Introduction: Theology after Heidegger’s Critique of Onto-theology

The position of Postmodern Christian theology vis a vis philosophy is strikingly ironic. The totality with which it asserts its right and need to proceed independently of philosophy is, in fact, philosophically situated and determined. Heidegger above all defines the problem and the project for theology and sets the terms within which it proceeds.

The problematic is set up by his narration of Western Fate as a history of Being, or rather, of its progressive hiding. In this story of ontological closure, he gives the leading role to onto-theology. Jean-Luc Marion, John Milbank and others now define this category more strictly than Heidegger did, and efforts are made to limit those theological positions to which it is supposed to apply. Their enthusiasm for ancient and medieval Christian Neoplatonism lies in its subordination of being and its limitation or elimination of ontology or metaphysics autonomous in respect to theology.¹ However, despite the limitations and exceptions, the use of this category by contemporary Christian theology to describe and judge its own history is determinative.²

When we think about theological history through the notion of onto-theology, we think that God is understood through, or, better, enclosed in, the historical horizons given by a succession of notions of being. Further, we understand that the human relation to itself and to the world occurs within particular ontologically determined theologies. At root, then, philosophical theology confuses Being with beings, and turns God into a super being. God becomes comprehensible within a particular conception of being. Looking at reality from the divine perspective, we gain a rational hold on the world. As Christians, we are related to being from the side of the Creator’s will. This relation reduces being so understood to manipulable things.³

I. The First Theological Difference: Trying to get beyond Philosophy

¹This essay was originally delivered as a lecture for the School of Hebrew, Biblical and Theological Studies, Trinity College, University of Dublin, November 6, 1997. I am grateful to Dr. Lewis Ayres for the invitation and for the stimulation he and his students provided, to Trinity College for its hospitality, and to Ian Stewart, Robert Dodaro, Robert Crouse and Ken Keirans who helped with its revision for publication.
⁴For an account of the argument and why Heidegger got it wrong, see Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 40ff.
Two trinitarian differences are required of theologians who understand theology’s situation through Heidegger’s narrative.4 The first is associated with the trinitarian differentiation of the Son or Logos from the Father. Its necessity may be recognised at the point we have reached. The confusion of Being with beings which, according to Heidegger and his Christian theological heirs, belongs to the origins of Western metaphysics, must be disentangled. An account of the procession of the Logos from the Father as font of Being must be resisted. Such an account is suggested when, as with Augustine, Exodus 3.14 is interpreted to make Being the highest name of God. And, indeed, with other Neoplatonists, Augustine makes his account of the triadic hypostases the basis of a theologizing of the Stoic sciences:

According to Augustine, physics has for its object God as cause of being, logic God as norm of thought, ethics God as rule of life. This Augustinian order: physics, logic, ethics, corresponds to the order of the divine persons in the Trinity: the Father is the principle of being, the Son of intelligence, the Holy Spirit of Love. The systematic unity of the parts of philosophy reflects here the reciprocal interiority of the divine Persons.5

If this is developed in accord with the orthodox Christian teaching that the Persons of the Trinity have an identity of essence, being and logos would be identical in the Son. Thus, theology would provide the basis of a well founded ontology. The logos or science of being, would be placed at the heart of divinity.6

But, post-Heideggerian theologians demand above all theology’s independence from philosophy, or, more precisely, to use their formulation, from philosophy as ontology or metaphysics.7 In fact this is to oppose philosophy having a subject matter of its own, its own content and its proper autonomy. At most, for example, with Marion, it may be phenomenology as opposed to metaphysics.8 For Milbank, quite inconsistently, given how completely he relies on contemporary philosophy to constitute “the real as linguistic” and to describe the character of reality so understood,9 even phenomenology is too much.10 This is

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7 “… it is arguable that recent researches suggest that ‘modernity fulfills metaphysics’ should be radicalized as ‘modernity invented metaphysics’.” Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 40.
9 Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 2.
10 “An independent phenomenology must be given up, along with the claim, which would have seemed so bizarre to the Fathers, to be doing philosophy as well as theology. … [P]hilosophy as autonomous, as ‘about’
the first way postmodern theologians derive their programmes generally, and their trinitarian

Jacques Derrida is right in seeing that Heidegger opposes “Christian philosophy” because it requires a mixing of Greek ontology with a theology which is revelation. A separation of these would avoid onto-theology.\footnote{Jacques Derrida, “How to avoid speaking: Denials,” in Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory, eds. S. Budick and W. Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 55. The French is Jacques Derrida, “Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations,” in Psyché: Inventions de l’autre, (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), 535-595.} However, ultimately, avoiding this mixing requires that neither being nor God can be thought philosophically. Marion thus wants to keep theology from becoming science. Milbank hopes to regain both science and being for God by eliminating the independence of philosophy.

So far as the first trinitarian differentiation, the begetting of the Logos, or the question of ontology, is concerned, the answer of Milbank to Heidegger’s problem is more radical than that of Marion. Marion accuses Heidegger of making ontology our encompassing paradigm, and sets in opposition to him philosophically a phenomenology of the gift and theologically, “hors-texte”, charity. Initially Marion pushes this so far as to insist on God Without Being. But he recanted this extremism to allow, in a Neoplatonic fashion, God to have being provided that this was a gift even to himself as the Good beyond being. This allows Marion to make his peace with St. Thomas Aquinas, who notoriously said that Being is the highest name of God.

Professor Marion has now decided that Thomas’ philosophical theology is fundamentally Neoplatonic, and is not onto-thé-ologie, imprisoning God beyond the power of revelation within our conceptualization of being, but rather théo-onto-logic, revelation which determines the concept of being.\footnote{Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et l’onto-théologie,” 31-66, the retractatio is at 33 and 65. In it Marion notes that he was already moving in this direction in the 1991 “Preface to the English Edition” of his Dieu sans l’être.} For both Marion and Milbank, the acceptance of Thomas’ position on this point requires noting that for him God, not being, is the proper subject matter of theology; being is the subject of metaphysics. Neither, however, is able to give metaphysics, the theology which is part of philosophy, or philosophy, in general, the independence, substantiality and necessity within sacra doctrina which Thomas gives them.\footnote{Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et l’onto-théologie,” 37ff.; idem, “Phénoménologie et philosophie première. La question de la donation, in Le Statut Contemporain de la Philosophie premier, Philosophie 17 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1996), 29-50; Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 44. For philosophy and theology in Aquinas in relation to these positions, see Hankey, “Denys and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold,” 162ff. For a summary of two opposed interpretations of Aquinas as an onto-theologian, see Géry Prouvost, Thomas d’Aquin et les thomismes. Essai sur l’histoire des thomismes, (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 164-5. The differences lie in the degree to which God is identified with being and is thus positively known. Prouvost cannot decide between the alternatives and, so, commits “démi-paricade.”}

For Milbank, Marion, though profound and accurate in his perceptions of the character and faults of Heidegger’s thought, remains too much within it. His theology of love is an opposed mirror of Heidegger’s preoccupation with being.\footnote{Milbank, “Can a Gift be Given?”, 138ff. and “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 46: “And if the ultimate phenomenon is exactly describable as the gaze of a subject, it would appear that it is after all merely ontic, and in seeking to trump ontological difference, one has instead connived again at its obliteration.”} Despite the intentions
of his own work, he retains a Cartesian foundational subjectivity.  Further, and directly related to these, Milbank judges Marion’s correlated phenomenology to be the contemporary equivalent of Scotus’ fideistic metaphysics “independent of theology.”17 This, when developed by Suarez and Descartes, Marion also understands to be at the root of modern deformity. Marion followed Étienne Gilson in finding the Scotistic transformation of scholasticism by Suarez as a “univocist drift”18 which leads in Descartes to “a rationality not theologically assured by Christian Revelation, but metaphysically founded on the humanity of ‘men strictly men’.19

The generally assumed antimodern or postmodern account of the regretted historical movement bringing the West to the modernity now to be overcome is well summarized by Catherine Pickstock.

... Descartes follows in the tradition of Duns Scotus, for whom a being is that which is univocal and therefore graspable. ... Marion and Courtine agree in developing Étienne Gilson’s analysis of Descartes, by pointing out that the turn to epistemology is pre-enabled by a radical reconstrual of ontology itself, inherited from later scholasticism. ... [As a result] for Descartes, secure being has become being for the Cogito ... a single legislating subject ... 20

Clearly, if Milbank understands him rightly, Marion has not fully abandoned, as theology now must, “all scholastic attempts to graft faith onto a universal base of reason.” He has not fully turned to the method of the Church Fathers. But rather continues “doing philosophy as well as theology.”21 Marion is “still within a self-sufficient metaphysics, which is identical with secular modernity.”22

The problem, for Milbank, is not philosophy, metaphysics and ontology absolutely, if their substantiality and autonomy could be eliminated. Ancient philosophy sought objective substantiality and modern philosophy sought subjective substantiality because they remained “inside the horizons projected by the Greek mythos, within which the Greek logos had to remain confined.”23 Milbank envisages “another ontology” which is “another philosophy”

notes that this was Marion’s criticism of Levinas. For Jacques Derrida also there can be a move to negative theology within the Heideggerian criticism of onto-theology which assumes what it seems fundamentally to deny; “How to avoid speaking: Denials,” 9: “Yet the onto-theological reappropriation always remains possible ... my uneasiness was nevertheless also directed toward the promise of that presence given to intuition or vision. The promise of such a vision often accompanies the apathetic voyage.”

17 Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 45; idem, “Can a Gift be Given?” 137ff. where Milbank considers how, for Marion, theology’s “exit from metaphysics” has to do with “his relationship to Heidegger.”
20 Pickstock, After Writing, 62.
22 Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 47.
23 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 295.
and “another metaphysics”. This would be properly Christian, inscribed within the Christian rather than within the Greek mythos.

As with Marion, Milbank’s theology now turns again to Neoplatonism, though with equal selectivity. Milbank’s other philosophy, which does not “position” Christian theology from some pretense to a self-sufficient reason, is prefigured by “the radical changes undergone by ontology at the hands of the neo-Platonists and the Church Fathers: in particular Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite.” It was “no longer exactly Greek.” The ancient Greek notions of “presence, substance, the idea, the subject, causality, thought-before-expression, and realist representation” would be criticized. Those eliminated, “the Platonic Good, reinterpreted by Christianity as identical with Being,” could remain.

We must attend to the condition for Milbank’s return to a notion of God in which the Good and Being are identical, apparently produced despite Heidegger. For Milbank, in the wake of Derrida, reality is linguistic. Moreover, he follows Wittgenstein in Cambridge, and so it is now the task of the theology which describes itself as “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism” to expunge its Augustinian interiority and intellectualism. Though this is presented as an opposition to Cartesian dualism, in fact, the Wittgenstein it follows stands with Nietzsche against Plato, Aristotle and the whole tradition of western rationality. Wittgenstein and Milbank are right to judge that for such a project, Augustine is, of necessity, the Christian theologian most to be overcome or reinterpreted.

The divine Being has been radically transmuted in accord with this linguistic ontology. As usual today, history is scoured to find precedents so that a notion of reality as linguistic expression or indefinitely infinite dissemination -- to use a more Derridian phrase - - can be presented as Christian. Equally, an element of Augustine’s trinitarian phrase which Anselm placed at the heart of its medieval developments is down played. This understands human language as true so far as it is similar to the divine natural language in which word and thing are identical. This unity is ultimately the ideas in the Divine Word to which we have access by the movement inward and upward.

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25 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 295-96.
28 See Fergus Kerr, Theology after Wittgenstein, 2nd ed., (London: SPCK, 1997), 186-90 with 74-6, 80, 206-11. Illumining, for the kind of understanding of the consequences of Wittgenstein for theology and religion moving here, is George Guiver, C.R., Faith in Momentum. Distinctiveness of the Church, (London: SPCK, 1990). The key to the future is ridding the western soul of its interiority, the “inner depths of personality.” Here Guiver locates a positive link with Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and nineteenth century atheistical Christianity in the need to overcome Augustine’s influence.
29 Milbank is clear about this and chooses extremely selective reinterpretation. See his “Sacred Triads,” 465: “What must be argued here against Charles Taylor and others, is that Augustine’s use of the vocabulary of inwardness is not at all a deepening of Platonic interiority, but something much more like its subversion.” On the reinterpretation of Augustine by Milbank and Lewis Ayres to this end, see my “ReChristianizing Augustine Postmodern Style,” 6, 45ff and note 41. For the opposed interpretation of Augustine both in relation to Plotinus and Descartes, see Stephen Menn, Descartes and Augustine, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
30 Most notable is his dusting off of William Warburton in “Pleonasm, Speech and Writing,” in The Word Made Strange.
In contrast, only by making being linguistic and by proposing this as the authentic Christian theology of the begotten Word, can Milbank bring back “another ontology” in the face of Heidegger. Man creates his linguistic world so totally, that “man as an original creator” participates “in some measure in creation ex nihilo”. In fact, we now have not ontology but “logontic” in which the divine and human are interchangeable. In creating a “logontic,” Milbank responds to Heidegger in Heideggerian terms. For Heidegger is, as much as any philosopher of our century, a thinker for whom thought and being are limited to language.33

Milbank is forthcoming about the character of his theological and trinitarian theology, his théo-onto-logie, and Thomas’s inadequacy from this perspective, (I am less certain than he that Augustine really is any more than Aquinas on his side). He writes of Vico and, indirectly, of Herman and Cusanus:

Factum ... is Verbum in God, and so the made cultural object is promoted to the status of a divine transcendental ... and this is equivalent to saying that God in his creation ad intra in the Logos ‘incorporates’ within himself the creation ad extra, including human history. ... Because Verbum marks a primordial difference in the Godhead, it realizes a perfect tension between Unity and Being ... and allows no lapse into either a henological totality of system or structure, nor an ontological totality of the isolated subject. When Verbum is included as a transcendental, all the transcendentals are transformed into personal intersubjective trinitarian categories: but this leaves us with more than a ‘social God’, it leaves us also with a cultural God. A Christian ontology that takes account of language and culture, will then be, more fully than before, a Trinitarian ontology.34

So much, then, for the first trinitarian differentiation. Milbank’s treatment of it through a theology which is social, linguistic and cultural35 leads directly to “The Second Difference.”

II. The Second Theological Difference. Getting beyond Theology

The differentiation which Heidegger requires of theology demands more than a recasting of the begetting of the Son from the Father. Milbank thinks that “For a Trinitarianism Without Reserve,” “The Second Difference,” the procession of the Holy Spirit, must be more strongly taken up by theology than hitherto.36 The end which Milbank requires theology to serve in his transmuted ontology suggests another metamorphosis. Following Heidegger into the realm of the Spirit will transform theology into poesis and praxis. But such a self-overcoming does not take place all at once. We must proceed step by step.

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32 Milbank, “Pleonasm, Speech and Writing,” 79.
33 See J.A. Doull, “The Philosophical Basis of Constitutional Discussion in Canada,” Animus, 2 (1997), an electronic journal at http://www.mun.ca/animus, 25: “In the medium of language was sought a community anterior to the tyranny of thought and the universal. Language might be taken in a fragmented and empirical form (Wittgenstein) or as inspired and unified poetical utterance (Heidegger).”
34 Milbank, “Pleonasm, Speech and Writing,” 80.
 Appropriately Jacques Derrida, whose philosophy is as indispensable for John Milbank’s trinitarian theology, as Plotinus and Porphyry are for Augustine’s, or Aristotle and Proclean Neoplatonism are for Thomas’, provides a guide to those who would traverse the negative theology of the Black Forest. In his “Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations,” he gives directions for the new way which Heidegger provides for theology. This way, “neither Greek nor Christian,” would enable theology to escape the problem his narrative creates.

It is necessary to distinguish between, on the one hand, onto-theology or theology [sic], and, on the other hand, theology. The former concerns the supreme being, the being par excellence, ultimate foundation or causa sui in its divinity. The latter is a science of faith or of divine speech, such as it manifests itself in revelation (Offenbarung). Heidegger seems to distinguish between manifestation, the possibility of Being to reveal itself (Offenbarkeit), and, on the other hand, the revelation (Offenbarung) of the God of theology.

For Westerners to get beyond their spiritual malaise, they have to know the power and reality of revelation before and independent of philosophy. There must be for us divine revelation which cannot be contained, reduced, entrapped by conceptualizing and objectifying reason. Such a theology must be, and, Derrida, quoting Heidegger, tells us that it can be: “Faith has no need of the thinking of being.”

This theology as “science of faith or of divine speech, such as it manifests itself in revelation” is evidently a theology independent of philosophy and so of ontology. But, this is not enough to free the God of the Hebrews from fatal entanglement with the Greeks. Derrida does not judge Heidegger to have succeeded in this negative theology without Greek philosophy. Something more radical may succeed. Derrida in his return to his Jewish roots, like postmodern Christian theologians, looks for religion in the direction of negative theology, provided it does not merely postpone presence and union with reality as hyperessentiality. It would be a religionless atheistic “nonknowledge,” which, nonetheless, prays, as Derrida does, but which, he maintains, Heidegger does not.

Here we have a key to how theology will respond again to Heidegger’s demands upon it. It will again go beyond him -- or rather, beyond what he says at this point. For here, and in respect to “The Second Difference,” theology moves beyond theoria, which it takes as well as philosophy and logos to be Greek, to poiesis and praxis. Again, it moves in

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38 Derrida, “How to avoid speaking: Denials,” 53.
39 Ibid., 56.
40 Ibid., 57.
accord with Heidegger’s own response to the modern forgetting of Being. Heidegger also
turned to 

*poiesis* and did so consistently. But to satisfy him it is not enough to attend to the
difference of Being and beings. The primal difference for him is between Being and
thought. In his interpretation of Parmenides’ poem, a reading determinative for his
philosophy, they are not the same but “meet in the Same.” This must divide him from
orthodox Christian trinitarian theology, especially that which follows Augustine in
understanding the Persons through Being, Understanding and Willing. The divine
thinking is the divine being. Derrida is right in designating Heidegger’s negative theology as neither
Christian nor Greek. The postmodern Christian theologians who follow Heidegger have not
faced this problem directly enough in their own approach to “The Second Difference.”

Responding to Heidegger’s demand that the theology of revelation be separated
from philosophy, at the end of our century a series of Christian theologies have appeared of
which the nearest historical likeness is the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth. Barth’s refusal of
the philosophical *logos* was prophetic for theology in our century generally. But the new
postmodern theologies are well beyond Barth. To understand fully what is moving, and to
appreciate the irony of theology’s position, we must understand how contemporary theology
is specifically determined in its antiphilosophical stance by its specific location relative to the
given philosophy of our time. Assuming the failure of the Hegelian endeavour to unite
philosophy and Christianity, an endeavour which postmodern theologians agree must be
taken as final, Barth discovered the extremely narrow space for his work within what Kant
allowed. Equally, theologians like John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion and John Zizioulas, work
within the space Heidegger assigns them. Even if Milbank accuses Marion of seeking “to be
both Barth and Heidegger at once,” when to Heidegger are added Derrida and
Wittgenstein, the same applies to Milbank.

The space philosophy after Heidegger allows Christian theology is defined by
quotations from Heidegger’s “The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics” righty
set at the very beginning of a recent French doctoral dissertation on the thought of John
Zizioulas. Dr. Konstantinos Agoras uses Jean-Luc Marion to disassociate God from *ens
commune* and to reverse “the idol of an absolute conceived after the manner of the most high
existent.” In this matter, Heidegger laid down one of the dogmas of postmodern religion.
Here his words are quoted to remind us that we -- as opposed to ancients, medieval and
moderns -- cannot worship God as cause:

Humans neither pray nor sacrifice to this God. It is possible neither to fall on
anxious knees nor to make music, sing and dance before the *causa sui*.

In order to restore the personal liberty out of which religious communion is possible,
Zizioulas will want to exorcise from the interior of theology the God of the philosophers,
the God to whom we cannot pray. For, as Heidegger prescribes:

45 For Milbank’s reinterpretation of this triad, see his “Sacred Triads,” 463.
47 Marion, *Étant Donné*, 329, note 1 describes the fact of revelation (if there is one) as exceeding “l’empan de
toute science,” so “seule une théologie, et à condition de se laisser construire à partir de ce fait seule (K. Barth
ou H.U. von Balthasar ...) pourrait éventuellement y accéder.” Also consult Taylor, “Denegating God,” 601
and Hankey, “Denys and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold,” 150.
49 I am here translating from the French but an English version may be found in *Identität und Differenz* trans. J.
50 Konstantinos Agoras, *Personne et Liberté, ou “être comme communion” “etvou oò kouvounia” dans l’oeuvre de Jean
Christian thought must no longer fight a campaign to find a philosophy or a science considered definitive in order that this might immediately be inappropriately baptized or awkwardly adapted. It ought rather to return to what has originally and properly been given to it.

This gift Agorast specifies as “the ‘presence’ of God in Christ.” He concludes by quoting Heidegger again on theology proper:

She has a double mission: to elaborate the concepts which permit thinking the strict specificity of revelation and to contribute to the development of the reason common to all.

If theology stayed exactly here, the result would still be theoretical. In fact, Zizioulas, in ways which Marion and Milbank also develop, unifies koinonia as mystery of the Church with koinonia as mystery of God, Pneuma with Eclesia, Christology with Pneumatics, liturgy -- especially the Eucharist -- with theology. Praxis, in the ecclesial community, and pneuma, as creative experience of charity, subsume theology as science and even as theoria. By this means, still working ever more deeply and completely within the fundamental Heideggerian narrative, framework and conceptions, postmodern theology expands its room by changing theology's character.

Professor Marion took a step in this direction in his first theological book, L'idole et la distance. Cinq études, and never turned back. For him, the Dionysian theology negates philosophical conceptualization, theology as science. The Dionysian writings are not the medium of Neoplatonic philosophy, but its overcoming by the Christian religion. Dionysius' statements are not propositions conveying a conceptually graspable philosophical and theological content. Rather they are directions for religious acts, hymns of praise and guides to union. In fact, Marion's theology is not a turn away from Neoplatonism, which was as much religion and spirituality as theology and philosophy. In Neoplatonic terms, we are moving from Plotinus and Porphyry to Iamblichus and Proclus, moving from philosophy and theology to theurgy.

Postmodern Christian theology is generally moving this way. Crucially, Milbank's embrace and interpretation of Plato is at one with his opposition of philosophy and theology. This opposition is fundamentally Heideggerian even if Milbank understands the history of theology and philosophy differently than Heidegger does. Milbank turns to Plotonism as against metaphysical, ontological and autonomous philosophy. Closest to his Plotonism is that most thoroughly developed by Iamblichus and his followers where revelation and theurgy have essential place. The Plato who is usually seen as the archetypal

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51 Ibid., 306ff.; see Marion, “A Relief for Theology,” 579.
philosopher has been replaced by one who inscribes reason within myth and sacramental ritual.

One of Milbank’s students celebrates Plato as leading “dialogue ... into doxology, which for Plato is our principle human function and language’s only possibility of restoration.”

Catherine Pickstock’s use of the Latin Mass against a modern division of subject and object, requires an emphasis on its theurgic aspect. It is essential that material things are numinous and be addressed as if personal. Her return to a Christianity for which the problem is how it may be distinguished from Platonism, depends upon an effective critique of Derrida’s reading of the Phaedrus. Her purpose, however, lies entirely within a contemporary problematic. She wishes the “restoration of the subject,” a “living subject,” with “a substantive, though not completed identity,” having “a definite but open identity.” Appropriately coinciding with this is a Neoplatonic reading of the Platonic Good, which is affirmed, and an embrace of the Socratic dependence on myth as modeling a Christian restoration of language as liturgical. Indeed, the myth about the origins of writing told by Socrates is treated as wisdom. She might be very happy in the Academy under Proclus, as happy as some think the pseudo-Dionysius was. But, her Christian supplement to Platonism is found in the church as historical and practical intersubjective community. Here she is trapped within the constraints of post-Heideggerian theology in a way that both Milbank and Marion make clear.

So, this theology has no sympathy for what in Augustine is Plotinian, his interiority, intellectualism, etc. In the alternative Neoplatonic tradition which extends from Iamblichus, acts beyond understanding give saving contact with the divine beyond philosophy, beyond theology confined to the logos. Union with the One beyond theoria is by ineffable acts. To quote Iamblichus, theoretical philosophy does not secure union: “Rather, it is the perfect accomplishment of ineffable acts, religiously performed and beyond all understanding.”

In our day, and in our terms, we travel this route on our way, as Milbank proposes, to art as “modernity’s own antidote to modernity,” to poesis and the key to theology. Milbank puts it thus:

poesis may be the key to ... a postmodern theology. Poesis ... is an integral aspect of Christian practice and redemption. Its work is the ceaseless re-narrating and ‘explaining’ of human history under the sign of the cross.

Christian life is to be understood as a poesis, or, more precisely, as most like making music. Life and theology come together in such poesis, not in thought.

Milbank describes his theological writing as “composing a new theoretical music.” Theory belongs to composition and is not separable from it. The requirement that we join

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55 Pickstock, *After Writing*, 43.
56 Ibid., 195ff.
57 Ibid., 3-46.
58 Ibid., 95, 199, 114, 118, 192, 211-12, 214. This position is less polemical than that of Milbank.
59 Ibid., 20-22.
60 Ibid., 23-46.
61 Ibid., 268-72.
62 Hankey, “ReChristianizing Augustine Postmodern Style,” 41 and 52ff.
63 Ibid., 52ff.
in the *poiesis* means that there can be no theoretical distance or objectivity. Theory occurs as a necessarily incomplete moment within *praxis*.

[P]ractice cannot claim to ‘know’ the finality of what it treats as final. ... We know what we want to know, and although all desiring is an ‘informed’ desiring, desire shapes truth beyond the imminent implications of any logical order, so rendering the Christian *logos* a continuous product as well as a process of ‘art’. ... Now desire, not Greek ‘knowledge’ mediates to us reality.67

Our present is getting over this objectivity:

The end of modernity ... means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like. 2. [T]heology .. no longer has to measure up to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality. ... 4. ... the point is not to ‘represent’ .. externality, but just to join in its occurrence, not to know, but to intervene, originate.68

Here, again, we have moved beyond theology to *poiesis* in a way analogous to -- but far from identical with -- the ancient pagan move from theology to theurgy. The ancient Neoplatonists had no desire to end with endless communitarian *praxis* but with the life of the gods turned toward the One. Human *poiesis* was therapeutic, its aim was unity with the good by which the gods are creative, but *cosmogenesis* is not final for gods or humans.69 Eriugena, whom we shall meet again shortly, deals with this restful and contemplative finality by making God revert upon himself as neither Created nor Creating.

The last step in the postmodern version of this move brings us to community, and, from there, we arrive at “The Second Difference.” The First Difference involved including *Verbum* as a transcendental category. Thus “all the transcendentials are transformed into personal intersubjective trinitarian categories.” This left us, at minimum, with a ‘social God.’ Community is essential. When theology is *poiesis*, Christian community is the *concentus musicus*,70 and the Church herself is “the second difference”. Milbank writes:

God involves not just the first difference of expressive articulation of content (inseparable from content), but also the second difference of interpretation of expression (inseparable from expression) ... God as Trinity is therefore himself community, and even ‘community in process’ infinitely realised, beyond any conceivable opposition between ‘perfect act’ and ‘perfect potential’. A trinitarian

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67 “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism”, 231-35. See also “Pleonasm, Speech and Writing,” 79-80.


70 Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 228.
ontology can therefore be a differential ontology surpassing the Aristotelian *actus purus*.

It will be crucial to our purpose to return to the criticism of Aquinas implicit in this contrast between true trinitarian differential ontology and that possible from within Aristotelian categories like potency, act and *actus purus*. But before considering what response might be made on behalf of an older philosophical theology both to this description of its philosophical character and to its development of trinitarian difference, we must allow Milbank to complete his description of trinitarian difference as this is determined by his post-Heideggerian philosophical circumstances.

Above all, as other contemporary theologians from Johann Baptist Metz developing Rahner’s thought, to Jürgen Moltmann on the Protestant side testify, the Holy Spirit is endless communitarian *praxis*. Generally, Milbank finds that other contemporary theologians have not pushed postmodern linguistic philosophy radically enough. They have not completely eliminated all substantial objectivity and subjectivity — the philosophical remnants of Greek myth. This elimination he has made essential to his “Radical Christian Orthodoxy.” Whatever distinctions Milbank makes between their theologies and his own, he is with his contemporaries in this: *theoria* must give place to divinized *praxis*.

For him, by the *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit, the “Church perpetuates or renews a Creation prior to all coercion and conflict” and is the divine community where all is external.

This event of reconciliation must be not merely believed in, but actively realized as the existence of a community in which mere ‘self-immediacy’ is infinitely surpassed.

With the surpassing of interiority and self-immediacy, we also pass beyond *theoria* and theology as *theoria*:

Unless it reflects upon the singularity of Christian norms of community, theology has really nothing to think about ... [I]f Christians ask what is God like? then they can only point to our ‘response’ to God in the formation of community. The community is what God is like.

Dr. Milbank is correct in judging that Trinitarian theology as *theoria* must come to an end when it attempts to give an account of Trinitarian difference within contemporary antiphilosophical philosophy. It remains to ask if the same is true for earlier accounts. Certainly, other accounts of the history of theology than his might be given. Further, Derrida is right in describing the determinative Heideggerian directives for postmodern theology as neither Greek nor Christian. No doubt earlier accounts are Greek, self-consciously dependent on Greek philosophy and elevate Greek *theoria*. They may have still as much or better claim than postmodern theologies to be Christian. Whatever they claim,

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71 Ibid., 233-34.
73 See, for example, *Theology and Social Theory*, 158, where Hegel “is unorthodox” because he posits a prior ‘moment’ of relatively unrealized and merely abstract subjectivity in God. He is also ‘heretical’ because he conceives of creation as a negation which results in self-alienation ...’
75 Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 228.
neither escape determination by philosophy. Further, intentionally and unintentionally, postmodern theologies reiterate features of the Neoplatonic thought in which orthodox Christian theology and doctrine were developed. In order to compare them, I propose to look at the treatment of God in Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*. I will consider how the Aristotelian *actus purus* is modified by the Neoplatonic intellectual structure within which it is contained and developed in that system. I shall show how in this philosophical medium Thomas has an account of Trinitarian difference which remains within *theoria*.

III. Thomas’ Trinitarian Theology. Difference within *Theoria*  
A. Aquinas: onto-theology, metaphysics and the primacy of theory

With some exceptions, Milbank tends to treat Aquinas as if he were an Aristotelian. When he does take account of the differences between Thomas and Aristotle (as when Aristotle is treated as an onto-theologian and Aquinas is not), these are ascribed to his Christianity rather than to his Platonism.⁷⁶ For example, he writes that, in contrast to Eckhart: “Aquinas tended to derive unity, intellect and goodness from *actus purus*.⁷⁷ Milbank sets the Aristotelian *actus purus* against a Trinitarian differential ontology. In this paper, we cannot look at Aristotle directly. We might wonder, however, if *actus purus* adequately translates *entelecheia*, a notion which requires the thought of a self-relation. The interchangability of *entelecheia* and *energeia* is crucial to Aquinas’ conception of being. Plotinus regards the inherent division of Aristotle’s noetic actuality as a deficiency which reduces it to second place relative to the One. So he might also raise a question.⁷⁸ But the Plotinian question is not directly mine here.⁷⁹ Further, I do not wish to deny that “Aquinas ... derive[d] unity, intellect and goodness from *actus purus*.” The words of the *Summa Theologiae* stand against that.⁸⁰ Rather I want to look at the context and character of “derive.”

In differencing from the Pseudo-Dionysius on whom his theology is so dependent, Aquinas recognised how much he owed him.⁸¹ If Rudi te Velde’s treatment of the relations between Thomas and Dionysius be correct, the key to how Thomas will relate participation and substantiality may well have come to him from Dionysius.⁸²

Aquinas will take the notions of participation which he received and forge of them a tool to explicate how God in one single act creates things ‘according to their kinds,’ not only presupposing nothing but bestowing the richest diversity through that very ordering act.⁸³

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⁷⁶ Compare Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” 40 and 44.
⁷⁷ Ibid., 45.
⁷⁸ See *Ennead* V. 1 3ff. and Hankey, “Aquinas' First Principle, Being or Unity?” *Dionysius*, 4 (1980), 143-45. *Ennead* V. 1 7 speaks about the connection between the contemplative return of Intellect to the One and Intellect’s self-definition. This passage, with statements ambiguous with respect to the One itself, and *Ennead* VI. 8 12-13, contain language about the interconnection of activity, being, substance, self, knowledge, will, and the One’s “choice and willing of itself” which are well on the way to the doctrines of Porphyry, Augustine, Dionysius and of the *Liber de causis* which stand between Aristotle and Aquinas. “The first principle posits itself and creates itself as well, and is self-productive activity. In it activity and being coincide.” Gatti, “Plotinus: the Platonic tradition,” 29; see 31-32.
⁷⁹ For something on Aristotle see my “Aquinas and the Passion of God,” 325-26.
⁸⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [Ottawa: Piana, 1953 =37], 1.3, 1; 1.3, 2; 1.4, 1; etc.
⁸¹ The following reproduces my argument in “Denys and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold,” 171.
This understanding of Thomas’ teaching on the creative act differs explicitly from that in the existential Thomism of Gilson and Fabro.\textsuperscript{84} John Milbank writes comparably to te Velde:

God’s \textit{essential} Being, the \textit{esse ipsum}, or the coincidence of Being with essence in God, is conceived as the full \textit{giving} of Being as an infinitely determined essence, whereby, alone, there is ‘to be’.

Milbank judges that such in a view there could be a “a stronger link between the theological account of \textit{esse}, on the one hand, and trinitarian theology on the other.” But this stronger link is not, as Milbank supposes, “beyond Aquinas.”\textsuperscript{85}

Significant in Aquinas is the way multiplicity and division come to be introduced into the divine and so how the divine names are diversified and ordered. The first name Thomas gives to the divine existence is Simplicity. Within Simplicity, the identity of \textit{esse} and \textit{essentia} appears for Thomas. This identity belongs to God who “\textit{est} .. per essentiam forma” and \textit{forma ... per se subsistens}.\textsuperscript{86} Identity is therefore no existential exclusion of essence.\textsuperscript{87} The divine \textit{esse} is dynamic so that the diverse predicates emerge out of the simplicity. God is “\textit{bonum per essentiam},”\textsuperscript{88} a goodness by its nature infinitely diffused within the existence of things. Yet the divine \textit{esse} is also Immutable, Eternal, and One. It is both the Unity essential to beings and One \textit{in se}.\textsuperscript{89}

The effect of the Neoplatonic positioning of being, understood as \textit{entelecheia}, relative to unity appears in Thomas’ theo-logic. Return to source becomes fundamental to the structure of being. Self-relation introduces that otherness which allows the derivation of which Milbank writes. Perfection comes immediately after Simplicity in order to correct the human understanding of the simple as deficient.\textsuperscript{90} Perfection, (and so Goodness, a name which is in a way prior to Being for Aquinas),\textsuperscript{91} occurs within the dialectical movement between the divine Simplicity and the divine Unity. There are here, in principle, both “a henological totality of system or structure” and “an ontological totality of the .. subject” (not the “isolated” but, nonetheless, a total subject), which the “primordial difference” of \textit{Verbum} for Milbank would exclude. Indeed, when we take the step beyond the first circle which the


\textsuperscript{85} Milbank, “Can a Gift be Given?”, 153-54.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{ST}, I,3,2, resp. and ad 3. This is the overall argument of Hankey, \textit{God in Himself}.


\textsuperscript{88} \textit{ST}, I,3,2.

\textsuperscript{89} Hankey, \textit{God in Himself}, 57-80; see, on the contrary, Prouvost, \textit{Thomas d’Aquin et les thomistes}, 140, note 1, quoting Yves Labbe (\textit{René Thomiste}, 92 [1992], 654), with whom he agrees. Their common position is that Dionysius separates himself from Proclus by giving priority to the Good over the One. So far as Thomas follows Dionysius in this, his theology would be equally apophatic. I see no evidence either that Dionysius separates himself from Proclus in this way or that Thomas follows him. Moreover, Aquinas does not interpret Dionysius as giving a priority of this kind to the Good.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{ST}, I,3, prologue: “qua simplicita in rebus corporalius sunt imperfecta et partes”.

divine Being circumscribes in its relation to Unity, we borrow from the Proclean Liber de causis to discover that God Knows. Here too the logic is a return to unity as the self-relation of perfectly actual being: *ipse est maxime rediviis ad essentiam suam et cognoscens seipsum.*

Being is act, and, as perfect act, it is also simple. As perfect simplicity, it is also good, and, as good, infinitely self-diffusive. As diffusive good, the divine unity must be inclusive as well as a transcending negation. As a perfect return upon itself into unity, it is thinking. Thought’s inherent desire for itself as object implies that the divine is the good to itself as will. Because the activities of thinking and willing are purely internal, they are self-relations. But relations existent in the simple must be subsistences, and so the trinitarian differences, the Persons, appear. Thus, in its medieval Neoplatonic context, Aristotle’s *purus actus* is an *entelechia* both self-differentiating and complete within the undifferentiated unity of essence.

What is crucial here is incomprehensible for postmodern theology. The trinitarian differential ontology -- so to speak -- depends upon metaphysics. So the trinitarian differentiation, the trinitarian theology, is through and through metaphysics and ontology and theology. It is an Aristotelian onto-theology -- Milbank is right in regarding Aristotle as an onto-theologian, modified by Neoplatonism. Here lies its strength as Christian theology.

To the end, Aquinas is consistent in this regard. When late in his life he is writing an exposition of the *Liber de causis* and comparing it with Proclus’ *Elements* and with the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, Aquinas finally knows that it is not “The Theology of Aristotle.” The editors of a recent translation into English tell us that the *Liber* is for Thomas “metaphysics” in contrast to the theology proper, and refer to the beginning of the *Commentary*. But, that, when read, turns out to lead the philosophic quest for the ultimate happiness by means of intellectual contemplation to the gospel hope for eternal life in the knowledge of the one true God. By the continuity of what is sought in philosophy and in the gospel, Thomas explains why theology is one with the philosophic knowledge of causes. To his views on this in the *Summa*, I turn next.

So far I have said nothing about the location of Aquinas’ trinitarian differential ontology within the history of Christian trinitarian theology. I do intend to say a word about that -- at least as it bears upon the Christian transmission of Neoplatonic thought. From there I shall conclude with some further remarks about how far Aquinas can go with postmodern difference. To prepare for both, I need to make a remark about *theoria* in Aquinas. Here we juxtapose Christian faith, Aristotelian First Philosophy as the knowledge of causes, Dionysian and Augustinian Neoplatonisms.

The primacy of *theoria* in theology is asserted at the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae* and stands in relation to two contrasts. Both are relevant to our considerations. The first

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92 *ST*, I,14,2 ad 1. Throughout it will be necessary to consult my *God in Himself* in order to find the support for my interpretation of the *Summa*.


94 See also Marion, “A Relief for Theology,” 579.

contrast is between the theoretical and the practical. Theology is theoretical because its subject is God and is ultimately God’s own science. God knows himself and what he does *eadem scientia*, by the same science. Participation in that science is human beatitude. Both for God and for us, the practical is contained within *scientia speculativa*. Principally, then, seeing theology as theory involves getting to the divine perspective.

The second contrast is between this science and the philosophical sciences which Thomas without hesitation presupposes. They have as their subjects the various forms of being and are all either practical or theoretical. The knowledge which is *saecra doctrina*, overcoming the distinction between science and wisdom, as well as that between practical and theoretical, comes from, and participates, the unity beyond the reach of philosophical theology.96 Thus, *saecra doctrina* is at least as much the successor of the all embracing theological systems of the later Neoplatonists as it is the heir of the First Philosophy of Aristotle. Still, the knowledge attained in Aristotle’s sapiential science must not be despised; according to Aquinas, it pertains to beatitude.

The most important discussion of beatitude occurs in Question 12 on how God is known by us. There we find Thomas’ notorious doctrine of created grace developed in order to explain how we can have knowledge of God’s essence. In asserting the necessity of direct vision of God’s essence for human happiness, Aquinas sets Augustine against the Pseudo-Dionysius. Indeed, in his late exposition of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, Aquinas accuses Eriugena of heresy because Eriugena has absorbed the Dionysian negative theology more completely than Thomas will himself. Aquinas accuses Eriugena of denying that all the angels see God “per essentiam”. This was a mistake, Aquinas asserts, “de primis studentibus in libros Dionysii.” Such was “Ioannes Scotus, qui primo commentus in libros Dionysii. Sed hac opinio haeretica est ...”97 *Haeretica est*

For Aquinas the denial of such sight is contrary to both faith and reason. Faith would be nullified because its purpose is human beatitude. “Since the final happiness of man consists in his highest activity, reasoning, if no created intellect could see God, either it would never achieve happiness or its happiness would consist in something other than God. This is foreign to faith.”98 Reason, in turn, would be denied. It is fulfilled in the knowledge of the principles and causes. This frustrated, man’s natural desire would be vain. So both faith and reason require that “the blessed see the essence of God.” Presence, vision, essence, *theoria* are ultimate, and Scriptural theology must respect the integrity of what philosophy demands.

B. Eriugena, Anselm and Bonaventure

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To locate Thomas’ treatment of the Trinity in the history of Christian theology in the Middle Ages, three figures may be mentioned: Eriugena, who here chooses Dionysius against Augustine, and Anselm, who chooses Augustine, perhaps -- though this is only a guess -- against Eriugena, and Bonaventure. Bonaventure tries to unite Anselm’s Augustine with Dionysius. Aquinas will do the same and the difference between them is illuminating.

Eriugena works between two opposed trinitarian logics. The first: *ousia, dynamis, energēs*, he attributes to Dionysius, the other: *esse, velle, scire*, to Augustine. The Dionysian triad is fundamental to all things, both intellectual and unintellectual. The triad “constantly and incorruptibly present in all natures” constitutes them as manifestations of the divine substance, in itself unknown. The triad of *ousia, dynamis, energēs* is not for self-knowledge directly, but rather it moves to manifestation and externalization by which the divine becomes knowable. However, Eriugena identifies *ousia, dynamis, energēs* with another trinity: *nous, logos, dianoia*. Through the movement from intellect to reason to sense, and by their relation within the human, saving self-knowledge is finally achieved. Crucially, the first triad remains dominant in Eriugena’s system. Self-knowledge is attained only as a result of a total self-othering, a self-othering which is also the divine self-creation and, thus, the creation of the world in and through the human. Humans are known to themselves only through a complete externalization, a total *exitus* and *reditus*.

It is no surprise that John Milbank writes enthusiastically about Eriugena. He seems a precursor of Milbank’s cultural theology where the divine and human meet in *poiesis*. Aquinas uses the Dionysian triad to structure treatises on God, the angels and the human within the *Summa*. Its principle also governs the overall structure of the *Summa* itself. In it, the human and the divine come together through a total *exitus* and *reditus*, which must include the whole of what is other, including the physical.

Augustine’s own use of his trinity of being, intellect and will to establish individual self-certainty in a turn inward does not suit the purposes of Eriugena. In contrast, Eriugena’s self is situated between the extremes of unknowable essence and perfect knowledge attained by total exteriorization. Eriugena says that in the beginning humanity turned away from a possible Paradisal knowledge allowing immediate knowledge of God and self without the passage into sense. He avoids contradicting Augustine on the Trinity by transposing intellect and will -- he writes, instead, of *esse, velle, scire* -- by using Augustine’s triad very little, and by assimilating it to the Dionysian triad.

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99 The almost endless discussion of nothingness at the beginning of the *Monologion* so as to turn trinitarian theology to the inner production of the *locutio rerum* raises suspicions, but other explanations are possible.
101 *Periphyseon*, I. 506B.
102 *Periphyseon*, II. 570A.
103 On the political and ecclesiastical consequences of this, see W.J. Hankey, “Dionysius dixit, Lex divinitatis est ultima per media reducere’: Aquinas, hierocracy and the ‘augustinisme politique’,” in *Tommata D’Aquino*, 138.
104 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 424-26; idem, “Plenasm, Speech and Writing,” 79-80.
105 For example at *de Cunctate dei*, XI. 26.
106 This assimilation was normal in the Middle Ages and later, see my “Dionysius dixit,” 132 and my “Augustinian Immediacy and Dionysian Mediation in John Colet, Edmund Spenser, Richard Hooker and the Cardinal Bérulle,” *Augustinus in der Neuzeit*, edited by Dominique de Courcelles, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 117-52. This is not to deny that Eriugena also chooses Augustine against Dionysius — see Donald F. Duelow, “Isaiah Meets the Seraph: Breaking Ranks in Dionysius and Eriugena” *Eriugena: East and West. Papers of the Eighth International Colloquium of the Society for the Promotion of Eriugena Studies*, Chicago and Notre Dame, 18-20 October 1991, edited B. McGinn and W. Otten, Notre Dame Conference in Medieval Studies V (Notre Dame:
The opposite is true of Anselm. Both Monologion and Proslogion claim to be no more than results of reflections on Augustine. This is mistaken humility. Augustine is carried beyond himself into the freer relation to reason which places Anselm on the way between Augustine and Descartes. Still the elements are all Augustinian. The arguments of Anselm’s treatises require not only the Plotinian and Augustinian move ab exterioribus ad interioria, ab inferioribus ad superioria, but inclusion of the presupposed externality, the per alius, within the divine per se. From the union of these, both in the meditative soliloquy -- one of the theological genres Augustine invented -- (the Monologion), and also in the alloquium, address to another, (the Proslogion), faith is transformed into rationes necessariae.

For Anselm, the Augustinian mental trinity of being, knowing and loving is both pure self-relation and also the primal self-othering to which all that is per alius is reduced. The identity of word and reality, on which divided human speech and thought depends, is also the locutio rerum, the production of a mental word. This production is essential to mind or spiritus. So far as this Verbal self-differentiation, this “First Difference”, is identical in finite and in infinite mind, a deduction of the Divine Trinity is possible. This deduction from the univocal structure of mind, a deduction which Augustine never made, Anselm undertakes in his Monologion.

Aquinas refuses such a deduction in his Summa. A genuine development in his teaching brings him to the conviction that a conception of a mental word is essential to thought. Intelligere dividere, And so it might seem that he is on his way to a linguistic cultural theology. But, from the character of the human production of a mental word, he does not think anything can be safely concluded about a divine differentiation. This prevents Aquinas being recruited for contemporary cultural theology where the divine and human meet in the original poesis ex nilo. Anselm’s Augustinian need to find his quest contained within the divine per se, where the divine differentiation into equal substances is within the self-relation of being, intellect, and love prevents his being converted to poetic theology.

Bonaventure’s complex Itinerarium includes marriage between Augustine, (sometimes read through Anselm), Anselm himself, and Dionysius. Triadic logics, through not used to exclude binary and other patterns, dominate. Perhaps in their combination, we may find something positive for theological poesis. To look, we must first move from the Monologion to the Proslogion.


109 This is a summary of part of the argument of chapters 5 to 29 of the Monologion.


111 See Hankey, God in Himself, 133.

112 Monologion, c. 79.
In the *Proslogion*, Anselm neither uses nor arrives at Augustine’s psychological triad in order to consider the Trinity.113 *Proslogion*’s beginning, its misnamed “ontological argument”,114 Bonaventure unites to Dionysius’ doctrine of the self-diffusive good. Bonaventure informs us: “Dionysius, following Christ, says that the Good is God’s primary name.”115 Describing the highest good, Bonaventure calls it:

without qualification that than which no greater can be thought. And it is such
[Bonaventure continues, following Anselm in the *Proslogion*] that it cannot rightly be thought not to be, and since to be is in all ways better than not to be, it is such that it cannot rightly be thought of unless it be thought of as three and one. For good is said to be self-diffusive, and the highest good (*summum bonum*) is supremely self-diffusive.116

The self-sufficient and perfect good communicates itself so that persons are formed who give “to one another their entire substance and nature.”117 In this emanation, “Ibi est *summa communicatio et vera diffusio*.118 “You are able to see that, through the utmost communicability of the Good, there must be the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”119

The arguments of Anselm in the *Proslogion*, and of Bonaventure in the *Itinerarium*, are from the simple self-sufficiency of the highest good communicating itself within the divine unity so as to bring forth distinct divine Persons. The two doctors differ so far as the explicit Dionysian character of Bonaventure’s argument makes the dialectical confrontation between being and unity, good and triadic diffusion stronger. In Bonaventure, they are the opposed visions of the Cherubim who gaze across the Mercy Seat. For both doctors, the relations of the Persons are the relations of love (other constitutive activities are not mentioned). The Seraphic Doctor begins and concludes his *Itinerarium* not with the intellectualism of Aquinas but with love.120 However, the *Proslogion* concludes with the demand to know; *delectatio* is complete knowledge of the perfect good.121 Love in the *Itinerarium* does not lead to *poesis* or communitarian *praxis*. The *Itinerarium* concludes beyond division in the silence and darkness essential to union as represented in *The Mystical Theology* of Dionysius.122 Bonaventure’s Anselm leads to Dionysius, and a “spiritual” union fulfilling vision is said again and again to be “enough.”

C. Aquinas: the ontology of difference

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116 Ibid., vi, 2, 310.
117 Ibid., vi, 2, 310.
118 Ibid., vi, 3, 311.
119 Ibid., vi, 2, 311.
120 Though on this question, Thomas and Bonaventure are both more subtle than an exclusive either/or -- Dante in the Paradise of the Doctors is right to make them complementary.
121 This complete knowledge must fully satisfy every aspect of the human, see *Proslogion*, cc. 1, 14, 17, 24-26.
We come back now for the last time to Aquinas and to a brief consideration of the ontology of difference. I shall deal with two general questions: 1. how theological difference is constructed, and 2. difference within the Trinity. In respect to the second, there are three subheads: a. motionless motion, b. giving and receiving, c. the difference of the Holy Spirit. In dealing with each of these I have in mind the literature both contemporary and medieval which we have considered already, though space will not permit bringing out the points of comparison.

Difference is constructed in Thomas’ Summa Theologiae, as in Neoplatonic systems generally, by a movement from a higher to a lower level requiring the increase of differentiation. When this process is complete, it is reversed. Thus, Aquinas begins with a treatment of the substance of God through a dialectical movement from simplicity to unity developed in nine questions. He goes on to the self-related activities of knowing and loving and to the activity ad extra of power. This section in the descending triad which structures the treatment of Deus in se concludes with the divine happiness. God’s Beatitude is a function of his knowing in much the same way as God’s Unity corresponds to Simplicity at the immediately higher level. Knowing and loving, as the activities making internal relations in God, become the first and second substantial differences. Self-knowledge and Self-love become, at this third “personal” level, the begotten of the Son or Logos from the Being of the Father and the procession of the Spirit or Love from both. It is crucial to see that after these emanations -- Thomas’ own term123 -- differentiating emanation continues. But, because differentiation is then no longer within the medium of the divine substance, its character is radically dissimilar.

Within the divine substance, differentiation produced only numerical multiplication of equal substances. Once outside divinity itself, the mirroring of the divine goodness requires inequality of grade and distinction of kind as well as numerical multiplicity -- making this transition is logically the most difficult; in later Neoplatonism the benads serve this necessity. Three ranks are created by the various forms in which matter and form -- already analogously present within divinity itself -- relate. These three are: the angelic realm of pure intellect, the realm of material and sensible things without intellect, and the human which is in between.

Most of the Summa is devoted to the world humans make for themselves as free principles of their own works, little gods, seeking their own happiness.124 Certainly this is poesis, and poesis of which the basis is the human imaging of the divine, but it is poesis and praxis which is outside that mind and love which are united and subsisting in the identity of esse and essentia. In that otherness, the self-relation of knowledge and will in which happiness is sought falls into the confusion and self-assertion which are sin. To overcome that impossible frustration of the common human and divine will for the happiness of spiritual creatures requires a divine self-othering by which human difference in its opposition to the divine goodness may be drawn back within it.125 For this, the substance of the divine Son must be found to contain an as yet unknown difference: the divine actus purus is the identity of esse which contains the difference of essence and existence. So, in accord with the formula of Chalcedon, the one divine Person, or hypostasis, or essence as esse, has two

123 St, I,34,2; I,40, prol.
124 On the structure and character of the Secunda pars, and an argument as to why it does not fit within a Neoplatonic exitus reales framework, see Mark D. Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy in Catholic Theology, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 141, n. 6.
125 This is the basis of the necessary reasoning by which the incarnation is deduced in the Car deus homo of Anselm, see the interesting remarks of John Milbank, “The Second Difference,” 182.
existences. By this difference, having its logic in a treatment of being which Pierre Hadot and others traced from Porphyry to Aquinas,126 metaphysics is already -- in principle -- trinitarian theology, and trinitarian theology is already Christology. The end is in the beginning.

Thus, there is perhaps greater difference in the original actus purus than may have been supposed. I turn to look at it again to bring out differential features in the Neoplatonic form in which Aquinas received it.

This is not the place to trace how Aquinas came to read Aristotle in the way that Neoplatonists often did when reconciling him with Plato.127 The most important medium of this interpretation for him was the Liber de causis and the Arabic commentators. In the case we examine, Averroes, for one, whom Aquinas called “The Commentator”, handed on the reconciling reading already present in Proclus. Aquinas supposed that Aristotle did not assert against Plato that intellect was different from motion (as text and argument of the de Anima say) but that intellect was a different kind of motion. Intellectual motion is not, like physical motion, the act of the imperfect, but is rather the activity of the perfect (actus perfectus), a complete return upon self, in fact, motionless motion. This is, for the Neoplatonists, the character of the life of Nous, and we encounter it when Aquinas comes to the questions about God’s knowledge. When he considers life, we arrive simultaneously at what is always in act, at Aristotle’s self-thinking thought as God’s perfect life, and at the Neoplatonic motionless motion as the means of ascribing life to God.128

Just to have the categories, motionless motion -- which Aquinas will not always employ -- and activity of the perfect -- which he is pleased to use -- is enough. Neoplatonic being, which, when perfect, is self-knowing subjectivity because perfectly returned upon itself, is a metaphysical Circumcession. The moving circle is full of differences but always also complete. Aquinas would have difficulty with John Milbank’s statement:

In God .. potential is itself infinitely actualized, yet the category insists that an infinite actus purus (unlike that of Aristotle) is not a closure, or a circumscription - God does not limit even himself, any more than he causes, begins or ends himself.129

The activities of knowing and loving, and their essential interconnection expand the difference generated by and contained within the always complete circle.130 Self-knowing by the creator requires self-differentiation, because the truth of the divine ideas necessitates a

127 On the importance of this reconciliation in the development, see my review of Simplicius, On Aristotle’s Physics 5, (Cornell University Press, 1997) for Bryn Mawr Classical Review [http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/bmr.html], BMCR 98.3.19.
128 Aristote, De Anima, I,3 and III,7; Aquinas, Sententia libri de Anima, Opera Omnia XLV, 1 (Roma/ Paris: Leonina/ Vrin, 1984), I,vi, p. 30, 219-22; I,1, p. 51, 207-10; III,vi, p. 230, 29-36; Summa contra Gentiles, I,13; ST, I,18,1 and 3; and my God in Himself, 103-6.
129 Milbank, “Can a Gift be Given?”, 154.
130 Aquinas considers the ways in which the various motions may be attributed to God at In libros Beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositis, ed. C. Pera (Turin/ Rome: Marietti, 1950), IX, iv, 839-42; God may be called circular.
comparison between God’s essence as cause and as imitated. Distinguishing love from knowing requires distinguishing two forms of the divine self-possession. In the first, being is for itself and moved to itself under the form of truth. In the second difference, which must not be the first - the negative here is crucial - the movement is ultimately spoken of as impulsion, and it is being’s relation to itself as known, but known as good, and so also desired. The identity and difference here produces the trinitarian “double procession” of Father and Son as origins of the Spirit. One more element is required in order to appreciate the significance of “impulsion” in the divine motionless motion, and therefore the nature of “The Second Difference” in Aquinas.

Aquinas moves from the divine considered as self-related activities to examine the relations within the essence. These the divine simplicity requires to be substances -- so, significantly, as with Bonaventure, it is Neoplatonic simplicity which requires differentiation to be substantial! Moreover, the move to trinitarian Persons from activities is also for the sake of the greatest unity. When an intellectual procession is concerned, “so much more perfectly it proceeds, so much greater is the unity with that from which it proceeds.” The activities are modified when objectified as Persons, so that the divine seems to have submitted itself to a kind of passion. The Persons are the essence as given and received. Even if the motion is not proper (the act of the imperfect), there is, properly speaking, a sapere. The procession of intellectual activity engenders a substantial difference, a difference of infinite subsistences. Moreover, the divine knowing, as source, is Father; as the essence known, thus, as object, it is Son. “The Son understands not by producing a word but as being a word which comes forth from another.” Father and Son are thus opposed as well as united. The opposition engendered must be overcome. The connexio duorum is the Spirit who receives his being from both as love. As Aquinas says, “If you leave out the Spirit, it is not possible to understand the unitas connexions inter Patrem et Filium.” Aquinas is explicit that this whole trinitarian process is an exitus and reditus. It is the basis of that other going out and return which is creation.

Thomas’ position on “The Second Difference” is difficult to understand. The Spirit has two opposed aspects. On the one hand, it is connexio, nectus, unitas, because it is bond of love overcoming the opposition of Father and Son. As spiritus, which is the proper name of the third Person as well as the nature of divinity as such, the return to it is return to the unity from which Personal difference arises. On the other hand, the Spirit is love as ecstatic. Love is “an action passing from the lover to the beloved.” The Spirit is thus “Gift.” Love is the primal gift, since, as he quotes Aristotle: “a gift is a giving which can have no return.” The Spirit is the love by which all graces are given. So, by the Holy Spirit, the Trinity comes in a mission to humans. In sum, the Divine Love is both the bond of unity and ecstatic.

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132 ST, I,27,1 ad 2.
133 ST, I,42,1 ad 3. See Hankey, God in Himself, 126-27, 131.
134 ST, I,34,2 ad 4 and I,37,1 ad 4.
135 ST, I,39,8.
136 ST, I,32,3 ad 3; I,42,5 ad 3; I,36,4 ad 1 and I,39,8. See Hankey, God in Himself, 119 and 131.
137 ST, I,37,1 obj. 2.
138 ST, I,38,2.
139 ST, I,43,5 ad 1.
Significantly, in the circular motion doubling on itself which is composed by the
questions on the Trinity in the Summa Theologiae, the questions on the Spirit are transitional.
They are both the term of the outward movement and the beginning of the return to
origin. However, these opposed aspects are only the two aspects of the nature of spirit:
“which seems to signify impulsion and motion.” “It is the property of love that it move and
impel the will of the lover into the beloved.” So the motion and impulse of love carry
both God in se and us back to unity.

At the conclusion of divinity proper we are left not only with the difference by
which willing was distinguished from knowing, but also with the dialectical motion, the reditio
ad seipsum by which being is constituted. There is a second difference and it is process or
motion, but it is actus perfecti.

Conclusion

For Aquinas the self-differentiation of God, his internal emanation, which is the
return of the divine being upon itself in knowledge and love, is the origin and ratio of the
divine emanation ad extra, creation. But in Thomas’ view, for creation to be free, to be a
genuine act of love, a gift, the process of the divine life must be complete in itself. The
circle is moving, but it is perfect, moving upon itself.

Such is the result in a theology which remains with philosophy and within Greek
theoria, even if philosophy and theology have been limited and transmuted in their
Neoplatonic passage to the Christian doctors. Theology remains with the thinking of being,
with ontology. The self-related structure of subjectivity becomes essential in the henological
modification of that ontology. The mutual modifications of the henology and the ontology
do nothing to reduce the perfection of the divine subjectivity or the totality of the system.
The negative theology is for the sake of a hyperessential vision which is total presence and
complete theoria. Even in bac vita, theology theoretically encircles and orders praxis. Finally,
or one might better say, firstly, metaphysics remains at the heart of sacra doctrina. Theology is
always moving hors-tete to the structure of being and God in se at once. The present
incapacity of divided human reason to complete an analogy with the divine thinking does
not make us by poesis participants in the original linguistic creatio ex nihilo. Rather it makes us
aware of the difference between the identity of intelligere and dicere in us and in God. By the
standards of postmodern Christian theology, it would be hard to find anything worse than
Thomas’ science of sacra scriptura.

There is no neutral ground on which to stand in attempting to judge between
postmodern trinitarian theology and Thomas’. John Milbank demonstrates correctly that
there is no raw Christian experience of the Holy Spirit “without being able in some way to
articulate to oneself the rationale for the personal subsistence of the Spirit.” Revelation is
not independent of theology, and neither postmodern nor Thomistic theology are
independent of philosophy. Thomas is more ready to admit that dependence than are his
postmodern successors. For nothing is more determinative of the present anti-philosophical
stance of theology than its dependence on the current anti-philosophy. Theology’s
dependence is so total that it appears, in fact, to be a new apologetics. In any case, the result

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140 See Hankey, God in Himself, 115ff., and B. Lonergan, Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas, ed. D.B. Burrell,
141 ST, 1.38.2.
is that neither revelation, nor theology, nor philosophy provides neutral ground for an arbitrator.

There is perhaps one reconciling word to be said, though it contains a rock of offense. So far as the primary trinitarian difference requires the passage of divinity into infinite indeterminacy, into an endless finitude, which as a principle of divinity prevents theoretical completion, Thomas’ self-differentiating Trinity and a postmodern one are incompatible. The same is true of “The Second Difference,” if, as a consequence of infinite verbal indeterminacy, the communitarian process which is both divine and human becomes endless praxis. However, if trinitarian difference requires only that difference is essential to divinity and not just once but twice, then Thomas’ trinitarian theology is fuller and richer than an antiphilosophical and anti-Greek polemic can think.

If, however, its rich logic be set in opposition to the Aristotelian actus purus, and if an opposition to onto-theology be also required, we are in a bad way. For this would exclude from view the continuity between Aristotle’s ontological theology and the systematic henological theology in which it was conveyed to Thomas. It is just these which make difference fundamental, all pervasive, and understandable in Thomas’ trinitarian theology.

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