The Second One Thousand Years, by Richard John Neuhaus

reviewed by David A. Hoekema in the November 7, 2001 issue

The Second One Thousand Years: Ten People Who Defined a Milennium. Edited by Richard John Neuhaus. Eerdmans, 126 pp., $14.00 paperback.

From the front cover of this slim volume peer the faces of its ten subjects, each representing one century of the millennium just ended. For Abraham Lincoln and Pope John Paul II there is a photograph; painted or sculpted portraits represent the rest. It is an imposing gallery of those who have shaped our intellectual and cultural history.

Maimonides, Columbus, Pascal and Rousseau all engage us with their direct gaze, but Pope Gregory VII, Dante and Calvin peer away into some invisible distance. A youthful bust of Aquinas with a curiously abstracted expression holds the central place. If only one could gather all ten around a dinner table! If there is television in heaven, perhaps Steve Allen set to work as soon as he arrived, lining them up for appearances on a celestial version of his whimsical "Meeting of Minds."

Can one capture the essence of a millennium through ten brief biographical sketches, which appeared first in the magazine *First Things*? Editor Richard John Neuhaus thinks so. His choices may provoke controversy: eight of the ten are Christian, for example, and all are white males. But they are not supposed to be representative figures, Neuhaus insists, but "prism[s], so to speak, through which to view each century." Taken together they help us understand who we Western Christians are at the dawn of the third millennium.

Most of the essays are well worth reading. Robert Wilkin describes the efforts of Gregory VII to separate the church's spiritual mission from secular authority--an effort that culminated in the famous scene of a king standing for three days in the snow awaiting an audience with the pope. David Novak offers a lucid summary of Maimonides's philosophical reform of Jewish teachings and of his shift from the condemnation of Christianity and Islam as idolatrous to an appreciation of their

providential role in advancing monotheism. If Romanus Cessario's essay on Aquinas occasionally verges on hagiography--why does the Angelic Doctor so often inspire uncritical devotion in his followers?--it also shows persuasively why Aquinas's abandonment of Platonic abstraction for Aristotelian concreteness, initially judged heretical, became the canonical philosophy of the Roman church.

Looking at book displays today, one may wonder whether anyone still knows how to say something in less than 300 pages. Robert Hollander's essay shows how much can be accomplished with a limited number of words: in just ten pages plus ten lines he paints a vivid portrait of Dante, one of the most remarkable figures of the 13th or any other century, whose *Divine Comedy* continues to enthrall contemporary readers. We must not take Dante as representing late medieval Christendom, warns Hollander. Part of Dante's genius was "to be completely himself, unworried should he oppose generally held beliefs, while also presenting his own ideas as if they were normative." Dante's claim of the status of revealed truth for his poem, Hollander notes, could offend "only two classes of readers: believers and nonbelievers." But those who grasp Dante's humor will find a remarkable text that continually invites readers to challenge its claims.

The remaining essays focus more specifically on the development of Christian thought. Columbus, Robert Royal shows, undertook his voyages both as a means of spreading the gospel and as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Alister McGrath emphasizes Calvin's expansive concept of Christian calling and its implications, still too little noticed by evangelicals, for social and political engagement. In a rich essay on the legacy of Pascal, Edward Oakes argues that Pascal's central concern was to transform "Cartesian dualism into merely one aspect of a much deeper and more central dualism: not between spirit and matter but between God's holiness and human misery." As a result Pascal deserves to be recognized as "the first modern Christian."

Rousseau, whose ideas are even more elusive and multivalent than Pascal's, receives credit from Mary Ann Glendon for being "the father of the politics of compassion," as well as an originator of a radically subjective, wholly personal form of religion. His influence betrayed his intent, she adds: "Philosophical works he meant for the few fostered popular skepticism and relativism, while his writings addressed to the many promoted a revolt against reason even among philosophers."

This quick millennial tour ends with more of a whimper than a bang, with Abraham Lincoln and John Paul II being chosen to represent the last two centuries. Jean Bethge Elshtain depicts Lincoln as a statesman and orator deeply rooted in biblical themes and images, while George Weigel offers a persuasive case that what may appear to be defensive conservatism in the actions and writings of the pope arises from a distinctive "theology of the body," a deeply sacramental understanding of reality. Yet I doubt that future historians of Western culture will consider these two figures, important as they are in their own respective governmental and ecclesiastical contexts, as wielding an influence comparable to that of Marx, Freud, Nietzsche or Kierkegaard in the 19th century, or Einstein, Reinhold Niebuhr or Martin Luther King Jr. in the 20th.

But the aim of this collection is not breadth but coherence. With the exception of Maimonides and (probably) Rousseau, all ten figures represent stages in the development of the Christian tradition. There is a bond "of communal solidarity, even of friendship, with these people and these times," Neuhaus writes--and "friendship is in very large part remembering when."