

## UNIT 7: THE TRINITY AND CREATION

### 1. The Doctrine of Creation and the Trinity

At the beginning of this module, we observed the way in which the different elements of Christian doctrine are mutually supporting in such a way that we can consider these elements *systematically*. Thus the doctrine of creation is intimately linked to the doctrine of the Trinity, and here we will explore how and why this is so. In the process, we will examine an important aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity which has been re-emphasised in much recent theology.

The doctrine of the Trinity articulates the Christian view that God is himself 'unity in difference'. What does this mean? The idea is quite straightforward. God is one and the perfect **unity** of three **different** persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now, we might think that **difference** somehow precludes unity, or even engenders conflict. We may think that the only way of establishing true unity is through **uniformity**. Yet the Christian doctrine of God claims that, within God himself – namely, being itself – is found a perfect unity **because** God is also differentiated (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). That difference enables proper exchange, and in the case of God this is the perfect exchange of love. Some theologians would claim that God could not be love if he were not Trinity, because love, in order to be love, must be properly exchanged. In order for exchange to take place, there must be **difference** (for example, two *different* people who love each other). Moreover, unity is fundamentally about love, namely the unification established by mutual desire. There cannot be mutual desire without difference, namely the difference of persons. This is why God is not narcissistic. Narcissistic 'self-love' only occurs when a monad loves him/herself. Proper love of 'the other' requires the **difference** of lover and beloved. We find this in the difference inherent in the two 'differences' of God himself: the difference between Father and Son, and the difference between Father and Son on the one hand, and Spirit on the other.

How does this impinge upon our understanding of creation? In particular, because within God there is the eternal peace and love of **unity** expressed in **difference**, creation can be understood as a **differentiated unity**. In other words, there are many and various entities and beings within creation. Yet they form a unity which exhibits mutual self-donation and form a **UNI**-verse. Whereas we might think that unity is only achieved by uniformity because difference necessarily engenders competition and violence (and this has been a predominant political view on both the left and right in the twentieth century), in fact the doctrine of the Trinity establishes a different ontology: unity is established by difference.

Some views of creation, notably that of Charles Darwin, have understood the basis of creation to be competition – and even conflict – over scarce resources. It is the difference (or differentiation between different beings) inherent within creation – the variety of competing beings – which engenders this competition and conflict. This is one aspect of a certain interpretation of the theory of natural selection: different creatures compete for scarce resources. Yet the Christian doctrine of creation has traditionally maintained that the basis of creation is not competition or conflict, but co-operation and unity. That co-operation and mutual self-donation (I give myself to my neighbour, the earth gives natural resources to humankind, and so on) is brought about because of the manifold difference inherent within the universe. I cannot give myself unless there is *another* to whom I can give myself. So there must be at least *one difference* – the difference between me and someone or something else – in order for donation, or even love, to occur. This understanding of creation is a direct outworking of the doctrine of the Trinity and the belief that God is, in himself, a perfect and peaceful ‘unity in difference’.

We might say that God is the ontological basis of creation: creation, insofar as it is fully itself and that which God intended it to be, participates in the differentiated unity which is God himself.

One particular concern of any doctrine of creation is how God, as well as creating the universe, continues to act within that universe. God is not material and neither, according to traditional Christian theology, is God temporal. God is also thought to be beyond change. So, how could God act within a temporal universe which is saturated with change? A very sophisticated answer to these questions is provided in the work of Thomas Aquinas.

**2. The Doctrine of Creation in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae* 1a.45 and Rudi te Velde (2006), *Aquinas on God: the ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot: Ashgate), ch.5 (an electronic version of this book is available via Athens).**

Before proceeding to the content of the passage from Aquinas, it is worth making some general comments. First, the passage you will read includes the Latin original opposite an English translation. You are *not* expected to read or refer to the Latin! Secondly, as mentioned in an earlier unit, Aquinas lays out his work according to the format of a seminar in the medieval university. The question (‘Creation’) is divided into eight articles. Each article poses a different question related to the theme (e.g. ‘what is creation?’). A number of answers are proposed.

The 'reply' is then given (and you may take this as Aquinas's own view). Finally, the original answers to the question are rebutted one-by-one.

More generally, Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, from which the text is taken, is divided into four parts: the *Prima Pars* (the first part), the *Prima Secundae* (the first division of the second part), the *Secunda Secundae* (the second division of the second part), and the *Tertia Pars* (the third part). References to the *Summa Theologiae* are usually given in the form 'part.question.article'. Therefore, '1a.45.1' would be *Prima Pars* (first part), question 45, article 1. Or '1a2ae.3.2' would be *Prima Secundae* (the first division of the second part), question 3, article 2. Or '2a2ae.14.5' would be the *Secunda Secundae* (the second division of the second part), question 14, article 5. Finally, '3a.6.10' would be *Tertia Pars* (the third part), question 6, article 10. Believe it or not, Aquinas wrote this great work for 'beginners in theology'!

The title of the question in this reading, the forty-fifth from the *Prima Pars*, already highlights a particular issue. The Latin translates 'On the manner of the emanation of things from the first principle'. However, the translator has interpreted these words and rendered them simply as 'Creation'. Why? The issue is the word '*emanatio*', or emanation. This is a word often deployed by so-called Neoplatonic thinkers, not all of whom were Christian. Arguably, Aquinas himself exhibits very strong Neoplatonic influences, and indeed this was the pervasive philosophical outlook of his time, although the challenge from the newly available works of Aristotle was becoming forceful. When the Neoplatonic thinkers spoke of the emanation of creation from the One (or God), they understood this emanation to be necessary. In other words, it was not properly speaking a free and sovereign act as we commonly understand these terms. Traditional Christian teaching has been clear that God is not in any way compelled to create. He does so from a free expression of his nature. Aquinas agrees, and believes that creation is an emanation from God but also an act of the sovereignly free divine will. He wishes to maintain the notion of emanation because this implies an intimate proximity between God and creatures: the universe is not a 'product' of God (as a pot is a 'product' of the potter), but an intimate expression of the divine nature and, importantly, therefore not alien to that nature.

The intricacies of emanationist doctrines of creation need not delay us, save to comment that this is Aquinas's position, coupled to the conviction that God freely creates and in no way is compelled to do so.

Here follows a brief commentary on the text of question 45.

### *Article 1*

Here Aquinas claims that things are created from something different. So, a human being is formed from what is not yet a human being. Now, creation, which is created being itself, comes from what was not created being, that is, non-being. So creation itself comes from non-being, or nothing – creation *ex nihilo*. ‘Creation’ (as opposed to ‘making’ or ‘manufacture’) refers properly to something being made from nothing.

### *Article 2*

Aquinas makes a distinction between our acts of ‘creation’ which involve working on material which already exists (for example, wood), and God’s act of creation. Our acts of ‘creation’, and even those of nature, involve merely *changing* things. So I create a car by changing and manipulating metal. Nature creates a flower by changing and manipulating the materials of seed, water, soil and light. God’s act of creation does not involve *changing* anything, so, strictly speaking, creation is not a change. Why not? Because there is nothing prior to creation which could be changed. God’s creation involves the bringing forth of *everything*, including matter.

### *Article 3*

In this article, Aquinas is keen to maintain that creation establishes a relation only between the creator and that which is created. This is somewhat different to items which we might ‘create’ or manufacture. The painting which I paint has a relation not only to me as the artist, but also the materials which are manipulated to form the painting. Aquinas’s point is that God uses no ‘intermediaries’ or ‘tools’ in his creation. Everything, by virtue of being created is really related directly and intimately to God as its creator. Some things are not ‘more directly created’ than others. Everything immediately owes its created nature to God himself.

### *Article 4*

Aquinas is here addressing a rather technical issue which relates to a debate between the followers of Plato and the followers of Aristotle. Aquinas, in this question, seems to side more with the latter, although his view could be given a Platonic interpretation. The details need not concern us, except to mention that Aquinas states that only subsistent things (that is, things which can exist as individuals of themselves) are properly created. By contrast, whiteness, for example, only exists in white things. Whiteness, in not being a subsistent thing, is not properly referred to as ‘created’. It comes to be via other things (in this case, via white things).

### *Article 5*

This is the most important article within the question, and introduces Aquinas understanding of how we participate in God's creativity, and how God acts within the world.

Central to Aquinas's view is the notion of a hierarchy of causes. This is best explained with reference to a rather trivial, but I hope clear, analogy (with apologies to those who care little for football!). Imagine that Chelsea win this year's Premiership title. A number of elements cause them to win the title. First of all, the billionaire owner of the club, Roman Abramovich, is the most general and universal cause of Chelsea winning the title because he has invested so much money in the club and bought the best players. But there are also other causes. The most obvious and 'proximate' causes of Chelsea winning the title are the players themselves. Which is the most important cause? Aquinas would say that the most 'universal' cause is the most potent and important. In the case of Chelsea, Roman Abramovich, the owner and investor, is the most universal and potent cause of the club winning the title because, without Abramovich and his money, Chelsea would not be in a position to compete to win any competition at all. The players, on the other hand, are more dispensable. In a sense, Abramovich, by buying players and paying wages, gives the players the ability to 'cause' Chelsea's victory in the league. So there is a hierarchy of causes, from Abramovich to the manager to the coaches to the players. Importantly, every element in the hierarchy has its own causal power. But every level is, in a sense, dependent upon the next in the hierarchy.

And so with God and creation. God is the most universal cause, because he is the cause of being itself. Without God, nothing at all would happen or be possible. God is, therefore, quite literally the cause of everything. But, crucially for Aquinas, this does not stop created things from having their own proper causal and creative power. Properly speaking, God is the cause of this module being written, because without God I would not be here to write the module. Yet, having created me, I then have the power to write the module. So I am the most proximate cause of this particular module being written, and in that sense I am responsible for the module. Yet God is the ultimate cause of the module, and indeed God is the ultimate cause of everything.

For Aquinas, while creation is proper only to God, in creating us God also gives us the power to participate in his creative power. We can be genuine and effective causes of things within creation. God is what Aquinas calls the primary cause, whereas we are genuine and potent secondary causes. It is by virtue of being the universal (and therefore the most potent) cause of all things that God acts within the universe.

This view is further explained in the following book: Davies, B. (2002), *Thomas Aquinas* (London: Continuum), ch.9

#### *Article 6*

In this article, Aquinas is keen to avoid modalism which would attribute the act of creation to just one person of the Trinity. He claims that 'to create' is to bring to existence. Existence is the very nature of the Trinity, and therefore creation is the action of the whole Trinity.

#### *Article 7*

Aquinas begins the reply in this article as follows: 'Any effect somehow copies (reflects) its cause, yet variously.' This is a restatement of the view we first met in Unit 2, namely that effects resemble their cause. Insofar as creation is the effect of the Trinity, we might therefore expect to find faint images, or 'vestiges', of the Trinity in creation. Once again, we find the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of creation intertwined.

#### *Article 8*

This final article is rather complicated and requires the explanation of some distinctions made by Aristotle which Aquinas frequently deploys.

- Potency and Act

This is key to Aristotle's metaphysics. I am currently cold, so I am potentially hot. After standing by the fire for twenty minutes, I am actually hot. The fire has drawn me from potency to act with respect to being hot.

All created things are potentially something else. I am potentially in Scotland, and I am potentially able to speak Portuguese. I am actually able to speak French. God, on the other hand, is pure act. There is no potency in God, which is to say that God is not potentially anything. There is nothing God could acquire which would make him any more real or perfect than he already is. God is fully actual.

- Form and matter

For Aristotle (and Aquinas following him), all material things are a combination of form and matter (they are a 'form-matter compound'). Form is what makes matter a particular kind of thing. For example, the object on my desk has the form 'glass', and this form realises the underlying matter as glass rather than, say, a ball. It is important not to think of matter as 'stuff' or anything as specific as 'wood' or 'glass'. Matter is, for Aristotle and Aquinas, a pure potency. In other words, matter is potentially anything at all, and so is, in effect, nothing in particular. 'Form' is what actualises matter as a certain

type of thing, and ultimately as this particular thing (e.g. the glass on my desk).

The question Aquinas asks in the final article of this question concerning creation relates to whether the realisation of form (for example, making this glass by giving the material the form of glass) constitutes 'creation' proper. Aquinas holds to his position that creation belongs only to God. He suggests that, when we 'create' something, we do indeed give that something a 'form', but the form pre-exists in the mind of the manufacturer. So there is no creation 'from nothing'. Once again, we merely manipulate form and matter, bringing things from potency to act, whereas God creates from nothing.

### **Further reading**

#### ***Aquinas***

Davies, B. (2002), *Thomas Aquinas* (London: Continuum), ch.9

Davies, B. (1992), *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press), pp.33-39. For a further explanation of the distinction between '**form**' and '**matter**', see pp.45-49 (which will also provide you with a detailed account of the doctrine of divine simplicity). **(This work is available online through ATHENS at 'Oxford Scholarship Online').**

*A comprehensive, advanced but very accurate account of Aquinas's doctrine of creation can be found in:*

Elders, L. (1990), *The Philosophical Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill), ch.10, especially pp.291-297