

Book Reviews

Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology: Attaining the Fullness of Christ by Alexis Torrance, *Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), ix + 239 pp.

AS A PART OF THE SERIES *Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology*, Alexis Torrance's *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology* examines the role of Christ's human perfection within key figures in the Byzantine tradition against the backdrop of trends in contemporary Orthodox theology. Torrance seeks to uncover a common "Christocentrism" within the Byzantine tradition that challenges the contemporary tendency among contemporary Orthodox theologians to "unmoor" theological anthropology from the doctrine of the humanity of Christ. Indeed, according to Torrance, some of these approaches go so far as to risk the danger of "theological shipwreck" (1). As general representatives of the tendency Torrance has in mind, we can name such figures as John Zizioulas and Vladimir Lossky, whose personalist anthropologies depart from the tradition by "bypassing or deferring Christology" (10). In the case of Zizioulas, for instance, Torrance sees the disintegration of theological anthropology into "a sentimental application or projection of worldly and hazy concepts of personality and 'community' to both the Godhead and the people of God" (10). If, for Torrance, the above thinkers appear to represent a wayward *tendency* (even if he takes issue with certain of their "starting points," Torrance nevertheless seems to agree with most of their conclusions), it is Fr. John Behr whose theology Torrance likely has in mind as risking "theological shipwreck."

As we shall see, the overall intelligibility of Torrance's work appears only in the final chapter, against the backdrop of Behr's "unmistakably Christocentric" (206) anthropology. While Torrance joins Behr in bemoaning the non-Christocentric character of much of modern theological anthropology, nevertheless, he sees Behr's project as positing a Christocentrism that flies in the face of the Byzantine tradition. In light of Behr's Christocentrism (and in a way that is reminiscent of *Gaudium et Spes* §22), Torrance wishes to

show that, for any genuinely Byzantine doctrine, Christ, *in his particular and enduring humanity*, must be the starting point of the human ideal: "Human perfection and human destiny are only revealed, known, and bequeathed in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man" (11). To this end, Torrance proposes a "fresh Christocentric paradigm" (3).

Torrance's study provides insight into important texts which both implicitly and explicitly reflect the priorities of the Fathers. Taking the historical and systematic approach of Georges Florovsky's "neo-patristic synthesis" as his cue, Torrance highlights the centrality of Christ's humanity in four key figures. He examines the immovability of the human will in the *eschaton* in Maximus the Confessor (ch. 2), the particular ("depictable") and enduring humanity of Christ in Theodore the Studite (ch. 3), the attainability of human perfection in Symeon the New Theologian (ch. 4), and the possibility of deification through uncreated grace in Gregory Palamas (ch. 5). In each of these thinkers Torrance discovers a "thoroughly Christocentric gaze" (37), which begins from the concrete and particular human nature of Christ, and thereby provides a contrast with the abstract tendency of certain contemporary Orthodox thinkers. However, as we shall see, on account of the ambiguity surrounding the term "Christocentric," it is not always clear whether or how Christ's humanity and human perfection figure into the themes discussed. More problematically, it is not always clear whether Christ's perfect humanity provides an insight into human *perfection* or human nature, as such.

For the purposes of this review, we will focus on Torrance's chapter on Theodore the Studite. Torrance's treatment of Theodore is distinct from his treatment of other Byzantine figures inasmuch as Theodore's teaching on Christ's depictability is historically situated in an explicitly Christological debate. While the studies on Maximus, Symeon, and Palamas certainly have themes that, in one way or another, advert to Christ's humanity, nevertheless none of particular issues treated can be said to have Christ's humanity as their essential starting point. This is to say that Christ's human perfection is not so much a principle of the teaching in question, but one (perhaps *the*) particular example introduced as confirming a distinct theological doctrine. For instance, in the chapter on Maximus, which focuses primarily on showing that the immovability of the human will is not contrary to eschatological *human* existence, the humanity of Christ appears significant only as it is evidence of this fact. Likewise, in the chapter on Symeon, Christ's humanity is proof that human perfection is attainable in this life; and in Palamas, the deification of Christ's humanity is introduced as proof of the possibility of human deification through the uncreated divine energy. In each

of these cases, we see the import of Christ's human perfection as exemplar, but it is not always clear whether and how exactly each of the anthropologies represented in the thought of the above figures can be understood as distinctively "Christocentric" (that is, it is not clear whether or how their respective "starting points" [10] is explicitly Christ).

To return to the example of Maximus, Torrance's argument about the eschaton turns on the application of the divine attribute of immovability to the believer through deification. Christ's own human deification arises in this broader context as a case in point. Here the claim to Christocentrism appears somewhat mitigated inasmuch as the account of Christ's deification is not so much the starting point but evidence that the nature of deification cannot simply be characterized in terms of perpetual change (pace popular readings of Gregory of Nyssa). While a similar problem ultimately arises in Torrance's study of Theodore (for here too the debate seems to be first and foremost grounded more in the depictability of human nature as such rather than in Christ's own depictability), it nevertheless has the strongest *prima facie* claim to providing a glimpse into a more traditionally Byzantine "Christocentrism."

We turn, therefore, to Theodore and his anti-iconoclastic position. The iconoclast controversy, at least as it pertains to images of Christ, centers on the iconoclasts' "Christological dilemma": Christ cannot and must not be depicted in icons, since what is depicted in the icon is either the divine nature or the human nature; it cannot be the divine nature, for the divine nature is uncircumscribable and undepictable; neither can it be the human nature, for to depict the human nature would be to fall into Nestorianism by separating it from the divine nature. Therefore, Christ cannot be depicted. Theodore rejects this dilemma on the ground that "every image is the image not of a nature [φύσις] but of a hypostasis" (86). It is not the nature, but the person who is depicted in the icon. As Torrance notes, such a view implies the broader notion that "a nature in abstraction . . . is undepictable." Since "human nature only has subsistence in individual human beings" (88), it follows that Christ in his humanity *can* be depicted in icons—for what is depicted is not the human nature in abstraction but the divine Person subsisting in a human nature.

Filling in some gaps, we might summarize Theodore's position as follows: The universal "humanity" has existence only in individual human beings. The particular human, having its own matter (on account of which we can speak of the particular properties of an individual human, the *ιδιώματα*, i.e., this flesh, these bones), is depictable on this account. Possessing a concrete material or corporeal nature, therefore, appears to be the main principle

for depictability. The abstract notion of humanity does not have particular matter; it has “flesh and bones” only in an indeterminate or abstract sense. Thus, Christ did not and could not assume universal humanity in the abstract, for, as Theodore argues, this would amount to a fiction. In order for the Incarnation to have truly taken place, therefore, it is necessary that the Word assume a particular (i.e., materially individuated) human nature—one that has its own (determinate) matter and is, consequently, depictable.

As is clear from Torrance’s presentation, the philosophical character of Theodore’s doctrine is unmistakable. Torrance tells us that Theodore’s teaching on the assumption of an individual rather than an abstract human is grounded in an Aristotelian doctrine of universals. It is “an exact formulation of the Aristotelian version of realism about universals: universals are real entities, but they exist only in individuals” (89, quoting Christophe Erismann). The difference of Theodore’s position from that of the iconoclasts thus appears to be fundamentally rooted in a difference in philosophical assumptions.

But if this is true, how ought we understand Torrance’s thesis that wishes to posit Theodore’s “grounded, rugged ‘earthiness’ of the human ideal” (85) as founded foremost upon Christ’s human perfection? Is Theodore’s “overriding concern to emphasize, in the person of Christ, the irrevocably *incarnate* nature of human perfection” (85) based on his philosophical assumptions or upon a Byzantine Christocentrism? Notably, Theodore’s argument does not begin with Christ’s particularity or his depictability to conclude to characteristics of human nature; rather, the reverse is true. To be a true human being is to be depictable; Christ is a true human being; therefore, Christ is depictable. While the revelation of the Incarnation is a datum of faith, the fundamental premise (i.e., what it means to be human) here logically *precedes* what is received by faith. If Theodore did not know anything about human nature, he would not be able to argue to Christ’s human depictability. In other words, Theodore’s focus on the “incarnate” nature of human perfection is first grounded in the fact that human beings are corporeal beings.

Such a reading would compromise Torrance’s broader attempt to uncover a Byzantine “Christocentrism” according to which the entry point be *explicitly* Christ (see 8). And though Torrance recognizes Theodore’s philosophical inheritance (see 85, 89), his language at times suggests that Theodore’s “strongly material or ‘earthy’ theology devoted to the incarnate Christ” (104) in some way acts as the foundation for something as philosophical as Theodore’s doctrine of universals. Elsewhere, Torrance attempts to answer reservations about Theodore’s use of the term “individual,” distancing it from the Boethian definition of “person” (see 15) by an appeal

to Theodore's Christocentric bent. Thus, we are told that Theodore's use of the language of "individuality" (which points to the subsistent nature) "has to do with his emphasis on the *specificity* of Christ's humanity, in particular its circumscribability (and thus depictability in icons)" (90; emphasis original). We are often given the impression that Theodore's refusal "to reify human nature in the abstract" (88) is due to his "deep and vivid devotion to the enduring particularity of Christ as a human being" (90). A similar confusion regarding the role of philosophy appears when Torrance speaks as if the predication of humanity to all men (a question of logical predication) is illuminated by Christ's assumption of "the whole of human nature" (109). From this, Torrance claims that one aim of Theodore's iconophilism is to cause his audience to reflect on "the whole of human nature possessed individually by each of his listeners and readers."¹ It is as if the predication of humanity to individual human beings holds a special significance in light of Christ's assumption of human nature. But this is surely something that can be known just as well without a consideration of the Incarnation.

In sum, for Torrance, Theodore's Christological/theological "creativity" (see 85, 90) is too frequently depicted as if it were the ground not only for his understanding of human perfection, but for his conception of human nature as such. Yet, this is to reverse the very logic of Theodore's argument. The particularity and depictability of Christ's human nature does not belong to him on account of a characteristic unique to the Word incarnate, but instead is a consequence of his sharing in our common human nature. The result of such a confusion is a tendency to conflate philosophical principles with theological ones. What ought to be seen as arising from a properly philosophical consideration of human nature is treated as arising from Theodore's Christocentrism.

This points to a deeper ambiguity within the work as a whole regarding the meaning of "Christocentrism." Beyond seeing human *perfection* in Christ, Torrance in places speaks as though human nature as such can be known only in Christ. For, Christocentrism requires that the "entry point"

¹ There is a confusion about what Torrance understands by "universal humanity." In speaking of two functions of Theodore's approach, he writes: "The first is to direct Theodore's audience to the circumscribed Word incarnate, in whom the whole of human nature has found its resting place and exaltation. The second is to direct the audience self-reflexively, to the whole of human nature possessed individually by each of his listeners and readers, a humanity that is currently not at rest and not exalted" (109). While denying the possibility of the assumption of an abstract, universal human nature, Torrance nevertheless speaks puzzlingly of the "continuity and permanence of the *particular and universal humanity* of the resurrected Son of God" (92; emphasis added). This reflects a broader confusion on Torrance's part regarding Theodore's view on universals.

be “explicitly Christ” (8). Yet, if we are to take Theodore as our guide, it seems that to be Christocentric (if the moniker can rightly be applied to Theodore’s theological anthropology) does not exclude the possibility of making claims about Christ beginning from what is known (and therefore knowable) about human nature considered in itself. In fact, if Theodore’s account is to be trusted, it seems that we must begin from what is known about human nature through natural philosophical reason. Whether this is the “certainly hazardous” (10) attempt which Torrance seeks to avoid, meaning “to *begin* Christian theology with metaphysics,” it is nevertheless clear that natural human reason must have some kind of real priority with respect to Christology. Thus, Theodore’s impatience with “any idea of humanity that is not abidingly concrete, particular, and thus specific” (97) should not be understood as grounded in his Christocentric theological anthropology, but should instead be seen as a conclusion drawn from his understanding of human nature, from his *philosophical* anthropology. It is only because we first know something about human nature that we can affirm and wonder that the Word became flesh—and further, it is only on this basis that we can intelligibly reason about Christ’s concrete, particular, and depictable human nature.

The confusion regarding the philosophical principles at play in Theodore’s work leads Torrance to emphasize aspects of Theodore’s thought which are not essential to the historical debate. For instance, Torrance spends an unusual amount of time on Theodore’s discussion of Christ’s distinct human properties (*idiomata*). When Theodore lists the various properties of Christ in Epistle 359, he mentions, in passing, Christ’s eyelids: “If [Christ’s] depictability disappears, how is it that not all his corresponding [human] properties disappear with it?” (90). Theodore’s main point is that the perduring human properties of Christ depend on his depictability. The argument is a *reductio*. If one denies depictability, one must also deny Christ’s human properties that depend on it. But Christ’s human properties remain forever (a position that the iconoclasts presumably also held). Therefore, Christ must be depictable. By denying depictability, the iconoclasts risk denying Christ’s human properties, and thus Christ’s true humanity altogether.

Torrance, however, uses this text as an occasion to push home the point that Christ’s *idiomata* remain in perpetuity. While it is undoubtedly true that, for both Theodore and his opponents, Christ’s human nature remains in perpetuity (and thus his human properties), nevertheless, Torrance’s decision to focus on this aspect is at first puzzling. Torrance summarizes the argument thus: “Theodore’s logic is that if we are to deny one of Christ’s human properties (in this case ‘depictability’) we must deny them all, and

vice versa: if Christ is depictable, as the iconophiles claim, then he possesses all his human properties intact, only now, in the resurrected state, no longer subject to corruption" (90).² Torrance tells us here that, in this text, "[Theodore] insists on the permanence of all the distinguishing properties of Christ's specific humanity." It is as though Theodore's argument concludes to the perdurance of Christ's humanity. Notwithstanding the question of the coherence of Torrance's paraphrase of the argument (for instance, how do we get from Christ's possession of all his human properties to the perdurance of said properties?), it is nevertheless clear that Torrance is keen here on highlighting "[Theodore's] deep and vivid devotion to the enduring particularity of Christ as a human being." But if the historical context of the iconoclast controversy does not account for Torrance's emphasis on Christ's perduring human properties, what does? Why is Theodore's "radical affirmation" of Christ's human identity, "down to the continuity of all natural human properties no longer subject to corruption" (214) so important for Torrance? We discover the answer only in the concluding chapter, which has Behr in its crosshairs. Incidentally, it is here that one recognizes the vital contribution of Torrance's study.

According to Torrance, Behr's Christocentrism is contrary not only to Theodore but to the Byzantine tradition as a whole. The former's emphasis on the paradoxical centrality of the Passion *event* (which includes the death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ) results in an "apparent dissolution and collapse of the historical life and even fleshly properties of the man Christ Jesus" (209). For Behr, "the 'historical man' Jesus 'vanishes' and must vanish because . . . we no longer know Christ 'after the flesh' (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16), flesh here connoting for Behr Jesus's historical existence as man" (207). While not directly essential to Theodore's argument, Torrance uncovers what is nevertheless an important assumption of Theodore's theology: "Any threat to the natural, even physical, continuity of Christ's humanity with its constitutive properties before and after the discrete yet interconnected events of the Crucifixion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension would threaten the whole Gospel" (209). This is true not only for Theodore but also for each of the figures Torrance treats. In saving mankind, Christ also preserves the integrity of his humanity—by consequence, he preserves the integrity of our own humanity as well. And it is just this that Torrance seeks to establish: "The preservation and salvation of our whole humanity in the state

² Theodore's own argument, rather than counting depictability as on the same level as other properties, seems instead to premise the rest of Christ's human properties on his depictability.

of deification is constitutive, in fact, of the Byzantine doctrine of human perfection" (203). So long as Behr abstracts from Christ's "historical human properties," his definition of Christ's humanity "remains, at best, opaque" (210). As Torrance states, this raises "the most serious question . . . of the rending of Christ's historical human properties from his status as a full or true 'human being' as this is enacted in his death on the Cross" (210). Here we see how Torrance's study attempts a *neo*-patristic synthesis. He aims to show that the Byzantine doctrine of human perfection unambiguously excludes a Christology that departs, as Behr's clearly does, from the particular and concrete humanity of Christ.

If there was any question of the possibility of a rapprochement between the Byzantine tradition and Behr's radical "Christocentrism," Torrance has definitively shown that the answer is no. In this respect, we can appreciate and commend his contribution to contemporary historical and systematic theology. Still, among friends, it is possible to raise questions about the way in which Torrance arrives at this grave impasse. If Florovsky's neo-Patristic synthesis requires a "creative reassessment of those insights which were granted to the Holy Men of old" (3; quoting Florovsky), then it is necessary first to properly grasp not only the stated positions (which Torrance has done), but also, and perhaps more crucially for our times, the mode of reasoning behind the teaching of the Fathers. Any undue haste in applying the conclusions of the Fathers to modern theological questions without a grasp of the principles at work runs the risk of misunderstanding ways in which our own way of approaching theology might be subject to criticism. In the case of Theodore, the importance of philosophical reasoning, which is so "inextricably interrelated" (85) to his theological conclusions, demands that we not only acknowledge but also adopt the sort of role that he implicitly accords to philosophy within theology.³ In fact, doing this

³ There is at least an apparent tension here between thinkers such as, on the one hand, Maximus and Theodore, whose theology more evidently makes use of philosophical terms and categories, and on the other, Gregory Palamas, whose reaction to the arguably naturalistic theology of Barlaam (who is described as beholden to "Aristotelian logic," 155) gives his theology an apparently anti-philosophical hue. Nevertheless, if Palamas's "rich and varied but little studied" epistemology (174) can be understood as a reaction to the undue elevation of natural reason, which appears to be the case in certain instances (though not in all; e.g., Torrance's insistence on Palamas's rejection of the "unicity of truth" [156], i.e., the idea that "all truth is one" [172], appears to contradict any philosophical and theological vision of the unity of Truth in God), then even his teaching can be contextualized within the broader harmony between faith and reason discussed above. For instance, the following quotation of Palamas clearly implies a distinction between natural and supernatural knowledge: "It is not by removing this [scientific]

strengthens Torrance's own arguments against Behr. The perdurance of Christ's concrete and particular humanity is and must be the perdurance of that very human nature that we know apart from the Incarnation. To be sure, human nature undergoes a supernatural elevation through grace, but as Torrance shows in his account of Maximus the Confessor, this is an elevation that is revealed in Christ's humanity to be profoundly consonant with our very own human nature.

In order to challenge Fr. Behr's Christocentrism, then, it seems necessary first to question what it means to be "Christocentric." In what way must Christ be "first"? Is Christ first absolutely so that the very order of our coming to know what is essential to human nature as such can ever only be through Christ's humanity? In this case, Behr's project, which transforms Christ's humanity into one that can no longer be recognized as our own, has the stronger claim to Christocentrism. But if Christ is "first" in the sense that it is in the Incarnation that we see the *full and final* perfection of human nature, then it appears that we can and must also speak about what is essential to human nature in a way that is prior to the revelation of Christ's perfect humanity. It is clear that it is the latter approach that Torrance wishes to affirm. Yet an eagerness to affirm "Christocentrism" in the Fathers without clearly indicating what is meant by it often leads Torrance to statements that can easily be confused with the former. For Theodore, at least, the answer is obvious. We must know certain things to be true about human nature independently of the Incarnation, for only thus can we make intelligible claims about what is true of Christ's humanity. Nevertheless, to consider human nature at its last end, in Christ, is to speak of this *same* human nature, but in a way that cannot be known except in and through the humanity of the Word made flesh. N·V

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ignorance, but by removing ignorance with regard to God and the divine dogmas, an ignorance forbidden to us by the theologians, and by improving all your conduct according to their precepts, that you will be filled with the wisdom of God, becoming a true image and likeness of God, being made perfect through keeping of the Gospel commandments alone" (170). Thus, in the case of the controversy between Palamas and Barlaam, the question should not be construed as being about philosophical knowledge as such, but the limitations of philosophical knowledge with respect to what is supernaturally revealed in Christ. Contrary to some of Palamas's more reactionary statements, his theology can be interpreted as implying a real though limited role for philosophical knowledge in service of theology.

The Trinitarian Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction

by Brendan McInerny (*Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020*), 250 pp.

THOMAS AQUINAS AFFIRMS that knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity is useful to think about creation and about the salvation of humanity (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 3). Brendan McInerny addresses this challenge by introducing, in a captivating and suggestive way, the Trinitarian theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. This book responds in great detail to the question posed by Balthasar in *Razing up the Bastions*: What place does the doctrine of the Trinity have in Christian existence? In order to answer this question, the author divides the book into four chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. The first two chapters are about the immanent Trinity, the third about deification, and the last one about apophaticism.

In the introduction, McInerny comments on Balthasar's distinct theological method. This method has been praised by some scholars, such as Lucy Gardner or David Moss, for presenting old mysteries in new configurations; but it has also been criticized by other scholars such as Karl Rahner or Karen Kilby for alleged Gnosticism or presuming a "God's eye view . . . above Tradition, Scripture or history . . . against his [Balthasar's] desire to remain epistemologically humble" (6). McInerny reaffirms that Balthasar never belittles the abysmal difference between creatures and God; but rather, he recognizes that alterity is founded on a principle of similarity. Thus, the Thomistic real distinction does not stop the possibility of creatures becoming "sons and daughters of the Father, in the Son, by the Holy Spirit." Instead, difference is the principle of similarity, since it is founded on the "movement of the divine essence . . . the kenotic outpouring, self-sacrifice, self-gift of the intra-trinitarian difference" (13).

Chapter 1, "God is Love: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of the Immanent Trinity," deals with the generation of the Son, the procession of the Holy Spirit, and thus the divine relations. The author explains that Balthasar seeks to affirm a strong unity in the person of the Father as the foundation of divinity or as the core of the mystery of selflessness and pure love. This unity, however, appears in the very difference between the persons in an "intra-mental act of producing distinct persons capable of reciprocal acts—a reciprocity required if God is love" (16). The Father is Father insofar as he eternally gives the entirety of divinity to the Son; and the Son is Son insofar as the groundless "love of the Father finds its expression in the mirror of the Son's own groundless consent to, and thanksgiving for, being

begotten" (26). The Spirit is in-between the Father and the Son as their bond of love so that it seals and maintains "the infinite difference between them"; the Spirit is the "identity of the gift-as-given and the gift-as-received in thanksgiving" (28). In the order of processions, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son in a miracle of eternal fruitfulness. The author argues in this chapter that there is both an active and passive function in each person of the Trinity due to a real I-Thou relationship that occurs in the divine life. Despite the provisional nature of any concept applied to God, this dialogue can be considered "of reciprocal wonder and worship, of infinite reciprocal gratitude, . . . the reciprocity of divine love as therefore the reciprocity of divine worship, adoration and prayer" (41).

In chapter 2, "A Confluence of Diverse Tendencies: The Sources of Balthasar's Immanent Trinitarian Theology," the author seeks to put Balthasar into context. McNerny highlights the influence of Richard of Saint Victor and Bonaventure in the context of the Franciscan and Thomistic dispute over whether the Father is Father by generating the Son, or if he generates insofar as he is Father. Balthasar says that "the Father cannot be thought to exist "prior" to his self-surrender. He is the movement of self-giving that holds nothing back" (54). In order to look for an effective model that explains the infinite difference between the divine persons, McNerny considers the influence of Augustine and Sergei Bulgakov ineffective because they "fail to maintain the unity of the divine substance" (68). The human family is a good image of the Trinity because the love of man and woman in a living exchange of love results in a fruitful third. More importantly, Balthasar sees in Martin Buber's dialogical ontology "a unique imago Trinitatis; the Spirit reigns between I and Thou, who are pure relation to each other, but each one, incommunicable in his core (as Other), nonetheless (and precisely for this reason) communicates all he has" (73). Only after the unity-in-difference of reciprocal love is established does Balthasar connect the immanent with the economic Trinity. McNerny mentions Karl Barth's influence on the doctrine of antecedence through which Balthasar unites the mission of Christ for the salvation of the world with the divine life of the Son, to the extent that the Son is his mission. This becomes clear with the input of Adrienne von Speyer. She argued that the way Jesus, via his human nature, relates to the Father in worship and reverence (by means of the doctrine of antecedence) permits us to understand the dynamic of love and self-giving in the Trinitarian life (82).

In chapter 3, "Unless You Become like this Child: Deification as Trinitarian Adoption," McNerny explores Balthasar's claim that "the doctrine of the Trinity has a profound soteriological significance" (86). The economic

Trinity cannot collapse the immanent because the latter has priority over the former ontologically. Nonetheless, by Christ's crucifixion and the wider horizon of deification, we are granted in grace "participation in the eternal inner dynamic of the triune God in the eternal procession of the Persons" (93). The Father's will is carried out by Christ and the Holy Spirit. First, Christ is not only the expression of the Father, but also the *principium* and final cause of creation. The two realities never vanish. In the Incarnation, the inner-Trinitarian difference is manifested when he becomes flesh and when he adopts a difference to show its Trinitarian horizon. Preeminently, the same happens in the Cross. It reveals the innermost being of God in the distinction between the persons, and the unity in the plan of redemption (mission). Thanks to this distinction-in-relation with the Father, the God-man "can expedite and banish that alienation from God that characterizes the world's sin" (107). In the resurrection, the distance marked by estrangement finally becomes a distance of positive love, of reciprocity. We are incorporated into this mission of the Son through the Spirit in the Church. In particular, McNerny highlights the importance of the Eucharist for Balthasar: "To receive the Eucharist, to receive the divine life, is to be implicated in this active stance of thanksgiving. One must, be receiving, given in and with Christ in return" (122).

The innovations described above have created much suspicion among scholars who consider that Balthasar oversteps the limits of apophatic trinitarianism. Chapter 4, "A Blessed Wilderness: The Trinity and Divine Incomprehensibility," provides some counter-arguments. McNerny explains that Balthasar is in full agreement with Augustine in that "a God who could be expressed to the end in finite words and deeds would no longer be God but an idol" (138). However, Balthasar also believes that God is infinitely knowable, even if "we cannot exhaustively know him by the created intellect, even in the beatific vision" (139). In agreement with Jennifer N. Martin and Anne M. Carpenter, McNerny affirms that "God's incomprehensibility is no longer a mere deficiency in knowledge, but the positive manner in which God determines the knowledge of faith" (141). Everything we say about God is said analogously: that God is Trinity, that the Son proceeds from the Father and so on. Yet this analogy shows the similarity between our knowledge of God and what God is in himself, within a far greater dissimilarity that grounds our theology "in a relationship of total dependency" (151). The overflow of intra-worldly knowledge demands of us not fatalism, but "to bend the knee in order to receive the gift of truth" (147). As von Speyer says: "Worship is the expression of God's encounter with God in love." Through von Speyer we definitively comprehend that

“negative theology finally becomes the locus of perfect encounter, not in a dialogical equality of dignity, but in the transformation of the whole creature into an *ecce ancilla* for the all-filling mystery of the ungraspable love of the self-emptying love” (155–56).

In the conclusion, McNerny argues against Balthasar’s study of the differences between the sexes as a trace of the Trinity because it runs the risk of falling “into an idolatrous series of hierarchical analogies” (161). Similarly, he disagrees with Balthasar’s resistance to the social and political dimensions of the Christian confession. The author thinks that political questions should stem from the theology of deification, or from the philosophical plane, rather than proceeding directly from immanent terminology (165). On the contrary, McNerny sides with Balthasar on the anti-apophatic critique. The author argues that Trinitarian apophaticism is not about “theology reaching its limits, in terms, to put it very bluntly, of the dead-end of theology” (167), but rather as Cyril O’Regan explains: an “excess of the infinite divine” (170). The end result is prayer: it offers a new life for “Christian theory . . . praying in a world reeling from the perceived absence of God” (171). McNerny finishes the book by doing justice to Balthasar’s Ignatian spirituality: “Perhaps theology is nothing but the intellectual playing of the children of God, to his ever-greater glory” (174).

This book is a notable contribution to the scholarship on Balthasar and Trinitarian theology. It is a fierce and convincing defense of Balthasar. The book is recommended for critics of Balthasar, as well as for graduate students of theology researching about the doctrine of the Trinity. Nonetheless, there are some areas where further clarification is needed. First, Balthasar never totally discards Augustine’s *imago Trinitatis in anima*, because he interprets it (in an Ignatian way) as a threefold way in which a creature is open, praises, and attains to God. Second, a distinction between the philosophical and theological analogy is necessary. The intra-Trinitarian alterity is not quite the same “kind” of alterity as that of creatures and God. Third, the doctrine of deification is profoundly ecclesial for Balthasar, to the extent that Christian existence is truly an ecclesial existence. Lastly, more evidence could have been provided to support the claim of a lack of dynamism in some Thomistic interpretations of the beatific vision. NEV

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Deep Mysteries: God, Christ, and Ourselves by Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020), vii + 133 pp.

BASIC CATHOLIC TEACHING DECLARES that God's will must be trusted and that perfect knowledge of all that is resides in the Creator. An implication of this claim is that all of God's work within time and history—in man's linearly conception of time and history—is meaningful. For, as perfect order himself, God's work is neither random nor coincidental. God's perfect understanding means that he is able, colloquially speaking, "to connect the dots" perfectly. Thus, the historical particulars of the New Testament events are not random and coincidental, but they connect perfectly within God's plan.

In terms of biblical events, then, what are the significances of the time periods during which, and places at which, they occurred? Why was Jesus born on a particular date, at a particular time, and in a particular manger in Bethlehem? Why was the womb of Mary, *Mater Dei*, chosen at that exact time, and at that exact place? Why did Jesus stand on that particular mountain and not upon another? There are perfect answers to all of those questions and more, for, as Proverbs declares in this vein: "The LORD has made everything for a purpose" (16:4).

In *Deep Mysteries: God, Christ, and Ourselves*, Father Aidan Nichols, O.P., meditates on questions related to the potential reasons for some of the historical particulars of "the principal Christological mysteries." Fr. Nichols defines the mysteries as these: "the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Passion and Death, the Descent into Hell, the Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost, and the Second Coming." (41).

Attempting to understand how all of the parts of the New Testament fit together perfectly in an historical sense—as God's mind would see it—is a fascinating intellectual endeavor. The primary difference between the innocent inquirer and the vain one, however, is that the former understands that God's reason is infinite and that only the First Mover has the ability to see and to put together all particulars. Thomas Aquinas elucidates the essence of the endeavor to connect the particulars when, in reference to man's ability to understand "the truth of faith," he argues: "Yet it is useful for the human reason to exercise itself in such arguments, however weak they may be, provided only that there be present no presumption to comprehend or to demonstrate. For to be able to see something of the loftiest realities, however thin and weak the sight may be, is . . . a cause of the greatest joy" (*Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 8).

Posing the question of what the particulars of history might mean brings immediately another question. As Fr. Nichols asks: "How can the Eternal

and time be conjoined in a phrase, and the truth of such conjoining made credible?" (29). Indeed, if God transcends the man-conceived conception of time, how can man even understand God's movements if man can see time only in linear fashion? Fr. Nichols contends that Christ's "mystery-events are not just historical occurrences that, like all such events, belong to the human past" (31). Rather, argues Fr. Nichols, the mysteries "are permanently able to affect the intended beneficiary of the mysteries: namely, the human race" (31). In other words, contends Fr. Nichols, the mysteries are past, present, and future, in the human conception of time.

Attempting "to connect the dots" in Christological historical particulars is a subjective endeavor that requires a great deal of individual deciphering, with reliance especially on the interpretation of perceived symbolism. Fr. Nichols's broad theme-based meditations can provide starting points for further study on more concentrated topics.

The most exceptional part of the book is Fr. Nichols's discussion on how Jesus's mysteries exist, simultaneously, in the past, in the present, and in the future. This point is of great significance for both theology and philosophy. For, until the Second Coming, God, not being tied to man's limited experience of time, simultaneously, and always, would be experiencing the joys and trials and tribulations of Jesus's life, death, and Resurrection. Simultaneously, he experiences all of the mysteries: He experiences the Last Supper and his crucifixion as priests around the world consecrate Holy Communion; he feels the nativity as men pass images or icons of the manger; he is pained when men turn away from him in sin, but rejoices when they accept their faults in the sacrament of Reconciliation; he celebrates when men heed his call to make disciples of all nations by way of the sacrament of Holy Orders; he welcomes his newly baptized; he sees the Holy Spirit repeatedly descend during Confirmation; and he prepares the worthy for eventual homecoming in the sacrament of Extreme Unction. He is the Alpha and the Omega.

Fr. Nichols explains that the Church allows for man's active participation in all of the mysteries but one: the Parousia, or Second Coming. The Second Coming, however, writes Fr. Nichols, "can certainly be anticipated. This is the point of Christian hope" (120). Indeed, one may only anticipate participation in the Parousia, when the end of "the end" (Matt 24:14) is finally upon man. "For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct" (Matt 17:27). N.V

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Free Will and the Rebel Angels in Medieval Philosophy by Tobias Hoffmann (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021*), xiv + 292 pp.

MODERN READERS are often perplexed by the frequency and rigor with which angels are discussed in medieval philosophical texts. To the untrained eye, it may seem as if debates concerning the various properties and abilities of purely spiritual beings are the epitome of Scholastic extravagance, which can be safely disregarded—if not outright ridiculed—as a fanciful diversion from more essential philosophical concerns. The truth, of course, is that angelological reflection gave rise to some of the most original philosophical ideas of the Middle Ages, from Anselm's two *affectiones* of the will to Aquinas's "real distinction" between essence and existence. Far from being an idiosyncratic theological addendum to an already complete philosophical system, consideration of the angelic nature was in fact a central component of medieval philosophy, without which certain crucial metaphysical and psychological insights might not have occurred. This often-neglected truth is given detailed expression in Tobias Hoffmann's *Free Will and the Rebel Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, which explores how philosophical investigation into the fall of the angels—that is, the hypothesis of an evil choice made by rational beings under optimal psychological conditions—helped bring about significant advances in medieval debates about free will. Focusing on the century immediately following the reception of Aristotle's action theory in the Latin West (from roughly the 1220s to the 1320s), Hoffmann examines how theological claims regarding angelic sin influenced medieval thinkers as they sought to reconcile the intellectualism of Aristotelian moral psychology with their understanding of free will as the power to choose between alternatives.

This period is particularly deserving of study, Hoffmann argues, because it was then that the existence of free will first began to be "investigated within a philosophical account of action," rather than merely asserted on theological grounds as a necessary corollary of the doctrines of grace and sin (1). Consequently, theological anthropology took what Hoffmann calls a "psychological turn," with theologians newly determined to explain rational agency in terms of the interaction between different powers of the soul. In Hoffmann's estimation, the subsequent debates over the respective roles of intellect and will in the process of decision-making, as well as the relation between faulty cognition and voluntary wrongdoing, gave rise to some of the most innovative theories of free will in the later Middle Ages—including not only those of celebrated thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, but also those of lesser-known luminaries such as

John of Pouilly and Peter Auriol. Although the concerns that motivated these debates were primarily anthropological, having to do with specifically human psychological processes, Hoffmann's study foregrounds the role that the angels played in the unfolding of various controversies. Comparing medieval angelological discussion to the thought experiments commonly employed by contemporary philosophers, Hoffmann argues that angels proved significant because they provided a subject matter in which rational freedom could be considered in a pure and ideal form, abstracted from any material constraints (3). While the angelic nature was certainly regarded as worthy of study in its own right, it was also often viewed as an opportunity to explore the nature of cognition and volition *simpliciter*, in relation to which the distinctiveness of human psychology could be better understood.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which traces the historical development of a distinct topic related to the free will debate. In the first part, Hoffmann presents a lucid account of the various ways that medieval thinkers employed Aristotelian ideas—including not only the essentials of his action theory, but also metaphysical doctrines such as the distinction between active and passive powers—as they sought to explain the psychological origins of free will. Comprising over half the text, these chapters provide a comprehensive overview of the free will debate from its origins in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury to its culmination in the proto-modern theorizing of William of Ockham, including a thorough discussion of the controversies surrounding the condemnations of 1270 and 1277.

Having introduced the reader to the key thinkers and philosophical issues at stake in the debate, Hoffmann then turns in the second part of the book to examine medieval discussion of the first cause of evil. As Hoffmann notes, this topic was closely connected to that of angelic sin, even though medieval thinkers normally treated the two independently from one another. Whereas the former has to do with how a good person can make an evil choice for the first time, the latter more specifically addresses how someone can do so under ideal psychological conditions (199). Discussion of evil's origin therefore provides a helpful introduction to the philosophical issues that arise from reflection on the fall of the angels, which are the focus of part three. In these final chapters, Hoffmann adds further depth to his account of the debate by detailing how medieval thinkers refined and clarified their theories of free will through sustained reflection on angelic sin. Concluding with an insightful chapter on the obstinacy of the rebel angels, this part of the book more than any other demonstrates the unique contribution that theological speculation made to medieval philosophy, prompting scholars to employ Aristotelian insights in manifestly un-Aristotelian ways.

Throughout the book, Hoffmann frames his analysis in terms of the disagreement between intellectualists and voluntarists—designations that he finds helpful to distinguish, in the most general way, between those who considered freedom to be rooted primarily in reason and those who instead prioritized the role of the will (5). Thus, whereas the intellectualists tended to tie volitions very closely to practical knowledge, such that evil willing was assumed to presuppose some sort of intellectual deficiency, voluntarists instead held that evil willing was possible even in the absence of any deficient cognition, since one always has the power to choose contrary to one's practical judgment. Hoffmann is careful to note, however, that there was no small amount of variation among thinkers within each camp, with some adopting stricter, and others more moderate positions. Indeed, a number of thinkers developed what he calls "intermediary" theories, which incorporate certain elements from each. While these theorists sided with the intellectualists in rejecting the notion that the will can choose directly against one's practical judgment, they nevertheless maintained, in a voluntarist vein, that the will has some sort of direct control over what causes this judgment (264). Although Hoffmann takes pains throughout the book not to color his analysis with any sweeping evaluative judgments, his sympathies seem to lie primarily with this third group of thinkers, who, even if they failed to provide a fully satisfactory solution to the problem of free will, nevertheless recognized the twin dangers posed by intellectualist determinism and voluntarist irrationalism.

As Hoffmann presents it, the fundamental problem that each of these theories sought to address was how to reconcile the necessary conditions of rational deliberation with the control that we must have over our choices to be morally responsible for them. Prior to the reception of Aristotle's action theory, medieval thinkers tended to assume that this control is secured by the fact that we can act in alternative ways by choosing either in accordance with or against reason's dictates (19). On the Aristotelian view, however, whether we decide to perform an action is determined solely by our rational judgment of what option is most choice-worthy. The adoption of such a view therefore seemed to entail a kind of intellectual determinism, since "a perfectly rational agent . . . would only act on the best reasons, and thus would not truly have alternative possibilities" (264). Consequently, intellectualists who sought to integrate Aristotelian insights into their theories of free will were faced with the task of explaining how their views did not compromise moral responsibility. On the other hand, voluntarists who wished to retain the standard control requirement had to find a way to account for the rational intelligibility of the decision to act against one's

practical judgment. As Hoffmann notes, medieval thinkers generally did not admit the possibility of clear-eyed wrongdoing (4). It was therefore incumbent upon voluntarists to elucidate the motivational structure of evil willing without compromising their commitment to the Aristotelian dictum that “every evildoer is ignorant.” Of course, in each case, the primary concern was with determining whether and to what extent the traditional understanding of free will as the ability to do otherwise needed to be revised in order to accommodate Aristotelian moral psychology. Whereas intellectualists were generally favorable to such revision, voluntarists tended to resist it.

How did angels factor in? According to Hoffmann, they did so by placing constraints on what could be considered an acceptable theory of free will. That is to say, for the medievals, such a theory not only had to reconcile the intelligibility of an evil choice with the agent’s control over it, but also had to explain how such a choice is possible for an agent who possesses perfect knowledge and is free from all disordered passions and dispositions. Moreover, it must account for the fact that, among those agents in such an ideal epistemic condition, only some sinned and not others. Thus, as Hoffmann notes, even the strictest intellectualists were forced to admit, if only implicitly, that free choices are determined not by cognition alone, but by the use that rational agents make of their cognition (265). Although explanations of what such use consists of—and whether it, too, must be preceded by a cognitive process of some kind—varied widely, Hoffmann’s subtle analysis reveals an underlying consensus among medieval thinkers that the control an agent has over his free choices must be “primitive,” meaning that it cannot be fully explained by its antecedent causes: “Freely made choices have an explanation—there is a story behind them—but at some point, the explanation stops at a bare fact, at a person willing something rather than not willing it” (265). Thus, in Hoffmann’s estimation, the primary upshot of the medieval free will debate, to which reflection on angelic sin directly contributed, was the emergence of the following view: although every free choice may be intelligible, insofar as it is based on a reason, there can be no contrastive explanation of why a person makes one choice instead of another, or why two persons who are in identical situations make different choices (266). In other words, while we may be able to explain how an agent *could* have acted in one way or another, we cannot ultimately account for why the agent *did* act in the way he or she did (214).

Hoffmann arrives at this conclusion by way of a rigorous philosophical analysis of the writings of over twenty medieval thinkers, including some whose contributions to the free will debate have until now received scant

scholarly attention. Although his goal is ultimately to cast these disparate writings into a coherent philosophical narrative, he is careful throughout to address each thinker on his own terms, sometimes even wading into interpretive disputes on matters of particular significance. Thus, in addition to advancing Hoffmann's overarching thesis, the book also contains much that will be of interest to scholars whose focus is somewhat narrower, extending only to certain figures in the debate. Thomistic scholars, for example, will benefit from Hoffmann's careful rendering of Aquinas's treatment of the first cause of evil, which has in recent years been the subject of much controversy. In his discussion of it, Hoffmann argues persuasively for the internal coherence of Aquinas's solution, which famously depends on the contested notion of "blameless nonconsideration" as the condition for the possibility of evil willing. Moreover, by situating this account within the context of the medieval free will debate, Hoffmann demonstrates Aquinas's exemplarity with respect to his integration of Aristotelian moral psychology into a theological account of free will, thus substantiating Jacques Maritain's claim that his explanation of the origin of moral evil was "one of the most original of his philosophical discoveries."¹

In all of these respects and more, Hoffmann's study succeeds in bringing to greater systematic clarity a wide-ranging debate that was central to medieval philosophy. Even if some contemporary scholars might wish for a more thorough interrogation of its philosophical presuppositions, Hoffmann clearly accomplishes his goal of "presenting the medieval free will debate according to the breadth of the thinkers' own interests" (3). Of course, even a strictly historical study such as Hoffmann's is not entirely free from the influence of contemporary philosophical concerns, which inevitably frame the way in which the various texts are analyzed. Thus, it is perhaps not inappropriate to consider whether the book might have benefited from an examination of not only the control condition of moral responsibility, which admittedly was the preeminent concern of medieval thinkers, but also what contemporary philosophers call the epistemic condition, by which they simply mean the knowledge or awareness an agent must have of his behavior in order to be morally responsible for it. Although a wrongdoer must be ignorant enough of his evil behavior to make his choice of it intelligible, he must also be cognizant enough of what he is doing in order for such a choice to be truly free. Unfortunately, Hoffmann raises this issue only in passing, as part of his discussion of Aquinas's account of angelic

¹ Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1942), 23.

sin (210). While this is understandable, given its relative insignificance for most medieval thinkers, a more thorough consideration of how the relationship between knowledge and moral responsibility was understood might have further enriched Hoffmann's fascinating study, while perhaps also helping to convince contemporary moral philosophers of the ongoing relevance of the medieval free will debate. N.V.

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Cur Deus Verba: Why the Word Became Words by Jeremy Holmes (*San Francisco: Ignatius, 2021*), 284 pp.

THIS BOOK'S TITLE plays on the incarnational analogy, and its argument begins and ends with God's purposes to draw humanity into communion with himself through revelation. In both aspects, Holmes echoes *Dei Verbum* (DV, §§2, 13). However, rather than pursuing a revelation-historical organization or beginning with Scripture's texts to derive conclusions about its nature and purpose, the book takes a "top-down" (13) approach to bibliology. In this way, its strength is the theological framing or reframing it gives to common questions.

The first three chapters culminate, he claims, in a "definition of Scripture" (11). Beginning with the Trinity and creation, Holmes argues that all things have their being by participating in the inner life (the Word) of the Father, thus reflecting him, and that the Spirit drives creatures "toward the pattern of the Son" (33). God desires creatures to be good and causes of goodness in others, patterned after and in the Son through the Spirit's impulse to return them to God. In the Incarnation, God "reconciles nature with grace" (39) and in Christ perfects these desires. In Christ, man is now "included in the life of the Trinity" (37) and an agent of revelation, reflects God perfectly, and in love sends the Spirit to return humans to God through himself. This leads to reflections on Scripture directly. "Scripture is meant to impress the interior life of the Church on each generation; put another way, it is meant to impress Christ the Head on the members of his Mystical Body" (69). This brings Holmes to the topics of inspiration and canon. In order for human texts to impress Christ on his members, to communicate the divine through human means, "God himself" must be "addressing the

heart of the believer" (72). He makes a case for canon by pointing to the communal nature of humans. Tradition and canon, by which truth as a common good is formulated for a society, order and inform the society regarding its purpose, history, and character. "Tradition," then, "is good for man as man" (57) even in natural society, and all the more so in the supernatural society, the Church. The "texts that embody and transmit the tradition" (63) give continuity and life to the organism that is the Church, while within that tradition these texts can function as a sort of "guide rail" and a "mirror" of its identity (67).

This overall view of Scripture lends perspective to particular topics (chs. 4–12). Turning to Scripture's authorship and inspiration, Holmes emphasizes again that God means humans to be real causes of revelation as God "attaches his voice" to their writing (82, 91, and throughout). This may, in differing circumstances, involve endowing them with particular and even unusual graces, many of which God grants to others who hand on revelation (such as Augustine), but in the case of the biblical authors the ("only") difference is that God "intended" biblical texts like Luke "to sound not only Luke's voice but God's voice as well" (91). His "general account of the fact of biblical difficulties" (202), then, depicts the human "author's soul" as "like the body of an instrument, determining the overtones of everything he writes" (208). God writes the notes to be played and selects the instruments, and God "asserts what the human author asserts" (210). But the particularities of an author's soul (and upbringing, assumptions, etc.) can be seen in anything from grammatical infelicities in Paul to the author's assumptions about a geocentric solar system, the goodness of killing the Canaanites, or Qoheleth's unawareness of an afterlife. God attaches his voice to their writing, and these instruments play "only God's note" (219), but God "does not affirm or deny" the assumptions or unasserted views of the author when writing (209). Scripture's purpose is not merely to impart doctrine but to conform one to Christ, and difficult passages are inspired in part for us to wrestle with and grow in virtue as we do (222, cf. 203).

Inspiration's criterion then is not focused merely on inerrancy or prophetic elevation of a single author's intellect. Inspiration is framed here by its final cause. This carries over into Holmes's discussion of Israel and the Old Testament. Israel participates in Christ as its final cause, and its "history and institutions received Christ's form as their own," such that "statements about Israel were already in a way statements about Christ" (111). This is helped by his argument that the Old Testament texts were written or at least standardized in the exilic and postexilic periods, when the authors and editors were in a better position to see the significance of Israel's story for

all of humanity under God and for its redemption in the coming messiah (see 95, 135, 137). This in a way anchors the spiritual sense not merely in the words that happened to be written down, but in “the human author’s own depth of understanding” (137). Though Holmes does not see the Old Testament authors as necessarily having a clear mental picture of the details of Christ’s future life (110), he is quick to show that an author who knows that what he recounts has greater prospective significance for the redemption of Israel will shape his text accordingly (137, 139). Readers of the literal sense in this case are helped by modern attention to literary genre, if they retain an ancient appreciation for the role of tradition and its literary tradents as the necessary “matchmaker” between our minds and divine realities by the way they shape their narratives (178, 184–85). Reading the spiritual senses likewise requires attention to the divine author. For, just as God inspired the authors and editors to creatively and faithfully construct Israel’s and the Church’s memory and identity through narrative, God can lead us to make connections and creatively “fill the gaps” (237) in Scripture ourselves as receivers and tradents of revelation. Indeed, the eternity of God and God’s intent for these texts to nurture the Church of all generations means that “our creative contribution to the meaning of the text can be a meaning the author [i.e., God] both intended and brought about” (241). Modernity perhaps makes a helpful contribution to call us to be aware of our subjectivity, and our interpretations must submit to the rule of faith and the common good, but we may take “as intended by God any interpretation that expresses a truth and is consistent with the meaning of the words and the context” (243). The spiritual senses ask us to consider the texts in light of Christ’s threefold coming—in humility (allegory), in glory (anagogical), and in the pilgrim Church (moral; 142–43)—and are thus part of our encounter with and conformation to Christ. The Scriptures live in the heart of the Church and, indeed, in the heart of Christ incarnate, who himself read and took to heart the inspired word, and in whose heart we are restored in love to the Father.

There is much to appreciate here. Holmes’s top-down and somewhat teleological approach offers a theological reframing to issues of inerrancy, the relation between the Old and New Testaments, and the relation of the literal and spiritual senses. He helpfully emphasizes the goodness of narrative (against one who might think the divine book *should* be an abstract catechism or philosophy primer) by emphasizing that narrative uniquely presents Jesus, the Word himself, “in his own mode” as one who lived and acted to save within linear-historical time (170). I also appreciated Holmes’s insight to press beyond or nuance the mere “signs and things” hermeneutic, noting

that, “while a human author cannot cause real things to signify [because he has not created them], he can do something remarkably like it” in creating parabolic stories and characters or even in the way he adjusts his presentation of events or characters for the good of the Church (138).

However, this approach—and its execution—bear weaknesses. Formally, I was uncertain of the ideal audience. Some arguments begin with illustrations or assumptions that seem to befit the introductory level (clarifying that “inspiration” does not mean the same thing as an artist being inspired by a sunset [81–82]), while at other points a Latin sentence (not merely a stock phrase) is given first and English only secondarily (97) or a question is framed anticipating an audience more familiar with Aquinas than with Scripture. One is surprised—from either audience—in a book about Scripture to see the accurate claim that John 1:1 echoes Gen 1:1, and yet to see the citation of Gen 1:1 (“In the beginning God created . . .”) defended thus: “So the Septuagint renders it, and I think it probable that John was interacting with this Greek text” (27n12). It is universally acknowledged and demonstrated in several studies from the whole of John that John is using the Septuagint. And the Septuagint is merely giving a straightforward rendering of the Hebrew (the occasional rendering “when God created” is an interpretation of the relation of 1:1 to the discourse it introduces, not a rendering of a “when” word that most English versions have left off). If the citation needs defending, why not explain what needs defending for the uninitiated or defend it for scholars with scholarship? The signposting is also often unhelpful. As an example: the last sentences of chapter 7 state that the literal sense of the Old Testament “is also inherently valuable to Christians, as we will see in the next chapter” (146). Chapter 8 opens by asking why God would inspire so much narrative rather than clear doctrinal pronouncements, and states that its goal is to explain why narrative is fitting (147–48). The chapter achieves this goal and, in the process, illustrates the literal-sense value of Old Testament narrative. But chapter 9 opens: “In the previous chapter, I offered a basic answer to the question, ‘How do texts mean?’” (173), and builds from that. Chapter 8’s discussion of the role of narrative is my favorite part of the book, and there are elements of it that would be part of an account of meaning, but it is hardly an adequate or explicit account of textual meaning. Several such mismatches in signposting might either lead a sympathetic reader not to shore up all the connections that add cogency to the argument or lead an unsympathetic reader to think that the argument is a mere succession of topically related animadversions.

Materially, the benefits of any top-down approach should be buttressed from below. Holmes helpfully accounts for the creative role of the human

under God. Yet even the nuanced articulation of signs and things here leaves the weight of spiritual meaning in the “natures” of things (124). But human communication—which God has inspired—encodes meaning within a preexisting network of symbols that have value beyond their “natures” (relations, stereotyped attributes, the emotive or patriotic value of a symbol or pattern of events, etc.). One need not deny essentialism to consider the modes of human communication in which Scripture’s text participates. Holmes has not rejected this—his account of narrative and event mirrors in some ways Paul’s perspective in 1 Cor 10:11 (“these things *happened* to them [Israel] as types, but they were *written* for our instruction”)—and his argument that one’s own interpretation may be divinely inspired opens a space for readings that are less controlled by the human authors’ historically conditioned communicative options and intentions. But his statement that we can take our own reading as divinely intended when it “expresses a truth and is consistent with the meaning of the words and the context” (243) requires more consideration of words within their ancient communicative contexts. Indeed, investigating the human author’s communicative intent in this way is part of trying to hear “clearly what God wanted to communicate to us,” even if such analysis does not exhaust divine meaning (*DV*, §12). Presumably this is all the more important in Scripture’s public role as a “guide rail” when one considers interpretation not merely devotionally but magisterially.

More “from below” analysis would also supplement this bibliography’s reframing with a historically prospective dimension. Holmes’s quotation of a ritual passage in Lev 14:4–7 invites subjectivity and eisegesis by saying the details and “bizarreness of the ritual . . . throws down a hermeneutical gauntlet: Interpret *this!*” (236; emphasis original). From a modern devotional vantage, this may be the impression of many, but why begin by inviting readers (students?) to retain that impression by problematizing the text, rather than reminding them that this is a Persian-period (see above) codification or perhaps modification of what priests had been doing for centuries, and evaluating it at least initially within that context? Such set-ups not only encourage less sympathy for the text than they could; they can also create an unhelpful hermeneutical asymmetry. The treatment of biblical “difficulties,” again from a modern vantage point, emphasizes that the inspired authors play God’s note and symphony but that their culturally based assumptions or blind spots that shape and are implied in their texts are *not* assertions divinely intended in the meaning of the text. Yet we *are* told to see our own (orthodox) interpretations as divinely intended meanings of the text, and that to decry eisegesis “offends pious ears” (235). Our culturally based

assumptions and beliefs are constituents of our reading just as much as of the authors' writing, and this account might encourage readers to trust their own biases without first trying to attune their ears to God's symphony and his chosen instruments, so that pious ears can listen more clearly. 

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1 & 2 Thessalonians by Douglas Farrow (*Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020*), xx + 336 pp.

1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS are probably the very first written testimonies of early Christianity. When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in AD 50, Our Lord Jesus Christ had “accomplished his exodus in Jerusalem” (see Luke 9:31) not twenty years before. Here we find the *paradosis* of the Mystery of Christ among the Gentiles, the first articulations of Trinitarian faith (see 1 Thess 1:2–5), expressions of longing for the coming Parousia of Christ, warnings of a strange lawlessness already at work ripening towards a great apostasy and the coming of the “man of lawlessness.”

Douglas Farrow has pondered 1 and 2 Thessalonians for many years, attested by his numerous expositions and essays over three decades. He brings to his task a ready command of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, and a vast reading of historical commentary and controversy, an intense personal and ecclesial faith, and a sense of historical, prophetic, and pastoral urgency.

Throughout the book are excurses on themes opened up by the words and phrases of St Paul's text: Satan (82–86); the sexual body and virtue in sex, divorce, and remarriage (95–114); the remedial pains of purgatory (beginning in this life); the reality of final retribution, the finality of hell; the untenability of so-called “universalism” (131–41, 178–84, 192–96); the imminency and the delay of the Parousia (199–204); the apostasy / man of lawlessness / Antichrist; the temple in which the Antichrist seats himself (205–42); the mystery of lawlessness at work, especially in undermining the Church (245–61).

In studying Paul's eschatological themes, Farrow necessarily ponders other scriptural texts leading in the same direction: Dani 7–12; Jesus's Olivet Discourse in its most extensive form at Matt 24:1–25:46 (though it really begins at 23:23); 2 Pet 2:1–5, 3:3–15; much of the Rev 6:1 through 19:21;

Deut 32:1–43 (Farrow says the Song of Moses encapsulates the whole of human history); Psalms 97 (LXX 96); 110 (LXX 109); Wis 4–5, 10–19; Sirach 50; Joel; Zech 8–14; Mal 3–4; 2 Macc 5–9; Isa 66:5, 14–16; and so on. Farrow holds that Paul worked from knowledge of Jesus's apocalyptic teachings in a version closest to Matthew's (138, 142, 184, 189, 205).

Farrow takes companions in his exegesis: Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Haimo, Anselm, Aquinas, and others. He knows Luther's hermeneutics and Calvinist disputes about supra- and infra-sessionism and double predestinationism. He consults more recent prophets, quoting at length from Newman's amazingly prescient 1838 discourses on the last times, Solovyov in 1899, and Fulton Sheen in 1948 and 1958. Another exegete is an artist: Luca Signorelli, whose *Disputation of the Antichrist* in Orvieto Cathedral Farrow refers to several times.

Farrow shows his affinity with Irenaeus. That means cleaving to the visible and invisible truths of the Incarnation of God the Word, respecting concrete and embodied realities, keeping in view the transcendent goal ("The glory of God is a living man—and the life of man is in the vision of God"), instinctively flinching at gnosticizing tendencies—sophisticated re-interpretations of Scripture that elide the rule of faith and dissolve truth. It means a ruling sense of the Kingdom of God as an intervention from heaven rather than generating from man or from the earth. It means a spirit of obedience to the commandments, to the *paradosis* that descends to us from above in Christ, effected by the Spirit in the *ecclesia*, the company of brethren destined to "gather to Christ" at his coming (1 Thess 2:1), who practice that final *gathering to Christ* by participating in the Eucharist on the "Eighth Day," the Lord's Day.

Farrow deplores the patchy reading of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in the lectionaries: "While 1 Thessalonians fares a little better, barely half of 2 Thessalonians is read in the Churches" (11). Missing is the eschatologically pivotal 2 Thess 2:3–15, where Paul, distinguishing the imminency and immediacy of the *Parousia*, speaks of the "mystery of lawlessness at work." Farrow wonders drily with Jaroslav Pelikan whether the Church prefers among the faithful "their more customary torpor" to any risk of stirring up eschatological fervor (12). 1 and 2 Thessalonians are read in their entirety in the fourth week of Ordinary Time in the Office of Readings. Nevertheless, the eschatological urgent passages of 1 Thess 4:13–18 and 2 Thess 2:3–15 would be fittingly read in the last couple of weeks of Ordinary Time and the first two weeks of Advent, when the mood of the liturgy does turn to the coming Day of the Lord.

Farrow studies three possibilities for that “temple of God in which the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition . . . will seat himself, giving himself out to be God” (2 Thess 2:3, 5). Relegating the idea of a restored Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (the first option), he favors a combination of the second and third options: the adhering of many to the man of lawlessness, in the world at large and within the Church. The conclusion, in Farrow’s view, is painful and inescapable. If the Antichrist is a simulacrum of Christ, so he will attempt to suborn the Church into a counter-Church, another simulacrum.

For the new and eternal Temple of God is the Incarnate Son himself (Jn 2:21), and by extension his ecclesial body (1 Cor 3:26–17, Eph 2:21). To violate God’s place then, and to occupy his temple, it is necessary to violate and occupy in some fashion his Church, which must be suborned and brought to heel, defiled and then destroyed, like Jerusalem itself. (222)

Jesus himself foretold an end time of “false messiahs and false prophets, who will deceive even the elect if possible” (Matt 24:24). He asked his disciples: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith upon the earth?” (Luke 18:8). Farrow answers, schooled by St. Paul: “Yes, he will, though it will not be common” (238).

From time to time, he ponders what is even now befalling the earthly Church and wider society. The referents are clear enough to watchful readers. Towards the end, Farrow names names (267). Our forebodings are merited:

Do we no longer believe in the mission? Do we no longer consider it our business, or indeed God’s business, to exalt the name of Christ? Have we lost all confidence in the power of his word? If so, then we ourselves have been hindered *by perverse and evil men* (2 Thess 3:2), who have taught us not to be too quickly shaken or disturbed by God himself, and have led us away into somniferous myths about peace and progress. (169)

The preacher who either does not believe these things or is afraid to preach them perforce preaches *another gospel* (Gal 1:6). Does he prefer “mercy”? What he calls “mercy” is a very cruel mercy that causes others to stumble and fall, suffering the penalties that accrue to the disobedient in this life and (where repentance is lacking) in the next; for when the ἐκδικος (1 Thess 4:6) comes, with his holy ones and for his holy ones, those who thought their disobedience a small thing, who forgot that the virtue of obedience is in its way “the mother and

guard of all the virtues" (Augustine, *Civ.* 14:9), will not be ready, and will not be able to stand. (114)

Farrow firmly upholds the reality of the retributive justice of God:

It may be open to some Marcionites to say that the true God is a God without retributive justice, but they will have to dispense with Paul in order to do so, leaving them with no canon at all. The biblical God is a refining fire; for those who will not be refined, he *is a consuming fire* (Heb 12:29 et al). (177)

Further to the suggestions of some Alexandrians, from the beginning of the third century, that hell is transient, Farrow quotes St. Basil on the reality of an everlasting hell from which there is no return:

"Since these and many such sayings are found everywhere in the God-inspired Scripture," he says, "this is surely one of the devil's stratagems: that many human beings, by overlooking such important and serious words and declarations of the Lord, award to themselves an end of punishment in order that they may sin with greater bravado." And he adds, showing his grasp both of the dominical words and the deeper issue, "if there ever were an end of eternal punishment, then surely eternal life would also have an end, . . . since the same adjective [*αἰώνιος*] is attached equally to both." (184)

Towards the end, Farrow allows poetry to his spirit of faith as he brings 1 and 2 Thessalians to bear on contemporary events. He ends by sounding like one of those prophets of the early Church:

If two millennia on, we cannot recognize around us, inside the Church as well as outside, the advance of the mystery of lawlessness, and the appearance of the signs of the end, then there *is* no advancing mystery nor any approach of the end. If we cannot see, in the theoretical and practical atheism with which we have been experimenting for several centuries, and in today's sudden repudiation of the body and of any God-given moral order, a preparation for the appearance of the *man of lawlessness*, then no doubt we can say that such a man is always with us and will never be with us. In which case, neither will the Son of Man come. . . . Which means that the long arc of justice, to employ that popular phrase, will never terminate in an actual judgment. . . .

We have been given these letters and these texts to teach us to stand firm, how to be stable in our manner of life, how not to be easily shaken, how to wait for what, in the justice and mercy of God, we have been told to expect—in a word, *to serve the God who is living and true, and to wait for His Son to appear from the heavens, whom He raised from the dead—Jesus, the one rescuing us from the coming wrath* (1 Thess 1:10). (292–94)

Farrow holds together the tension of two truths: human responsibility on the one hand, and divine retribution on the other:

The line between the literal and the metaphorical is hard to draw here, but we do not have to draw it. What we have to do is to face squarely the fact of retribution. . . . Universalism is a grave departure from tradition, and the notion that hell, like sin, is merely an effect of free will is wrong. Hell is *the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels* (Mt 25:41), not a temporary fire prepared *by* the devil and his angels, of which they later repent. . . . Hell is the last destination of those who prefer love of self to love of God and love of neighbor. . . . Hell is the place of banishment from the presence of God *who is love* (1 Jn 4:16), and from the creaturely face of love which is the face of Jesus Christ. All who go to this place go willingly in one sense, and unwillingly in another. They go there because they themselves have determined thus; they go there because God has sent them where they belong. (179–80)

Farrow frequently returns to the themes of thanksgiving, the Eucharist, and the “economy of the gift.” The “time between the times”—between the Beginning and the Eschaton—is “a Eucharistic time, a pause in which the Church has its own anaphoric work to do” (123). He responds to Paul’s exhortation, “Rejoice at all times. Pray unceasingly. Give thanks in every circumstance, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:17–18):

God’s design for us, the very ground of our humanity, is that we should be Eucharistic creatures who know how to give thanks and gladly do so, who are thus able to participate in an exchange of gift and gratitude and joy. Therefore, the apostles urge prayer, thanksgiving, and rejoicing at all times, even and especially when things look bleak. (163)

In praying for others, we participate in Christ, who “lives forever to make intercession for those who draw near to God through him” (Heb 7:25). So Farrow elucidates Paul on what it is to offer intercessory prayer in Christ:

The Spirit, who through the apostles proposes the Son as object of faith and obedience, also enables the apostles to join with the Son in presenting the Thessalonians to the Father as the object of the Father’s blessing. The Ascension of Jesus into heaven, alluded to at 1:10, is a license to recall *before our God and Father* (cf. Jn 20:17) the merits of the brethren, past and present. (33)

What Farrow says of the exigencies of persevering in a life of prayer surely catches fire from lived experience, and we very much recognize the truth of what he says:

For our safe conduct to the kingdom is a process of learning the love of God and the constancy of Christ, which cannot be done without prayer. That we stumble in our lessons; that neither our words nor our intentions are properly conformed as yet; that we do not as yet see God like the saints in glory, with God’s own eyes, or hear him with his own ears; that we do not know fully even what is in our own mind, never mind about the mind of God; . . . that we desperately need those *sighs of the Spirit* (Rom 8:26), especially when they are most inaudible and inaudible to us—is no reason not to pray, but rather a reason to pray. For only what is in motion towards God can be directed. (273)

Finally, Farrow cedes the long view of Paul’s urgent eschatological doctrine:

We may after all agree with McGinn, then, that the chief use of the doctrine of the Antichrist is to warn us against ourselves, meaning this the way that Gregory the Great meant it—that we should fight the antichrist within, lest we find ourselves allied with the antichrist without. (239)

Yes, one can take this lesson to heart from the disturbing, dramatic doctrine of the “man of lawlessness” who is to anticipate and simulate Christ’s Second Coming: “Pay heed to yourselves, and keep your soul diligently” (Deut 4:9), especially in days of worsening polarizations, lest we wake on that Day—for “it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the earth”

(Luke 21:35)—and find that we have sided with a plausible, “safe” counterfeit, that is, the *lie*, and we hardly knew it—it took us so smoothly, so incrementally—and behold, our Lord is come “to judge the world by fire.”

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