

Dominus Deus Noster Deus Unus Est: **Aquinas on Divine Unity**

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“The Lord our God is one LORD,” says the Shema (Deut 6:4), echoed by Christians and Muslims alike. “We believe in one God,” the Nicene Creed announces; and the *Shahada*’s “There is no deity but God” affirms the same. But at first sight, Christian theology looks like the outlier here, as St. Thomas obliquely acknowledges when, early in his discussion of the Trinity (*Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 30, a. 1, obj. 1 and ad 1), he quotes Boethius: “That [alone] is truly one in which there is no numeration” (obj. 3). If there is a plurality of relation in God, there is something that can be enumerated, says Thomas. This objection is duly met by distinguishing between “absolute” plurality and the mutually definitory relations of the Trinitarian life which rule out any “composition” in God. But, for this fully to make sense, we must return to Thomas’s explicit discussion of divine unity (ST I, q. 11). The present essay attempts a brief examination of how divine unity is understood in this *quaestio*, in the hope of clarifying an aspect of Aquinas’s Trinitarian thought, and also of suggesting ways of developing an implicit theme of some significance for contemporary theology.

It is still a textbook commonplace that “Western” Trinitarian theology begins from the divine unity and treats the distinction of the divine persons only in the light of this prior reality. The eloquent polemic of Orthodox theologians like Vladimir Lossky has played a major role in canonizing this supposed opposition. He writes, for example, that Western Trinitarianism treats the relationships of the divine hypostases as “a system of relationships within the one essence: something logically posterior to the essence,” with

the distinguishing “relations of origin” (originary fatherhood, generatedness, procession) as “more or less swallowed up in the nature or essence.”¹ Examples could be multiplied, from Lossky and many others, and from Western theologians influenced by this characterization.² The very structure of Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*, with the *quaestiones de Deo uno* preceding those *de Trinitate*, is sometimes adduced in support of this analysis of the ambiguities and inadequacies of Thomist Trinitarianism, and of a general Western resistance to the radical personalism of authentic patristic theology.

But, polemic apart, what is Aquinas actually saying in his treatment of divine unity, primarily in *ST I*, q. 11? The four articles of the *quaestio* deal with whether saying that something is “one” actually tells us anything beyond the postulation of something as a coherent subject/substance; with whether unity and plurality are simply opposed and incompatible notions; with whether it is right to say that God is one, and if so, whether he is *maxime unus*, one in a unique and unsurpassable sense. Basic to his argument, as we shall see, is something touched on briefly in *ST I*, q. 30, a. 1, where his response (ad 3) to the Boethian formulation associates divine unity with *simplicity*—that is, with non-composition:³ affirming the divine unity is, crucially, *denying* the applicability of certain kinds of discourse in theology. But, as we shall see, part of the abiding importance of Aquinas’s discussion is, perhaps unexpectedly, to open the door to a new ontological perspective in which laying out the difference between different senses of “unity” allows for the development of a more systematically relational metaphysics. Related to this is the distinction drawn (especially in ad 2 of

¹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957), 57.

² See the nuanced and very valuable discussions in Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 30–44, 192, 197–98, 213. The work of Michel Barnes on the origins of Lossky’s account of East–West polarization is of great importance; see especially his groundbreaking “De Regnon Reconsidered,” *Augustinian Studies* 26 (1995): 51–79.

³ Thomas Joseph White’s chapter on the subject in *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 239–60, is an exemplary summary of Aquinas on the subject. Historical treatments include Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), and Pui Him Ip, “Re-imagining Divine Simplicity in Trinitarian Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 3 (2016): 274–89. Ip’s doctoral research on the subject is shortly to appear in monograph form, and I acknowledge a real debt of gratitude to this work. Robert W. Jenson’s *The Triune God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 111–14, is uncompromisingly critical of the doctrine of divine simplicity.

a. 3) between “mathematical” and “metaphysical” unity; one of the problems with a good deal of modern criticism of Western Trinitarianism is a failure to reckon with the diversity of ways in which “*unus est*” might be used, and St. Thomas is in fact abundantly clear about the senses that must be ruled out in theology—including any sense that would oppose an “individual” essence to “multiple” hypostases, as if the divine essence were itself a sort of numerically identified individual.

The ground for this is laid in the first article. If we say that something is “one,” we are surely offering a *determination* of it, specifying one way of identifying an *x* as *this x*. We cannot identify anything simply by saying what kind of thing it is; we have to add specifications, and numerical detail is such a specification, the specification of *quantity* (later, in q. 3, a. 3, we come back to this from another angle in terms of picking out some substance by its “incommunicable” features). How many of this sort of thing are we talking about? “One” is evidently an answer to such a question. It may be the case that there is, as it happens, only one instance of some kind, but there is nothing logically peculiar about there being more. At some point in the mid-eighteenth century (if the tradition is accurate, which it probably is not): it was correct to answer the question “How many speakers of Cornish are there?” with the answer “One, Dolly Pentreath of Mousehole.” There is nothing conceptually strange about there now being rather more. The class of native Cornish speakers has a clear general definition; a quantitative specification tells you no more about the conditions for “being a Cornish speaker,” but does give you genuine information about actual speakers of Cornish. So it seems that “*unum addit aliquid super ens*” (“‘one’ tells us something more [about a subject] than ‘actually existing’”), says Thomas. Again, something cannot be at once “one” and “many”; and deciding between such alternatives clearly gives us information. And finally, if *unum* adds no information to *ens*, we should—nonsensically—be treating the terms as convertible; it would be impossible to say that “there is one *x*” if *ens* simply meant “one thing” by definition.

This is a general logical preliminary to Thomas’s full argument, designed to make it plain that in fact the concept of unity is not exclusively numerical. In a very typical way, he simply draws our attention to how the context will clarify which sense of “unity” is in focus, what particular questions are being asked and answered here and now. He has established in *De ente et essentia* 4 that *ens* (rendering here the “second *ousia*” of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*) is “everything about which an affirmative proposition may be made”—an identifiable existent, a grammatical subject, which may be, as we should say, abstract or concrete. In order to use the concept of an individual substance at

all, we have to presuppose that, for the purposes of this particular discourse, we are treating it as an entity in itself—a continuous subject of predication. Hence in the *Summa* discussion, Thomas's quotation from Pseudo-Dionysius as his *sed contra*: nothing exists except by participation in oneness, that is, except insofar as it is thinkable as a coherent single reality of which predication may be made. Continuity in *esse* and continuity in "non-division" are inseparable. But this makes it clear that the sense of unity that we have to consider here is simply "that which enables something to be treated as a substance." As Thomas says, this substance/subject may be "simple" or "complex" (*compositum*), but in either case we begin from the acceptance of it as an undivided reality; if complex, it may be resolvable into its elements, but is nevertheless single from the point of view of any discourse that aims to talk about it coherently.⁴

The second article similarly invites us to think about the usages of unity as opposed to multiplicity, arguing that, while "one" and "many" are not logically contradictory in terms of numeration, they are so in the metaphysical sense that Thomas wants us to concentrate on. Numerically, "manynesses" are composed of individuals, so that we cannot say that "one" and "many" are incompatible. Numerically, the "opposite" of one unit is another unit—that which cannot be numerically identical with it—not manyness as such (whose logical opposite is "fewness"). And if unity and multiplicity were logically opposed as "undivided" and "divided," would that not mean that unity was being defined as a kind of "privation," the effect of removing determinations from concrete reality, so that it would be conceptually *dependent* on multiplicity—which sounds a bit odd (*inconveniens*)? Aquinas's response is that there is an opposition between one and many in a non-logical sense, as a system of measurement is "opposed" to what it measures: "one" is, numerically, a *tool* for calculation, and so works in a different conceptual space from the material whose quantity is being calculated. However, considered as the single subject of an act of predication, the oneness of an *ens* is logically opposed to manyness. Aquinas exposes the confusion around the idea of "privation" that haunts the objections he has summarized: the argument is densely packed, but the gist is that it is logically nonsense to start from the multiple, since we have to utilize unifying concepts to identify multiples as individuals. "Privation" presumes a fullness from which certain things are taken away; but multiplicity or plurality is defined as determination,

⁴ Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, chs. 39–40, is also worth looking at for further clarification about the difference between mathematical oneness—the singleness of an item in a list—and the ontological oneness that—in the case of the unity of a genus—is simply the lack of differentiation or individuation.

limitation, rather than plenitude. We begin from the idea of an undivided subject, whose local and specific identification depends on the specifying of certain limitations; we do not arrive at the idea of the single subject by a process of removing determinations.

The technicalities of these arguments are designed to make it plain that the unity that will be of interest to us theologically is the unity that belongs to the notion of *ens* as an undivided subject or substance. But it should by now be clear that to speak of divine unity in this context is precisely *not* to begin from the idea of God as an individual over against other individuals, a single case of some kind of being. The third article of the *quaestio* draws out the point: unity as *principium numeri* is inapplicable to God. As the preceding arguments have established, numeration is about quantification, and this is manifestly inappropriate to God. “There is one God” is grammatically entirely different from “There is one native speaker of Cornish.” We have now seen that numerical unity is by no means the only or the most important way in which we can speak of unity, so this is not a problem for using the language of unity for God. We simply have to be careful not to misunderstand “There is one God” as an answer to the question “How many gods are there?” Asking such a question implies a failure to understand the word “God,” as if it designated *singulas partes mundi*, items in the inventory of the universe (*ST I*, q. 3, a. 3, ad 1). God is not an individual. When we are talking about individuals, we distinguish that in virtue of which someone is a member of a class of individuals—which is “shareable” with many—from that in virtue of which someone is *this* individual and not that. But in God this distinction is impossible. We need a way of establishing that *this* individual is *this* specific human being and not another, and we do so by mentioning their “incommunicable” characteristics. But “*idem est Deus et hic Deus*,” says St Thomas in the corpus of the article; there are no instances of the divine that need to be distinguished from one another, as Odin might from Thor or Huitzilopochtli from Quetzalcoatl. The reference of “God” as the subject of a proposition is identically and exhaustively “the divine nature.” Otherwise we should be saying that there are different ways of actualizing the divine perfections, such that one possessor of divine nature would exemplify something that another did not realize. This would introduce into the divine the category of potential excellences that could be made actual in varying degrees, so that one divine subject would be deficient in what another possessed. We should end up with the unsustainable idea that a divine subject/substance could be lacking in the unlimited perfection that is part of what “God” means; Thomas refers us back to the arguments of classical philosophy here, to establish that the concept of ultimate and

unconditioned active existence precludes a “division of labor” between divine individuals. If the divine is in any sense subject to differentiation as a result of contingent circumstance (the sort of thing that means that we can distinguish Socrates from Plato, the things that *happen* to be the case with one as opposed to another existent within the finite world), we have to recalibrate the argument and postulate a further and higher level beyond that of plural “gods” so as to secure a unified first principle.

And the “unified first principle” point is then briefly elaborated, again in the corpus of the article. The universe is conceivable *as* a universe because its processes are *ordinata in invicem*, interdependent; but they cannot be so unless there is a single coherent pattern that orders them. The same classical point is being invoked: there cannot be a plurality of “organizing principles” without an infinite regress threatening. The point must come at which we have to recognize a final level that comprehensively grounds the interaction of finite substances. If “God” means what we say it means—if the divine is the foundation of a regular and intelligible creation—then “God” must be one. In a. 3, ad 2, Thomas spells out the point once more in terms of the difference between “mathematical” and “metaphysical” unity; and he also returns to the issue of “privation,” noting that—paradoxically—the only way in which we can express in language the unlimited reality of divine life is by linguistic “privation” or *remotion*, taking away certain sorts of predicate (those associated with materiality, for example) and denying that certain things can properly or univocally be said of God. But what this does not and cannot mean is that God’s existence is itself deprived of anything except limitation.

Before looking briefly at the final article of the *quaestio*, we can take stock of what has so far been said; and—as indicated earlier—there are two major points emerging. The first is that, in insisting on the divine unity, Aquinas in no sense suggests that there exists a “one” God prior to or superior to the Trinitarian life, for the simple reason that the argument is first about the grammar of the word “God.” If God is the subject of intelligible predication, if God can be spoken of consistently in a theological discourse that has the character of a *scientia* (which is what Aquinas has argued for in the very first *quaestio* of the *Summa*), God is one, simply as *ens*. But this unity as a subject of predication is further explained by way of the clarification that, whereas, with finite substances, both this metaphysical sense of unity and the mathematical sense will apply in different circumstances, there is *no* circumstance in which numerical identity can be applied to God. God is never an instance of anything; there are no “cases” of the divine as there are cases of the human, cases of dogs or hamsters, cases of abstract subjects like lawsuits, elections, or marriages. “God” is *nomen operationis*, says Aquinas in *ST I*, q. 13, a. 8, not a

proper name; but that *operatio*, being eternal and unconditioned, cannot be exercised to different degrees or with different intensities by different agents. Hence, “God” is neither the name of an individual nor the designation of a kind. It refers to that undivided action by which the universe is constituted as a universe rather than a chaos of unconnected processes.

But this also emphasizes that there is no “essence” or “nature” that is separate from the active God as encountered in revelation (once again, it is worth referring back to the opening *quaestio* of the *Summa* on the nature and criteria of theology). Talking about God begins with the text of Scripture, and thus with the specific engagement of the divine with human intellect and agency. This tells us that the divine—as creator of heaven and earth—is changeless and beyond condition; it also tells us that the form of divine agency as we receive its communication is bound up with a plurality of reciprocal relations into which the creature is adopted. All theology begins with what the divine utters or communicates; and for the Christian, what the divine communicates is the eternal “filial” relationship that is one irreducible dimension of this eternal actuality. Later *quaestiones* on the doctrine of the Trinity (especially *ST I*, qq. 27–32) will discuss in greater depth how this is to be traced by way of defining relation and “person” when we are speaking of the active *esse* of limitless and unconditioned being; but the essential point is that the content of the *ens* that is God as the subject matter of theological discourse is nothing other than what the scriptural narrative sets out; there is no “divine individual” to be identified independently of this—even though, for Thomas, human reasoning outside of revelation can in principle conclude to the coherence of an idea of ultimate and foundational agency, an idea that acts as a needful backdrop to the scriptural narrative of creation and creature. This is the point of the “thought experiment” of *quaestio* 2 in *ST I*, especially the third article, the so-called “five ways.” But there is no divine “subject matter,” no *ens*, other than or prior to the God of revelation, so that, if this revelation indicates a plurality of internal and eternal relation in the divine life and act, *this* is precisely what constitutes the one *ens* of our discourse. At the risk of laboring the point, the theological models associated with “Western” or Scholastic theology by its critics, the myth of a prior divine individuality of some sort or an abstract category of “divinity” that is subsequently filled in, are in fact impossible within the terms of Thomas’s analysis of what we mean by “divine unity.” Of course the divine is a single *ens* as a subject of discussion, but the metaphysical unity thus defined rules out any notion of this entailing a numerically single agent or an abstract essence separable from the actual object of theology considered as an extended exegesis of revelatory action.

So, if we turn to the final article of question 11 in *ST I*, “Whether God is supremely one” (*maxime unus*), we might note that the *sed contra* here is a quotation from St. Bernard about the Trinity: “Among all the things that are called “one” the supreme place is held by the unity of the divine Trinity.”⁵ A critic might express surprise that we should have to wait so long for any reference to the Trinitarian doctrine in a discussion of divine unity, and some might conclude that their worst suspicions were well-founded. But the quotation in fact allows Thomas to *deny* that there could be any kind of ultimate unity other than or superior to relational unity. If it is axiomatic in the whole argument that God’s indivisibility is not only a grammatical necessity for the coherence of theology as a “scientific” discourse but also a function of God’s simplicity, of the reality that God’s unity is in no sense the product of any prior event or process, then that unsurpassably indivisible life is what ultimately defines unity. Thomas does not spell out the point in this *quaestio*, but the implication is crystal clear: there is no unity beyond the Trinitarian life. What is ontologically ultimate is a *relational* unity.

In other words, Aquinas can be claimed as, in his way, an exponent of that “Trinitarian ontology” that has attracted some theological attention in recent years.⁶ So far from his scrupulous discussion of divine unity in advance of his Trinitarian treatise being a sign of somehow subordinating hypostatic plurality to essential unity in the divine life, what he actually does is to make clear that there is no divine nature that is not identical with the mutual relations of the Trinity. It is not—as Lossky suggests—that these relations are “within” an essential unity that somehow exceeds or precedes them; they are *what defines the unity that is proper to God*. What makes “God” a coherent single subject for reasoned discussion is precisely and only the life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in their total *interdependence*. To return to the opening article of *ST I*, q. 11, the ascription of unity to the substantive “God” which is the subject of the discourse gives us no information; it does

⁵ From Bernard’s *De consideratione* 5.8. Both chapters 7 and 8 are a significant summary of what was taken for granted about divine simplicity and plurality in the Western monastic world of the time, and Bernard anticipates Thomas in his clarity about the divine simplicity (what God “has,” God is) and about the fact that God is what God is in virtue of nothing but what God is (i.e., in virtue of no extraneous agency or condition).

⁶ Klaus Hemmerle’s *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico, 2020) is a fundamental text; my hope is that the present discussion may serve as a reminder that, although Hemmerle and others pursue the theme largely in reference to the very strongly “pluralist” Trinitarianism of Balthasar and similar writers, there are other tributary streams flowing into this, not least St. Thomas’s own account of unity as outlined here. The connection should not be allowed to be obscured by the technical abstraction of St Thomas’s writing on the subject.

not posit a definition of unity to which the substantive is—so to speak—subordinated. What the actual ground may be of the coherence of the subject in question has to be established by the entire discourse; and in the case of God, this is the *sacra doctrina* of revealed truth, though clarified and sharpened by the logical analysis of what must be entailed in speaking about an *ens* that is identical in nature and act because it is beyond all conditioning and thus “simple” in a supreme and unqualified sense.

To recruit Thomas for the cause of a relational ontology, the radical denial of any active substantiality that exists as an isolated individuality, can be supported also from the condensed and not much noticed point made in the *corpus* of *ST I*, q. 11, a. 3, which we touched upon a little while back, the argument for divine unity based on the coherence of the finite world. The finite universe continues in existence because of the way particular realities are “ordered” towards each other: the pattern of created life is one of mutual service *quaedam quibusdam deserviunt*). But we can make sense of such a pattern only if we suppose that a single convergent energy is at work here. Radically individual and independent substances could be harmonized only by chance, whereas a single unifying energy produces unity by its own nature. In other words, to paraphrase Aquinas’s text somewhat, if God is indeed the active principle from which everything takes its origin, and if that “everything” turns out to be a stable and intelligible world, in which there is a steady exchange, as a modern might say, of energy and information, it is appropriate to ascribe a kind of unity to the first principle—not the unity of a single substance over against others, let alone an infinite substance over against finite ones (for Thomas, a manifestly incoherent notion), but an indivisible act of being, *esse*, to which every finite substance is ultimately related in the same way.

The universe that St. Thomas conceives is one in which every distinct and determinate agency, every concrete *ens*, is teleologically involved with every other. There is no specific particular substance or agency that could be defined in its purpose and intelligibility without reference to the role it plays in other such realities: each substance “serves.” It is not that we must begin conceptually from independent clusters of properties attached to some unimaginable or unreachable center of isolated singleness; each substance is unique in the particularity or unrepeatability of its relation to others—ultimately to all. What is at stake, we might say, is the very idea of a “universe,” a coherent (intelligible) system of interaction. We do not penetrate or exhaustively survey every aspect of this system—not because there are hidden essences concealed from our eyes within the things around us, but because our own relatedness to the environment, our own “always

already” involvement in the exchange of information that is the intelligible world, does not provide us with a global and detached perspective. But we continue to involve ourselves in the practice of tracing causal patterns and relationships of “in-formation” in the world in the confidence that the universe is what the word itself suggests, a turning in a single direction, not an ultimately chaotic environment in which diverse regularities hold in diverse regions. And for the religious intellect, this model of the universe is grounded not in a set of impersonal eternal laws of nature, but in the actual constraints of mutuality—what is entailed in a world in which creation is unceasingly realized in the exchange of an energy that is mediated in what we think of as the “codes” and signals by which one kind of life or actuality modifies the intelligible form and concrete activity of another.

The wider point I am seeking to make here should be clear. Aquinas’s account of divine unity, so far from providing some sort of rationale for atomized models of finite or infinite existence and agency, in fact gives us some powerful tools for consolidating an ontology in which reciprocity is the most fundamental reality. This is not a simple matter of saying that both divine and created reality are characterized by interaction. That, as it stands, would just leave open the door to another variety of univocity in our language about God and creation. It is rather that Thomas first obliges us to do some careful methodological work on the assumptions we make in doing theology at all, work that makes plain the risks of confusing radically different senses of “unity.” To speak of the oneness of God is first and most simply to note that we should not be doing theology at all unless we assumed that “God” provided a single coherent subject matter for discourse. But the central point in this argument—that “unity” in this sense means non-divisibility—turns out to have a broader application. Theology is a discourse in which we cannot go behind or beyond into a “meta-discourse,” as we could in principle in talking about finite subjects. “God” cannot be resolved into other terms: divine simplicity is the straightforward denial that God can be part of any *context*, any narrative in which God is an element among others. To talk about God at all is to talk about that which needs no identification to pick out *this* particular subject/substance from others with which it might be confused. In Aquinas’s pithy formulation, “God,” and “this God” are one and the same.” But this means that the encounter with or the revelation of “this God” is what establishes the conditions for speaking of the divine: “God” designates neither an instance of divinity nor a “kind” of existence (at least in anything like the ordinary sense of those words; we may and can say, a bit loosely, in some circumstances that “God” is the name given to a form of existing [*nomen operationis*], simply in the sense that the

divine agency can be characterized by certain consistent features that we may recognize, even though those features themselves deny the possibility of listing a set of discrete positive predicates in the normal way).

Thus the identification of the one God depends on both the record of revelation—creation and redemption—and the elaboration of the grammar of creation and redemption that allows us to be clear about God’s independence of process, composition, change and so on. Doctrines of divine unity and divine simplicity are the programmatic affirmations of that independence; or, to put it in terms that Thomas does not use, it is for God to define the being that God actively is.⁷ The Trinitarian pattern of divine life is precisely what God actively is, and there is no “unity” other than that which consists in this relationality. As Aquinas’s quotation from St. Bernard makes clear, there cannot be a kind of unity superior to or prior to this.

In the light of this, we can assume that a model of unity as self-contained self-identity is not the ultimate form of oneness, but a distorted and deprived kind of unity. And, in this connection, it is no surprise that the unity of the universe has to be construed in terms of reciprocal action or—to use Thomas’s telling phraseology—mutual “service.” It is not that the created order reproduces the mutuality of the divine life, since the created order is by definition temporally evolving through mutual influence and effect. But we have seen that the idea of a substantial unity that is exclusive of relation is inapplicable to the foundational act by which reality is sustained; and so we can hardly import such an idea into our ontology of the finite world. St. Thomas has both “problematized” and clarified how we use the language of unity, in general and in theological particular, and his discussion has significant implications for continuing to do theology sensibly.

Much could be said about this, but we might bear in minds two broad points. I have written elsewhere⁸ that a major part of the importance of Fr. Thomas Joseph White’s Trinitarian essay is that it concentrates the reader’s mind on the risks of *idolatry*. There may be various compellingly vigorous accounts of the Christian God—especially some of the more extravagantly poetic and homiletic adaptations of Barth or Balthasar—that unconsciously

⁷ St. Edith Stein quotes Pseudo-Dionysius to the effect that God is the “Primal Theologian”: “God gives his theologians the words and images that enable them to speak of him to others. And to these others he speaks as a ‘symbolic theologian’—through nature, through their inner experience and through his traces in human life and world history—thereby enabling them to understand the language of the theologians” (Edith Stein, *Knowledge and Faith*, vol. 8 of *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, trans. Walter Redmond [Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2000], 117).

⁸ Reviewing White’s book on the Trinity in *First Things*, October 2022.

risk idolatry in the widest sense because they implicitly envisage God as bound in to a context of other agencies. But to insist (rightly enough) that God defines/requires/reveals the divine being in the divine action does not absolve us from clarifying as carefully as we can the grammar of the divine. Indeed, the emphasis in some such theologies on the absoluteness of divine freedom in fact *requires* a clarification of the sort St. Thomas offers. The appeal to divine simplicity, so far from being a malign philosophical immigrant in theology, is nothing but an appeal to the liberty implied in creation *ex nihilo*. We are not—despite a wilderness of textbook misunderstandings from Eastern and Western, traditional and liberal, “biblical” and “metaphysical” stables—left with a choice between a clear doctrine of transcendent divine unity somewhat complicated by credal formulations and a robust revelationist insistence on divine triunity vocally unworried by idle philosophical scruples. Thomas’s discussion simply invites us to reflect on what we mean by “unity” and urges us not to assume too quickly that we know what we are talking about; it gently steers us towards the recognition that the concept of self-identical individuality as a metaphysical ultimate is doubtfully compatible with philosophical coherence and certainly incompatible with theological integrity, but it also warns us off a philosophically careless pluralism that sidesteps the radicality of a fully relational picture of reality—“relation all the way down,” as you might say.

And this is the second insight Thomas provides, in his brief allusion to the connection between affirming the unity of God and making sense of the finite universe. To believe in one God is bound up with believing in a universe in which substances are “ordered” to one another—directed towards the good of others. The wording implies that they are not simply directed towards a generalized good of the whole, but to the specific life of other substances in their distinctiveness. The failure of a finite substance to serve such specific others, in both immediate and remote contexts, is a failure on the part of that substance to be itself. And the aspiration of the human mind to occupy a systematically detached position with respect to the processes of the world, colluding with the self-regarding will of fallen humanity to harness, exploit, and plunder those processes as if they could be “ordered” simply to whatever the current version is of human desire, is the mark of a disordered and failed humanity. Our environmental crisis, like the monumental injustices of the international financial and industrial practices we have come to see as normal, shows us failing in our humanity—and consequently “disordering” the workings of our environment in such a way that it cannot in practice “serve” us.

There is, in other words, a properly “Trinitarian” ethic to be elaborated

in the light of Thomas's discussion. It is not the somewhat simplistic version sometimes associated with proponents of "social" Trinitarian schemes—that God "models" for us a depth of interpersonal communication we must seek to realize—but a rather more radical challenge to any pre-critical privileging of a radical individual identity for any aspect of the finite universe, any self-definition of need or desire that fails to attend to mutual involvement and obligation. It is in some ways understandable that Western theology in the last few decades has been unsettled by the powerful critique of theological "monism" advanced by so many theologians from the Christian East—and the critique has been echoed within Western theology by thinkers as different as Barth and Rahner. Certainly, the rise of European deism of one kind and another in the early modern period, and an overly abstract approach to the Scholastic tradition, ignoring its exegetical and contemplative dimensions, did much to justify the revolution that has brought Trinitarian theology to a renewed prominence in modern discussion. But the foregoing has perhaps shown not only that the textbook versions of the problem are often unfair and superficial, but also that a closer reading of Aquinas's text brings some positive clarity to issues currently in need of theological exploration. Such a reading takes us back to those elements in the Christian theological tradition that help to dismantle the persistent and powerful myth of "given," self-sufficing or self-defining individuality. It engages us in some necessary attention to the strain of non-dualism or (as it has been called) "adualism" in Christian thought—that is, the strain that refuses to think of the divine as occupying the same logical space as the finite, so that we are saved from thinking that they compete for place or power. It shows us that the profound and pervasive reciprocity in the Spirit that defines the life of the sacramental Body of Christ is in fact the fulfilment of the essential pattern of finite life—human and non-human, not merely something bolted on by grace to a world of basically fixed, atomized, and independent substances. In short, it has implications for our theology of social life, for our exploration in conversation with non-Christian metaphysical systems (not least Buddhism), and for our understanding of what our theology and practice have to contribute to the struggle for a just and durable relation with our environment. It may be a surprising amount to draw out from a relatively brief discussion in the *Summa*; but recidivist readers of that work will recognize the way in which Thomas's brevity consistently opens rather than closing pathways for creative reappropriation of the shared deposit of revealed truth, the revealed truth in which God uncovers the intellectual and spiritual landscape in which we are to grow and rejoice and learn the critical tools for discipleship.