

BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God*, Thomistic Ressourcement Series. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022. xvi + 715pp. Paperback. \$34.95

Who God is as Father, Son, and Spirit, and what God does to save sinners has always been the core of Christian theology. Though suffering partial eclipse in some theological circles for some time, the Trinity is again becoming the center of theological reflection (and debate). Some options presented to contemporary readers are good, while others are misdirected, even harmful. The best engagements with Trinitarian doctrine are solidly biblical and draw heavily on historical conversations over the doctrine of God and Christology. Thomas Joseph White's massive treatment of Trinitarian theology reflects the best of both worlds, reappropriating and adapting Thomas Aquinas' profound Trinitarian thought to current theological issues. His work is a penetrating and profound retrieval of Trinitarian ideas in Thomistic dress, drawing extensively from psychological analogies of the Trinity to bring Thomism into conversation with alternative options.

A true master of his topic is marked by depth, clarity, and simplicity. Despite the book's length, White's material is concise, clear, and quickly gets to the point. He grasps his material well enough to creatively summarize and restate precise ideas, making them intelligible without losing their meaning. Building a logically progressive case one step at a time, the four parts of the book move from the natural knowledge of God and early church Trinitarian doctrine through Aquinas on the unity of the divine nature and essence to his treatment of the three persons proper, launching ultimately into current debates over various forms of social Trinitarianism and theories of divine suffering. While retaining Thomas' assertion that we know the Trinity through revelation rather than through reason (e.g., 352), part I nevertheless illustrates well how philosophy not only relates to a general natural knowledge of God but prepares the way for *sacra doctrina* via special revelation by giving us coherent categories in which to express and apply God's Triunity (3–4). Treating the Old and New Testaments and early church reflections on the Trinity mark the capstone of this section.

Part II explores the nature of the one God, masterfully showing the logic of Aquinas' ordering of the divine attributes, starting with simplicity and moving progressively up to the knowledge of God. Serving as a bridge between Parts II and III, chapter twenty on the knowledge of God enables White to address personhood as "subsistent relations" in God marked by "relations of origin" (e.g., 385). Though, peculiarly, he does not use *suppositum* (unless in a citation, such as page 484, fn. 5), one of Thomas' favorite terms to describe the divine persons, he explains an otherwise comprehensive

range of Trinitarian terminology. Though doctrines like perichoresis, or the interpenetration of the divine persons, are often favorite avenues for social Trinitarians to posit three wills in God with three persons collaborating in a quasi-Tritheistic communion, White incorporates such ideas into divine processions as subsistent relations (515). This move enables him simultaneously to promote an inherently relational view of God and to offer an alternative to less-than-orthodox redefinitions of personhood. His distinct chapter on appropriations (chapter 29), reflecting the processions in God, is much-needed since appropriations have often received little notice in modern Trinitarian thought.

By the time White addresses contemporary thought in Part IV, he has already stacked the deck, illustrating why psychological analogies to intellect and will in the human soul give us some creaturely analogical knowledge of immaterial processions (see pg. 668 for a strong statement of the importance of such analogies), and illustrating why studying the divine names and attributes is essential for maintaining co-essentiality and procession as relation of origin in God. Though winsome and sympathetic, his critique of authors like Hegel, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jurgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, Seguius Bolgakov, and others is as devastating and decisive as it is fair and friendly. He leaves no room for subordination (e.g., 120, 157, 169, 501, 629 or multiple wills in the Godhead (e.g., 235, 629), let alone God suffering through a historical process alongside humanity. Far from distancing God from human suffering, his application of orthodox Christology, including Christ's divine and human willing (606–08), to divine compassion and the revelation of the Trinity in his penultimate chapter is nothing short of breathtaking.

It is impossible to illustrate the strengths of this work without reading it in full. White is readable and gripping, making it hard to put the book down. White integrates Aquinas' adaptation of Augustine's psychological model of the Trinity consistently throughout the book 9 (e.g., 13, 121, 133, 155, 167–169, 385, 388, 392, 397, 400, 407, 668, 678–80). More or less, the idea is that rational creatures have "processions" of intellect and will, or wisdom and love, without division. While any reflection of the Trinity in creation must be analogical and limited at best, he argues that psychological analogy paves the way for conceiving immaterial processions on some level. Regardless of what readers think of the value of such psychological analogies, White illustrates their chastened and measured use in their best form. At the least, this point will challenge many Protestants to see reflections of God wherever they can while keeping Trinitarian theology in its proper place as revealed rather than natural theology.

Adding an example from Part IV, Chapter 32 offers a penetrating, if not devastating, critique of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner's proposals for collapsing the economy (work) of the Trinity into the theology of the Trinity. Incorporating ideas such as Moltmann's importation of suffering into the Godhead to redeem human suffering, White astutely observes that making

this move removes God's ability to triumph over suffering because suffering becomes part of God's being (582). If union with God through Christ in the Spirit is eternal life (e.g., 5, 289, 535), then treating suffering as integral to God's being would entail some measure of eternal suffering for his people, making God unable to overcome human misery (e.g., 5, 289, 535). Moreover, despite the fact that "Rahner's Rule," that the economic Trinity is the ontological Trinity, has become mainstream, he argues that we should abandon the economic Trinity altogether. He asserts, "One can believe either in the classical Nicene affirmation of the *homoousios* (the ineffable singular divine essence of the three persons) or in an 'economic Trinity' but arguably not both" (585). The real distinction is between theology and economy or between God and his works. The Triune God reveals himself in the economy, but the Trinity is independent both of creation and the economy of redemption. His extended caution is worth taking to heart: "Rahner's novel approach should not be taken for granted as an advance of theological thinking simply because it has recently and often been cited in theological literature. The classical distinction between the eternal processions and the divine missions provides a better framework, in fact, for addressing even the most contemporary of concerns regarding the way God can make himself known to us, as he is in himself, precisely in and through a shared history with us in the economy" (587). Though many today are so accustomed to referring to the ontological and economic Trinity that they take the terms for granted, White reminds us that such terms reflect seismic philosophical and theological shifts in Trinitarian doctrine. We must distinguish between God in himself, and God revealed in his works; otherwise, we will lose Nicene and classical Trinitarianism.

One minor weakness is that the author quickly moves from Pseudo-Dionysius to the Fourth Lateran Council (ch. 10), bypassing John of Damascus and Richard St. Victor. Since Aquinas drew heavily from both authors in his Trinitarian theology, they provide an important bridge towards grasping the development of his thought. Particularly, Richard St. Victor reflected elements of both Dionysius' stress on God as "supra-essential" being and Lateran IV's emphasis on greater unlikeness than likeness in analogical language about God. Including such material would strengthen White's assessments of what was distinctive and common in Aquinas' articulation of the mystery of the Trinity. Likewise, Richard St. Victor stressed the processions of the divine persons as incommunicable existences of the divine essence, anticipating Aquinas's distinction between essence and existence and their coincidence in the divine nature (249). Though White argues rightly that Aquinas' distinction between essence and existence was a unique contribution to "human thought" (249), Richard illustrates how he developed such ideas from earlier precedents. White includes Richard on pages 356–58 (and elsewhere) but restricts his treatment to whether or not it is possible to demonstrate the Trinity through natural reason, bypassing positive influences on Aquinas. As a result, he

largely pits Aquinas against Richard (and others like Bonaventure and Scotus) regarding definitions of personhood and whether natural knowledge of the Trinity is possible, omitting constructive points of continuity. Though he notes that we should “distinguish ecclesial dogma from schools of theology,” such as Thomism (673), making room for alternative explanations, the tone of his interaction with other medieval models seems to be too adversative at times.

Another feature of this work that will catch readers' attention is the scattered references, ordinarily in footnotes, to “the universality of the grace of Christ” (543; e.g., 628). While this could merely reflect a theory of the extent of the atonement, he seems to mean something more. Including what he calls the “holy pagan,” who did not have supernatural divine revelation, he states, “They too, then, were to be saved by the Cross, in collective unity with the whole human race, with all those who are offered and who cooperate with it effectively. They are part of the Church, broadly speaking” (650–51). In the same place, he clearly affirms the reality of the doctrine of hell in line with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. However, his statements appear to imply a modern and creative move among some post-Vatican II Roman Catholics to widen the definition of the “church” to include “pre-Christian gentiles” (650) and potentially those of other religions. Both Protestants and Roman Catholics profess their own understandings of “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” Roman Catholics have traditionally restricted their understanding of catholicity to visible communion with their visible body in communion with bishops descending from the apostles by ordination. At the same time, Protestants broadened catholicity to include all visible churches standing in an apostolic succession of truth. Ironically, White's view outstrips Protestants on this point by extending the church's catholicity beyond its visible outward expressions by including people entirely outside of its identifiable boundaries. This issue is certainly not a significant feature of this work and does not detract from its outstanding features. However, this tangential point raises its own set of theological questions and challenges.

Regardless of one's confessional convictions, White drives home one thing clearly: the gospel is about the mystery of the Triune God. Put differently, the gospel is not a list of things we receive from God or that Christ does for us. What God gives believers is himself, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is about the way back to God (e.g., the *exitus reditus* theme; 470). In a time when the Trinity has fallen to the periphery of how the average church-goer views the gospel, we must pull front and center the goal of knowing the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. Eternal life is not enduring forever, but knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (Jn 17:3; p. 542). Life is a quality of being rather than a quantity of time. Readers familiar with Aquinas himself, especially parts one and three of the *Summa Theologia*, will doubtless get the most from this book. For those in search of a compelling and well-reasoned alternative to the inadequate

models of the Trinity that are prevalent in the church today, White's work provides an invaluable resource.

Ryan M. McGraw
Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary