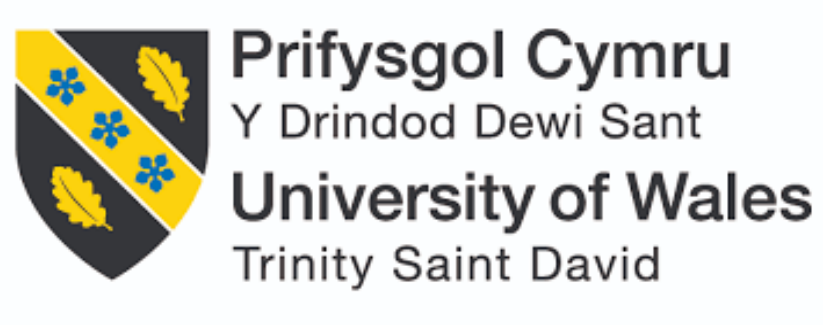


MTh in Christian Theology

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Module Title

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Summa Theologiae

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To what extent, if at all, is the person and work of Christ as explained in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae STh* III q.1 'OF THE FITNESS OF THE INCARNATION' a contribution to our understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity?

In *Summa Theologiae,* Aquinas's portraiture of the fittingness of the incarnation and its necessity, not in absolute terms but qualified by divine preference for what is most fitting, contributes an aesthetic dimension and an appositeness to our understanding of the Trinity in the economy of salvation.[1] It does this without undermining the incarnation as the *sine qua non* for humankind's redemption.

Trinitarian Context

Aquinas's Christology in *Summa Theologiae* (*Tertia Pars*) presupposes knowledge of his earlier discussions on triune processions and the divine missions of the Son and Holy Spirit.[2] The effects of a visible mission, such as the incarnation, in the economy of salvation are produced by the whole Trinity, notwithstanding their *terminus* in one divine person.[3] Appropriated roles in the divine economy arise from 'an affinity within the property of' a divine person. Accordingly, it is proper for the Son to be incarnated.[4] The

[1] *STh* III q.1 'On the Fitness of the Incarnation (Six Articles)'. All references to and quotes from *Summa Theologiae* are from St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, Benzinger Bros. edition, Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, <https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html> [accessed 12/03/21].

[2] Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.4. 'In respect of Trinitarian doctrine, the *Summa theologiae* offers his most complete synthesis', Gilles Emery, 'The Trinity', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. by Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.418-427 (p.419).

[3] Legge, *Trinitarian Christology*, pp.21-22. 'Thomas is committed to the traditional principle that the outward works of the Trinity are undivided (*opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*)', Steven J Duby, 'Trinity and Economy in Thomas Aquinas', *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology,* 21.2 (2017), 29-51 (p.40).

[4] Emery, 'Trinity', p.425. 'Each person engages in the one single divine action according to his personal property…it is in a proper manner and not only by appropriation that the Son is he "through whom the Father does all things." Each divine person acts with the others according to his proper and distinct mode of acting, a relative mode of acting that concerns the intratrinitarian relations of divine person to divine person…', ibid.

purpose of the incarnation is to restore and recreate fallen humankind and to reveal the triune God.[5] This brief overview furnishes a Trinitarian contextuality within which to consider fittingness.

Fittingness

Aquinas's conception of fitting (*convenientia*), by itself and as qualifying necessity, contributes both an aesthetic dimension and an appositeness to understanding the Trinity's manifestation through the incarnation. It does so by characterising the incarnation as God's most aesthetically pleasing way and most suitable method of achieving redemption's aims. Bauerschmidt notes the *argumentum ex convenienta*, whilst not probative, seeks to 'engage the reader in an act of persuasion that might be described as "aesthetic"…[by]…attempting to display the decorous convergence of a variety of truths, so as to manifest the contours of a particular truth of faith.'.[6] Milbank and Pickstock view *convenientia* as signalling 'an aesthetic construal of participation' whereby God discloses himself in the divine economy within 'appropriate proportions which radiate according to their inherent *integritas*'.[7] Aquinas associating *convenientia* with *omnia in esse conveniunt* and 'ontological *analogia*' permits a linking between *analogia* and *esse.*[8] Christ in his humanity analogically resembles God in being, albeit only by approximation, and discloses this by 'the mode or "way of being" of the divine *persona* of the *Logos'.* Only through *analogia Christi* may humankind experience

[5] Legge, *Trinitarian Christology*, p.62.

[6] Frederick C Bauerschmidt, 'Reading the *Summa Theologiae*', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Summa Theologiae*, Cambridge Companions to Religions, ed. by Philip McCosker and Denys Turner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.9-22 (p.14).

[7] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock., *Truth in Aquinas*, Radical Orthodoxy series, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005 edn (London: Routledge, 2001), p.53.

[8] '…the hierarchical approximations of analogy are shown to be relative coherences grounded in an absolute harmonious fittingness or 'belonging together' in *esse* itself, which is yet something other than pure logical exigency.' ibid., pp.52-53.

Analogia entis.[9] In their aesthetic dimension, arguments for fittingness point to the triune God being manifested through the incarnation by aesthetically pleasing effects in the economy of salvation.

In answer to the question whether it is fitting for God to become incarnate,[10] Aquinas replies in the affirmative. It is 'fitting that by visible things the invisible things of God should be made known'.[11] Invisibility cloaks God from humankind. Incarnation uncloaks God. Through sense perception God's goodness, wisdom, justice, and power are revealed to humankind. Quoting Damascene 'there is nothing greater than for God to become incarnate'.[12] Fittingness also derives from what belongs to a thing by 'reason of its very nature'. The essence of God's nature is goodness which demands self-communication to humankind in the highest manner possible. God uniting himself to human flesh fulfils such demands.[13] As the embodiment of God's goodness Christ represents its ultimate reflection and supreme expression in the divine economy. Incarnation is therefore fitting by being aesthetically pleasing, as it most excellently manifests attributes of the triune God, and superlatively apposite, as it speaks to humankind in the best and most comprehensible way.

In answer to the questions whether it was fitting for the incarnation to have occurred when humankind began or been postponed to the world's end,[14] Aquinas replies in the negative. Scripture reveals God, in his wisdom, decreed the timing of the incarnation.

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[9] ibid., p.53.

[10] *STh* III q.1 a.1.

[11] *STh* III q.1 a.1 cont.

[12] ibid.

[13] *STh* III q.1 a.1 resp.

[14] *STh* III q.1 a.5 and *STh* III q.1 a.6.

This alone is determinative of what is fitting.[15] Nonetheless, one may locate insights into God's wisdom for ordaining it was not fitting for the incarnation to have occurred at humankind's beginning. These include the primary purpose of the incarnation, the restoration of humankind by eradicating sin, and observations from history in the economy of salvation, which indicate God was preparing humankind to recognise its sickness for which the incarnation was the medicine.[16] Similarly, neither is it fitting for the incarnation to have been delayed to the world's end as incarnation is 'the efficient cause of the perfection of human nature'. Again, historical observations from the divine economy corroborate this. God disclosed knowledge of himself successively through Abraham, Moses and supremely through Christ as redeemer. Postponing the incarnation to the world's end would have obliterated 'all knowledge and reverence of God' and moral uprightness.[17] Accordingly, the incarnation is fitting in being superlatively apposite as to the timing of its occurrence in salvation history and aesthetically pleasing by disclosing its timing as 'God's love accommodating itself to the requirements of human nature.'[18]

Necessity

Fittingness also contributes to understanding the Trinity's manifestation through the incarnation as a qualification to the absoluteness of its necessity. In answer to the question whether the incarnation of the Word of God was necessary for the restoration of humankind,[19] Aquinas provides a nuanced response. The incarnation, by freeing

[15] *STh* III q.1 a.5 cont.

[16] *STh* III q.1 a.5 resp.

[17] *STh* III q.1 a.6 resp.

[18] Frederick C Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*, Christian Theology in Context, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.187.

[19] *STh* III q.1 a.2.

humankind from perdition, was necessary.[20] However, the incarnation was not necessary in the absolute sense that humankind's salvation could not have been achieved otherwise. It was necessary in the sense of 'better and more conveniently' achieving such objective.[21] This distinction is important for Aquinas as it permits him to acknowledge that God's sovereignty and omnipotence cannot be circumscribed or compelled. God 'could have restored human nature in many other ways'.[22] Corroborating this is Aquinas's answer to whether or not God would have become incarnate if man had not sinned. Aquinas concedes he could have as 'the power of God is not limited'.[23] However, this belongs to speculative theology. The reason for the incarnation is a matter for God's will which can only be known by revelation. As Scripture declares the incarnation is the remedy for sin, Aquinas concludes that without sin 'the Incarnation would not have been.'[24] It follows where necessity is not absolute but preferable and more fitting, it is a necessity arising from God choosing to exercise his sovereign will in a particular manner over alternatives. Such necessity therefore belongs to the *potentia ordinata* rather than the *potentia absoluta*.[25] A necessity of fittingness has been termed 'the weakest form of necessity' and 'conditional necessity'.[26] It may also be viewed as Aquinas rationally attempting to justify and explain the divine preference for incarnation, as sin's remedy, as an inevitability arising out of God's love and wisdom. The divine choice, as to what is apposite and more aesthetically pleasing to achieve redemption's aims, is vindicated by the beneficial and

[20] *STh* III q.1 a.2 cont.

[21] *STh* III q.1 a.2 resp.

[22] ibid.

[23] *STh* III q.1 a.3 resp.

[24] ibid.

[25] Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth*, p.53.

[26] Bauerschmidt, *Faith*, p.185 and Legge, *Trinitarian Christology*, p.102.

curative effects the incarnation generates in the economy of salvation in the actual or potential experience of those who embrace its remedy.

In this context, taking his cue from Augustine 'that there was not a more fitting way of healing our misery', Aquinas sets out justifications and explanations for the divine choice.[27] These relate to incarnation effecting 'furtherance in good' (*promotio boni*) and 'withdrawal from evil' (*remotio mali*), both soteriologically and ethically essential to restoring humankind.[28] Humankind's *promotio boni* is effected by the divine *Logos,* via Christ's humanity, inculcating faith as he speaks truth, strengthening hope by becoming 'a partner with us of human nature', enkindling love by his coming demonstrating God's love for us, motivating good works as an exemplar and making possible humankind's divinization by showing that as 'God was made man…man might be made God.'[29] Humankind's *remotio mali* is effected through the *Logos*, by virtue of his incarnation, teaching us about the devil and the dignity of human nature so evil deeds may be eliminated, commending God's grace, curing pride through God's incomparable humility and liberating humankind from enslavement to sin by making satisfaction.[30] In relation to satisfaction, Aquinas views the incarnation as essential to its sufficiency for remedying sin. However, unlike Anselm, Aquinas's focus here is on the incarnation repairing humankind rather than repairing 'sinful offences against God'[31] and its being

[27] *STh* III q.1 a.2 resp.

[28] '…the confluence of two things 'necessary' for human salvation, our advancement (promotio) in good and our removal (remotio) from evil…for Thomas form a fundamental structure within which to think about God's saving activity. God is both perfecting and repairing human nature.' Bauerschmidt, *Faith*, pp.182-183.

[29] *STh* III q.1 a.2 resp.

[30] ibid.

[31] Gerald O' Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.209.

'necessary' by reason of God ordaining it to bring humankind to himself 'in a way that accords with God's justice and mercy'.[32]

Such justifications and explanations for God's divine preference for incarnation, due to their fittingness, are not exhaustive as 'there are many other advantages which accrued, above man's apprehension.'[33] Nonetheless, what is enumerated is salvifically and ethically efficacious in the divine economy and highlight God's love and wisdom. The Word of God, through Christ's humanity analogically resembling the triune God's being, enables humankind to experience divine being, albeit in approximation, through Christ acting as a 'model for emulation',[34] and pedagogically through Christ's actions and words. These facilitate advancement in good and withdrawal from evil. By demonstrating incarnation to be apposite and the more aesthetically pleasing way to effect redemption, the incarnation is vindicated as the inevitable divine preference for remedying sin. God's revelation in Scripture, that the incarnation is the *sine qua non* for humankind's redemption, is therefore justified and explained rationally by reference to its intended effects in the economy of salvation.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the triune God, in his providence, could have chosen a different method of effecting redemption, the necessity of the incarnation to humankind's redemption is not undermined. Whilst fittingness, in its aesthetic dimension and appositeness, may be determinative for divine preference, once God, in his sovereign will, decides in its

[32] Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.331-332.

[33] *STh* III q.1 a.2 resp.

[34] Joseph Wawrykow, 'The Christology of Thomas Aquinas in its Scholastic Context', in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. by Francesa A. Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.233-249 (p.235).

favour, the incarnation becomes the *sine qua non* for redemption. This summarises an aspect of Aquinas's contribution to our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

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