

Introduction

This book is an exploration of Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics of the hypostatic union. According to the traditional Christian teaching accepted by Aquinas, God created humans and placed them in paradise, but they rebelled and fell into sin. This damaged their relationship with God in a way that they could not themselves repair, so God intervened to remedy the situation. The method God chose was for the second of the three divine persons, the Son, to become human, suffer, die, and rise from the dead. This divine person's becoming human resulted, on the traditional understanding, in there being one person or "hypostasis," Jesus Christ, in which two natures, humanity and divinity, were united. This union is often called the "hypostatic union."

The central claim of classical Christology is thus that Christ is one person with two natures, divinity and humanity. But it is far from obvious how one person can have two natures, and attacking this problem is what Aquinas's theory of the hypostatic union is about. Aquinas's work on the subject grew out of a long-running tradition, a tradition that did not express these ideas explicitly from the start. Oral traditions originating from Jesus's first followers would seem to have included the idea that Jesus himself, and not just his message, was in some way extremely important, and in any case, that is certainly the clear upshot of the writings that originated from those oral traditions, most importantly the New Testament: Jesus is proclaimed as "Lord," and having a correct relationship with him is said to be necessary for salvation. But to say this much is not yet to make it very clear why Jesus is so important. Some New Testament passages do suggest rather strongly that Jesus is divine, and many passages make it almost inescapable that he is human, but Biblical interpretation is tricky, and it is not always easy to tell which passages should be understood literally and which symbolically. For that reason, Christians found themselves in discussion and even controversy essentially from the start.

Multi-volume books have been written on the early Christological controversies.¹ For present purposes, a simplistic and unoriginal sketch will have to suffice. The first main watershed was, famously, the Council of Nicaea, called in the year 325 in response to the teachings of the Alexandrian priest Arius. Arius taught that the Son was less than the Father – not that he was human, but more that he was a sort of demiurge or minor god. Against this, the Council affirmed that the Son was “of the same nature” or “of the same substance” as the Father – *homoousios* in Greek. In a certain sense it is right to say that this teaching is really a part of Trinitarian theology, inasmuch as the main point is that the second (and third) divine person is divine in the full sense, and not merely godly. Even so, it clearly plays an important role in the subsequent Christian understanding of Christ, inasmuch as it affirms his divinity.

A second crucial debate culminated in the first Council of Constantinople, held in 381. At issue here was the proposal of Apollinaris that Christ had no rational soul, his rationality being, on Apollinaris’ account, entirely accounted for by his divine nature. If Nicaea emphasized Christ’s divinity, Constantinople I emphasized the fullness of his humanity by rejecting Apollinaris’ proposal.

The next crucial council was held in Ephesus in 431. Nestorius, the archbishop of Constantinople, taught that the Son, the second person of the Trinity, was not the same as Jesus, a human being who died on the cross. To be fair, Nestorius’ teaching was not altogether clear, and he did try to affirm that the Son and Jesus were “one person” (Gk. *prosôpon*), but his adversaries were convinced that his understanding of “person” was too loose. On his proposal, at least as they understood it, the incarnation involved not a true union in one hypostasis or one person but instead only a particularly close cooperation of two hypostases or persons; Nestorius labeled the result “one person,” but using the right language was not enough. Against Nestorius, the Council affirmed that Jesus and the Son were not two persons but just one person and one hypostasis, in part by declaring that Jesus’s mother Mary was *theotokos* or God-bearer: The person to whom she gave birth was the same person as the second person of the Trinity.

Another controversy soon arose from the other direction, however. Where Nestorius had suggested that Christ was not one person but two, the monk Eutyches held, or at any rate was thought to hold, that Christ had not two natures but one, namely, divinity. Against this, the Council of

¹ The locus classicus is, of course, Aloys Grillmeier’s *Christ in Christian Tradition*.

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Chalcedon, held in 451, gave what was the clearest and most systematic formulation to date of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation:

So, following the saintly fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from Mary, the virgin God-bearer, as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ.²

So Chalcedon affirms, emphatically and in detail, both uniqueness of person and duality of natures.

This statement, clear though it was, did not eliminate all further controversy. For example, the second council of Constantinople, an extremely messy affair, attempted in 553 to make clear that the decree of Chalcedon was not a capitulation to Nestorius's affirmation of two persons. In 680, the third council of Constantinople then came at it from the other direction once again, spelling out that the oneness of Christ's person did not undermine his having two natures, this time by stating explicitly that Christ had two wills – his having both a divine and a human will being a necessary condition of his truly having both a divine and a human nature.

There is a sense in which theological controversies – like philosophical controversies – never die out altogether. At the same time, however, it is fair to say that by the end of the seventh century, i.e., the time of Constantinople III, a consensus had been reached that was shared by the vast majority of Christians: Christ was a single person, none other than the second person of the divine Trinity, who at a certain point in history had become human as well, with both halves of this affirmation to be understood in as uncompromising a way as possible. “One person” was to mean one person and not, say, two persons acting as a team; “two natures” was to

² *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 86.

mean two distinct and complete natures, divinity serving to make Christ truly and fully divine with all that that entails, and humanity serving to make Christ truly and fully human with all that that entails.

This orthodox understanding is the basic framework within which Aquinas's ideas have to be understood. But there is a more immediate context for Aquinas's views, namely, the Christological reflections of his predecessors in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Latin-speaking West. This historical period has not been fully explored yet, and for that reason, it is even more difficult to summarize than the earlier centuries. I certainly make no claim to original scholarship in this connection. For the purposes of this book, the most important thing to note about Aquinas's immediate Christological inheritance is simply what was most important to him about it, namely, the so-called three opinions in Christology. These are the views or tendencies identified by Peter Lombard in the *Sentences*, book III.³ The first, often referred to as the *assumptus homo* or "assumed man" theory, says that the Word assumed an independently existing human being in such a way that one divine-human person resulted. The second, often referred to as the "subsistence theory," says that the Word assumed a human nature in such a way that one divine-human person resulted. The third, often referred to as the *habitus* theory, thinks of the assumed human nature as similar to an acquired garment (think of a religious "habit"); according to this last approach, the body and soul of Christ are not united to each other (this prevents them from giving rise to a second person), but each is independently united to the Word. As indicated already just above, these three are not so much precise theories as tendencies that can be detected in early medieval Christology, each tendency having been developed in different ways by different authors. Leaving such complexities aside, what is most important here is that Aquinas (together with his contemporaries) sees the second of these three as being an authentic presentation of Catholic doctrine, and the first and third as being unorthodox deviations.⁴

³ Jason West stresses the importance, for understanding Aquinas's Christological reasoning, of how Aquinas responds to the three opinions; see J. L. A. West, "Aquinas on Peter Lombard and the Metaphysical Status of Christ's Human Nature," *Gregorianum* 88 (2007): 557–586. In a somewhat contrasting way, Joseph Wawrykow argues that Aquinas's historical study of the early councils eventually led him to treat the councils, and the patristic authorities and heresies, as a deeper and more important context, with the three opinions being fitted into, and judged against, that context; see Joseph Wawrykow, "Hypostatic Union," in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow, eds., *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 222–251.

⁴ See especially *ST* III, q. 2, a. 6. In his "Aquinas's Theology of the Incarnation in Light of Lombard's Subsistence Theory," *Thomist* 65 (2001): 409–439, at pp. 430–1, 437, Michael Raschko argues that Aquinas, in his *Sentences* commentary, sees a need to correct the second opinion, but Raschko's translation of the Latin text he is discussing reveals a serious misunderstanding of Aquinas's analysis.

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Because Aquinas was a Christian theologian, the incarnation ought to have been an important topic for him, and so it was. He discusses it at length, in a number of works, during every period of his career: in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, in his ninth *Quodlibet*, in the *Summa contra gentiles*, in the *Compendium of Theology*, in the disputed question *De unione verbi incarnati*, in the *Summa theologiae*, and in several Scriptural commentaries. Its importance can perhaps be indicated by the way he introduces the third part of the *Summa theologiae*:

After our consideration of the ultimate end of human life and of virtues and vices, it is necessary, for the fulfillment of the theological enterprise in its entirety, to turn our consideration to the savior himself and to the benefits that he offered to the human race.⁵

The entire *Summa* finds its fulfillment in the discussion of the person of Christ and the benefits he bestows. It would, to be sure, be a mistake to say that everything in the *Summa theologiae* that comes before the third part is merely a preparation for it; nonetheless, it is clear that Christology in the *Summa* is not an afterthought, but rather an essential aspect of the work and perhaps even its highpoint.

Studying Aquinas's views on the incarnation not only gives us insight into an important element of his thought. It also sheds light on his understanding of other topics, such as God, human nature, various metaphysical issues, and so on. Much of this will become apparent in the chapters that follow. Further, studying Aquinas's Christology gives us an occasion to reflect on a very important truth about his thought more generally, namely, that it is not only philosophical but theological as well. (I will say more on this last point later in this introduction.)

If studying Aquinas is worthwhile at all, then, it is clearly worthwhile to study his thoughts on the incarnation. This is true not only for reasons of

For general discussions of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christology, see among others: A. M. Landgraf, *Dogmengeschichte der Frühscholastik*, 4 volumes (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1952–1956), vol. II.i, pp. 70–149 and vol. II.ii, pp. 7–43; Lauge Olaf Nielsen, *Theology and Philosophy in the Twelfth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982); Walter Principe, *William of Auxerre's Theology of the Hypostatic Union* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), pp. 64–70; Walter Principe, "St. Thomas and the Habitus-Theory of the Incarnation," in Armand Mauer et al., eds., *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274–1974: Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), 381–418; Corey Barnes, "Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas on Person, Hypostasis, and the Hypostatic Union," *The Thomist* 72 (2008): 107–146; Marcia Colish, *Peter Lombard*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 398–438.

⁵ "[N]ecesse est ut, ad consummationem totius theologici negotii, post considerationem ultimi finis humanae vitae et virtutum ac vitiorum, de ipso omnium Salvatore ac beneficiis eius humano generi praestitis nostra consideratio subsequatur" (*ST* III, *prologus*).

historical interest but also because understanding his views may shed light on the actual truth about any number of matters. Aquinas is so powerful a thinker that what he has to say on such topics is bound to be illuminating, even when we end up disagreeing with it.

I have mentioned both historical and speculative reasons for studying Aquinas's Christology. These two kinds of reason, while different, are of course in no way opposed.⁶ It is immensely valuable to grapple with the thoughts of others, and the best way to do this is not just to read them and let their words trigger new thoughts in us, but to truly engage their thoughts in detail.

And Aquinas is not just another thinker. Reading what he has to say is not just one more step in getting familiar with "the literature." He truly is a philosopher and theologian of genius, someone from whom anyone has a lot to learn. Just as it would be unwise to do physics without learning from past physicists (not necessarily by reading their works, however – the analogy limps here), so too are we working at a great disadvantage if we try to engage in Christology or metaphysics without dealing with Aquinas. We will run a great risk of re-inventing the wheel, not to mention making it less round than it ought to be.

Coming at the point from the opposite side, now: If we really want to engage in a historically accurate reading of Aquinas, we will have to be as sharp as we can speculatively. Not only will we have to be concerned with the words that Aquinas uses and the historical context he is writing in, we will also have to be sensitive to the meanings of his words, to the concepts they convey, to the structures of his arguments, to the ambiguities in his formulations, to the distinctions he is making, and to how his views differ from other views – including views he never considered. Our real goal is not to know what he wrote, but what he meant, and we cannot get to that without real philosophical and theological engagement on our part.

Perhaps all this is obvious, but obvious things sometimes bear repeating. Those who deal with the history of philosophy and theology are sometimes so anxious to stay historically faithful to their authors that they stop at the words and miss the chance to grasp fully the ideas behind them, thus failing to achieve a higher kind of historical faithfulness. Others, out of a legitimate interest in the truth of the matters under discussion, jump too quickly to struggling with the Big Ideas without dealing with the nitty-gritty of historical analysis; these miss the chance to learn something new

⁶ For a detailed examination of this sort of point, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Philosophy and Its History: Issues in Philosophical Historiography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

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from their authors, finding in the end only what they themselves already thought. Different scholars have different emphases, which adds to the richness and mutual helpfulness of the scholarly community, but here as elsewhere, excess is to be avoided.

That brings me to indicate the kind of study engaged in here. Naturally, I will aim for both historical accuracy and philosophico-theological insight: who doesn't? But there are different ways to go about it. Beyond the brief historical background already provided in this introduction, I will not spend a lot of time in this book carefully comparing Aquinas to his sources.⁷ Instead, I will focus on carefully studying Aquinas's texts and trying to get clear on what is going on in them. Especially beginning with Chapter 3, I will focus my attention on areas where Aquinas's thought is unclear or problematic. Sometimes, Aquinas expresses himself rather casually – the idea that his formulations are always rigorously strict and consistent is an obfuscating myth – and careful analysis is needed to figure out what he really means. Other times, the problem runs deeper: an issue that we want to know about turns out to be one that he did not explore explicitly and in depth, with the result that it is not obvious whether we can figure out his views at all.⁸ In this book, I spend a lot of time focusing on such difficulties. That is not because I think that Aquinas's Christology is just a mass of unclarities and problems. On the contrary, most of it is clear and straightforward – but for that reason, most of it does not require extensive commentary.

In dealing with the difficulties, we have to read Aquinas as carefully as we can. Sometimes this will enable us to figure out what he meant, but not always; when we come up short, honesty requires us to admit that, on those topics, we do not know what his views were. At that point, we will have attained as much historical truth as we can. Then we can turn to a different but related task, namely, engaging in speculative reconstruction in order to work out what a "Thomistic" view of the issue would be. This is a perfectly legitimate thing to do, so long as no confusion arises about what is going on: There remains a difference

⁷ Not that exploring sources has no value – on the contrary! For an example of the sort of light that can be shed by that approach, see Joseph Wawrykow, "Hypostatic Union."

⁸ There are, in fact, a significant number of issues on which Aquinas did not spell out his views as clearly as we wish he had. An easy way to draw up a list of such issues is by drawing up a list of issues that Thomists are always arguing about: for example, the object of the human act, what is and what isn't *praeter intentionem*, whether the human person has one end or two, precisely how God's grace interacts with human freedom, where things come to a stop in the back-and-forth between intellect and will, the role of acquired virtues in the Christian life, and so on.

between what (as it seems to us) Aquinas would or should have said, and what he actually did say.⁹

Because our topic is the metaphysics of the hypostatic union, we will be constantly faced with the interaction of philosophical and theological streams in Aquinas's thought. Aquinas thinks it important to distinguish these – to distinguish, that is, between issues that can be dealt with by philosophical reason alone, without guidance from divine revelation, and issues that can be dealt with only by having recourse to divine revelation. The metaphysical tools that Aquinas uses in his Christology are, for him, examples of the first kind of thinking; Christology proper is an example of the second. A few words should be said about Aquinas's approach with regard to the second, theological kind of issue.

The first point to be noted has to do with the ground on which one accepts a given theological claim. Let us take as our example the central Christological claim that Christ is one person with a divine and a human nature. While Aquinas considers it to be a fact that God became human, he would say that it is a fact that could not be discovered by human reason operating on its own. Humans can learn it only by God's revealing it: God tells them that it is true, and they accept what God says as true, i.e. they have faith in what has been revealed. This is, in Aquinas's view, the indispensable starting point for Christology as for any other properly theological inquiry.

The second point is that once one has accepted the incarnation in faith, one should try to understand it. The assent of faith is for Aquinas not a substitute for reflection but rather something that paves the way for it.¹⁰ A theologian, therefore, is at the outset someone who accepts in faith what is revealed, but from then on someone who attempts, using every means possible, to reflect on what has been revealed so as to understand it as fully as possible. He or she will draw out implications, make comparisons between revealed realities and more familiar things, and so on.¹¹

Third, it is worth noting something about how Aquinas compares theological things to more familiar, created things. He takes concepts that could be discovered by reflecting on ordinary experience without recourse to revelation, and he adapts these concepts in a way that allows

⁹ "What a philosopher has not seen in his own principles, even though it may flow from them with absolute necessity, does not belong to *his* philosophy." Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (reprinted Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1982), 300–301.

¹⁰ See *Quodl.* IV, q. 9, a. 3, resp.

¹¹ See *In De Trin.* q. 2, a. 3, resp.; *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8.

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him to make sense of revealed doctrine. The following example can illustrate the point. Plato and Aristotle and other philosophers developed a notion of nature or essence: The objects of our experience are not mere individuals, but come in types or kinds. It is possible to use this idea to talk about Christ as divine and human by saying that he has “two natures.” However, the idea that something has more than one nature is somewhat at odds with the ordinary philosophical concept of nature. As we shall see in detail in Chapter 4, Aquinas is best read as thinking that the off-the-rack philosophical notion of nature is inadequate for Christological purposes. Something tailor-made – a modified notion of “nature” – is required. Comparison to created realities, then, is not assimilation to them. Certain possibilities become apparent only in light of revelation, and the theologian’s task will, on occasion, involve adapting philosophical ideas to make them adequate to this larger context. Theology for Aquinas demands that we be willing to accept that the full truth is surprising and even somewhat subversive of our natural ways of thinking. It requires a willingness to allow theological reflection to suggest new ways of metaphysical thinking. This is a theme that we will encounter several times in this book.¹²

Fourth, while Aquinas is eager to understand things as much as he can, he thinks it crucial to remember that the theologian will eventually run up against certain limits.¹³ Some truths, above all some truths about God, exceed human understanding, and especially human understanding as it operates in this life.¹⁴ With regard to the hypostatic union itself, Aquinas says:

As his [God’s] power is not limited to those modes of goodness and existence which are in creatures, but he can make new modes of goodness and existence that are unknown to us, so also, through the infinity of his power, was he able to make a new mode of union, although no adequate exemplar for it may be found among creatures.¹⁵

¹² See remarks by Bruce Marshall, *Christology in Conflict*, 198 n. 61 (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987); J.H. Walgrave, “The Use of Philosophy in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas,” *Aquinas and Problems of His Time*, eds. G. Verbeke and D. Verhelst, 181–193 (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1976).

¹³ See for example *ST I*, q. 12, aa. 12–13.

¹⁴ In *ST I*, q. 12, aa. 7–8, Aquinas makes it clear both that the souls in heaven will have a much richer understanding than they can have on earth, and that even in that blessed state, there are certain things that are forever beyond their reach.

¹⁵ “[S]icut virtus eius non est limitata ad istos modos bonitatis et esse, qui sunt in creaturis, sed potest facere novos modos bonitatis et esse nobis incognitos, ita etiam per infinitatem suae virtutis potuit facere novum modum unionis, . . . quamvis ad hoc in creaturis nullum sufficiens exemplum inveniatur” (*De Unione* a. 1, resp.).

Even in such cases, however, the quest for understanding has not been abandoned: The theologian can at least give an intelligent account of the way in which the object of inquiry has eluded his or her intelligence.

Aquinas thinks that proceeding along such lines, from revelation to understanding, with acceptance of the fact that some points will never fully be grasped, is eminently sensible and that it can actually rise to a “science” in the Aristotelian sense.¹⁶ Now whether one should agree with him on this is a difficult question and not one that I will try to settle in this book. But at least we can note that his way of proceeding – from belief in revelation to incomplete understanding of it – is far from absurd. Supposing there is a God, it is at least plausible to suppose both that we will be able to have some understanding of him (in part on the basis of his own self-revelation) and that we will nonetheless be unable to grasp his nature and actions completely.

All this raises interesting points for the interpreter. If the interpreter is, like Aquinas, a Christian, then he or she will likely agree with Aquinas’s views about the need to rely on revelation, the need to not be limited by what can be learned from reason unaided by revelation, and the need to accept the limits of what humans can understand. Of course, he might disagree with this or that aspect of Aquinas’s account of the incarnation (or any other theological topic), but he will not be out of step with the overall approach.

But if the interpreter does not agree with Aquinas on these things – if, for example, the interpreter thinks that there is no God, or that God has revealed nothing, or that what Christians claim to be revelation is false – then he will be in an interesting interpretative situation. He will find himself in greater opposition to Aquinas than the first kind of interpreter, and probably this will show itself in how he reacts to the details of Aquinas’s account of the incarnation. For example, when Aquinas comes to propose a modification in the concept of nature, the non-Christian interpreter may be struck with the thought that this is a merely *ad hoc* proposal. Or, when Aquinas makes a certain suggestion but at the same time points out that it contains elements that cannot really be grasped by human reasoning, the second kind of interpreter may consider this to be not rational humility but irrational obscurantism. Now, no one will wish to deny this sort of interpreter the right to react in this way, but the following warning should naturally be kept in mind: Whatever one criticizes Aquinas for, one should keep in mind that at least sometimes, the

¹⁶ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2.