

## Response to *The Incarnate Lord*

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I READ *THE INCARNATE LORD* when it first appeared in 2015, as I was beginning to work on my own book on Christology.<sup>1</sup> I thought it a major achievement at the time, and reading it again has done nothing to change that first impression. It is a magisterial piece of scholarship, and I am in full agreement with most all of its substantive Christological conclusions. Father White's judgment that the deviations from Chalcedonian Christology in the work of (*inter alios*) Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Jon Sobrino create problems for a coherent confession of Jesus as Lord strike me as both fair and persuasive. More specifically, I find his contention that the implications of Trinitarian doctrine pose serious difficulties for various forms of kenoticism compelling (especially for the questions they raise about the coherence of penal substitutionary accounts of the atonement); I think his case for the necessity of the beatific vision in the earthly Christ is pretty well decisive; and I have never read an analysis of the cry of dereliction that is more exegetically convincing or theologically astute.

And yet if I am in general agreement with Father White's specifically Christological claims, I find myself less at ease with his overall approach to the subject. This may seem a rather odd line of critique, for if he ends up pretty much where I myself would land, and by way of arguments that are dogmatically sound, it might seem that concerns over methodological

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017); Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019).

issues could easily be left to the side. I would normally be inclined to agree, except for the fact that these issues seem to stand very much at the center of his own concerns. Indeed, although part 1 of the book is called “The Mystery of the Incarnation,” the first four of its five chapters are as much concerned with defending the importance of metaphysics for theological argument as with specifically Christological topics, and these same methodological concerns return to center stage in the book’s conclusion. By this measure, nearly half of the volume is not directly concerned with Christology at all, but rather with establishing the conceptual context (viz., that of classical metaphysics) he believes needs to be in place for Christological questions to be explored productively.

I want to be clear that I do not view the fact that Father White chooses to devote so much attention to methodological issues as a problem in itself. I make the point only to substantiate my claim that his concern with such questions is by no means marginal to the overall argument of *The Incarnate Lord*. In this context, I confess that when I read the opening sentence of chapter 5 (“Let us assume for the sake of argument that the central claim of this book hitherto is correct: Chalcedonian Christology has a permanent importance for Christian theology” [236]), my immediate reaction was one of surprise. For it seemed to me that the central claim of the book up to that point had *not* been the perennial importance of Chalcedonian Christology (clearly though this conviction had been affirmed), but a rather different sort of claim that is most clearly stated on 152:

Unless some natural knowledge of essences is possible, then Christian discourse is inevitably reduced to one meta-narrative among others, a tribal rhetoric that is not subject to the laws of universal verification in any respect, and that cannot in turn make an appeal to human nature (or educate Christians or non-Christians as to what is proper to nature and to the natural law) *even from within the domain of Christology and even in the light of Christ.*

With this claim I do not agree. For as much as Father White’s criticisms of Barth’s views on the Son’s eternal obedience seem to me spot on, I continue to side with Barth when he rejects the idea that theology either needs or ought to wed itself to any metaphysical system capable of being articulated prior to or independently of specifically Christian theological positions.

In taking this position I am not arguing that Christian dogmatics either can or does float free of particular claims about the way things are, for, as a Christian, I believe that Christianity communicates the essential and

ultimate truth about God and God's will for the world. Nevertheless, I see no way of avoiding the conclusion that Christian discourse is, in fact, "one meta-narrative among others," precisely because I do not believe that it can be vindicated by any putative "laws of universal verification." It seems to me, rather, that in a context where God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20), Christians can do no more than engage in what George Lindbeck called "*ad hoc* apologetics": eschewing the pretense of a universally available and acknowledged framework within which the claims of faith might be given definitive demonstration, in favor of a more contingent program of responding to particular objections with whatever conceptual resources may be at hand.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I would claim some support for this view from Thomas himself, who at the very beginning of the *Summa theologiae* writes:

If . . . an opponent believes nothing of what has been divinely revealed, then no way lies open for making the articles of faith reasonably credible [*ad probandum . . . per rationem*]; all that can be done is to solve the difficulties [*ad solvendam rationes*] against faith he may bring up. For since faith rests on unfailing truth, and the contrary of truth cannot really be demonstrated, it is clear that alleged proofs against faith are not demonstrations [*demonstrationes*], but charges that can be refuted [*solubilia argumenta*].<sup>3</sup>

One might object that Thomas's claim is limited to divinely (viz., supernaturally) revealed truths here; but even if we concede this point, it seems evident to me that, in denying the possibility of "making the articles of faith reasonably credible" (in distinction from the more modest task of resolving objections to them), Thomas precludes the Christian meta-narrative being assessed by "laws of universal verification."<sup>4</sup> But for Thomas (and me) that

<sup>2</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 131–32.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I [*ST*], q. 1, a. 8

<sup>4</sup> But does Thomas not, in the very next question, *ST* I, q. 2, offer five "ways" in which the existence of God can be proved? There is no denying that Thomas uses the word *probari* in a. 3 (and *demonstrabile* in a. 2). Yet it is surely significant that Thomas does not conclude any of his five *viae* with "and therefore God exists" (as William Placher points out, this is consistent with Thomas's insistence in q. 1 that the *Summa* is a work of "sacred doctrine," not philosophy; see *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 23–24). Moreover, Victor Preller notes that the metaphysical presuppositions of the *viae* are all over the place: neither fully consistent with one another, nor with

does not mean we despair of argument; it simply calls us to scale down our expectations for what theological argument may accomplish. We may not be able to prove that Christian claims are true, but we can nevertheless engage opponents meaningfully, by explaining the meaning of Christian doctrines, and thereby showing how Christians believe their teachings avoid contradiction, equivocation, and incompatibility with other truth claims that are accepted by both the Christian and the critic.<sup>5</sup>

I think that this is roughly Barth's position. In defending it, Barth did not mean to suggest that Christians can avoid metaphysical language (e.g., "nature," "person," and the like): theological speech necessarily draws on human words, and these will have native semantic habitats that will, in turn, carry more or fewer explicit metaphysical connotations in their wake.<sup>6</sup> But (again with Barth) making use of metaphysical language need not commit us to a particular metaphysical system. Father White argues that, where commitment to a robust metaphysical superstructure is lacking, theological discourse lacks sufficient conceptual anchorage to keep the theologian from drifting into error, precisely because the semantic "drag" (my language, not his) of key terms will lead to metaphysical commitments being smuggled in unawares. He cites Barth's account of intra-Trinitarian

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claims Aquinas makes elsewhere (*Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967]). In this context, the fact that Aquinas concludes all five arguments with variations on "and this is what everyone calls 'God'" suggests that the point of q. 2 is less probative than illustrative: mapping out the semantic space within which God-talk naturally arises, rather than establishing that a "thing" called God exists. If nothing else, when the *viae* are read with an eye to the limitations on human knowledge of and speech about God laid out in the prefatory material between qq. 2 and 3 of the *prima pars*, it is clear that Thomas is keen to avoid any form of talk about God that would suggest God might be regarded as a discrete item in a metaphysical inventory.

- <sup>5</sup> By "incompatibility with other truth claims," I have in mind Thomas's insistence that Scripture should never "be understood to mean certain things the contraries of which are shown by sufficiently evident reason" (*De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1, ad 5; cf. the *responsio* for the same question: "One should not say that what is plainly false ought to be understood in the words of Scripture" [trans. mine])—though I would want to stress that the criteria of "sufficiently evident reason" and "plainly false" will be relative to particular communicative contexts (e.g., Thomas would not have regarded the biblical dating of the earth's creation or its implicit geocentrism as "plainly false").
- <sup>6</sup> Indeed, *hypostasis* was itself a term appropriated from a linguistic context where it was, at best, only vaguely different in meaning from *ousia* to name a different ontological category under the pressure of biblical witness. Neither the aim nor the result was to make a new metaphysical system, but simply to use a term to avoid both tritheism and modalism.

obedience as an example, and I agree that Barth is in error here.<sup>7</sup> But when error is present, it seems to me sufficient to identify and correct it. The idea that metaphysics is a prophylactic against error seems to me belied by the fact that even people with shared metaphysical commitments can come up with very different theological conclusions, not to mention the fact that people have done Christian theology from a number of mutually incompatible metaphysical systems, and I see no way of adjudicating between them apart from the kind of *ad hoc* approach I am advocating (since, insofar as metaphysical systems set the terms of verification, they cannot themselves be subject to a common framework for verification). Again, that does not mean that argument is pointless, just that arguments remain moments in an ongoing conversation and cannot be secured in any air-tight fashion.<sup>8</sup>

I trust my general position here is clear enough, and I do not see much point in the context of this panel in getting into the weeds of longstanding debates between foundationalist and non-foundationalist epistemologies. I think it will be more productive to indicate briefly two areas where it seems to me that my approach does affect my assessment of Father White's theology, even if it does not entail disagreement with his substantive theological claims.

The first has to do with theological language. I have no interest in disputing Kant's influence on Barth and other modern theologians, but my view of his significance for theology is more benign than Father White's. Although Kant clearly saw himself as an opponent of theology as *scientia* (viz., as capable of making valid claims to knowledge), I am inclined to see him as having done theology something of a favor. For it is important

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<sup>7</sup> See White, *Incarnate Lord*, 194–95. As an aside, while Barth conceded to “a little Hegeling” in his later work, I would contend that, in his deduction of the Word's eternal obedience from the economic obedience of the incarnation, he is doing rather too much Hegeling. See Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 271.

<sup>8</sup> Two further points may be added here. First, to say that arguments are not conclusive or final is distinct from claiming that the doctrines they seek to defend are not final: I can maintain that the orthodoxy of Chalcedon is irreformable while recognizing that a set of arguments in its favor that once proved persuasive no longer carry much weight and need to be supplemented. Second, to claim that the conversation over doctrine is ongoing is not to deny that, at any given point, interlocutors may simply give up on that conversation in frustration, mutually convinced that no progress can be made; but that, too, is a contingent development—and one that may be reversed based on changing conditions (as arguably happened, e.g., with Catholic and Lutheran debates over justification between the sixteenth and late-twentieth centuries).

to remember that the most immediate target of the first *Critique* was the rationalist theology of the Enlightenment, which sought precisely to vindicate God-talk on the same terms as other sciences (viz., in terms of univocal argumentation). Against such approaches, Kant provided a salutary reminder that, by Christianity's own tenets, God could not be talked about in this way. It is not that Kant thought the idea of God incomprehensible or nonsensical; on the contrary, he conceded that the idea of the absolutely unconditioned (or, as Thomas would say, that "to which everyone gives the name of God") is the natural goal of scientific investigation.<sup>9</sup> The problem, Kant argued, is that by definition that goal is incapable of being reached through empirical science, because that which is unconditioned is by definition not relative to other phenomena and so lies outside of the spatio-temporal nexus within which scientific investigation takes place—and within which scientific knowledge is therefore possible.

Leaving Kant's own attempts to recover God-talk on other grounds to one side, the upshot of his analysis for those who want to defend that idea that Christian doctrines do entail claims to knowledge is that recourse must be made to analogy in explicating those doctrines: because God is not a "thing" alongside other things, the words we use to talk about created beings (and these are the only words we have) cannot be understood to have the same meaning when applied to God. And it is just here that I am doubtful that metaphysics is going to be of much help. This is partly because I part company with Father White's understanding of the role of analogy in theological discourse. His position is shaped by the idea that analogy saturates our speech, and that extending analogical speech to God is therefore not a great leap.<sup>10</sup> By contrast (and recognizing that analogy, like being, can be said in many ways), I view the use of analogy in theology

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<sup>9</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Kant and Aquinas approach the concept of God in similar ways, for they do not (Kant's first cause is a regulative idea, whereas Thomas' is derived from *a posteriori* reflection on human experience; see *Incarnate Lord*, 178n18). My point is merely that the theological value of Kant lies not in his assault on metaphysics, but in his challenging Christians to take seriously God's incommensurability with created entities.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically (and in the context of the example of "human existence," which I pick up in the next paragraph), he argues that consideration of the conditions of everyday discourse "makes use of the analogy of being absolutely unavoidable at what modern Thomists . . . term the 'predicamental level,' because such a use is simply co-extensive with rational thought. Pontius Pilate exists, Jesus exists, Peter exists, and so do you and I, each in an analogically signified fashion" (*Incarnate Lord*, 222).

as far more *sui generis*, reflecting the unique character of theology's object, God.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in discussing human existence (on 221–22), Father White states that the kind of existence that can be attributed to himself or me or anyone else as a human being may also be attributed “analogically” to Pilate and to the man Jesus. By contrast, I would say that the existence in question is attributed univocally to all those subjects, insofar as all enjoy specifically human existence. For, if my existence as a human being is only the same as yours analogically (on the grounds that each of us enjoys a “singular existence”), then I am unsure under what circumstances univocal predication is possible at all, except perhaps of purely notional entities like numbers. When I say that the existence I have as a human being can be predicated univocally of every other human being, I am not saying we are all the same, but only that the predicate (“possessing human existence”) is being applied in the same way to all members of the species. Likewise, if I say, “this basketball player is tall; that oak tree is tall; Mt. Everest is tall,” I am predicating the word “tall” univocally of all three subjects, notwithstanding the fact that their heights differ by orders of magnitude, absolutely speaking. That is, the word “tall” is being applied in the same way (viz., to mean “characterized by above-average vertical extension for members of the species”), so that if I tell you, “the widget behind the curtain is tall,” and I am using “tall” univocally with the other examples given, you will understand the point of my locution (viz., the relatively greater vertical extension of the named widget compared to most other widgets), even if you cannot see the widget and have no idea what a widget is.

Talk about God is different, and so when Thomas describes in question 13 of *Summa theologiae* I, what it means to predicate attributes of God analogically, he is pointing to a much more significant shift in meaning. When we say God is good, wise, or whatever, we are saying something true of God—but not in a way that allows the kind of extrapolation I have just illustrated using the word “tall.” God’s wisdom is not disconnected from our experience of wisdom, but his is not simply able to be extrapolated from ours, just as (to use the example Thomas gives) the word “healthy” may be properly applied to diet and to urine, but it signifies something different in the two cases, such that understanding its meaning in the former case (viz., that which makes healthy) does not give any clue as to its meaning

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<sup>11</sup> Father White makes it clear that he refers to “the so-called analogy of proper proportionality” (*Incarnate Lord*, 222n33), which (as I argue below) seems to me different from the sense of analogy Thomas uses to set up his discussion of divine predication in *ST* I, q. 13.

in the latter case (viz., that which reflects health). If the language we use to talk about God is analogical in this sense, and if, prior to the eschaton, we lack with respect to God the wider framework that allows us to understand the different uses of the word “healthy,” then theological language is indeed a proper object of suspicion, because the Christian theologian will have to confess that, when she applies words to God, they do not mean just the same thing that they do when applied to worldly items. It follows that Christians do not know fully what they are saying when they talk about God, and this fact legitimately gives rise to the worry that the whole theological enterprise is tennis without a net. Analogy in this sense (viz., the incommensurable-but-not-quite-equivocal use of a term illustrated by Thomas’s “healthy”) seems to me pretty well distinctive to theology.<sup>12</sup> It is for this reason that Barth preferred to speak of analogy of *faith* rather than of *being*: out of concern that the latter implied a ground of univocity that risked a projection of creaturely categories upward on to God.<sup>13</sup> The point at issue for Barth (and me) is not whether analogy is necessary in speaking of God, but whether the basis for applying and interpreting divine predicates is a general ontology or Scripture.

Father White fully well understands this line of reasoning, but counters that “in thinking out the *analogia fidei* . . . we [are] perhaps . . . committing ourselves to the *analogia entis*” (205). Against this perspective, I would again make a distinction between adopting metaphysical language (which is unavoidable) and committing oneself to a particular metaphysics that would require positing an “ontological resemblances between God and creatures that can be discerned and understood by the powers of natural human reason” (205). Because God is (in the language of Nicholas of Cusa) “not other” with respect to creatures, it seems to me that we simply lack the ability to do any analogical relating of divine and creaturely attributes apart from revelation. Instead, the words we use need to be given us—and even then we lack the ontological framework to know exactly what we are saying when we say that God is good, wise, and so on, even

<sup>12</sup> That Thomas can deploy worldly uses of the word “healthy” as an example would seem to disprove my claim here. In response, however, I would note that the ambiguity of the word “healthy” could in principle be resolved through the use of more precise terminology (e.g., “health-making” and “health-reflecting” alongside “healthy”), no such possibility exists for language about God because, again, we lack in this life the wider framework that would allow us to understand how divine wisdom, justice, etc. differ from its worldly instantiations.

<sup>13</sup> I hasten to add that I do not believe Barth’s critique actually applies to Aquinas, who (as the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy in particular have pointed out) posited analogy over against any idea of univocity of being.

though the fact that these words are vouchsafed for us by God in Scripture means that we may be confident that these assertions are true. In short, the asymmetry between God and creatures means that, although when I say God is wise and Socrates is wise, I commit myself to the belief that there is indeed an ontological basis for this claim in God and Socrates, this basis can be neither discerned nor understood by the powers of human reason alone.<sup>14</sup>

Does this make any difference in practice? I think it does, and this brings me to the second area where I have concerns about Father White's approach: the way in which he talks concretely about God. When in *The Incarnate Lord* the topic of divine attributes comes up, they tend to be the so-called "absolute" or "metaphysical" (!) attributes of omnipotence, immutability, simplicity, eternity, and the like (see, e.g., 279–87, 294–99, 302–6, 418). Now, I am in full agreement that these are indeed divine attributes, but they are not attributes we discern from looking at Jesus, who, precisely as a human being, displays none of them.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the attributes that distinguish the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob" from that "of the philosophers and savants" are precisely those that are visible in revelation, beginning with the call of Abraham and culminating in the Incarnation: God's compassion, mercy, goodness, and love, which lead him to save people from their sins.

Father White certainly acknowledges these attributes, but he tends to speak about them rather generally and abstractly, with the result that their meaning seems mostly assumed rather than defined with concrete reference to the biblical accounts of the history of Israel and the life of

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<sup>14</sup> Here I follow Ralph McNerny and Bruce Marshall in reading analogy in Aquinas as pertaining to the structures of our thinking rather than to the nature of the things about which we think (to which Father White responds on 205n4). This is not to deny that there is ontological similarity between, e.g., God and Socrates with respect to wisdom, nor that this similarity results from causal dependence; it insists only (again, following the thrust of what I take to be the upshot of Thomas's discussion of analogy in *Summa Theologiae* 1.13) that God's transcendence is such that we have no access to the divine term in a way that would allow us to understand the nature of the similarity, and thus to compare divine and creaturely wisdom in any systematic way. Paul's comments on divine wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1 seem to me to substantiate this point rather forcefully.

<sup>15</sup> Jesus does display great power (e.g., Matt 8:27 and parallels), but he denies that this in itself distinguishes him from other humans (see John 14:12); in any case, insofar as Jesus during his earthly ministry lives within space and time, any perceptible act he performs is relative to (and thus conditioned by) other entities, and therefore falls short of the unconditioned exercise of power characteristic of the divine nature.

Jesus, in spite of his claim that Jesus reveals “to us who God is precisely by being human, in and through his human actions” (113). Here the exception—Father White’s close and careful reading of the crucifixion narratives, which includes extensive reflection on divine love (see esp. 316–20)—proves the rule. For his argument here makes little reference to the concrete character of Jesus’s ministry before his arrest; and this is problematic, for the significance of Jesus’s death can only be assessed in light of the commitments that characterized his life (since it is, after all, perfectly possible to give one’s life for a dreadful cause). It is only by viewing Jesus’s death in light of the concrete practices of solidarity with outcasts—the “tax collectors and prostitutes” of Matthew 21:31, as well as ritually unclean persons like the leper (Matt 8:1–3 and its parallels in the other Gospels), the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20 and parallels), and the woman with the hemorrhage (Matt 9:20–22 and parallels)—and sinners that we know concretely what it means to call him Lord and Savior.<sup>16</sup>

Now, given that I am not claiming that any of Father White’s Christological claims are wrong, I recognize my critique of his book is a pretty pallid one. Moreover, since no book can claim to treat fully every aspect of Christ’s person and work (John 21:25!), and since Father White addresses with clarity and insight a number of significant issues in modern Christology in what he has written, it may seem puerile to dwell on what he has not. To this, I have two rejoinders. First, when someone has written a very good book, then it is unreasonable to expect much more than a relatively pallid critique! Second, my critique (pallid though it may be) relates to what for me is the chief significance of the doctrine of the Incarnation as explicated in Chalcedonian terms: that it is precisely the *humanity* of Jesus, as lived out in Palestine from the years 1 to 30, that is our final and definitive index for Christian talk about God. What I worry about in Father

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<sup>16</sup> In this context, I find the claim that “Christ is our unique savior because he can raise us physically from the dead” (*Incarnate Lord*, 464) odd, since it is at least possible that some will be raised to eternal torment—and therefore will not be saved by resurrection. The claim that “it is the victory of Christ, his triumphant, luminous entry into hell on Holy Saturday, that manifests most to us his love for the human race” (420) seems equally odd, since this is not a matter of his visible, public ministry (and, indeed, is at best witnessed to only rather obscurely in the Bible). More promising is Father White’s earlier claim that “Christ is the savior because he bears within himself the action of God who reconciles us with himself effectively, through the event of Jesus’s passion, death, and resurrection” (306). But while this statement is completely unobjectionable in itself, in the absence of discussion of the divine character as one who seeks the flourishing of creatures in the face of historical (no less than supernatural) powers that seek to diminish and destroy, it remains, again, rather abstract.

White's exposition is that his attention to metaphysics means that he tends to talk about Jesus's divinity as a power lying behind the "instrument" of his humanity rather than that which is disclosed most fully through it. As a result, Jesus's humanity, although confessed in thoroughly orthodox terms, becomes marginalized as a focus of genuine theological interest.

By contrast, it seems to me that the upshot of the doctrines of the resurrection and ascension is that the Incarnation is not simply a means to an end, but is itself the end of God's ways with the world: the proleptic realization of the promise that "the home of God is among mortals" (Rev 21:3). The resurrection is the vindication of Jesus's incarnate life as God's life—a life that God wills to live with us, and which has the specific characteristics shown forth in the practices that led Jesus to have the reputation of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt 11:19). And I fear that, if a Chalcedonian Christology does not maintain a tight focus on those concrete features of the Incarnation as recorded in the Gospels, the result will be the same sort of crisis that led to the modern rejection of Chalcedon: that the Christ preached by the Church becomes in practice an otherworldly figure hovering (in rather Nestorian fashion!) behind his humanity, rather than in it. N:V