

BOOK REVIEWS

Tyler R. Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*

(Cambridge: CUP, 2019), pp. xiv + 315. £75.00.

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God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth is a reworked doctoral thesis done under the supervision of the late John Webster. As such, it exhibits many of the characteristics and qualities of Webster's own work. While one cannot always tell a book by its cover, in this case one can: the book really is about God, creation and the vexed notion of a 'relation' between God and creation as these doctrinal concerns are developed in the theologies of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth. In Part One, Wittman takes the reader on a guided tour of Aquinas's theology proper. What does it mean to say that the triune God of the Christian faith is 'pure act'? Great care is given to the notions of divine simplicity and perfection as these are connected to the central theme of divine goodness in Aquinas' thought. A proper understanding of these important concepts is then applied to an account of the doctrine of creation that is truly theological; here Wittman explores issues of causality and the 'end' of creation. This in turn leads to a careful exposition of the difficult notion of the 'relation' of creation to God. In Part Two we have a similar study of major theological themes in the thought of Barth. Here Wittman unpacks Barth's account of God's 'being in act', and he does so both by laying out the central doctrinal affirmations made by Barth and outlining the positions which Barth criticised and rejected. Again, due attention is given to Barth's understanding of divine simplicity, and the understanding that unfolds is then brought to bear upon Barth's proposals concerning divine election. Finally, Wittman draws some of these themes together in a comparative synthesis that offers some sense of the direction of his own thought.

Overall, Wittman's study is patient, careful, thorough, penetrating and charitable. It is, however, of rather uncertain genre. It should not be mistaken for a work of historical theology. The focus is neither on Aquinas within his medieval context nor Barth within his own modern setting. Matters of continuity and discontinuity with predecessors and contemporaries are not the primary concern. This is not a judgement that the book is historically flat-footed; it is simply an observation: neither Aquinas nor Barth is examined closely in terms of historical context. But nor is this book really a piece of constructive theology. While Wittman indicates a preferred direction towards the conclusion, readers should not expect a developed proposal for how we ought to think about God and the relation of creation to God (with Aquinas and Barth only serving as important conversation partners). Instead, what we have are careful readings and narrations of important themes in the thought of two important figures. These interpretations are set beside one another with some concluding observations from the author. This leaves us with descriptions that are indeed helpful for understanding these

important thinkers – but the work could be improved by placing them within their contexts. It also leaves us with an account that it is insightful – but that would be even more penetrating if it were to provide more completely the ‘analysis’ that is repeatedly promised.

I do note several points at which this book might have been made better. The first two are closely related; one is more formal and the other is more material. First, there is a pronounced lack of engagement with – and even awareness of – work in ‘analytic theology’. Some of this analytic work is distinctly historical in nature (with considerable work being done on Aquinas) while other elements are more constructive but nonetheless directly relevant to consideration of the issues at hand. Thus, for example, when Wittman addresses the worry that Aquinas’ doctrine of divine simplicity seems to be at odds with Aquinas’ affirmations of divine freedom, he references only one source (that is several decades old) and passes over the extensive recent discussions of this issue (including those of Brian Leftow and Eleonore Stump, who directly address Aquinas’ account). Second, and perhaps as a result, he does not address the most pressing concerns (which have to do with nothing short of modal collapse), and in response he appeals to the resources of ‘speculative grammar’ to address what appears to be a metaphysical (rather than merely grammatical) problem (p. 86). Finally, I find it odd that a work that is devoted to the God–creation relation in the theology of Barth has so little to say about the important contemporary debates within Barth studies that concern the doctrine of election. Wittman does not ignore these debates entirely, but he has very little to say about them and even less to say *to* them.

These observations and concerns should not distract us from appropriate appreciation. Overall, this is a very erudite and careful study of two important thinkers. It is measured, insightful and rich. I have learned much from it, and I shall return to it.

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Gerald O’Collins, *Inspiration: Towards a Christian Interpretation of Biblical Inspiration*

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Father Gerald O’Collins is no stranger to the topic of divine revelation. The subject takes centre stage in several of the more than seventy books he has written through his decades of teaching and research, most recently in his *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God’s Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (OUP, 2016). As the mirrored subtitle indicates, our book extends that project by carefully distinguishing (on the one hand) divine *self*-revelation from *biblical* revelation, and (on the other) biblical inspiration as originating *cause* from inspiration as ongoing *effect*, in order to examine afresh how the Bible functions as a source of truth for Christian faith. The result is no dry recitation of the