

CHARITY AND EMPIRE: Is Trinitarian Monotheism Violent?

~ Matthew Levering ~

University of Dayton

Is charity, as conceived and practiced by Christians, inherently violent? For some, this question will seem absurd, but for an influential segment of the modern academy, the answer is self-evidently “yes.” Regina Schwartz and Laurel Schneider, for instance, have argued with considerable influence that Trinitarian monotheism, the core Christian belief in one God in three divine persons, imbeds a violent principle of exclusion within human communities. In effect, they say, it is not possible for Christians to believe that there is only one God and to love that God and at the same time love their neighbors as themselves.

In her *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, Schneider states: “Christian monotheism is empire theology.”¹ To put the argument in its starkest terms: she and others find an inherently violent and totalitarian “logic” in the belief in one God. This logic, they say, has played out in the history of the nations, beginning with the Constantine’s establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. “The totalizing drive of the One” has led Christian believers down through the centuries to seek to exclude, enslave or repress all that they cannot conquer and control in the name of the one true God. Thus, in this account, Christian monotheism is an ideology of legitimation for colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, racism, classism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and heterosexism.²

The theological claim that “monotheism is empire theology” thus underwrites a comprehensive indictment of Christian orthodoxy and the role it has played in the development of Western civilization. I want to limit myself in this article to exploring the basic theological critique that undergirds the larger political and cultural agendas that might be at work. The key theological question is this: is Christian monotheism, in essence, a theology of empire rather than of love? Specifically, are these critics correct in finding a violent, totalitarian logic at the heart of Christian orthodoxy? Is Schneider correct when she argues that “Oneness, as a basic claim about God, simply does not make sense”?³

To address these questions, I want to first sketch the origins of Trinitarian monotheism in the context of the Church’s relationship with the Roman imperial

1 Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

2 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 3.

3 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, ix.

state. From there, I will examine the arguments of Schwartz and Schneider, two of the more influential critics of “empire theology.” In light of their challenge, I will turn to the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, who influentially sets forth the implications for charity—the love of God and the love of neighbor—implicit in Trinitarian monotheistic faith. I will focus on the key question of whether Aquinas’ portrait of charity as a unifying force requires the violent exclusion (“empire-theology”) of those who do not possess charity; or does the charity in fact enable us to love persons (“the Other”) who would otherwise be excluded? These questions get to the heart of contemporary post-Christian challenges to Christianity.

Theologies of Empire and the “Myths” of Monotheism

Our first question, of necessity, must be historical. Did the doctrine of Trinitarian monotheism, whose articulation began at the Council of Nicea, constitute a legitimation for the imperial ambitions of Constantine, as the critics of “empire theology” contend?

In his history of the concept of the law of God, Rémi Brague finds it significant that Constantine was baptized on his deathbed by the leading disciple of Arius, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. For Brague, “Nontrinitarian monotheism was well suited to the empire, which saw itself as the terrestrial image of divine monarchy. The Arian doctrine, which saw Christ as a sort of representative of a First God—the Caesar of a celestial Augustus—shifted the structure of Roman power to God.”⁴

Brague argues that the Church made deliberate theological and juridical decisions that enabled it to remain distinct from the empire. The defeat of Bishop Eusebius and the Arian challenge was critical to the Church’s efforts. In establishing Trinitarian monotheism as the law of orthodox belief, the early Church not only upheld the truth of Christ’s revelation about the nature of God, but refused the absorption of the Church by the empire or the ascribing of “the structure of Roman power to God.”⁵

4 Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 128.

5 For an appreciation of the complexity of the period, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004). Ayres notes that “original Nicene theology was a fluid and diverse phenomenon, and one that kept evolving” (at 99). For instance, the Nicene phrase “from the *ousia* [substance, essence] of the Father” was rejected by Arius and Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia on theological grounds: “Origen treats this phrase as implying something like a human birth and thus a materialistic understanding of divine being. Eusebius of Nicomedia criticizes the phrase both for implying a materialist view of the Son’s generation and for implying that the Son shares the nature of the Father. To share this nature would mean that the Son was unbegotten as is the Father. Eusebius insists that nothing is ‘of the Father’s *ousia*’: things that are begotten or created do not share the Father’s mode of existence” (at 97). Despite the ambiguity of its terms, the Nicene Creed made “clear that certain perceived errors of Arius and his early supporters were unacceptable” (at 99).

Trinitarian monotheism then cannot be claimed as an imperial ideology. And Robert Louis Wilken, in his survey of early Christian thought, has illuminated the implications of Trinitarian monotheism for the theology of divine and human love. He points out that both St. Augustine and St. Basil the Great emphasize that the Holy Spirit is “love” within the Trinity. He cites especially Basil’s exegesis of 1 Corinthians 2:10 (“God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.”), “But the greatest proof that the Spirit is one with the Father and the Son is that he is said to have the same relationship to God as the spirit within us has to us.”⁶

The key for Wilken is that despite the efforts of some, “after the coming of Christ it was not possible to think of God as a solitary monad.”⁷ Christian orthodoxy held firmly to the belief that God is Trinitarian love, and that Jesus invites us to enter into the divine communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love. As Wilken concludes, “If God is not solitary and exists always in relation, there can be no talk of God that does not involve love. Love unites Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, love brings God into relation with the world, and by love human beings cleave to God.”⁸

Schwartz, in her provocative work, argues to the contrary that monotheism is a cause of violence not of love. Expanding upon the arguments made by Erik Peterson in his now classic article, “Monotheism as a Political Problem,” Schwartz argues that the one God’s election of one person or people over others makes the Bible, and cultures influenced by the Bible, deeply violent.⁹ “Over and over

6 Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), 105 (citing Basil, *The Holy Spirit*, 40).

7 Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 105.

8 Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 106. Wilken emphasizes that although St. Augustine seeks to understand the unity and Trinity of God, his conceptual labor aims at union with the living God, not merely at conceptual clarification (at 109).

9 Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997). For Peterson’s seminal essay, see “Monotheismus als Politische Problem,” in Peterson, *Theologische Traktate* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1951). For Christian responses to Schwartz’s argument, see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009), ch. 5: “Genesis 4: Cain and Abel,” which draws upon Moberly’s “Is Monotheism Bad for You? Some Reflections on God, the Bible, and Life in the Light of Regina Schwartz’s *The Curse of Cain*,” in *The God of Israel*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 94–112; Alan Jacobs, “Afterword,” in *Must Christianity Be Violent? Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology*, ed. Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 224–235; Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 82–95; Miroslav Volf, “Christianity and Violence,” in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1–17, at 7–8; Elmer A. Martens, “Toward Shalom: Absorbing the Violence,” in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, 33–57.

the Bible tells the story of a people who inherit at someone else's expense," she contends.¹⁰

According to Schwartz, this pattern begins with the story of Cain and Abel who compete, not for the love of their parents Adam and Eve, but for God's love. The pattern repeats itself in Jacob and Esau, who are "the eponymous ancestors of peoples" that compete for scarce blessings.¹¹ The identity of these peoples, she says, is formed in violent opposition to the "Other." Schwartz finds that throughout the biblical narrative, cultural identity is formed in this way, thus making the Bible a conduit of personal and communal violence.¹² She does grant that the Bible construes cultural identity in more positive ways as well; indeed, ultimately Schwartz blames not the Bible itself but later interpreters who "violated the [biblical] editors' preference for multiplicity."¹³ Nonetheless, she decries the "myth of monotheism" for fueling intolerance toward those outside the circle of what she skeptically terms "*the Truth*."¹⁴

In the same vein, Schneider charges that since Constantine, rulers have employed Trinitarian monotheism in their search for "a divine mirror for their totalitarian dreams of state or of church power."¹⁵ She suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity may have permitted an acceptance of difference and multiplicity. But in the early doctrinal struggles, a pure Trinitarianism never emerged because, despite the efforts of the second-century African theologian Tertullian, "the underlying monotheism was never actually challenged," according to Schneider.¹⁶

Instead, in her account, Constantine made Christianity into an "empire theology" by insisting upon a single set of orthodox doctrines. The resulting "full-blown warfare" produced a confused and stunted doctrine of the Trinity that

10 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, x.

11 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 4.

12 Compare Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 109–110. Schwartz's reading, which contrasts scarcity and plenitude, relies upon Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis.

13 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 10; compare 118–19 for Schwartz's view of what could have been. Schwartz also connects the rise of modern historical-critical scholarship with the rise of German nationalism: "With the archeologist's spade and the philologist's verb ending, miracles gave way to science, mythic origins to history, and the once sacred understanding of collective identity—as a people forged by the Deity—gave way to secular understandings of collective identity, including modern nationalism" (at 11).

14 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 15, 33.

15 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 4. See also Schneider's *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash Against Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1999).

16 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 67. She reads Tertullian in light of A. O. Ogbonnaya's *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994). Ogbonnaya rightly argues, in Schneider's words, that Tertullian's "innovation of 'trinity' makes the most sense in terms of African cultural presuppositions of communal (which is not to say polytheistic) divinity in general." Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 66.

was unable to develop further in the direction of embracing multiplicity.¹⁷ Thus, despite the potential of Trinitarianism, it was inevitably placed in the service of a theology of divine monarchy (monotheism) so as to justify the authority of earthly monarchs.¹⁸ The most egregious example of this servitude of theology to empire, in Schneider's view, is found in the work of Eusebius of Caesarea; but she finds that St. Augustine, too, "ends up collapsing the three into the one, and so serves the One in theological imagining, rather than clarifying the multiplicity at work in divinity."¹⁹

The solution to this problem, as Schneider sees it, requires the deconstruction of every effort to number divinity. For this project Schneider focuses on incarnation, not of course in the Nicene sense, but insofar as incarnation stands for "a divine reality not only implicated in but explicated out of the very fabric of the worlds we inherit and incorporate."²⁰ She envisions "empire" and "the One" as standing over against the multiplicity of the "gospel" understood as "a mobile and always contextualized message of good news to the poor and disenfranchised."²¹ Schneider accepts the need for "functional unities," which are nominal, partial, event-based, temporary groupings that "generate meaning and orientation" and that are good for humans so long as they are not taken up within an absolutized monotheist structure.²² According to Schneider, when humans attempt to turn a nominal unity into an absolute unity, we end up oppressing others by turning from "the cacophony of embodied existence toward the serenity of unifying concepts in the hope of bringing closure to the world's actual unruly shiftiness."²³

Schwartz likewise favors those strands of the biblical narrative that she thinks "offer glimpses of another kind of deity, a God of plenitude, of generosity, who needs not protect his turf because it is infinite."²⁴ Her God would not be the one God of "exclusive monotheism," because that one God, according to Schwartz,

17 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 67–68.

18 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 68.

19 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 71. She adds: "This means, as Moltmann, Jennings, and others have pointed out, that what came to be the Christian Trinity could not sustain the communality originally given it against the pressure to accommodate it to the hierarchical rules of empire and of imperial Church. Nor could it sustain that openness to world implied in Tertullian's organic images against the pressure to maintain individual agency (such as the mind) that can dissociate itself from the disappointments and traumas of life on earth. ... Eminently useful in the administration of imperial power, the logic of the One survived the fall of the Roman Empire, the splintering of the Greek and Roman Churches, and the convulsions of the Reformations" (at 71–72).

20 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 5.

21 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 5.

22 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 5.

23 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 200.

24 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 119.

is always construed over against others, in terms of a “metaphysical scarcity.”²⁵ Thus Schwartz would rewrite the biblical canon in a way that “subverts the dominant vision of violence and scarcity with an ideal of plenitude and its corollary ethical imperative of generosity. It would be a Bible embracing multiplicity instead of monotheism.”²⁶ Whereas monotheism serves jealousy and violence in a world of scarcity, multiplicity allows for “God’s promiscuous pursuit of lovers—of the world itself.”²⁷ On this view, traditional orthodox monotheism seeks idolatrously to control and reify God, whereas multiplicity embodies a truly “kenotic,” or self-emptying and self-giving understanding of love.

As Schneider notes, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have long sought such self-giving love. Indeed their “instructions of openness to others create a tension with the logic of One and suggest openings to the multiplicity that such a generosity porously creates.”²⁸ With these “openings” in view, Schneider’s book concludes with a definition of love based upon her effort to identify multiplicity as “the conceptual shape of divinity.”²⁹ Rather than positing a set of rules for love, she seeks to explore love’s dimensions of “being-present”:

[Love] is grown-up regard; it is deep, physically present recognition of actual others in the world; it is a refusal to be dismissed or erased by others; it is courage to see suffering and a courage to sin in witnessing to it; it is a filling out of space and a making of time; it is relinquishment of stasis and openness to strangers, even the dangerous kind.³⁰

In other words, for Schneider, love is built upon tolerance and is not defined by moral rules. Love is physically being present to help others in their times of need. Love is unencumbered generosity.³¹

25 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 33, 119.

26 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 176.

27 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 203. The value of homosexuality is a recurring theme in Schwartz and Schneider, in part because of the link they see between religious and sexual desire.

28 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 204.

29 Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 205. She goes on to explain, “Divine multiplicity, like any construct, is just a concept, metaphor. It is not divinity. ‘Divinity is, if nothing else, free. And this means that it is also free of theology and doctrine.’ The stories we tell of it, however, form the fabric of imagination about what is possible for us in this world that God so loves” (at 207, quoting from Schwartz, *Re-Imagining the Divine*).

30 Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 205.

31 In a similar vein Mario Costa, Catherine Keller, and Anna Mercedes write: “When our *agape* is infused with *eros*, the coalescing of our differences becomes fecund: we pulse with vital energy, expanding, opening, and generating new being and new energy. Such erotic fecundity, we suspect, drives the biopolitical production of the multitude. ... Secure within the trustworthy persistence of *agapeic* love, we can risk an insistence on bright hope and pleasure all around. Engaged in such an erotic insistence, we might nurture the fecundity of diverse coalitions in

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Meaning of Love

The question, of course, is whether Schwartz and Schneider are correct in their analysis of the deficiencies and contradictions they find in the doctrine of love promoted by Trinitarian monotheism. In an attempt to assess that, and the larger question of the relation of charity to what they call "empire-theology," in the remainder of this essay I will examine certain aspects of St. Thomas Aquinas's discussion of the act of charity in his *Summa theologiae*, paying close attention to the biblical texts that he selects for discussion.

Aquinas asks whether the "principal act of charity" is to love or to be loved. Empire-building rests upon the overweening ambition to be loved (or to be treated as such). He quotes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle observes that "most men ... because they love honor, seem to be more desirous of receiving than of bestowing affection."³² Aristotle goes on to remark that "most men like flattery, for a flatterer is a friend who is your inferior, or pretends to be so, and to love you more than you love him."³³ Yet at the same time, the philosopher insists that "in its essence, friendship seems to consist more in giving than in receiving affection: witness the pleasure that mothers take in loving their children."³⁴ Quoting this passage, Aquinas comments that a mother's "love is the greatest" (*maxime amant*).³⁵

Aquinas then appropriates Aristotle's insights in light of Christian revelation, considering the relationship of friendship that is possible between God and humanity. "There is a communication between man and God, inasmuch as he communicates his happiness to us," Aquinas says.³⁶ He cites John 15:15, where Jesus tells his disciples:

ways both arduous and ardent, slipping between self and other such that loving the other as the self is our daily labor and our daily delight." See their "Love in Times of Empire: Theopolitics Today," in *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo*, eds. Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 291–305, at 304. For Catherine Keller's perspective see her *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and my review of her book in *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 905–907.

32 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 8, 8, 1; trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1934), 481; quoted by Aquinas in *Summa theologiae*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 1, obj. 2.

33 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 8, 8, 1 (not quoted by Aquinas).

34 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 8, 3; quoted in *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 1. For an introduction to Aristotle's views, see Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003). Aristotle's modeling of love on maternal love continues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 9, 4, 1, where he describes a friend as one who, among other things, "wishes, and promotes by action, the real or apparent good of another for that other's sake" and "one who shares his friend's joys and sorrows." He attributes both characteristics paradigmatically to mothers.

35 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 1.

36 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 23, art. 1.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.³⁷

As sharers in God's Trinitarian life, we become friends of God. Friendship with the omnipotent God occurs through this sharing, through God's own gift of himself, in the self-giving love that characterizes the communion of the Trinity. Thus, the unity toward which the act of charitable love tends is a unity of mutual self-giving; it is a communion in eternal goodness, infinitely shareable.

Aquinas does not reject the desire to be honored and loved. Rather, he identifies the proper reason for such desire—namely to have one's goodness (ontological and / or moral) recognized: "By being loved, a man is shown to have some good, since good alone is lovable."³⁸ The charitable person, however, does not focus on being loved by others. The better the charitable person, the more perfect his or her charity is, and so the more strongly he or she loves. This love does not seek one's own, but rather, as Thomas says, seeks "to love for the sake of loving."³⁹ In other words, being more lovable means simply loving more; perfection in Trinitarian friendship is not a matter of the will-to-power, but rather the very opposite.

Exploring the requirements of loving others, Aquinas speaks of benevolence or goodwill. He notes that "goodwill sometimes arises suddenly, as happens to us if we look on at a boxing match, and we wish one of the boxers to win."⁴⁰ Through this example, Aquinas emphasizes that benevolence is a wishing of good to another person that does not presuppose a "union of the affections."⁴¹ The love that binds together friends in Christ includes benevolence, by which, as Aristotle puts it, one "wishes, and promotes by action, the real or apparent good of another for that other's sake" and "wishes the existence and preservation of his friend for the friend's sake."⁴² Following Aristotle, however, Aquinas also insists that love in friendship requires a unity of affections.⁴³ Benevolence belongs to friendship, but friendship is more than benevolence. To love truly means to attain a real union with the beloved.

37 Cited in *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 23, art. 1, contra.

38 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 1, reply obj. 2.

39 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 1, reply obj. 2: "*Amare autem quaerunt caritatem habentes secundum se, quasi ipsum sit bonum caritatis: sicut et quilibet actus virtutis est bonum virtutis illius.*"

40 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 2.

41 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 2.

42 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 9, 4, 1; cited in *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 2., obj. 2.

43 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 9, 5, 1; *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 2, contra.

Motives for the Love of God

But when love is understood as unitive, does it not mask the dominance of one party over the other? Aquinas is aware that “[i]t would seem that God is loved out of charity, not for himself but for the sake of something else.”⁴⁴ Indeed, when we love God we hope to receive particular temporal and spiritual goods from him and we fear that we might not receive these goods. Could it be, then, that our love for God does not actually attain to God, in which case we inevitably privilege being loved over loving?

Using Aristotle’s understanding of causality, Aquinas inquires into the reason or cause of our love of God. Infinitely surpassing any created good, God is “the last end of all things,” rather than being ordered to any further and better goal.⁴⁵ Similarly, it is not the “form” of goodness that makes God lovable, so that our love of God might arise from attraction to what makes him good. God simply is in his goodness. Again, God is the cause of all goodness, and so our love for God cannot be reducible to love for a goodness causally prior to God. In short, we desire union with him from love of him for himself (*propter seipsum*). It is because he is infinitely wonderful that we desire union with him for himself.

This depiction of our love of God requires that we know God, and here a problem arises: we know God through creatures. Aquinas cites Romans 1:20, “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”⁴⁶ If we know God through creatures, can we actually love God for his own sake rather than loving him for what he does in creatures?

To answer this, Aquinas observes that once we come to know God, our knowledge inaugurates a personal communion with him. As an example, Aquinas points to the people converted by the words of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well. Their knowledge of God began with her words and ended in their personal experience of communion with the living God revealed in Christ:

It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world. (John 4:42)⁴⁷

Even so, our knowledge of God remains mediated by created things, as all human knowledge in this life must be. Aquinas grants the force of 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly.”⁴⁸ If by faith our knowledge of God is only “in

44 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 3, obj. 1.

45 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 3.

46 Cited in *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 3, obj. 2.

47 Cited in *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 3, reply obj. 2.

48 Cited in *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 4, obj. 1.

part" (1 Cor. 13:12), how can charity truly unite us in mutual love with the living God? The key is to recognize that love works differently from knowledge. This is so because the will tends directly to the thing in itself, whereas the intellect apprehends the thing in the knower. In this life, our intellect can know God only through knowledge gained from the senses; we cannot know God in himself prior to the state of glory. By contrast, the will can love God in himself. Indeed, the union with God in love is such that the will "tends to God first, and flows on from him to other things."⁴⁹

Since God is infinite goodness, we love finite goods in God who is the source and goal of everything. Aquinas observes that "in this sense charity loves God immediately, and other things through God."⁵⁰ As support for this position Aquinas quotes Paul's statement that "Love never ends" whereas knowledge, in its present earthly state, "will pass away" (1 Cor. 13:8).⁵¹

What about the disorder caused by sin, which weakens the will's ability to cleave to its true good? Since God is self-giving love, we must be self-giving lovers if we are to share in his Trinitarian life. But does not our experience suggest that, on the contrary, we are quite weak in willing the good? In discussing our union in love with God, Aquinas observes that charity both removes "aversion from God, which is brought about by sin" and "unites the soul immediately to him with a chain of spiritual union (*spiritualis vinculo unionis*)."⁵²

Our charity, however, can only accomplish this because Christ's charity makes it possible for us. Quoting Augustine's *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity), Aquinas observes that Christ's cross is fitting because "man's pride, which is the greatest stumbling-block to our clinging to God, can be convinced and cured by humility so great."⁵³ The incarnation of the Son of God inspires our charity and enables Christ to bind up from within, through his sufferings, the wound of injustice that separated all humans from God.⁵⁴ Only Christ solves the problem so powerfully identified in Isaiah's prophecy: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,"⁵⁵ with the result that "justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we look for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom" (Isa. 59:2, 9).

Out of sheer love, God pours forth being and goodness. Creation enacts the supreme divine love: God "is the most perfectly liberal giver, because he does not

49 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 4.

50 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 4.

51 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 4, contra.

52 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 4, reply obj. 3.

53 *Summa*, pt. 3a, q. 1, art. 2.

54 *Summa*, pt. 3a, q. 1, art. 2.

55 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 4, obj. 3.

act for his own profit, but only for his own goodness.”⁵⁶ Similarly, regarding the incarnation, Aquinas comments that “what belongs to the essence of the goodness befits God,” and “it belongs to the essence of the highest good to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature.”⁵⁷ The Trinity communicates to us a share in self-giving love. In this vein Aquinas quotes 1 Corinthians 6:17, “he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.”⁵⁸

If God’s love is supremely expressed by Christ’s cross, is love thereby linked too closely with violence?⁵⁹ Exploring whether God can be loved wholly (*totaliter*) by us, Aquinas twice quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”⁶⁰ When Jesus fulfills this precept of the Mosaic law, why does he do so through suffering? Aquinas observes that in the context of human sin and violence, charity is an active power for healing spiritual wounds. He assumes that God could have restored the human race without becoming incarnate in Christ Jesus: “if he had willed to free man from sin without any satisfaction, he would not have acted against justice,” because God, as the common good of the whole universe, could simply overlook the offense.⁶¹

Why then does God will that his mercy and love be revealed on the cross? Aquinas argues that it was a greater mercy on God’s part.⁶² Jesus’ love enters into the wound of sin—human injustice, experienced as punishment in human suffering and death—and heals the wound from within. He transforms the path of suffering and death into the path of life and love. Where there was once alienation from God’s love, there is now the justice of supreme charity. Jesus’ love, far exceeding the power of human wickedness, establishes the path of reconciliation and forgiveness.⁶³

56 *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 44, art. 4, reply obj. 1.

57 *Summa*, pt. 3a, q. 1, art. 1.

58 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 4, obj. 2.

59 See Peter Abelard, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, on Romans 3:19–26, trans. Eugene R. Fairweather, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 283: “How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!” Abelard holds that Christ’s charity inspires us to have the same charity and be reconciled to God. For Abelard, reconciliation comes about solely through Christ’s charity. Abelard’s perspective does not measure up to Paul’s teaching that God sent Christ Jesus to offer bloody expiation for sins.

60 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 5, contra and answer.

61 *Summa*, pt. 3a, q. 46, art. 2, reply obj. 3.

62 See *Summa*, pt. 3a, q. 46, art. 1, reply obj. 3.

63 Recalling a “Captain G.” who brutally interrogated him in Communist Yugoslavia, Miroslav Volf calls for communal eucharistic participation in the forgiveness wrought by Christ’s passion: “The whole community would be celebrating my transformed memory of his wrongdoing—a

Aquinas argues that no creature can love God as much as God is lovable; we cannot exhaust all the ways in which God is lovable. He is always infinitely more lovable than we can grasp: "God is infinitely lovable, since his goodness is infinite."⁶⁴ Our task is to mirror the divine generosity by pouring out ourselves in our acts of loving God. Aquinas notes that we must "love all that pertains to God" and seek to conform ourselves and our lives entirely to the love of God.⁶⁵ Hence, for Aquinas, Deuteronomy 6:5 is perfectly consonant with the traditional monotheistic reading of the verse that comes before it, the *Shema* ("Hear") that summons the Jewish people to prayer: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4). Oneness for Aquinas means "undivided being," in the sense of a negation of division rather than in the sense of numerical quantity. God is the infinite plenitude of Being, a plenitude that is not divisible but rather is perfectly simple.⁶⁶ God does not stand over against us (as would be the case only if God were a divisible quantity or a multitude of parts), but instead we participate in his supremely simple yet inexhaustible plenitude.

Because of God's infinite plenitude, we should hold nothing back in our love of God. In his teaching on virtuous action, Aristotle observes that "emotions and actions ... can have excess or deficiency or a due mean."⁶⁷ Aquinas notes, however, that love of God, as an internal action, cannot be placed within this portrait of virtuous action. Although external acts of charity such as almsgiving must be measured by charity and by the other virtues, there can be no excess in loving God.⁶⁸

Union with God in love can never be too much because God's infinite lovability makes it impossible for an excess of love to undermine the character of the action. Just as a medical doctor moderates medicine but does not seek to moderate health, so also in loving God "the more the rule is attained the better it is, so that the more we love God the better our love is."⁶⁹ It follows that while charity is the measure of other virtues, charity does not itself have a measure.

This is how Aquinas understands St. Paul's teaching that charity is the pinnacle of the life of virtue: "And above all these put on love, which binds everything

memory that allows me to name the Captain's offenses as wrongdoing but that does not elicit in me only condemnation and disgust; a memory through which I, in receiving Christ in the sacrament of his Body and Blood, also receive myself as a new creature, made in the image of the God who loves the ungodly, with an identity that transcends anything anyone could ever do to me; a memory that frees me from the hold of my suffered wrong and motivates me to extend a reconciling hand to the Captain, whom Christ has already embraced with open arms on the cross; a memory that I ponder in the hope of the final reconciliation." See Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 127–128.

64 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 5.

65 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 5.

66 *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 11, art. 4; compare pt. 1a, q. 11, art. 1.

67 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, 6, 10.

68 *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 27, art. 6, reply obj. 3.

69 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 6.

together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14).⁷⁰ Just like health, charity gives life, as Aquinas emphasizes by quoting the psalmist: "For me it is good to be near God" (Ps. 73:28).⁷¹

The Knowledge of God and the Love of Enemies

Aquinas holds that in the same one interior action of loving God, the love of neighbor is included.⁷² He gives an eschatological reason for this unity of love:

Now the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God. Hence it is clear that it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbor.⁷³

On this view, believers cannot truly love their neighbor without referring this love to the neighbor's union with God. Love of the triune God includes love of all rational creatures who enjoy, or who potentially will come to enjoy, a personal communion in the Trinitarian life. Love of God, in other words, is an expansive friendship, including those who are now enemies but who have the potential to be our friends in heaven.

Discussing whether it is more meritorious to love an enemy than to love a friend, Aquinas recalls Jesus' teaching on love of enemies, "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?" (Matt. 5:46)⁷⁴ As Jesus points out in this passage, those who love God will in fact be emulating God's love of sinners: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt 5:44–45).

Since love of God is rooted in knowledge of God, however, can the one who loves God avoid dividing the world into people who share one's faith and people who do not? As regards loving both friends and enemies, Aquinas keeps at the forefront the eschatological dimension, calling to mind St. Paul's statement about the apostolic ministry—that "each shall receive his wages according to his labor" (1 Cor. 3:8).⁷⁵ Only God, who calls each person to an ultimate destiny of eternal communion in Trinitarian life, can give these eternal "wages." Thus one cannot divide one's neighbors into sheep and goats because one cannot know how God is acting or will act in people's lives. Instead one simply recognizes that each person, called to eternal communion in love, is infinitely precious.

⁷⁰ *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, obj. 1.

⁷¹ *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, reply obj. 3.

⁷² *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 25, art. 1.

⁷³ *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 25, art. 1.

⁷⁴ *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 7, obj. 1.

⁷⁵ *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, obj. 3.

What does it mean to love an enemy? One's enemies, Aquinas suggests, can be known by their hatred for one's person.⁷⁶ Enemies pose a real threat to one's well-being and happiness, both now and eternally. Schwartz and Schneider, for instance, might pause before giving their enemies tenured professorships at their schools. Aquinas grants that in a certain sense it cannot be helped that we love our friends more, simply because we judge our friends to be more lovable, more good, and less threatening than enemies to our person. If we have judged correctly that our friends have more goodness, then they are in fact more lovable than our enemies.

In this sense, Aquinas's position does warrant loving our friends more than our enemies, as indeed would hardly be possible to avoid in practice. He adds that special love of close friends is also unavoidable: "Charity loves with greater fervor those who are united to us than those who are far removed; and in this respect the love of friends, considered in itself, is more ardent and better than the love of one's enemy."⁷⁷

God is our "chief friend" (*Deus maxime est amicus*), Aquinas says, again citing Scripture: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).⁷⁸ On the other hand, in respect to human friends, Aquinas argues that the love of enemies is more meritorious in two senses. First, we have reasons other than love of God for loving our friends.⁷⁹ Love of enemies, by contrast, is rooted solely in love of God, because we cannot expect any good in return from our enemies, who in fact threaten our well-being. Second, Aquinas reasons that if both friend and enemy are loved for the sake of the love of God, then it is more meritorious, a richer love, to extend our love even to those who are furthest from us.⁸⁰

The difficulty of loving our enemies makes it the great test of true charity. In these ways, Aquinas repudiates the tendency to love only those who share our perspective and who value us personally. Without denying the existence of enemies, he eschatologically relativizes the distinction between friends and enemies, even as he recognizes that in fact some persons have more goodness and therefore are more lovable.

These considerations about the love of neighbor lead Aquinas to the question of whether the priority he gives to loving God might be misplaced. Does his account of charity undo itself by proving instead that it is better to love what is

76 *Summa*, pt. 2a-2ae, q. 27, art. 7, contra.

77 *Summa*, pt. 2a-2ae, q. 27, art. 7.

78 Cited in *Summa*, pt. 2a-2ae, q. 27, art. 8, obj. 2.

79 *Summa*, pt. 2a-2ae, q. 27, art. 7; compare *Summa*, pt. 2a-2ae, q. 27, art. 8, reply obj. 2: "A man's love for his friends is sometimes less meritorious in so far as he loves them for their sake, so as to fall short of the true reason for the friendship of charity, which is God."

80 *Summa*, pt. 2a-2ae, q. 27, art. 7.

more difficult to love, namely one's neighbor? If God is infinite goodness, while one's neighbor is flawed like oneself, should not one focus on the more difficult task of trying to love one's neighbor? Will not loving God be, so to speak, automatic once we have reached heaven and have direct knowledge of God? Why should we trouble ourselves here on earth worrying about loving a transcendent, invisible God who is able to take care of himself?

In reply, Aquinas reminds us of the core tenets of Trinitarian monotheism. The goal of our lives is to share in the eternal Trinitarian communion of love. In this sense, loving one's neighbor does not compare with loving God. No matter how wonderful or how needy one's neighbor is, loving him or her cannot suffice as the ultimate end for our lives. When we place all our love in finite creatures without allowing them to point us to the Creator, we lose our way. Aquinas extends this argument to show that while cleaving to earthly things rather than to God is a mistake, so also is imagining that we can love God without loving our neighbor. Indeed, only love of God that includes love of neighbor is "perfect love of God."⁸¹ Were we to exclude our neighbor, we could only have a profoundly "inadequate [*insufficientem*] and imperfect love of God," not worthy at all of being characterized as the love of God.⁸²

The point is that in Aquinas' definitive formulation of Trinitarian monotheism the two loves—the love of God and the love of neighbor—are inseparably united. Again, Aquinas finds his warrant for this formulation in the apostolic witness of the New Testament:

If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:20–21).⁸³

Thus, far from authorizing violence, exclusion, or conquest of the "Other," the "logic" of Trinitarian monotheism instead compels us to seek communion in the love of God which, in turn compels and nourishes love for our fellow men and women, including those who wish us harm, our enemies.

From Empire Theology to Trinitarian Love

I began with Brague's judgment that the Church, through her rejection of Arianism as well as through certain canonical and juridical steps, avoided the trap of "empire theology" and becoming a tool for the ambitions of earthly rulers. I also brought

81 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 8.

82 *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 8.

83 Cited in *Summa*, pt. 2a–2ae, q. 27, art. 8.

forward Wilken's observation that the Trinitarian monotheism of Christian orthodoxy positions the self-giving love of God at the center of reality—as, one might say, the source and summit of all creation and of every human life.

This vision of the spirit of Christian thought is in sharp contrast with the thoroughgoing critiques advanced by the Schwartz and Schneider, who argue that Christian orthodoxy of necessity promotes a "metaphysics of scarcity," that privileges those who possess "*the Truth*," while requiring the violent exclusion or repression of "*the Other*," defined as those who do not possess this truth. For them the love of God cannot be reconciled with a love of neighbor within the framework of Trinitarian monotheism.

However, I believe that I have been able to show, through a close reading of St. Thomas Aquinas, some of the deficiencies in their critical accounts of Trinitarian monotheism.

Schwartz and Schneider are unfortunately correct in their historical finding that Christians have been implicated in abuses and injustices down through the centuries. But this, we must conclude, is rooted more in what the Scriptures call the "mystery of iniquity" (2 Thess. 2:7), than in any logic inherent in the doctrine of Trinitarian monotheism.

In fact, our study suggests that a notion of charity based on the love of God found in Trinitarian monotheism is a way out of the logic of empire-building. Guided by biblical texts such as John 15:15, John 4:42, 1 Corinthians 13, Deuteronomy 6:5, and 1 John 4:21, Aquinas examined the act of love from diverse angles. First, he asked whether to *be loved* or to *love* is the principal act of charity. If being loved were the principal act of charity, then Trinitarian monotheism would indeed end in self-centered empire-theology which seeks the "love," defined as subordination, of the Other. Aquinas shows, however, that to *love* is the principal act of charity.

Next, as we considered, Aquinas explores how charity includes but goes beyond benevolence, so as to require a real union of wills. In charity we attain to a personal union with God, despite the fact that our knowledge of God depends upon creatures (with the corresponding risk that our love of God might become a love of what God does in creatures). But this union with God is not exclusive of others. Through his supreme charity, Jesus Christ, through his passion and cross, enters into our sinful alienation and heals our condition from within. Loving this God is inseparable from loving our neighbors, including our enemies. We love our enemies, not because of the power of our love for them, but because the power of our love for God—a love that God gives us—enables us to love our enemies powerfully.

A notion of charity rooted in Trinitarian monotheism thus overcomes the violence of disordered empire-building in multiple ways: by the primacy of the

act of love for the other, by the focus on mutuality, by the power of God's love in Christ overcoming the world's violence, by awakening us to the infinitely lovable Trinitarian communion, by revealing that all human beings are called to share in eternal love, and by enabling us to love our enemy through the power of our sharing in Trinitarian love.

The transformation of the person sought by Schwartz and Schneider—involving being present to others, a spirit of openness and generosity, appreciation of particularity, and repudiation of unjust violence and of the lust to dominate others—becomes truly possible when our hearts are raised to self-giving communion in the eternal love of the Trinity. Understood as an eschatological communion present in the world through human beings' visible participation in Christ's overcoming of the powers of death, the acts of love that arise from the Church's eucharistic participation in Christ's overcoming of the power of death reveal the eschatological communion of love that overcomes empire. Taking Schwartz's and Schneider's challenge seriously thus helps us better to appreciate the wondrous love to which God the Trinity calls all human beings.