also tackled questions that were actual in Ireland. In 1936 he discussed the pros and cons of Second Chambers in democratic constitutions--an issue which was live, and indeed explosive, in the wake of the abolition of the Irish Senate. The following year (1937) he reviewed recent French and German works relative to vocational organisation within the political, economic and social order. He firmly opposed the notion of a bureaucratic, corporatist system imposed upon society from above, seeing therein the ideology of the totalitarian, authoritarian state. He supported the Catholic ideal of voluntary vocational organisation.

A man of great industry, his consistent aim was to inculcate 'a critical scholarly philosophical attitude that would enable [his students] to grapple with any problem in any terminology' (Ryan, 1952, p. 313).

Bibliography

'Ethical Problems of the Future', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 28 (1910) 573-89; 29 (1911) 14-28; 146-62.

'Henri Bergson's Critical Philosophy', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, April 1913, 178-89.

'Philosophy and Life', *Maynooth Union*, 1914.

'Dante's Theory of Creation', *Revue Néo-Scholastique de Philosophie*, fév. 1924.

Published in *Studies*:

'John Duns Scotus', 16 (1927) 564-78.

'The Problem of the Senate', 25 (1936) 204-14.

'Co-operative Organisation of Society', 26 (1937) 177-89.

'The Nazi Movement in Germany', 27 (1938) 1-11.

'Democracy: An Analysis', 28 (1939) 185-94.

'Liberty and Law', 29 (1940) 187-96.

'Equality', 30 (1941) 161-72.

'Catholic Political Theory', 30 (1941) 481-87.

'The Law and the Universities', 38 (1949) 270-72. (A symposium comment on an article by D.A. Binchy published in the same number, pp. 257-65).

The above list is incomplete; it is taken from the tribute written by his friend A.H. Ryan: 'Denis O'Keeffe', published in *Studies*, 41 (1952) 309-16.