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Trinitarian Spirit-Christology in Thomas Aquinas

Biblical Hermeneutics and the *Munus Triplex*

Introduction

The term ‘Spirit-Christology’ has begun to play an increasingly conspicuous role in contemporary theological discussions. Arising on the one hand from a growing field of Pentecostal theological reflection, and on the other from a post-Kantian desire to replace metaphysics with ‘history’ and ‘narrative’ (an aspiration evident among both biblical scholars and Barthians), the concept of Spirit-Christology remains somewhat ambiguous in its meaning and usage. Although it often serves as a moniker for contemporary Adoptionism, there is a mounting interest in Chalcedonian approaches to Spirit-Christology. Such approaches seek to forge a path between “exclusive Logos-Christology” (with no reference to the person of the Spirit) and “exclusive Spirit-Christology” (in which the Logos is *replaced* with the Spirit).¹ In so doing, they strive to uphold both a sufficient ontology and an adequate understanding of Christ’s activity. In a recent book, Dominic Legge has argued persuasively that Thomas Aquinas (1225–

¹ See discussion in Greg Liston, “A ‘Chalcedonian’ Spirit Christology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 81 (2016), pp. 74–93.

1274) evidences just this sort of balanced Spirit-Christology.² I will engage with and extend Legge's argument in order to suggest some possibilities that it opens up with respect to biblical hermeneutics and the theological interpretation of Scripture. To this end, I will closely follow Legge's exposition of Aquinas's thought in the first two sections, before branching out beyond it in the third.

I. A Trinitarian Doctrine of the Incarnation

Legge explores how, for Aquinas, the eternal processions of the Son from the Father (cf. Jn 8:42), and of the Spirit from the Father and Son (cf. Jn 15:26), which characterize all of God's acts of creation and redemption, are extended into time in the divine missions. The key here is that "a mission includes the eternal procession, with the addition of a temporal effect" (*ST* I, q. 43, a. 2, ad. 3). While every divine action is efficiently caused by the whole Trinity, the effect (or 'terminus') of a divine mission is properly related to a single divine person who is made uniquely present therein. In their invisible missions the Son and Spirit produce in creatures, through habitual grace, a likeness to their processions by which they dwell within the creature and lead them back to the Father. In these cases, creatures are drawn into the divine persons as a 'terminus' according to exemplar causality. Within their visible missions, on the other hand, a key difference obtains, for while the presence of the Spirit is only *signified* visibly by a sign (e.g. the dove in Jn 1:32), the divine person of the Son is truly and uniquely *made visible* as the Word made flesh.

² Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). This contra Rahner, Balthasar, Weinandy, and others who have argued that Aquinas divorced Christology from the Trinity in his theology. See e.g. Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 30.

In the Incarnation, the human nature of Christ is drawn into the second person of the Trinity in a wholly unique way, as a terminus according to being (*esse*).

Following the Cappadocian Fathers, Aquinas distinguishes between the one *esse* of the three divine persons and their threefold mode of existing (*modum existendi*), delineated according to the relations of origin. The three persons exist as subsistent relations within the one divine nature, such that when we speak of the ‘personal *esse*’ (‘act of being’) of the Son, we are referring to the proper supposit of the Son whose *esse* just is the one divine nature *as it is received from the Father*. As a result, Christ’s human nature is not united to the divine being in general, but specifically to the personal *esse* of the Son. In this way, the single personhood or ‘act of being’ of the Word incarnate exists in a distinctly ‘filial’ mode of being, such that everything he is and does comes from the Father and makes Him known (cf. Jn 14:9). The ‘theandric’ words and actions of Christ constitute divine revelation; Jesus humanly manifests the Son as the one who proceeds eternally from the Father, and thereby reveals the Father “as his principle.”³

II. Theandric Action: The Word and the Spirit

Legge maintains that Aquinas speaks of Christ with respect to the causality and presence of the Son (by the hypostatic union), the Spirit (“indwelling Christ’s soul by charity”), and the whole Trinity (“as creative principle and efficient cause”), each according to a different

³ Legge, *Trinitarian Christology of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 116.

mode.⁴ Thus far, we have glimpsed the first and last of these elements, but what about the Spirit?

One of the views that Aquinas shares with certain contemporary proponents of Spirit-Christology is that, in order to avoid a confusion of natures, we cannot simply say that the hypostatic union divinizes Christ's humanity.⁵ As St Thomas puts it, "the soul of Christ is not essentially Divine. Hence it behooves it to be Divine by participation (*fiat divina per participationem*), which is by grace" (*ST III*, q. 7, a.1 ad.1). This habitual grace is the invisible mission of the Spirit to the human soul of Christ, who fully sanctifies Christ's human nature and prepares it with the 'habitus' (what Aquinas calls a 'divine instinct') to function as an 'instrument' of the Word (*ST III*, q. 7, a. 2).⁶ Christ, says Aquinas, receives 'the whole Spirit' (*totum spiritum*), and Legge notes three key implications of this: Jesus receives the gifts of the Spirit to the fullest extent; he perpetually possesses the fullness of the Spirit's power to work miracles and prophesy; and he has the infinite capacity to pour out the gifts of the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit himself, upon others.⁷

For Aquinas, because the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son, the humanity of Christ receives the habitual grace of the Spirit from the font of the Word, to which he is united in person. As Legge notes, Aquinas thus:

...offers an authentic Spirit-Christology, [which] preserves the Trinitarian order of processions . . . while accounting for the absolute uniqueness of Christ. . . The humanity of Christ is not mixed with the divine nature, but is supremely sanctified by the Holy Spirit's gift of grace in accordance with his human condition,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵ E.g. Liston, "A 'Chalcedonian' Spirit Christology," p. 77.

⁶ Legge, *Trinitarian Christology of Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 135–59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-3.

so that the Holy Spirit is present in that humanity according to the full capacity of a human nature for union with God.”⁸

Spirit-Christology, when approached from an orthodox perspective, enables us to delineate the different depths and modes of the causality and presence of the Word and the Spirit within the person and work of Christ. Not only is this important for consistently upholding Trinitarian doctrine, it also allows us to better discern the patterns of the eternal processions *within* the created effects of the divine missions, patterns that provide what Legge calls the ‘vectors’ for our own return to God.

III. The Narrative Turn: Divine identity and Spirit Christology

There is a plethora of Christological loci from which we could further explore this issue, but I will limit the remaining discussion to just one: the question of Jesus’ knowledge. In qq. 9-12 of the *Tertia pars*, Aquinas argues that Christ possessed divine knowledge and a threefold human knowledge: beatific, infused (i.e. prophetic), and acquired. Legge has rightly noted the role of the Holy Spirit as both the cause of the *lumen gloriae* that enables Christ’s beatific vision of the Father, and the one whose invisible mission imparts the habitual grace of infused knowledge to Christ’s human soul.⁹ I would like to supplement this primarily ontological interpretation by arguing that crucial pneumatological elements of St Thomas’s Christology are revealed through his focus on Scripture’s larger narrative of salvation history.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 167–68.

⁹ Legge does not see a role for the Spirit in acquired knowledge. *Ibid.*, pp. 172–86.

Aquinas draws a connection between Christ's threefold human knowledge and his threefold office (*munus triplex*). He notes that "Wherefore as to others, one is a lawgiver (*legislator*), another is a priest (*sacerdos*), another is a king (*rex*); but all these concur (*concurrunt*) in Christ" (*ST* III, q. 22, a. 1). In this connection, he highlights the fact that, by his flesh, Christ belongs to the people of Israel and is born a son of Abraham and of David. It was to these two patriarchs that God's great promises were made (cf. Gen 22:18; Ps 132:11), and as prophet (i.e. lawgiver),¹⁰ priest, and king, Christ fulfills their roles in salvation history (*ST*, III, q. 31, a. 2).¹¹ But note that these titles describe Jesus' human nature: Christ *as man* fulfills the roles of the Patriarchs.¹² This brings us to the role of the Spirit, anointing and sanctifying Jesus' humanity, enabling him *humanly* to fulfill the roles of prophet, priest, and king that God entrusted to his chosen people, and thereby releasing them from bondage as was promised in Isaiah 33:22.

Aquinas maintains that Christ's kingship is founded upon his possession of the beatific vision in his human soul (*ST* III q. 58, a. 4, ad. 2). "He that was born King of the Jews" shares in the Father's rule (*ST* III, q. 36, a. 8). As Simeon foretold in Luke 2:35, *this child is appointed . . . so that thoughts from many hearts* (ἐκ πολλῶν καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί) *may be revealed*. Part of Jesus' rule and judiciary power as the messianic king is that he knows what is in the hearts of others (e.g. Lk 5:22; 11:17), so that he might "[order] all things according to his

¹⁰ Aquinas uses 'lawgiver' and 'prophet' interchangeably: a prophet teaches the people how to live according to God's law.

¹¹ Aquinas maintains that Abraham was a prophet and priest, David a prophet and king.

¹² "Because of the hypostatic union, these attributes in a real sense 'belong to' the divine Word as subject; but they are nonetheless attributes of Christ *as man*" (Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation According to Thomas Aquinas* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002], p. 70).

justice.”¹³ And yet, Aquinas rightly notes that “to know and judge the secrets of hearts (*occulta cordium*), of itself belongs to God alone” (e.g. Gen 17:15-20; *ST* III, q. 59, a. 2 ad. 3). This is not prophetic knowledge—no prophet in the Old Testament can ‘overhear’ the internal thoughts of others¹⁴—but that does not mean it is not caused by the Holy Spirit. Citing Romans 2:16, Aquinas explains that because he is the Word incarnate, Christ as man receives the ‘whole Spirit’, which flows from the Word and imparts to his soul the supernatural *habitus* of the light of Glory “under which” (*sub quo*) he sees the essence of God directly, and thereby, the hearts of others (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 5). This is divine knowledge possessed in a human manner in Christ’s soul: *receptum est in recipiente per modum recipientis*. In this way, Christ, as man, holds a human royal office, but reigns therein as the divine king—and this has as much to do with the invisible mission of the Spirit to his human soul as it does with the divine Word to whom he is hypostatically united in person.

Though we cannot here explore similar connections between Jesus’ knowledge and his priestly and prophetic offices, this brief foray gives us a glimpse into how Aquinas’s Spirit-Christology can help us connect the narrative presentation of Jesus’ distinctiveness—something like what Richard Bauckham calls a theology of divine identity—with a metaphysically informed Christology that reveals the presence and causality of all three divine persons within the words and actions of the Incarnate Christ. At the same time, it is evident that, for Aquinas at least, ‘Spirit-Christology’ is simply Christology, adequately informed by the Trinitarian processions and missions and focused on the mysteries of the life of Christ, which are understood

¹³ Levering, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, p. 73.

¹⁴ See discussion in Colin Blake Bullard, *Jesus and the Thoughts of Many Hearts* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 46–64.

as divine revelation in the fullest sense. For this reason, St Thomas remains a vital source for Trinitarian Christological reflection today.