

Module HPRS7021: The Doctrine of the Trinity

Assignment Two: Textual Analysis 2 (Aquinas)

Name: Kirsty Eirinn Zsofi Ebadi-Parratt

Student No: 1903025

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Aquinas is often accused of divorcing Christology from the Trinity. More recent studies have sought to show that this is not the case.¹ The following analysis will identify several key aspects of Aquinas' Christology in the *Summa Theologiae* III q.1² and seek to demonstrate that they do contribute to a certain extent to our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Key Aspects of Aquinas' Christology in *Summa Theologiae* III q.1

In the six articles of *STh* III q.1, Aquinas deals with the question of the fittingness of the incarnation. Bauerschmidt notes that "This opening question is like an overture that sounds the major themes of what will follow"³ in the discussion of the incarnation. In the following questions, Aquinas will deal more in-depth with Christological issues such as the hypostatic union and the way in which Christ effected our salvation, but there are several significant aspects of his understanding of the person and work of Christ which can be seen in the opening question.

Firstly, it is important that Aquinas starts from a place of belief in the doctrine of the incarnation as set out at Chalcedon: Christ is one subject of which two natures (divine and human) can truly be predicated. This will be discussed in greater depth in later questions but his belief in this is clear from the way in which he speaks of God uniting human nature to himself.⁴ Also significant is his insistence that the Son assuming a human nature did not come about "through God being changed in any way from the state in which He had been from eternity, but through His having united Himself to the creature in a new way, or rather through having united it to Himself."⁵

The major theme of the first question is, of course, the fittingness of the incarnation, not only in terms of its timing in history but also the supreme fittingness of the incarnation as God's method to bring about mankind's salvation. While the person and work of Christ as

¹ See for example Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016).

² All citations of the primary source are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd, rev. ed., 1920. Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>.

³ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 180.

⁴ Especially in *STh* III q.1 a.1

⁵ *STh* III q.1 a.1 ad 1

revealed in Scripture were in one sense not *necessary* for our salvation, in that “God with His omnipotent power could have restored human nature in many other ways”,⁶ it was nevertheless the best and most appropriate way, and in this way ‘necessary’ for our salvation. This emphasis on fittingness as opposed to a stronger form of necessity⁷ will be significant in the discussion of the implications for our understanding of the Trinity below.

Finally, it is significant that Aquinas understands the purpose of Christ’s work in the incarnation not only as “a remedy for sin”⁸ but also as making possible our “full participation of the Divinity, which is the true bliss of man and end of human life.”⁹ This, along with his understanding of the incarnation as the visible mission of the Son,¹⁰ will also be significant for the discussion below.

Implications for Our Understanding of the Trinity

What, if anything, do these aspects of Aquinas’ Christology contribute to our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity?

Firstly, as we saw above, Aquinas is particularly concerned to maintain the simplicity and immutability of the God who is both three and one. In the first article he deals with the objection that the incarnation is not fitting as it added something to God, changing how he had been from all eternity. Aquinas’ response is that it was not God who was changed but the creature, in being united to God. And there is nothing unfitting in this as a creature “by nature is mutable”.¹¹ Put another way, “the event of incarnation is “in” creation, not “in” God”.¹² This means that the Son who became incarnate remains unchanged, as he has been from eternity and, in becoming incarnate made known “the invisible things of God.”¹³ The Son has eternally been the Son, defined by his relationship of filiation to the Father. Similarly, the Father has eternally been the Father, defined by his relationship of paternity

⁶ STh III q.1 a.2 resp.

⁷ Bauerschmidt refers to the necessity of fittingness as “the weakest sort of necessity” in his discussion of the term. See Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas*, 161ff.

⁸ STh III q.1 a.3 resp.

⁹ STh III q.1 a.2 resp.

¹⁰ The divine missions, both visible and invisible, are discussed in STh 1 q.43.

¹¹ STh III q.1 a.1 ad 1

¹² Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas*, 182.

¹³ STh III q.1 a.1 cont.

to the Son. So too, the Spirit is eternally defined by the relationship of procession from the Father and the Son. Since “The relation of one person to another in the Trinity is, for Thomas, really identical with (the same “thing” as) the divine essence itself”,¹⁴ in the incarnation of the Son we are given a glimpse into the trinitarian being of God, the three persons in subsistent relationship with one another.

Perhaps most significant for our understanding of the Trinity is Aquinas’ emphasis on the work of Christ in the incarnation as fitting rather than necessary in a stronger, syllogistic sense.¹⁵ This is connected to Aquinas’ concern to maintain divine freedom. He emphasizes both that God did not *have* to save mankind by means of the incarnation - “God with His omnipotent power could have restored human nature in many other ways”¹⁶ - and that, though sin “is assigned as the reason of the Incarnation” in Scripture, God was not limited to this: “even had sin not existed, God could have become incarnate.”¹⁷ This emphasis on divine freedom means that, for Aquinas, there is a *conceptual* distinction between God’s acts in history and his being, between what we would now term the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, though of course, those terms were not familiar to Aquinas.

It is clear that, for Aquinas, the immanent Trinity is at work and revealed in the economic Trinity, particularly the mission of the Son in the incarnation. As he states in his answer in the first article:

“it belongs to the essence of the highest good to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature and this is brought about chiefly by “His so joining created nature to Himself that one Person is made up of these three – the Word, a soul and flesh,” as Augustine says.”¹⁸

However, his emphasis on the freedom of God, who could have chosen to reveal himself and to save mankind in another way, means that we cannot strictly apply the vice versa of

¹⁴ Steven J. Duby, “Trinity and Economy in Thomas Aquinas,” *SBJT* 21.2 (2017), 31.

¹⁵ Much of my thinking in what follows is indebted to Aaron T. Smith, “The Trinity in Barth and Aquinas,” *Academia*. Cited 24 February 2021. Online: https://www.academia.edu/35610294/The_Trinity_in_Barth_and_Aquinas.

¹⁶ STh III q.1 a.2 resp.

¹⁷ STh III q.1 a.3 resp.

¹⁸ STh III q.1 a. 1 resp.

Rahner's rule and say that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. God could have revealed himself in another way. Notably, God's self-communication of his goodness in the incarnation was also "fitting" rather than syllogistically necessary.¹⁹ God acted the way he did in history not out of necessity but of his will.

This conceptual distinction, meaning that God in his inner life is not of *necessity* bound to his actions in the economy of salvation, makes it possible to speak of God from the perspective of his ontological simplicity and not simply from the perspective of his relationality - his threeness. This allows for a more scripturally-faithful dialogue between the ontology and relationality of God. As seen above, maintaining an emphasis on God's simplicity and immutability is of great importance for Aquinas. The emphasis on divine freedom and the fittingness of the incarnation mean that "One can make statements about the divine ontology from the perspective of divine relationality and vice versa. God is he who subsists relationally and whose relations are subsistent".²⁰

Finally, it was noted above that the incarnation not only dealt with the problem of sin but also made possible the participation of mankind in the divine in a new and fuller way through the joining of humanity to the Word. This comes about through the visible mission of the Son which can be understood as "simply his coming forth "from" the Father "according to origin" and coming forth "toward" his human nature."²¹ The mission of the Son in the incarnation is entirely consonant with the relationships which define his person in the Trinity: "the mission is the act of the eternal procession with the addition of a temporal term and effect".²² Thus, the coming of the Son in the incarnation reveals something of the relational ontology of the triune God. Furthermore, the goal of the incarnation in enabling the full participation of mankind in the divine is itself also trinitarian. As Legge summarises,

"The divine work of restoring and recreating man in the incarnation is the consummation of all things as they proceed from the Trinity and return to the Trinity. This entire

¹⁹ STh III q.1 a. 1 resp.

²⁰ Smith, "The Trinity in Barth and Aquinas," 25.

²¹ Duby, "Trinity and Economy," 39.

²² Ibid. 39.

movement of coming-forth and returning follows the Trinitarian patterns of the divine processions".²³

In conclusion, we have seen that there are several key aspects of Aquinas' Christology which contribute to some extent to our understanding of the Trinity. God remains unchanged, even in the incarnation, meaning that in and through the incarnate Son, the trinitarian God is revealed. At the same time, the fittingness of the incarnation and the related conceptual distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity makes it possible to speak of the triune God not just in his plurality but also in his simplicity. Finally, the work of the Son in the incarnation is an extension of his eternal procession from the Father in the triune Godhead and enables the participation of humanity in the divine, as all things return to the Trinity: the incarnation is trinitarian in shape and nature.

²³ Legge, *Trinitarian Christology*, 62.

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