

# SCRIPTURE AND METAPHYSICS

Aquinas and the Renewal of  
Trinitarian Theology

Matthew Levering





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To Romanus Cessario, O.P. and Matthew L. Lamb





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# INTRODUCTION

Many recent theologies of the triune God envision an opposition between scriptural and metaphysical modes of articulating truth. In this view, metaphysical analysis, with its effort to expose “reality in its ontological, causal and communicative structures,”<sup>1</sup> impedes theological understanding of the God who chooses to reveal himself not in philosophical propositions, but in dramatic, historical, and narrative form. Given this criticism, it follows that the abstract language of metaphysical theologies of the triune God obscures the practical relevance of the living God of Scripture and salvation history.

Theologians and biblical scholars who grant the reality of this opposition between Scripture and metaphysics have responded in two main ways. First, some have repudiated Greek metaphysics, arguing that it has served as a means of the Church’s distancing herself from the living God of Israel and has enabled the Church to supersede and domesticate this God. Secondly, some have sought to redefine “metaphysics” along scriptural lines, by developing a Christological and Trinitarian metaphysics. In this vein, Christ’s Paschal mystery, for instance, serves as an analogy for the Trinity. The fact that Christ has revealed God to be a Trinity of Persons, likewise, is seen to require a Trinitarian metaphysics, in which the relational character of the Trinity governs our understanding of “being.” For such thinkers, Scripture provides the justification for developing more dramatic and narrative accounts of the distinction of the divine Persons, accounts that move well beyond the cautious metaphysical illumination of the divine order of origin by means of the traditional Trinitarian names Father, Son, Word, Image, Holy Spirit, Love, and Gift.

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 66.

Each of the seven chapters of this book will address in depth an aspect of these concerns regarding the relationship of Scripture and metaphysics in the theology of the triune God. The book will thus provide a unified analysis of, and constructive response to, such concerns, in the course of presenting systematically the themes of Aquinas's treatise on God in *Summa Theologiae* 1, qq.1–43. Throughout the book, I argue that renewal of the theology of the triune God requires that theologians reject the alleged opposition between scriptural and metaphysical modes of reflection, without conflating the two modes. Scriptural and metaphysical modes of reflection came unglued, I argue, when theologians no longer recognized contemplation as the rightful “end” of Trinitarian theology. As Jean Pierre Torrell reminds us:

When Thomas says that theology is principally speculative, he means that it is in the first instance contemplative; the two words are practically synonymous in Thomas. This is why – we shall not be slow to see this operative in Thomas's life – research, study, reflection on God can find their source and their completion only in prayer. The Eastern Christians like to say of theology that it is doxology; Thomas would add some further clarifications to that, but he would not reject the intention: the joy of the Friend who is contemplated is completed in song.<sup>2</sup>

When practical relevance replaces contemplation as the primary goal of Trinitarian theology, the technical precisions of metaphysics come to be seen as meaningless, rather than as ways of deepening our contemplative union with the living God revealed in Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1: *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996): 157. Cf. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., “Recherche de la signification véritable du terme *spéculatif*,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 81 (1959): 673–95.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bruce D. Marshall, “The Trinity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), which offers an intriguing account of the past, present, and future of Trinitarian theology. Marshall examines Schleiermacher's account of the Trinity. Schleiermacher holds that all doctrines express Christian (temporal) experience, and he argues that the traditional teaching (were it true) is both conceptually incoherent and fails to express a significant aspect of our experience of “salvation.” Marshall compares this account to that of Cardinal Johann Baptist Franzelin, who published the first edition of his *The Triune God* in 1869. Franzelin's manual argues that the Bible itself teaches the fundamental aspects of traditional Trinitarian doctrine, as illumined by the Councils of the Church. Having drawn the comparison between Schleiermacher and Franzelin, Marshall notes that theologians of the twentieth-century “renewal” in Trinitarian theology, led by Barth and Rahner, sought to move beyond both Schleiermacher and Franzelin in a way

For pre-Enlightenment theologians, contemplation of the triune God – a contemplative union rooted in faith formed by charity – is the primary goal of Trinitarian theology, and it is only within this contemplative end that “practical” ends are truly achieved. For this earlier theological tradition, the Church’s mode of contemplating the triune God in Scripture requires a difficult metaphysical *ascesis* – the limp of Jacob, the awe of Moses – because her God is salvifically and radically strange. Indeed, with this perspective in mind, A. N. Williams has approvingly remarked that “eternity will apparently be spent in the reflection on issues today considered purely technical.”<sup>4</sup> This view is held by both the Greek and Latin Fathers, as well as by the great medieval theologians. St. Gregory of Nyssa states, “The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb – the majority of people scarcely reach its base.”<sup>5</sup> Using a different analogy to make the same point, St. Bernard contends that “the bedroom of the King is to be sought in the mystery of divine contemplation.”<sup>6</sup> Contemplative Trinitarian theology belongs to the interior spiritual conversion by which self-centered human beings become *God-centered*.

This book will argue that modern theologians, seeking to ascend the mountain of divine knowledge and to find the “bedroom of the King,” need to learn anew the contemplative and metaphysical practices that are

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that would integrate the insights of both. Marshall concludes, however, that the result has been to lose touch with the profundity of the tradition of Trinitarian teaching. In his view, the alleged “renewal” has succeeded largely in elevating the positions of the nineteenth century beyond their actual importance. In Marshall’s view, Trinitarian theology rooted in the classical tradition has far more profound resources at its disposal than those which are available to theologians whose work springs out of the controversies – the parallel movements of Protestant liberalism and Catholic manualism – of the nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> A. N. Williams, “Contemplation: Knowledge of God in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 131. Williams is expounding Augustine’s view, but makes clear that it is her own as well. See also her *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and William T. Cavanaugh, “A Joint Declaration?: Justification as Theosis in Aquinas and Luther,” *Heythrop Journal* 41 (2000): 265–80. On Williams’s work, see Fergus Kerr, O.P., “Thomas Aquinas: Conflicting Interpretations in Recent Anglophone Literature,” in *Aquinas as Authority*, eds Paul van Geest, Harm Goris, and Carlo Leget (Leuven: Peeters, 2002): 165–86, at 183–6.

<sup>5</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978): 93 (no. 158).

<sup>6</sup> St. Bernard, *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh O. C. S. O. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983): Sermon 23, no. 9, 33.

necessary for worshipping *Israel's* God rather than culturally relevant idols. As we will see, Aquinas proves an invaluable guide for this "learning anew." He understands theology as wisdom, that is, a participation in Christ's sacred instruction in divine Wisdom. In his view, the story of YHWH should be read as sacred instruction in the divine "name," charged throughout with the prophetic urgency that this "name" not fall among the idols. We learn from Aquinas how the language of "being" preserves Israel's radical insistence upon the *intimate presence* in the world of her *transcendent* God, a presence that is ultimately Messianic, given the evil of the world. Furthermore, Aquinas exposes how the doctrine of divine Personhood attains real knowledge of, without overnarrating, the inner life of God as revealed in Scripture. He finds in the proper names of the Trinity – Father, Son, Word, Image, Holy Spirit, Love, Gift – the biblical distinctions of the divine communion-in-unity into which our lives have been salvifically drawn. Against supersessionism, including the unconscious supersessionism that is Trinitarian ontology, he teaches Christians that we must always speak of our *triune* God under two aspects.

The present book is thus an exercise in dialogic contemplation of the triune God, guided by the insights of Aquinas, that draws upon the insights of a wide array of Jewish and Christian exegetes and theologians. Revealed Wisdom, as interpreted in faith by the modes of human intellectual wisdom, illumines the mysteries of divine "being" in three divine Persons. I should note that neither the problem, nor the basic solution advanced here, is new. Already in 1964 Giles Hibbert had written:

It is common enough to encounter Christians who have been seriously upset and put off by what they have seen of St. Thomas's theological treatment of the Trinity. They go as far as to regard it as thoroughly untheological and even unfaithful to the Christian tradition, because it seems to them that it destroys the Mystery-Content of the Trinity and tries to substitute for it a series of explanatory "metaphysical formulae". . . . Our starting point will be a question which is raised by this accusation against St. Thomas: namely, whether a thorough and consistent use of metaphysical philosophy should, or even can, be allowed within theology; or whether it necessarily impedes, if not actually destroys, the realization of God as Mystery – present within the worshipping Christian community. In other words, does metaphysicizing inevitably mean de-theologizing? We would maintain that the metaphysical approach to the Trinity of the great Doctors of the West, if properly understood, can be seen to provide a means for



better appreciating how man in this life is to stand in his presence before God, and as such it certainly does not de-theologize.<sup>7</sup>

Hibbert goes on to show that “metaphysics” belongs to the personal encounter by which human words truly express *divine* revelation. Scripture, as human words about “God,” cannot help but have metaphysical intelligibility. Hibbert points out that in order for human words to signify God, “[t]hey must have the possibility of being open, being able to point beyond themselves, beyond the sphere and context of their own immediate origin; or in other words by way of analogical predication they must have the possibility of metaphysical realization.”<sup>8</sup> The Church expresses revelation in human words which are inevitably metaphysical in content. As Hibbert concludes, “Thus, because the words with which the revelation of God is handed on are human and have a potential metaphysical content, what is handed on by way of them has a direct personal relevance – ‘encounter content’ it could be called – in making God known to man. But it is of course necessary that this content be actualized and brought to life. An inadequate metaphysics will only kill it, robbing it of its significance and power. A genuinely metaphysical theology will make it live.”<sup>9</sup> Metaphysical analysis sustains the believer’s ability to express, both within Scripture and in Christian theologies that interpret Scripture as a channel of divine Revelation, the Holy Trinity’s radical and mysterious presence.

The technical issues that will concern us are thus relevant not only to the few who have the time and ability to study philosophy and theology.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Giles Hibbert, O.P., “Mystery and Metaphysics in the Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 31 (1964): 187–213, at 187–8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> In noting that such issues are today considered “purely technical,” Williams does not of course mean to suggest that they have no soteriological import or no import for regulating our action, that is, for enabling us to encounter the God who saves us and to identify and live out the Christian virtues. On the contrary, as Williams shows in her *The Ground of Union*, the “purely technical” issues of classical Trinitarian theology are shot through with soteriological implications. Yet, the significance of contemplative ends has been neglected, or to put it another way, the *telos* of Trinitarian theology has been reversed (cf. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997]). “Purely technical” issues are explored *primarily* for the sake of reformulating action. Without being able to examine his programmatic proposals – many of which, certainly, I think are valid – one can simply note this tendency (influenced by his teacher Jürgen Moltmann) in Miroslav Volf, “‘The Trinity Is Our Social Program’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 403–23.

Most Christians contemplate God liturgically and through personal prayer and study, rather than also by developing the intellectual habits proper to speculative theology. Nonetheless, attempts to speak about God (not merely to fellow theologians, but also and perhaps especially to persons in the pews) require some understanding of “technical” issues. Anyone who has ever heard a sermon on the Trinity – Catholics will attest to the painfully awkward experience that is “Trinity Sunday” – will admit that talk about the three Persons quickly becomes horribly thin unless the preacher has some metaphysical understanding (without denying the unfathomable mystery) of how the Persons are perfectly one and yet distinct.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, no one in the pews wishes to hear about three gods. There is an expectation, rooted in Christian faith and the practices of faith,<sup>12</sup> that the mystery must possess some intelligibility, that scriptural and metaphysical modes of reflection cannot ultimately be opposed. There must be some way of distinguishing the three Persons from the multiple gods of polytheism, beyond simply asserting that this is “not polytheism” and that the three are “one God,” whatever that might mean.

Likewise, popular nonfiction suggests a widespread fascination with whether the word “God,” the agent whose works are testified to in Scripture, has a metaphysical referent.<sup>13</sup> Is God real? Does he “exist”? Does

<sup>11</sup> For explorations of the relationship of doctrine and worship, see, e.g., Waclaw Swierzawski, “Faith and Worship in the Pauline Commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Divus Thomas* 75 (1972): 389–412; Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Robert Barron, *And Now I See . . . A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Reinhard Hütter, “Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine,” in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002): 206–27; and Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J., “Trinitarian Theology as Participation,” in *The Trinity*, ed. S. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 295–325.

<sup>12</sup> For analysis indebted to the work of George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas reminding us that Christian doctrines “are entangled with” (to use Sarah Coakley’s phrase) Christian practices, see *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, especially Sarah Coakley’s “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” 78. Coakley’s essay emphasizes the way in which the graced practice of “infused contemplation,” at the highest stage of the day-to-day ascetical (thus not otherworldly) and sacramental life made intelligible by the doctrine of cooperative grace, enables deepened theological insights, as God connaturalizes the believer to the doctrinal truth. With regard to Aquinas as a contemplative, see the work of Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2: *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003); cf. M.-D. Chenu, O.P.’s evocative chapter 3 – “The Contemplative” – in his *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, trans. Paul Philibert, O.P. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002): 35–61.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Cornelius Ernst, “Metaphor and Ontology in *Sacra Doctrina*,” *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 422–5.

God know and love us? To name only recent bestsellers, Karen Armstrong has written a “history” of God that historicizes God as a cultural construct. Jack Miles has authored a “biography” of God that puts God, a split personality in Miles’s view, on the therapist’s couch. Stephen Hawking’s introduction to the physical universe, *A Brief History of Time*, ends with the hope that, were physics able to discover a unified theory that explains all the internal structures of the universe, then attention could be turned to the greatest question of all, namely *why* the universe exists: “Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God.”<sup>14</sup> But since God is not a creature, human attempts to articulate the uncreated could not be satisfied by physics, let alone cultural history or psychoanalysis. Beginning from creaturely things, one may inquire into what it would mean to be “not a creature.” Only such metaphysical inquiries<sup>15</sup> can encounter the God of history who teaches, “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?” (Isaiah 40:26)

Yet, to many believers in the God revealed in Scripture, metaphysics appears to be exactly the problem. Not only has the very possibility of metaphysics been the subject of intense disputation especially since Luther,<sup>16</sup> but also metaphysics seems to many Christians to be a way to

<sup>14</sup> Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988): 175.

<sup>15</sup> On this see David B. Burrell, C.S.C.’s review of L. Gregory Jones and Stephen E. Fowl, eds, *Rethinking Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) in *Modern Theology* 12 (1996): 109–12. Burrell begins, “Whether or not one is favorable or not to metaphysics, the tricky question remains: what is it? That is a metaphysical question, of course; perhaps the metaphysical question, which should remind us that metaphysics has come to refer to the paradigmatic activity proper to philosophy: one which inquires into the nature of things, indeed of anything at all. So anyone who urges us ‘beyond metaphysics’ must have in mind a peculiar way of carrying out that inquiry, for actually to venture beyond metaphysics would carry us beyond inquiry itself, which would put us quickly out of bounds,” 109. Burrell has in view the complex work of John Milbank. See, e.g., Milbank’s “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” in *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 36–52.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); cf. Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Heidegger influentially structures his whole philosophy around the rejection of classical metaphysics (onto-theology). For discussion of Heidegger’s influence, see e.g., Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger’s Atheism*, chapter 8: “Jean-Luc Marion and the Contemporary Theological Appropriation of Heidegger,” 249–69; Fergus

get around the fact that the living God *has revealed himself historically* to Israel and the Church. To put it bluntly, now that God has revealed himself in Scripture, why would Christian theologians still rely on the insights of Greek metaphysics? Why would not the revealed God of Scripture either completely transform prior notions of “metaphysics,” or else be utterly beyond the conceptual realm of metaphysics? The present book seeks to engage such questions. The book, I hasten to note, is not a work of metaphysics, although it contains metaphysical analysis. Rather, I have written a work of Trinitarian theology that persistently calls into question the alleged opposition between metaphysical analysis and scriptural exegesis by exploring how Aquinas’s use of metaphysics illumines the meaning of scriptural revelation.<sup>17</sup>

For Aquinas, Trinitarian theology is ultimately ordered to contemplative union, and so at the outset we can note that his Trinitarian theology is not isolated from his doctrine of salvation. In the Eucharistic liturgy, in which the whole Mystical Body shares in Christ’s sacrificial fulfillment of Israel’s Torah, Christ’s members (as the perfect Temple) manifest God’s name by worshipping the Trinity. By sharing in the self-emptying form of Christ, revealed by the Spirit in word and sacrament, Christ’s

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Kerr, O.P., *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 85–93. Kerr finds a similarity between Hans Urs von Balthasar’s metaphysics in his *Theological Aesthetics* and Gilson’s metaphysics. Both Balthasar and Gilson emphasize that the doctrine of pure Act, in which creatures are a finite participation, does away with both essentialism and any attempt to make God a “being” among beings.

<sup>17</sup> For exemplars of Christian metaphysics, see e.g., Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941); idem, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949); David B. Burrell, C.S.C., *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986); Thomas S. Hibbs, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946); idem, *Essence and the Existent*, trans. L. Galantiere and G. Phelan (New York: Pantheon, 1948); Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tommaso d’Aquino*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1950); idem, *Participation et Causalité selon S. Thomas d’Aquin* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1961); L. Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de s. Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1942); Rudi A. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995); Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992); Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); W. Norris Clarke, S.J. *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001); Steven A. Long, “On the Natural Knowledge of the Real Distinction of Essence and Existence,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 1 (2003): 75–108.

cruciform members already mystically “see” the Father.<sup>18</sup> This liturgical union with the Trinity is contemplative, although as a liturgical union requiring the active holiness of Christ’s members, Christian contemplation is not thereby bifurcated or cut off from Christian action. As the Fathers and medieval theologians recognized, the contemplative liturgical union with the Trinity that is enjoyed by believers whose faith is formed by charity, is expressed theologically in contemplative and metaphysical modes.

The goal of this book, therefore, is sharing in the Church’s manifestation of God’s “name” by renewing the practices of theological contemplation. The first chapter of the book treats *sacra doctrina*, the sacred teaching or wisdom that is knowledge of God and all things in relation to God. This chapter argues that appropriating the revealed sacred teaching has always demanded, even for the biblical authors, metaphysical questioning. Indeed, the practice of metaphysical questioning constitutes a

<sup>18</sup> Cf. my *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002). Contemplative practices cannot be separated from moral practices: both require an ascesis, a self-humbling, a conversion from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Put another way, overcoming idolatry requires both intellectual and moral conversion. Gustavo Gutierrez has argued that “contrary to interpretations based on readings of the Bible from the standpoint primarily of religious philosophy, idolatry cannot be reduced to a kind of process of intellectual and religious cleansing on the way to monotheism, a process that supposedly went on throughout the history of the Jewish mind. Without abandoning the realm of the cultic, the prophets forcefully point out that the idolatry of the people also takes the form of placing their trust in power and wealth, which they turn into real idols. Their behavior means that they follow principles that differ from, and are opposed to, those that spring from the covenant they have made with Yahweh, the only God and the Lord of Israel” (Gutierrez, *The God of Love*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991]: 56). From a similar perspective, Roberto S. Goizueta has noted that “Christian doctrine remains important as the Christian community’s articulation of our lived commitment to Christ, and as the word of God which inspires and transforms our lives. But what most defines us as Christians is not our intellectual assent to those doctrines but our lived commitment to Christ and our neighbor. Likewise, theology remains important as the community’s reflection upon that commitment in the light of the Scriptures, but what makes that reflection credible and authentically Christian is, above all, its roots in the lived commitment to Christ and neighbor” (Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995]: 78–9). Gutierrez and Goizueta are right to insist upon uncompromising Christian morality, but the arguments of both authors would be assisted by a richer account of what constitutes, and what sustains, “our intellectual assent to those doctrines.” Through his critique (influenced by the work of Matthew L. Lamb) of the modern concept of “praxis,” which leads him to advocate an “aesthetic” understanding of praxis, Goizueta moves in the direction of providing such an account (cf. 80ff., especially 106–8).

spiritual exercise that purifies from idolatry those who would contemplate the self-revealing God. This unity between rational investigation and contemplative beatitude finds wonderful expression in St. Athanasius's understanding of human sharing in the divine image:

They would be no better than the beasts, had they no knowledge save of earthly things; and why should God have made them at all, if He had not intended them to know Him? But, in fact, the good God has given them a share in His own Image, that is, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and has made even themselves after the same Image and Likeness. Why? Simply in order that through this gift of God-likeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him apprehend the Father; *which knowledge of their Maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life.*<sup>19</sup>

The alleged opposition between metaphysics and salvation history in theology founders when confronted with this understanding of salvation (in history) as holy contemplation, an understanding shared by Aquinas.<sup>20</sup>

The remaining chapters continue in systematic fashion the book's discussion of divine "being" with various theologians, most importantly St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>21</sup> The chapters span the themes contained in Aquinas's treatise on God in the *Summa Theologiae* 1, qq.2–42. While not directly treating q.43, on the temporal missions of the Son and Spirit, the book

<sup>19</sup> St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. a Religious of C. S. M. V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1993): 38 (no. 11), emphasis added. See also Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Compare a twelfth-century Muslim contemplative approach to the divine unity: "The first stage of faith in divine unity amounts to a person speaking the words 'There is no god but God' while his heart is heedless or even denies it, as hypocrites may profess faith in divine unity. In the second stage one believes the meaning of the statement in his heart, as the community of Muslims believe it, and this is the faith of the common people. The third represent those who bear witness to [faith in divine unity] *on the path of interior illumination by means of the light of truth*, and that is the stage of those who are 'drawing near,' and takes place when one sees many things, but sees them emanating in their multiplicity from the Almighty One. The fourth stage is that of those who see only unity when they regard existence, which is the witness of the righteous ones and those whom the Sufis call 'annihilated' by faith in divine unity" (Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, Book XXXV of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, trans. David B. Burrell, C.S.C. [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001]: 10, emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> To grasp the contemplative spirit that distinguishes Aquinas's theological appropriation of biblical, liturgical, patristic, and philosophical themes, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P.'s magisterial two-volume study, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1: *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996) and especially *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2 *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

engages this topic by emphasizing the scriptural and soteriological foundation of Aquinas's theology of God.<sup>22</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 address God in his unity, in dialogue with Jewish and Christian theologians whose concern is that Aquinas's account of God's "attributes" (what one can say about God as one) distort, in a supersessionist and onto-theological manner, the one living God revealed as YHWH to Israel as narrated in the Old Testament. Chapters 4 through 7 then explore aspects of the theology of the Trinity. Chapter 4 asks whether the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ is revelatory of the Trinity in such a way as to constitute an analogy for the Trinity. This chapter inquires into the modes by which we understand the "distinction" of Persons in God. The fifth chapter extends this topic by directly considering Aquinas's account of the "psychological analogy" as a means of understanding the Persons as subsisting relations. In both the fourth and fifth chapters, at stake is whether Aquinas's analogy for understanding the Trinity is grounded sufficiently in God's revelation in Scripture.<sup>23</sup>

The sixth chapter turns to Aquinas's description of the Persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here the theologians in light of whose work I contextualize Aquinas's views are biblical exegetes. Aquinas's description

<sup>22</sup> On this topic see e.g., Émile Bailleux, "Le cycle des missions trinitaires, d'après saint Thomas," *Revue Thomiste* 63 (1963): 165–92.

<sup>23</sup> My approach to Scripture is reflected in Adrian Walker's "Fundamentalism and the Catholicity of Truth," *Communio* 29 (2002): 5–27. Walker notes, "The inspiration of Scripture necessarily passes through, while never being simply reducible to, the participation of the Church (and of Israel) in Jesus Christ's original act of traditioning, which is both immanent in, and transcendent of, the Church" (20). Cf. the important work of David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994): 152–64; idem, "The Spirit, the Church, and the Scriptures: Biblical Inspiration and Interpretation Revisited," in *Knowing the Triune God*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001): 49–93; Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), especially 183–205, where he offers "a theoretical account to support my *ad hoc* use of biblical scholarship in the course of this book" (186); idem, "The Conceptual Structure of New Testament Theology," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002): 225–36; C. Kavin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002): 295–312; Thomas G. Guarino, "Catholic Reflections on Discerning the Truth of Sacred Scripture," in *Your Word is Truth: A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, ed. Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002): 79–101; Thomas Weinandy, O. F. M. Cap., *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000): 27–39; Gilles Emery, O.P., "Biblical Exegesis and the Speculative Doctrine of the Trinity in St. Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on John," chapter 7 of *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003); Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, Vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) and Vol. 2, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Thomas F. Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); R. Francis Martin, "Sacra Doctrina and the Authority of Its *Sacra Scriptura* According to St. Thomas Aquinas," *Pro Ecclesia* 10 (2001): 84–102.



of the Persons can seem far from the narrative reality that one meets in the New Testament and in the “biblical theology” practiced by contemporary biblical exegetes. This chapter inquires into whether Aquinas’s highly metaphysical (speculative) account treats the themes of “biblical theology,” and if so, what is gained by Aquinas’s nonnarrative approach. Lastly, the seventh chapter addresses the movement in theology towards developing a metaphysics that is properly theological, in other words a Trinitarian metaphysics. After examining the work of proponents of this development in light of classical Jewish and Muslim concerns, I argue that Aquinas’s nuanced analysis of the relationship of “essence” and “Persons” accomplishes the main goals of proponents of “Trinitarian ontology,” without creating the conceptual and interreligious problems that Trinitarian ontology creates. Aquinas’s approach retains the integrity of the Old Testament revelation while fully displaying its integration into Christ Jesus’ definitive revelation of God.

In short, the book aims both at reordering contemporary Trinitarian theology and at identifying further “signposts,” as Walker Percy might put it, along the contemplative path marked out by God himself in Scripture and tradition.<sup>24</sup> I hope to show that by following a path of contemplation (grounded in the active holiness that sharing in Christ’s salvific fulfillment of Israel’s Torah involves), Trinitarian theology remains fully inserted within Christ’s salvific fulfillment of Israel’s Temple, where God’s name, against the idols, is manifested.

## 1 Setting the Scene: Theological Ends

Before embarking on this task, however, a brief “setting of the scene” is in order, so that the reader will understand more fully the post-Kantian and post-Hegelian debate about theological *ends* within which this book, and contemporary appropriation of Aquinas’s theology of God, is inscribed. In different ways, Cornel West, Stanley Hauerwas, and Charles Taylor have retold American intellectual history with William James – himself profoundly influenced by Kantian and Hegelian streams of thought – at the center.<sup>25</sup> As such retellings would suggest, modern Trinitarian

<sup>24</sup> Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Portions of the following have appeared in my “Beyond the Jamesian Impasse in Trinitarian Theology,” *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 395–420. Cornel West’s study, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press,



theology conceives of its goals, content, and structure along the lines of the Jamesian pattern. For this reason, the remainder of this introduction will describe James's philosophy, its instantiation in certain criticisms of classical theology of God, and contemporary resources for moving beyond such criticisms. I will show that in the name of making the Trinity relevant and useful, modern theologians have fallen into a "Jamesian impasse" that ends by either knowing nothing or claiming to know too much. What is needed, I will argue, is a rediscovery of the meaning of contemplative wisdom.

In James's famous Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he examines from a psychological perspective classic accounts of "the religion of healthy-mindedness," "the sick soul," "the divided self, and the process of its unification," "conversion," "saintliness," "mysticism," and "philosophy," among other topics. For our purposes in this introduction, James's understanding of philosophy is especially telling.

James begins by noting that philosophy, as related to religious experience, has generally been thought to have to do with the intellectual warrants of religious claims. He inquires as to whether philosophy has been able to live up to this task:

The subject of Saintliness left us face to face with the question, Is the sense of divine presence a sense of anything true? We turned first to mysticism for an answer, and found that although mysticism is entirely willing to corroborate religion, it is too private (and also too various) in its utterances to be able to claim a universal authority. But philosophy publishes results which claim to be universally valid if they are valid at all, so we now turn with our question to philosophy. Can philosophy stamp a warrant of veracity upon the religious man's sense of the divine?<sup>26</sup>

James's conclusion is a firm "No." His chapter reviews various attempts to demonstrate the existence of God and his attributes – from Protestant

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1989), nicely connects Emerson with James. I am indebted to Stanley Hauerwas's analysis of James's work for bringing this insight to the fore, as well as for directing my attention to James's use of Newman (although Hauerwas mistakenly attributes to Newman a lengthy quotation culled by James from a contemporary manual on natural theology). See Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001): 72–86. See also Charles Taylor's *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), and my forthcoming review of this book in *Modern Theology*.

<sup>26</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982): 430.

and Catholic manuals to Kant and Hegel – and finds that none of the attempts succeeds. James limits the task of philosophy as regards religious expression to logical clarification of doctrines and to weeding out claims that have been proven scientifically to be false.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, philosophy that seeks to speak about God remains of interest to James. Granting the validity of Schleiermacher's theory that "theological formulas" are at best "secondary products" attempting to express religious feelings, he adapts this theory to encompass the whole variety of religious expression: "Religious experience . . . spontaneously and inevitably engenders myths, superstitions, dogmas, creeds, and metaphysical theologies, and criticisms of one set of these by the adherents of another."<sup>28</sup> James then responds to a great opponent of Schleiermachian precepts, John Henry Cardinal Newman. First, James discusses Newman's argument in *The Idea of a University* that theology is indeed a science or a systematic arrangement of truths known about God (James mistakenly summarizes Newman's view as "theology based on pure reason"<sup>29</sup>). For James, this can be shown empirically to be false, since, unlike science, neither dogmatic theology nor "natural theology" (metaphysics) has ever led to anything but sectarian division. Second, James nonetheless admits that Newman's account of God's attributes is, as "rhetoric," magnificent.<sup>30</sup> James does not quote this passage of Newman's, but instead quotes at length a Thomistic manual's dry account of God's existence and attributes. James then gives Newman backhanded but real praise. Newman, says James, "gives us scholastic philosophy 'touched with emotion,' and every philosophy should be touched with emotion rightly understood. Emotionally, then, dogmatic theology is worth something to minds of the type of Newman's."<sup>31</sup> Thus although Newman has insisted that his theology is scientific, James finds its real value in its ability to convey and stimulate religious emotion.

James goes on to note that the manualist's account of God's existence and attributes fails precisely this test. The falsehood of the manualist's account can be shown not only empirically, but also by the meaninglessness of the manualist's account even were it to be true. James states:

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 455.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 442.

Take God's aseity, for example; or his necessariness; his immateriality; his "simplicity" or superiority to the kind of inner variety and succession which we find in finite beings, his indivisibility, and lack of the inner distinctions of being and activity, substance and accident, potentiality and actuality, and the rest; his repudiation of inclusion in a genus; his actualized infinity; his "personality," apart from the moral qualities which it may comport; his relations to evil being permissive and not positive; his self-sufficiency, self-love, and absolute felicity in himself: – candidly speaking, how do such qualities as these make any definite connection with our life? And if they severally call for no distinctive adaptations of our conduct, what vital difference can it possibly make to a man's religion whether they be true or false?<sup>32</sup>

He then compares dogmatic theologians to naturalists who never get out in the fields and woods, but stay inside classifying and arranging bones. Metaphysical accounts, in this view, are nothing but meaningless words, quite cut off from anything relevant to a religious person. These abstractions, James suggests, are even demonic – "they have the trail of the serpent over them" – insofar as they serve as substitutes for anything worthy of worship and religious feeling. He concludes, "So much for the metaphysical attributes of God! From the point of view of practical religion, the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind."<sup>33</sup>

Even as James bids "a definitive good-bye to dogmatic theology,"<sup>34</sup> therefore, Newman is somewhat excused by James on the grounds that Newman's description of God's attributes is at least emotionally evocative. James's criticism of the "metaphysical monster," however, sweeps away Newman's claims for the intellectual seriousness of theology. The gauntlet thrown down by James in the United States, and by Kant and Schleiermacher in Europe, has greatly influenced how Christian theologians understand theology and in particular how they understand the place of metaphysical arguments within theology. Most contemporary theologians of the triune God shy away from metaphysics as overly abstract and instead seek practical, rather than contemplative, ends.

For example, the late Catherine Mowry LaCugna's *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* begins with the following proposal: "The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 448.