

This review appeared in the journal *Angelicum* 2004

Matthew LEVERING, *Scripture and Metaphysics. Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford , 2004, 254 p. ISBN 1-4051-1734-6

Aquinas's Trinitarian theology has fallen under the criticism of those who envision an opposition between the God of scripture and salvation history and the abstract nature of a metaphysical theology of the triune God. In his new book, Matthew Levering , associate professor of theology at the Ave Maria University (Naples , Florida), co-director of the Aquinas Center for Theological Renewal and of the English edition of the journal *Nova & Vetera*, tries to respond to these allegations through his in-depth analysis of the relationship of Scripture and metaphysics in the Trinitarian theology of Aquinas. He starts out by identifying, as the main reason for the alleged opposition, the neglect of the truth that contemplation is the rightful end of Trinitarian theology. Under the influence of William James and others, many modern theologians have fallen into what Levering calls a "Jamesian impasse" (p. 13): in shying away from an abstract metaphysics, one looks for the pragmatic end of a Trinitarian theology. Throughout the book, Levering will argue that the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity consists in the acquiring the practices of contemplation, which is a knowing inspired by love, and by which we are drawn away from idols and united to Christ. As Aquinas shows, this requires even for the inspired authors of Scripture a metaphysical ascesis.

The book consists of seven chapters, which deal with God in his unity (chapters 2 and 3) and the theology of the Trinity (chapters 4 through 7) and constitute in this way a commentary on qq. 2-42 of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*. The main thesis of the book is more fully expounded and substantiated in chapter 1, which deals precisely with the meaning of 'sacra doctrina' in Aquinas. He argues that *sacra doctrina* seen as wisdom by Aquinas overcomes the opposition between metaphysics and salvation history as expounded by Karl Rahner. Crucial for this understanding is the insight that reality is radically theocentric and that Aquinas's intention in the *Summa* is to "raise and to convert the mind" to the triune God through intellectual exercises. (p. 36). Levering's analysis of St. John the Evangelist, who according to Aquinas was able to appropriate *sacra doctrina* more profoundly because he was more loved by Christ, illustrates this aspect very well.

Starting from the critique of R. Kendall Soulen, chapter 2 begins the discussion about whether Aquinas's treatise on God's unity is guided by metaphysics or by scripture. Levering's survey of qq. 2-14 focuses particularly on the role that "being" plays in Aquinas's theology and the significance of the name "YHWH" for Aquinas. Levering makes clear that "Aquinas integrates his metaphysical reflection on the name 'I am who am' into a complex account of YHWH, Moses, the Mosaic Law, and the relationship of Christians to the contemplative life enjoyed by Moses" (p. 71). In this way, the Old Testament is fulfilled, but not superseded by the New.

Chapter 3 (pp. 75-109) compares Aquinas's theology of God's knowledge and will to that of the Jewish biblical exegete Jon D. Levenson, "representative of an antimetaphysical turn in Old Testament theology" (p. 109). In this dense but intelligently argued chapter, Levering is able to show the advantages of Aquinas's metaphysical account, especially in relationship with the question God's involvement in evil. Here an account of Aquinas's commentary on

the Book of Job could have substantially contributed to this element and the overall thesis of the integration of Scripture and metaphysics.

With chapter 4 (pp. 110-143), Levering starts his exploration of Aquinas's theology of the Trinity in a highly original fashion. In order to respond to contemporary exegetes and theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar who try to locate in Christ's passion and resurrection the foundation for the speculation about the Triune God rather than in a metaphysical analysis, he investigates how, according to Aquinas, Christ's "Paschal mystery" determines our understanding of the Trinity. Especially qq. 46-47 of the *tertia pars* prove to be very illuminating. There Aquinas shows how Christ's passion and resurrection reveal the Father as sending his Word of love, the incarnate Son as the perfect Word and the Holy Spirit as the Father's gift of supernatural love. These dense questions are substantiated by Aquinas's Commentary on the Gospel of St. John. This leads Levering to the conclusion that "the Paschal mystery serves as an 'analogy' for the Trinity precisely in directing our hearts to the perfected *imago dei* that we see in faith in Jesus Christ." (p. 143)

This analysis is extended in chapter 5 (pp. 144-164) which deals with the psychological analogy for the Trinity in qq. 26-27 of the *prima pars*. Again, the interplay between biblical exegesis and metaphysics comes to the fore. On the one hand, Aquinas shows that we need a proper metaphysical understanding to confront the errors by Arius and Sabellius. On the other hand, the doctrine of the image of God in us (Genesis 1:27) illumines the metaphysical ascesis. This is further shown by the fact that "procession" clearly has a biblical foundation which propels Aquinas to express the relationality of the divine Persons who subsist, in distinct modes, as the one God.

These insights are further developed in chapter 6 (pp. 165-196) which contains an in-depth discussion of Aquinas's description of the Persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in comparison with the insights of contemporary biblical exegetes. Contemporary biblical catholic and protestant scholarship, Levering thinks, should explore once again "premodern" biblical exegesis in order to move beyond historical criticism's tendency to pit Scripture against the theological and ecclesial matrix in which Scripture is read. In this chapter, Levering tries to exemplify his thesis that Aquinas offers a metaphysical analysis of the names of the Persons, which does not distance itself from Scripture but illumines it and purifies our understanding of it.

Chapter 7 (pp. 197-235) is devoted to the question of a "Trinitarian ontology" which many contemporary scholars try to develop in order to avoid a reification of the divine essence. After depicting the positions of W. Norris Clarke, J. Zizioulas and R. Hütter in this debate, Levering highlights five aspects of Aquinas's approach, which enable Aquinas to answer the critique of the proponents of a "Trinitarian ontology". Aquinas stresses the need to investigate first what is common in order to be able to transfer this insight into the concept of Person. Secondly, the undividedness of God's being remains in the distinctly subsisting Persons. Thirdly, Aquinas holds a subtle balance between the real identity of Person and essence and the real distinction of Persons. Fourthly, Aquinas differentiates the Persons solely in terms of relations of origin and not in terms of an essential attribute as to uphold the divine unity along with the distinction of Person. Finally, Levering explains how the order of origin and the perichoresis of the Persons better uphold the unity of God and the distinction of Persons in God than does Trinitarian ontology.

Toward the end of the book, Levering asks himself: “Have I identified anything that will help believers in their life of faith, and preachers in their pastoral ministry” (p. 238). Aquinas wanted to offer assistance to the believers’ journey upwards, in faith, to the triune God who offered us true knowledge of Himself in order to unite us with Him. Provided we sustain our exercises towards this wisdom by continual prayer and sacramental grace, so Levering tells us, what we learn about the Triune God “inflames our longing for eternal union” with Him.

In this engaging study, Matthew Levering offers us a careful explanation of Thomas’ doctrine of the Trinity by constructively responding to contemporary theological positions of catholic, protestant, orthodox and Jewish authors. The book is well-structured and written in such a way that its content can be grasped by an astute undergraduate, as well as profoundly stimulate contemporary (Thomistic) theologians. The quality of the book is enhanced by the author’s good knowledge of the non-English literature. In sum, it provides an excellent example of the “perennial validity” (John Paul II) of Aquinas’s thought.

Jörgen Vijgen

Major Seminary “ Willibrordhuis ”

Diocese of Haarlem

The Netherlands