

Humbrecht, Thierry-Dominique. *Trinité et création au prisme de la voie négative chez saint Thomas d'Aquin*. Bibliothèque de la Revue thomiste. Paris: Parole et Silence, 2011. Pp 788. ISBN 978-2-84573-97-8

Review for *The Thomist*
by Wayne J. Hankey
Dalhousie University and King's College

This massive volume by a prolific member of the Dominican Thomists of Toulouse, follows another in the same area, *Théologie négative et noms divins chez saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 2005). A dissertation directed by Olivier Boulnois and with Gilles Emery, Jean-Luc Marion, Remy Brague, Rudi Imbach, and Alain de Libera on the jury, *Théologie négative* earned Fr Humbrecht a doctorate in Philosophy from the purely secular École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. Like *Théologie négative* and, in general, like the scholarly works of his Toulousian confreres, *Trinité et création* is simultaneously minutious in its survey of the works of Aquinas, well-informed in respect to the history of philosophy and theology, engaged with contemporary continental philosophy, especially with those issues which Heidegger imposed on it, and devoted to serving the theology of the Catholic Church. *Trinité et création* was written as Fr Humbrecht's dissertation for the canonical doctorate of Theology at the Dominican University of Fribourg in Switzerland. It was supervised there by Gilles Emery, with François-Xavier Putallas, and Serge-Thomas Bonino on the jury, among other notable philosophical – theological scholars of St Thomas.

In both doctoral theses, the interests of the Church are understood from a distinctly conservative perspective. Nonetheless, even if what can be preserved from the Neo-Thomist revival initiated in the nineteenth century and its Gilsonian continuation is cherished, there are no faux pas resulting from ignorance of history, fantastic invention, or lack of philosophical or theological sophistication. Fr Humbrecht's framework, questions, and solutions belong to an intellectual world common to him, his supervisors, and his juries.

On the philosophical side, and crucial for his treatment of the relation of philosophy and revealed theology, is the framework fixed by Jean-Luc Marion's postmodern criticisms of metaphysics, of negative theology as atheism, and of Neoplatonism as the self-defeating climb up the ladder of negation as abstraction. Despite refusing to substitute Marion's formula, "*théologie négative ou noms divins*" for his own "*théologie négative et noms divins*", and generally opting for the inclusive "and", rather than the exclusive "or", Marion's problematic is always present implicitly or explicitly in Humbrecht's *Théologie négative*. It is evident in the crucial question of the relation between Proclus and Dionysius there, the question of the relation between the Neoplatonic metaphysics of

Dionysius' undoubted source for the treatise on the divine names, and its Christian reiteration taken over by Aquinas. Fr Humbrecht does not see so much Thomas' delight in the metaphysical play, which, beginning with simplicity, powerfully and surely manifests step by step the divine self-differentiation and self-determination. Rather metaphysics tends to negation, to an emptiness which only Christian revelation can fill. This is Marion's Dionysius set in opposition to Neoplatonism. Importantly this chiasmus is carried over into *Trinité et création*. Fr Humbrecht is treating there these subjects in Aquinas through "the prisme of the negative way." Neoplatonism is described as "the univocity seeking to pass beyond itself" (*Trinité et création*, page 32). Aquinas is easily able to use terms which belonged to "pagan participation," because "in respect what is essential they have already been Christianised and metaphysically rectified" by Dionysius vis-à-vis Proclus (*Trinité et création*, p. 30; compare *Théologie négative*, p. 743). Nothing is said of how Aquinas misunderstood both Dionysius and Proclus in the most important way on the nature of the First, an error exhibited in his most philosophically sophisticated Exposition, that on the *Liber de causis*. The negative way is described as a monstrous parasite on the tree of theology leaving it empty and dried out needing the Incarnate Word and Aquinas the gardener (*Trinité et création*, p. 46; compare *Théologie négative*, p. 783-784).

The aim of *Trinité et création* is to find in Aquinas both a through-going use of the negative way which prevents the reduction of God to a being known conceptually and a positive theology which enables continued assertion of the dogmas of Catholic Church in respect to the Trinity and creation. There is no pretence that having both is not problematic and the dilemmas are considered seriously. Our question must be as to whether Fr Humbrecht's solution is satisfactory. The separation of what Aquinas united in a continuous argument in the first forty-five questions of his *Summa theologiae* into two different volumes, submitted respectively for doctorates in two distinct disciplines, Philosophy and ecclesiastical Theology, housed in two radically different institutions, suggests that Fr Humbrecht's approach to the subjects may be importantly different from Thomas' own.

Thomas certainly distinguished generically the theology which is a part of philosophy from that which pertains to sacred doctrine, but he kept the two together in one logical development moving from the simple to the more and more divided, which is, nonetheless, constantly drawn back to its origin. He constantly transgressed the division of labour between the Faculties of Arts and of Theology and spent much of his last years still engaged in the philosophical work of expositing the Aristotelian corpus. In contrast, Fr Humbrecht's theologian is "a Christian sage not a sage of philosophy" (*Trinité et création*, page 732). However, for the well-balanced moderates who he, and his Aquinas, are, there is no dispensing with metaphysics. In accord with Fr Humbrecht's

reordering of Thomist theology, it is the role of the dialectic of concepts in the doctrine of the Trinity which convinces him that: "Quelque chose qui se refuse à la métaphysique doit cependant être traduit métaphysiquement" (*Trinité et création*, page 734).

Fr Humbrecht's solution is to extend the negative way in Aquinas beyond any "region" (e.g. the question of God or being) and to find it obligatory and infiltrated throughout. He correctly judges that, in Aquinas, the negative is subordinated to the positive and has become a correction to the mode of signification. However, it is beyond the dogmas about Neoplatonism within which Fr Humbrecht thinks to recognise that this correction of the human mode of thinking and speaking is a Neoplatonic strategy, whose formulae stretch back at least to the *Sententiae* of Porphyry, that there it becomes the foundation of the doctrine of analogy, and that using it comprehensively is Proclean. The positive to which the negation of mode is subordinate is not, for Humbrecht on Aquinas, the "logico-métaphysique" (*Trinité et création*, page 727), but rather Christian revelation. Negation is subordinated to the double task of theology to manifest and refute. Aquinas wished to serve the Councils of the Church and his moderation of negative theology to a correction of mode is represented as an endeavour to promote Lateran IV's (1215) balancing of the dissimilarity and similarity between the Creator and the creature. Neoplatonism is equally subordinated, as well as dismissively misrepresented, while, at the same time, as with metaphysics denied, it provides much of the logic throughout.

Great care must be taken with looking at Thomas' theology in terms of service to the Church. Against both Albert and the Augustinians, Aquinas resisted making sacred doctrine a practical science. I suppose that, despite the tendency of postmodern theology, there is no danger of the moderate Fr Humbrecht turning the *Summa theologiae* into the *Church Dogmatics*; he is too clear about the necessity of metaphysics for that. However, the death of speculative theology is not that far distant in time from Thomas' own, and Catholic scholasticism became concerned, according to its very substance, with what was necessary for the Church and her priests. Fleeing the university, she immured herself in seminaries. We must remain aware that there is a great gulf fixed between Aquinas' sacred doctrine founded in the divine *theoria* and that.

The reversal of the order common to Aquinas and the Neoplatonists is so deeply required in Fr Humbrecht's intellectual world, that he proposes that the order of the *Summa theologiae* is, in fact, reversed so far as the logic of the *de deo* is concerned: "Retroactively, the Trinity as theological corpus confers a indispensable solidity to the divine names" (*Trinité et création*, page 726). This certainly needs reconsideration. The subject matters of the *de deo* do become more appropriate to divided and dividing human reason as the treatise moves from

the divine substance to the operations, which begin with knowing and follow on considering ours, and from there to real relations in the essence which are the Persons. This move is comprehensible within a Neoplatonic logic. However, accommodation to human modes is still far distant: Aquinas insists that the differences the human mind establishes in its operations cannot lead to deductions about the divine Trinity. In fact, the deductions higher up in the thearchy are more certain. I am unable to understand why Fr Humbrecht leaps to Question 10 of the *Summa theologiae* on eternity when working through the logic of Thomas' treatise on the divine names, but it is all too clear why he avoids expositing its own proper order.

Both *Trinité et création* and its pair are well-informed works of minutious scholarship. Much can be learned from them about Aquinas and the history of philosophical theology. At least as much can be gleaned, however, about the limits the present revival of philosophy among conservative French Catholics places on what we can retrieve from the past, and especially from Aquinas. One hopes that this is not still, and for new reasons as well as the old, because French Catholicism feels embattled.

December 17, 2012