

Review Essay: Aquinas, Modern Theology, and the Trinity

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As one would expect from his *Incarnate Lord*, Thomas Joseph White's *Trinity* is no exercise in historical theology, although of course it calls on history, but aims to give us St. Thomas's theology as an enduring and so contemporary theology that both respects the creedal commitments of the Catholic Church and offers a more satisfying understanding of the Trinity than anything proposed by the great theologians, Catholic and Protestant, of the past hundred years.¹ *The Trinity*, however, gives a more complete and satisfying view of its subject than does *The Incarnate Lord*.

Can St. Thomas really be fruitfully located within the dialectic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Trinitarian speculation? Yes, and it is one of White's principal contributions to show how St. Thomas's medieval contemporaries, the early Franciscans on the one hand and William of Ockham on the other, remotely but really adumbrate nineteenth- and twentieth-century theological positions, once due attention is paid to the key issues of the analogical naming of God and his knowability. The reader is thus assured that Aquinas's original project was composed with some awareness of temptations and alternatives repeated (though not exactly, of course) in modern thought. It should be added that St. Thomas is by no means treated as the only systematic theological authority for Trinitarian theology, but White recognizes his paradigmatic place in the Catholic theological tradition.

¹ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022).

The most important issue for assessing the enduring value of Thomas's Trinitarian theology, then, whether in the thirteenth century or twentieth century, turns out to be the applicability and centrality of the psychological analogy for an understanding of the immanent intelligibility of the Trinity, an analogy suggested by Scripture, and developed by the Cappadocians, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, and other medieval writers, not to mention John Henry Newman and Matthias J. Scheeben.

What is the status of this analogy? Olivier-Thomas Venard laconically describes it as "revealed"—too hot. Michael Maria Waldstein has recently argued vigorously and at length that it is not revealed at all—too cold. White does not discuss this in detail but is satisfied with saying that it is "derived" from Scripture—just right. However one thinks this question is to be resolved, White robustly defends the psychological analogy as a proper analogy and as the only systematic *theological* instrument ever offered by the theological tradition that succeeds in providing real understanding of the immanent life of the Trinity, one that preserves the transcendence of God and honors the dogmatic tradition of the Church bearing on the nature of God and the Trinity of persons—Nicaea, Lateran IV, and Vatican I, especially. This is how he does it in chapter 22.

1. We know the mystery of interior Trinitarian life based on God's manifestation of it to us in the economy of salvation via the missions of Word and Spirit, which disclose to us distinct personal processions.
2. Such processions are either immanent or transitive.
3. But transitive processions terminate in some substance distinct from whence they emanate.
4. God, however, is one in nature (essence, substance) both specifically and numerically.
5. Therefore, the processions are immanent to the godhead.
6. However, there are only two immanent immaterial activities known to us, that of knowing and that of loving.
7. Therefore, we cannot have some understanding of the mystery of interior Trinitarian life except by analogy with these two

activities. That is to say, we know the mystery of the Trinitarian life according to the “psychological model” or not at all.

This argument can be re-phrased with more pointed reference to modern theologies of the Trinity.

1. If we wish to understand the mystery of the immanent Trinitarian life of distinct persons, but not by way of immanent activities and processions, then we must appeal to transitive activity to account for the distinction of persons.
2. Transitive divine activity can be conceived of (1) as creative, (2) as within creation relative to its history (the continental way), or (3) as taking place between three already constituted divine individuals, relating transitively to one another (the analytic way).
3. But the first way (the creative) is Arianism, where Son and Spirit are created.
4. According to the second way (the continental), the persons will be really related to and so constituted only in relation to created realities, and in this way, God’s life will not in fact be wholly immanent, independent of and eternally transcendent to the created order.
5. The third way (the analytic) is tritheistic: once the idea of immanent processions *in* the one God is abandoned, we end up with three gods transitively related to one another, the knowledge of whose interior life is opaque apart from their communication of themselves.
6. In neither the second way nor the third (nor first way), therefore, do we attain to an immanent Trinitarian life *such as is disclosed to us in Scripture*.
7. So, there is either the psychological analogy or no Trinitarian theology adequate to Scripture (and to the tradition from Cappadocia to Augustine and beyond).

Thus, those who appeal to some transitive divine activity within the godhead or within the created economy to account for the distinction of

persons—Karl Barth, Sergei Bulgakov, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Hans Urs von Balthasar—cannot provide an account of immanent Trinitarian life that, in the most extreme instances, escapes tritheism (Moltmann, Balthasar), or that, even in the better instances, escapes compromising the transcendence of God accordingly as the distinction of persons is thought to be historically constituted by their activity within the economy of salvation (Rahner and sometimes Barth).

Moreover, White has an explanation of this common inability of the greats to preserve the transcendence of God, to provide some analogical intelligibility to the triunity of persons that are each the one essence of God, and to stay within the commitments of the conciliar tradition of dogmatic teaching. It stems from their acquiescence to the strictures on reason proposed by the Kantian critique (no natural theology, no *de Deo uno*, therefore no psychological analogate for the Trinity in the human mind), and thus the subsequent Hegelian attempt to find God constituting himself in history. The first part of chapter 31, where the debt of twentieth-century Trinitarianism to the influence of Kant and Hegel is laid out in some detail, helps enormously to make sense of the twentieth-century effort as a whole. The reader will find himself saying over and over again, “oh, now I understand why Barth (or Moltmann, or Balthasar, or ...) proceeded as he did.”

Stating the argument of the book in this way, however, makes it sound more polemical than it is. The author describes it, more justly, as an essay in “Thomistic *ressourcement*,” as both a contribution to the Thomist tradition, extending it into the present, and an engagement with contemporary theologies of the Trinity. As an essay in *ressourcement*, perhaps the finest chapter is chapter 23, on Trinitarian relations and the divine persons as subsistent relations, where we find the psychological analogy and the analogy of distinct persons in mutual encounter. The deployment of the category of relation to explain the distinction of persons follows from the processions of Word and Spirit disclosed in Scripture, to be sure, but “just as the use of relation sends us from the psychological analogy to the interpersonal analogy (by way of the consideration of *subsistent* relation: the communication of the whole of the godhead),” so also does “the use of relation . . . send us from the interpersonal analogy back to the psychological analogy (by way of consideration of subsistent *relation*: each person is wholly relational in all he is).” Exclusive reliance on the psychological analogy risks modalism; exclusive reliance on the second risks tritheism. Rather, the Trinitarian persons are “each truly personal” and “each truly God” and “each wholly relational.”

In order to make good the psychological analogy, it is altogether essential to arrive at a prior understanding of the divine essence in its unity, simplicity,

perfection, immutability, and eternity. That is, to make good the psychological analogy such as it is deployed by St. Thomas in questions 27–33 of *Summa theologiae* I, it is altogether necessary to pursue the treatise *de Deo uno* in questions 3–26, with its preamble in question q. 2, on the existence of God, all of which is undertaken in part II of White's book. Those who would think of using White to teach students mostly unfamiliar with the physics, metaphysics, and logic of Aristotle (and of the Areopagite), should be assured that White lays out the requisite philosophical principles and distinctions so simply and concisely that no child need ever be left behind. There is also a robust defense of the relative autonomy of the philosophical instrument St. Thomas deploys in conversation with Victor Preller, Stephen D. Long, and others and St. Thomas's evident commitment to the scientific integrity of philosophy (chapter 11). Scripture and the Catholic faith elicit the exercise of *natural* reason's capacity to know God.

The book is divided into four parts, each of whose chapters White has designed in such a way that they can be read independently of one another. Part I notes the peculiar cultural circumstances in which the question of God is asked today in the West. It then proceeds rapidly and expeditiously to assemble the Church's teaching on the triune God, canvassing the Scriptures, observing the homogeneity of Nicene doctrine with scriptural teaching, and rightly emphasizing the contributions of Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Augustine, especially their employment of the psychological analogy. Part II reviews questions 2–25 of the *Summa theologiae* I, paying that attention to the divine simplicity, perfection, knowing, and willing that are foundational for the subsequent Trinitarian considerations of White's part III. The treatment of divine immutability in part II is especially fine, as is the connection the author makes of the many topics of questions 3 and following with their *scriptural* background. Important and repeated use is made of the Dionysian doctrine of analogy in this section of the book. Part II closes very nicely and reasonably by asking about the possibilities of a natural knowledge of the Trinity (just as we have in principle a natural knowledge of divine simplicity and infinity, etc.), treating Richard of St. Victor's argument thereunto. Part III locates Thomas's Trinitarian theology in its historical context. It offers a spirited defense of the psychological analogy, as noted, which will give a theology that aims not simply at dogmatic assertion, but also at an imperfect, analogous, but still fruitful understanding of the mystery of the Trinity.

Part IV takes St. Thomas's theology of the Trinity into closer quarters with the greats of the twentieth century. This will be the most rewarding part of the book for many, since the comparisons and contrasts serve all the

more for us to see what we have in Aquinas, and what we do not have in the moderns. Part IV is a sort of essay in Trinitarian theological sanitation or healing, a *tour de force* wherein the virtualities in St. Thomas for understanding how the moments of the Paschal mystery display Trinitarian reality are put to work. One reads the Gospels armed with the distinctions of processions and missions, of essential and notional acts, with an acknowledgment of the *distinctive* modes of subsistence of the three persons, and with the stratagem of *appropriated* but still informative predications—armed, in short, with the armory available to many great pre-nominalist theologians but exemplarily deployed by St. Thomas and his followers. Thus, the attempt to find the revelation (but not the constitution) of the Trinity in the life of Christ and especially in the moments of the Paschal mystery, the common and great desideratum of the post-Kantian and post-Hegelian enterprise, is well within the compass of the explanatory power of Thomistic Trinitarian and Christological theology, where the missions declare processions and where the actions and passions of Christ are understood to be so entirely filial that they necessarily declare the identities not only of the incarnate Son but also those of Father and Spirit.

The Trinity opens by evoking the distinction between philosophic wisdom and the wisdom of *sacra doctrina*. I think we will be in debt to White's achievement of theological wisdom for many years to come. Nor is it to be thought that it will not sustain the exercise of that third wisdom, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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