

MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

JOHN CAVADINI: THE LAST CHRISTOLOGY OF THE WEST: ADOPTIONISM IN SPAIN AND GAUL, 785-820

Panelists: James J. Buckley, Loyola College, Baltimore
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Cavadini's book throws into question the traditional interpretation of the tenor and significance of the Spanish Christologies usually characterized as "adoptionist." Due to the efforts of the Carolingian theologian Alcuin, himself prominent in the later stage of the debate with these theologians, scholars have as a rule viewed these Spanish Christologies in terms of Greek patristic debates revolving around primitive adoptionism and subsequently around Nestorius. In the east, talk of "adoption" suggests a "two-person" Christology, in which one person, the divine, adopted an independently-existing human person to work out the salvation of the human race. Hence, Alcuin, aware of the Eastern discussions, concluded that by their talk of an "adoptive" human nature in Christ the Spanish theologians had in fact moved perilously close to Nestorius. In this crisply written book, Cavadini criticizes Alcuin and his scholarly successors for their theological insensitivity, arguing that Eastern concerns and arguments, whether Nestorian, monophysite or Chalcedonian, hardly if at all figured in the genesis of the Spanish teachings about Christ. Rather, the theologies of such figures as Elipandus, Beatus, and Felix must be read on their own terms, as bringing to fruition in a christological and soteriological setting the insight of such seminal Western patristic authors as Augustine: Spanish "adoptionism" is an indigenous, and orthodox, Western accomplishment. Presupposing a "one-person, two-natures" Christology, their talk of "adoption" in Christ has a soteriological focus, underscoring the relation to humanity established by Christ that renders possible our entry into the kingdom as adopted children of God. Especially compelling is Cavadini's consideration of Spanish readings of a favorite scriptural passage, the Christ hymn in Philippians. "Self-emptying" here refers for these theologians at once to the proper character of the Son who becomes incarnate, to his identification with those whose salvation he facilitates, and, to the call to discipleship and conformity to the Son's example.

In their prepared comments, the panelists skillfully rehearsed the main features of Cavadini's appraisal of the Spanish theologians; in concert with the

author, who responded in his own comments favorably to their reading of his book, they also highlighted important claims that merit further investigation. First, the Spanish theologians may have stood in a relation different from that of their Carolingian opponents to the earlier Western theological tradition. Relatively new to the doing of theology, the Carolingians required a conscious effort at appropriation to assimilate patristic insights, both Eastern and Western; the failure to interpret Spanish teachings on its own (Western) terms suggests that the Carolingian appropriation was often imperfect. For the Spanish thinkers, on the other hand, the connections with the Western past were more "organic," and their use of earlier insights less forced. Hence, for example, they were able the more easily to maintain and emphasize the profound connections between Christology and soteriology (and ecclesiology). Secondly, while genuinely indebted to Augustine and other Western thinkers, the Spanish theologians may in fact have gone beyond their predecessors in speculative gain. In particular, the repeated use of the Philippians passage perhaps led the Spanish theologians to a richer notion of this divine person than that available in Augustine himself: it is proper to this divine person to empty and give himself *for us*. Finally, the Spanish use of gendered language in speaking of the divine should offer no encouragement to those who would wish to privilege the male gender; indeed, their complex reading of the Philippians hymn in fact discloses the sinfulness of such an impulse.

In the ensuing discussion from the floor, there was a general consensus about the value of Cavadini's book. One intriguing proposal, made by a student of the high middle ages, is that the book is even more important than Cavadini allows, shedding light on post-Carolingian theology as well. Contrary to what the title implies, it is in fact highly doubtful that Alcuin's preference for Greek patristic positions won the day in the West, thus bringing to an end Christologies of purely Western inspiration. When viewed against the background of the profound cultural disruptions of later centuries, the Carolingian period was itself but a momentary "victory" for Eastern theology. Due to faulty transmission of ideas and texts, later medieval theologians were often quite ignorant of the Eastern debates and resolutions that had figured so prominently in Alcuin's thought. Such in fact is suggested in the Lombard's *Sentences* (bk. III, d. vi) where Peter reports three christological opinions that were then current. As Aquinas (e.g., *Summa theologiae* III,2,6) eventually claimed, two of these "opinions" are in fact "heresies," long ago condemned by the church meeting in council. Yet, in the detailed knowledge of the Greek debates that inform this judgment, won through his own independent research, Thomas was quite unusual. And, in light of Cavadini's book we may want to ask whether Thomas too, unwittingly following Alcuin's lead, is guilty of assimilating contemporary Western discussions of Christ too closely to the Eastern debates. Indeed, the supporting authorities cited by the Lombard for these twelfth-century christological opinions are in many cases identical with those favored by the Spanish

theologians. Did Cavadini's "last Christology" in fact have a resurgence in the later middle ages, showing the continued resilience of peculiarly Western insights into Christ? At any rate, even if there is no demonstrable direct connection between Cavadini's authors and the twelfth-century theologians, historians will at the least be emboldened by Cavadini's persuasive rereading of the Spanish adoptionists to bracket Thomas' judgment and to read these later christological opinions on their own (Western) terms.

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METHOD IN THEOLOGY

The interest group on Method in Theology heard a presentation by Terrence Tilley entitled "Pascal and the 'Practical Theory of Religion': The Validity of the Wager and the Wisdom of Masses and Holy Water." Tilley began with a "practical" theory of religion drawn from the work of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. McClendon's construal of religion as a set of practices distances him from the dominant trend in modern philosophy of religion. That trend has focused our attention on religious beliefs in abstraction from religious life. As a consequence the debates of philosophers of religion have failed to address the practical issues generally faced by an embodied person.

In Tilley's opinion, this habit of abstraction has deformed philosophers' attempts to construct a philosophy of religion. Those who argue over the proofs for God's existence or debate the justifiability of religious beliefs tend to ignore the more important question of the reasonableness or wisdom of participation in the richness and complexity of religious life. Recent developments in epistemology and in the academic study of religion have shown that the modern paradigm cannot accommodate the complexity of religious faith. Religion is not merely a set of beliefs nor even a theological or doctrinal system. It is a matter of living a life shaped by a religious tradition, which is carried by enduring institutions and transmitted through committed communities. Being justified in one's believing is less a matter of having warranted beliefs and more a matter of being able to make and keep a wise commitment to a religious life.

Religious believing entails the practices of embodied persons. However, rationalist and empiricist epistemologies generally fail to demonstrate adequately the conditions under which concretely embodied and socially located persons