

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY II—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Wisdom from the Past: Can Premodern Theology Teach Us Anything (At All)?
- Convener: Marian Maskulak, C.P.S., St. John's University, NY
- Moderator: Shawn Colberg, College of St. Benedict/Saint John's University
- Presenter: David Whidden, Our Lady of the Lake College  
Gilles Mongeau, S.J., Regis College, University of Toronto  
Robert J. Barry, Providence College

This session considered how the thought of Thomas Aquinas might contribute to contemporary questions regarding the purpose of theology, theological method, and theological disagreement. David Whidden began with "The Theology of Play and the Play of Theology in Thomas Aquinas," proposing that beyond Thomists' interest in theology as *scientia*, Aquinas gives reason to consider the notion of theology as play that evokes delight and pleasure in those pursuing wisdom. Whidden first considered Aquinas's treatment of play in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in *ST II-II.168*. He then turned to the prologue to the commentary on Boethius's *Hebdomads* where Aquinas refers to the contemplation of wisdom as a form of play. Aquinas argues in *ST I.1.6* that sacred doctrine is itself wisdom and quotes Augustine to convey that wisdom is the knowledge of divine things. Since the highest wisdom is God, Whidden understands the contemplation of wisdom to mean the contemplation of God.

Aquinas indicates two ways that the contemplation of wisdom is like play. Play is intrinsically delightful and the contemplation of wisdom is maximally delightful, and just as activities of play are done for their own sake, the delights of wisdom are not done for any other purpose. Noting that Aquinas points out elsewhere that we can only truly rest when we attain our final good and delight, Whidden posited that contemplating the wisdom that is God gives a foretaste of the beatific vision, for the eternal contemplation of God is where one will finally rest and find delight. Rather than productivity, theology as play is more about the contemplation of God for the utter delight in thinking about God, leading to love of God for God's sake. But as seen by Aquinas's massive output, theology as play does not rule out productivity.

The theme of wisdom carried over into Gilles Mongeau's presentation, "Mystery on the 'Move': Aquinas's Theological Method as Transforming Wisdom." Mongeau began by asking attendees to convey what information they could obtain from a sheet of music for "O nuit d'amour." Beyond information, sheet music provides instructions for performance and affective coloring, and Mongeau used this example to convey Aquinas's distinction between "knowing by a cognitive process" and "knowing by inclination."

Following an overview of how Noble, Maritain, Eco, Caldera, and O'Reilly have understood Aquinas's distinction between judgment via discursive reasoning and judgment from connaturality, Mongeau questioned whether judgment *per modum inclinationis* can be trained and developed. He referred to *ST III.42.4* where Aquinas considers whether Christ should have produced a written doctrine and concludes that Christ taught in such a manner that imprinted his doctrine on the hearts of his hearers. Mongeau noted that recent medieval scholarship has similarly uncovered the master's

role as a wise transmitter of living knowledge whose discourse was valued over written texts. The master was to form the knowing and willing of his students, empowering them to make judgments both *per modum scientiae* and *per modum inclinationis*. Mongeau highlighted Aquinas's use of rhetorical enthymemes which Aquinas contends serve as one of the highest forms of instruction on the mysteries of faith, corresponding to God's manner of teaching in salvation history. Mongeau submitted that rhetorical arguments bring connaturality (provided by faith) to act by promoting a judgment *per modum inclinationis* regarding the beauty or goodness of the mystery under consideration. As an example, he used Aquinas's articulation of the fittingness of the Incarnation as a means of salvation (*ST III.1.9*).

In his paper, "Heresy and Error: Learning to Really Listen to the Other," Robert Barry submitted that medieval theologians were able to demonstrate a position to be erroneous based on a common understanding of the sources and method of theological reasoning. To illustrate this process, Barry referred to *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV where Aquinas demonstrates the errors of the Photians, Sabellians, and Arians concerning Christ's divinity. Aquinas sets forth the argument of the "other," observes the partial truth therein, and with reasoned argument, demonstrates that other Scripture passages are ignored or wrongly interpreted. Barry noted that Aquinas's approach of using commonly held authoritative sources and reasoned argument finds parallels in juridical procedures used by universities to deal with those who publicly taught erroneous positions. Judgments concerned the truthfulness of the teaching, not the quality of the proponent's will. In most cases where a teaching was found to be erroneous, the individual renounced the error and corrected his teaching. A scholar who refused to take corrective steps after being given evidence of his error was regarded as a heretic and excluded from the academy.

While not endorsing a return to heresy trials, Barry held that processes used to include or exclude scholars in the academy today are often more arbitrary and un-theological than medieval practices. From hiring and tenure committees, to editorial and professional boards, judgments are rendered on theologians' work. But without agreement on what standards constitute good or bad theology, Barry maintained that the diversity of the medieval schools of thought has now devolved into a variety of camps where often a perverse inversion of the procedures for medieval trials occurs—the decision that an opposing view comes from an evil will.

The discussion that followed engaged the work of all three speakers and served to highlight common threads of thought in each paper.

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