

Thomas Joseph White. *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology*. Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2015. xiv + 534 pp. \$34.95 (pbk).

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Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P., has done a good work for theology, and also philosophy, in his new, large book on Thomistic Christology. The book focuses on modern Christological work in theology. Fr. White presents the central conclusion differently in different places. For instance, he writes:

“The basic argument of the book is that Christology has an irreducible ontological dimension that is essential to its integrity as a science” (5).

“the central thesis of the book [is] that scholastic Christology is of perennial importance for a right understanding of the central mysteries of the New Testament, those of the incarnation and redemption” (22).

“Both halves [of the book] argue for the centrality of metaphysical realism for a right appreciation of the heart of the mystery of Christ” (29).

“The goal of this concluding chapter is meant to be commensurate with the goal of this book at large: to show that there exist resources in the Thomistic and scholastic tradition that invite us to treat theological thinking “otherwise” than in the models that currently predominate” (469).

He is quite serious about the importance of ontology and metaphysics for theology. In three other places, he writes:

“If we believe in the incarnation, we need to be committed to the retrieval of some form of classical metaphysics” (66).

“[W]e must say that unless we study the mystery of Jesus ontologically, we fundamentally cannot understand the New Testament” (7).

“[T]he heart of New Testament teaching ... can only be grounded in a distinctively metaphysical mode of Christological reflection” (21).

He argues for these claims most often by presenting a difficulty a contemporary theologian has, then showing how that difficulty is neutralized by a Thomistic view. The modern theologians who come into discussion most often in the book are Hans Urs von Balthazar, Karl Barth, Eberhard Jüngel, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. The modern philosophers most commonly referred to are G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

As you might have thought, given the list of philosophers most engaged, the book is not written with an audience of analytic theologians explicitly in mind. Nevertheless, as I will go on to show, this book will be very useful for analytic theologians, and we are indebted to Fr. White for taking on this project and completing it in as successful a manner as he has.

One reason why this book will be useful for analytic theologians is that Fr. White does an admirable job of presenting the ideas he discusses in three different languages, so to speak: that of the modern theologian influenced by continental philosophy, that of the scholastic theologian steeped in perennial metaphysics, and that of, one might say, the generally educated reader. We see, for just one instance, a translation of Barthian concerns into scholastic terminology (195-201). Fr. White does similarly for his discussions of other modern thinkers throughout the book. I do not have the expertise to speak to the question of whether or not Fr. White interpreted Barth and the other contemporary theologians correctly, but I will say that the copious texts Fr. White adduces do seem to bear out his interpretations.

Another sort of example of this translation work comes in Fr. White's explication of scholastic terminology into plain English. To give just a few examples of many, see his discussions of objective formality (53-55), primary and secondary actuality (62-63), and his definitions of “nature,” “grace,” “*analogia fidei*,” “*analogia entis*,” and “*ens commune*” (204-5; 230). These translations can provide a Rosetta Stone of sorts for the thinker proficient in any of those languages to come to better knowledge of the others. Likewise, they are useful for the analytic, who can likely translate at least one of them into analytic terminology. Not all terms, though, are helpfully defined in their first deployment. Some, like the analogy of being, are used prior to an extended discussion of what is meant by them. The analogy of being is used a fair bit in the first chapter, but only defined and discussed in Chapter Four, to which Fr. White refers the reader in Chapter One. Other terms, like “concrete” and “concrete nature” (130) are used but not defined. Moreover, the analytic reader is cautioned at this point, for the terms are not used in the typical analytic sense, nor are they used, so far as I can tell, in the typical scholastic sense.¹

A second reason this book will be beneficial to analytic theologians is the care Fr. White takes to bring along the reader. Oftentimes, when reading outside of one's expertise, it is easy to get lost. Fr. White is a member of the Order of Preachers, the

¹ For these senses, see Timothy Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), 35-38.

Dominicans, and his preaching prowess is on display in the book, not insofar as each chapter ends with an altar call (he is a *Catholic* preacher, after all), but insofar as he is careful to bring his audience along with him, by means of repetition, summary, and sign posts.

A third reason that this book will be of use to analytic theologians is the emphasis that Fr. White puts on considering the metaphysics of the incarnation. Here we have a non-analytic theologian arguing, as I quoted above, that ontology is needful for Christology, a thesis that many analytic theologians will themselves accept. For instance, Chapter Three answers the Barthian objections to ontological accounts of the incarnation – primarily Barth and his followers’ critiques of the analogy of being. Not only does Fr. White argue that Barth’s objections fail, he argues that Barth’s theology *requires* an analogy of being (192). In Chapter Four he goes further, arguing that “analogical, metaphysical thinking about God is in fact intrinsic to Christological dogmatic theology, and unavoidably so” (234). The conclusion of the book, “The Promise of Thomism,” argues at length that, while historical knowledge is essential to Christology, Christology itself is not a merely historical enterprise. It is a *scientia*, the *telos* of which is knowledge of God, the Son’s incarnation, and the operations of that same Son for our redemption. Unabashed Thomist that he is, careful scholar that he is, his goal isn’t merely getting Thomas right; it is getting the doctrine of God right. And that doctrine of God, he argues forcefully throughout the book, requires metaphysics.

Before the philosophers from this interdisciplinary enterprise start high-fiving, though, I should emphasize that Fr. White is not encouraging a vice we’ve still yet to shake as a discipline, that is, the vice of approaching the philosophical and logical questions in blissful naivety concerning the historical teaching of the Christian community on the issues we discuss. He takes such an approach to task as well, though not as extensively.

Fr. White writes from a Catholic perspective, in the following senses. He cites the documents of Vatican II as circumscribing what can be said of Christ (see the discussion of *Gaudium et Spes* beginning on page 128). He cites the condemnation from the medieval Pope, Alexander III, which condemns saying that Christ’s human nature was a someone (rather it is a *something*), then uses that condemnation in discussions of other figures, many, but not all, of whom are Catholic (85). Additionally, he uses statements of Vatican I (204; 347) as evidence in places. I see nothing wrong with this: this is a Catholic priest writing a book about the Christology of a Catholic priest and Doctor of the Catholic Church, published by the Catholic University of America Press. The book has a heavy emphasis on modern *Catholic* theology, which I, for one, find to be a welcome resource for analytic theology, and I hope it will be a beneficial influence on contemporary analytic discussions.

The book does the following things. The Prolegomenon, “Is a Modern Thomistic Christology Possible?,” presents difficulties for Christology and the responses to those difficulties that Schleiermacher and Barth provide. It then considers some problems with the responses these two thinkers give, the main problem being that neither

“instructs us as to how, if at all, we might reasonably seek explicitly to integrate methodologically the content of modern studies of Jesus of Nazareth in his historical context with a modern defense of the classical doctrine of Chalcedon” (40).

Fr. White presents a Thomistic approach that both allows the integration and answers the original difficulties to which Schleiermacher and Barth were responding. The remainder of the book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the incarnation, the second on redemption.

The first part begins with a chapter taking up the hypostatic union, the union of the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. There Fr. White criticizes Rahner’s Christology for having a “Nestorian tendency” (25) and Schleiermacher’s Christology for slanting toward a “subtle’ form of Nestorianism” (102), a tendency and slant which, he claims, Thomism can help rectify. John Hick, Jacques Dupuis, and Jon Sobrino all present more overt forms of Nestorianism on Fr. White’s reading, which a dose of Thomism can also alleviate (102-111). The second chapter focuses on the assumed human nature of Christ, again taking up Rahner’s views, but also those of Marie-Dominique Chenu, arguing against them, with Thomas, that there must be a “perennial nature” (126) common to all humans, both pre- and post-fall. Much of this second chapter focuses on the proper interpretation of the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*. The third chapter, as noted above, discusses Barth and his followers, primarily Eberhard Jüngel, on the analogy of being. The fourth chapter continues the theme of the analogy of being, arguing for a form of natural theology. It focuses on the thought of Gottlieb Söhngen and Balthasar. The final chapter in the first part, Chapter Five, focuses on the human mind and will of Christ. Here Fr. White argues that, to fulfill his mission and knowingly sacrifice himself for the sins of the world, Jesus needed the beatific vision during his earthly life.

The second part of the book, the part on redemption, begins with Chapter Six, where Fr. White argues, against the views of Balthasar, Barth, Moltmann, and Pannenberg, that it is “not literally true to say that the Son of God *as God* is obedient to the Father” (27, emphasis in the original). The seventh chapter discusses Christ’s cry of dereliction from the cross. Fr. White argues that the cry of dereliction is consistent with Christ’s possessing the beatific vision, even when crucified. The eighth chapter argues with Thomas, and against Balthasar, Jüngel, and Pannenberg, that “the Son of God as God undergoes no form of ontological diminishment or self-relinquishment in the course of his passion” (28). The ninth chapter focuses on Christ’s descent into hell. There Fr. White argues that the Thomistic view is “much more profound and coherent” than Balthasar’s view of the descent (28). The tenth chapter considers Christ’s resurrection from the dead. He follows Joseph Ratzinger’s (Pope Benedict XVI’s) reading of Aquinas in criticizing the views of Bultmann and Rahner on the resurrection. I have already described the goals of the concluding chapter above when discussing the third reason this book will be of interest to analytic theologians.

I mentioned a word of criticism earlier in this review when I said that sometimes, though it is rare, important terms are used prior to their being explicated.

Here is a second criticism. In many places, the argumentation of the book is exemplary. For instance, see the careful arguments concerning the implications of Nestorianism on pages 114-115. Likewise, see the argument on the top of page 225 for the conclusion that humans have the ability to do natural theology, and the argument for a similar conclusion on the top of page 231. The analytic thinker will find nothing lacking in argumentative prowess in these sections. That said, there are some places where a conclusion is drawn, yet I do not see how or why it follows from what is said. See, for instance, the discussion of the compatibility of divine and human freedom on pages 200-201. There the argument goes too quickly, so far as I can see; the compatibility is not *shown* in the text, though it is claimed to be shown. Again, see the passage where Fr. White claims that God's being non-physical implies "that [God's] unique nature is 'wisdom' ... and God's wisdom directs the decisions of his will" (292-3). I do not see how this follows, and the surrounding text doesn't make the inference any clearer. It could be that there are unstated assumptions in play, assumptions that those more familiar with the relevant modern Christologies would immediately know of and employ, by which the argumentation becomes a valid derivation. It would be good for the reader to have those assumptions laid out. Though, to be fair, the book is already quite long, and an author can legitimately ask whether he must add more to a book to make the argumentation explicit to those who are not his intended audience or are not well versed in the discussion.

In conclusion the book will be quite useful for analytic theologians. First, it does a remarkable job of presenting the views and concepts of different schools, primarily contemporary, continentally inspired theology and perennial, scholastic theology, in multiple terminologies. Second, it is written in a way that leads the reader clearly through many nuanced and careful discussions. Third, the book presents argumentation for the common analytic view that metaphysics is important to the proper understanding of theology, but does so from a non-analytic starting point. I encourage analytic theologians who want to learn more about modern, continentally-inspired Christology or scholastic Christology, or those interested in comparing the relative merits of these approaches, to read this book. They will not be disappointed.²

² I thank Matthews Grant, Faith Glavey Pawl, Michael Rota, and Mark Spencer for helpful comments on previous drafts of this review.